BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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The New Geopolitical Scramble for Corridors

Velina Tchakarova

The geopolitical landscape in winter 2024-2025 is marked by significant transformation, uncertainty, and fierce competition for influence. The geopolitical hotspots of this new contest are most visible in the regions that bridge Europe and Asia—what the editors of *Baku Dialogues* call the "Silk Road region." Central to this dynamic is the growing intersection of interests between major regional players against the backdrop of a Cold War 2.0, putting the West against what I was the first to call the "DragonBear" alliance of China and Russia.

These corridors are not just infrastructural undertakings; they are the arteries of global power, trade, and connectivity, reflecting deeper geopolitical ambitions and contestations. This extensive analysis elaborates on today's most significant connectivity projects, exploring their strategic implications and the new power dynamics they are fostering.

In the traditional sense, empires have always relied on transport and trade corridors to project power and expand influence. From the ancient Silk Roads to the West's colonial sea routes, the ability to control the flow of goods and resources has often equated to geopolitical dominance. Today, this principle remains unchanged, though the scale and stakes have reached unprecedented levels.

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At the Heart of the Geopolitical Game

The modern scramble for corridors is not just about logistics: it is also about the reconfiguration of global power projection in an era of heightened competition. When China unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, many dismissed it as an overhyped marketing exercise. But a decade later, the Initiative has proven to be a strategic blueprint for global connectivity.

By weaving together terrestrial and maritime networks, China has sought to channel its industrial overcapacity outward while cementing its role as the world's manufacturing hub. This massive undertaking has catalyzed a global race, with competing countries now seeking to establish their own corridors to counterbalance Beijing's expanding influence.

Among the myriad challenges and opportunities shaping the global order, one phenomenon stands out as a critical driver of change: the scramble for corridors.

Each of the corridors I examine in this article represents a story of overlapping ambitions, conflicting priorities, and the relentless push for influence. One of the most notable developments is the operationalization of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), connecting Russia, Iran, and India. This corridor, while often overshadowed by BRI, is strategically significant, offering a multimodal route that bypasses the Suez Canal. As Western sanctions have isolated Russia, Moscow has doubled down on its partnership with Tehran and New Delhi, leveraging the INSTC to bolster trade and reduce reliance on European markets.

In a parallel development, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled with much fanfare at G20 summit in 2023, promises to challenge China's dominance in the connectivity arena with the help of the United States and EU. By linking India with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and extending to the European continent, this corridor aims to redefine trade routes while fostering deeper cooperation between democracies and key Gulf economies.

Yet even as IMEC gains traction, Türkiye has entered the fray with its

Türkiye-Qatar-Iraq corridor, offering an alternative path that underscores Ankara's ambitions to reclaim its historical role as a bridge between East and West. Not to be outdone, the European Union has responded to China's BRI with its Global Gateway initiative, a comprehensive strategy to fund sustainable infrastructure projects worldwide. While ambitious in scope, the initiative faces significant challenges in matching the speed, scale, and scope of Chinese investments, raising questions about the EU's capacity to shape the connectivity landscape in a fragmented global order.

The corridors of today will define the power structures of tomorrow. For smaller states caught in this web, the challenge lies in leveraging their strategic geography without succumbing to the pressures of great power rivalries.

Meanwhile, the heretofore American response to BRI has been multifaceted, focusing on countering China's growing global influence by promoting alternative infrastructure and development projects. Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. has emphasized the importance of transparency, sustainability, and adherence to international standards in infrastructure projects, positioning its initiatives like the Build Back Better World (B3W) and the India-Israel-UAE-U.S. Group (I2U2) partnership as alternatives to BRI. These efforts aimed to offer infrastructure investments to the countries in the Global South that are more aligned with the Western conception of democratic values, environmental sustainability, and fair economic practices, while also reducing the risks of debt dependency that can result from Chinese investments. Additionally, the U.S. has worked through alliances like the G7 to provide a collective response to China's economic outreach.

The foregoing is taking place against the background of a geopolitical chessboard that is shifting further north. The Northern Sea Route (NSR), facilitated by the melting Arctic ice, has emerged as a game-changer for transport between China and Russia. This development has taken on added urgency in light of recent crises in the Red Sea, which have disrupted trade flows through the Suez Canal. By opening a faster route between Asia and Europe, the NSR could alter the dynamics of global trade, further isolating the European Union and its member states while strengthening the Sino-Russian axis.

In South Asia, the revival of the Vladivostok-Chennai corridor signals a deepening alignment between India and Russia. With trade between the two nations surging, this corridor represents a critical link for energy and resource flows, underscoring the geopolitical recalibration taking place in that region. At the same time, these developments are reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, where Azerbaijan finds itself at the epicenter of competing interests. For Azerbaijan, the stakes could not be higher. Positioned at the crossroads of BRI, the INSTC, and EU-conceived connectivity networks, the country's strategic importance is undeniable. Yet, this prominence brings both opportunities and vulnerabilities. As larger powers vie for influence, smaller countries like Azerbaijan must navigate a complex web of alliances, ensuring their sovereignty while capitalizing on their pivotal location.

In short, the new geopolitical scramble for corridors is about much more than trade routes or infrastructure projects. It is a contest over the very fabric of the global order—a competition to shape the flows of goods, energy, and ideas in an increasingly polarized world. As this contest unfolds, the corridors of today will define the power structures of tomorrow. For smaller states caught in this web, the challenge lies in leveraging their strategic geography without succumbing to the pressures of great power rivalries.

In this evolving narrative, corridors are not just paths of connectivity but battlegrounds of influence. They reflect the shifting tectonics of global power, where old alliances are tested, new partnerships are forged, and the lines of competition are redrawn. The year 2025 will undoubtedly bring new uncertainties and unknowns, but one thing is certain: the race for corridors will remain at the heart of the geopolitical game.

The Importance of Corridors

The concept of corridors has long been central to the practice of geopolitics. Empires throughout history have used trade and transport routes to project power, integrate territories, and secure economic dominance. The Silk Roads, both overland and maritime, were instrumental in connecting civilizations, facilitating trade, and spreading influence

across continents. The nineteenth century's Great Game between Britain and Russia exemplified how control over routes and regions could shape the balance of power.

Today, corridors represent much more than logistical convenience. In an era of great power competition, they have become tools for economic statecraft, mechanisms of influence, and symbols of strategic alignment. Their development is inextricably linked to global trends such as the rise of multipolarity, the rivalry between the United States and China, and the emergence of new regional powers. The current competition for corridors underscores what I have identified in detail elsewhere as the growing bifurcation of the global system into competing blocs, particularly between the West and the DragonBear alliance of China and Russia.

China's Geopolitical Masterstroke

Launched in 2013, BRI is the most ambitious connectivity project in modern history, with an estimated $1 trillion in investments spanning Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. At its core, BRI seeks to establish a vast network of railways, highways, ports, and pipelines to reshape global trade patterns and stimulate economic integration. It also serves as a strategic tool for Beijing to address China's domestic challenges such as industrial overcapacity while strengthening its geopolitical leverage. By financing large-scale infrastructure projects, China enhances its global influence, particularly in developing regions, where it fosters economic dependencies that align countries with Beijing's strategic vision. BRI also secures critical trade routes and energy corridors, ensuring resilience in global supply chains.

A critical element of BRI's terrestrial connectivity is China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which has emerged as the geopolitical and logistical heart of Beijing's grand strategy. Located at China's western frontier, Xinjiang shares borders with eight countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Russia. This unique, strategic positioning transforms the Autonomous Region into a key gateway for China's overland corridors, linking it directly with Central Asia, and, from there, with the South Caucasus, the Middle East (including the Levant and Anatolia), and the European continent. Historically significant as part of the ancient Silk Road, Xinjiang now serves as the linchpin for multiple BRI corridors, reinforcing China's economic and strategic influence across the Eurasian continent.

The Northern Corridor, one of BRI's critical routes, connects China to the EU via Russia. Though disrupted by the Russia-Ukraine war, this corridor has regained importance due to recent geopolitical crises, such as disruptions in the Red Sea, which have forced stakeholders to seek reliable overland alternatives.

Meanwhile, the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, connects China to the EU via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea into the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. This corridor has gained prominence due to its EBRD- and World Bank-projected shorter travel time, improved transit efficiency, and lower transit cost in comparison with the northern route, as well as its ability to bypass Russia (and Iran), with Kazakhstan alone investing heavily to expand its capacity to 500,000 containers annually. For its part, Azerbaijan (without which the Middle Corridor route cannot arguably function at all) has taken a number of important steps to finance the expansion of the capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK, also known as the "Iron Silk Road"), the parallel highway route, the Port of Baku (its key connectivity node), and adjacent Alat Free Economic Zone (AFEZ).

Another major component is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued at $62 billion, which links Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. CPEC not only facilitates China's direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the vulnerable Strait of Malacca, but also strengthens trade connectivity with the Middle East and Africa. Similarly, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) connects China's Yunnan province to Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port on the Bay of Bengal, providing another direct route to the Indian Ocean and further enhancing China's access to South Asian markets. Complementing these overland routes is the Maritime Silk Road, which connects China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the European continent through extensive port developments, bolstering China's trade links across vital sea lanes.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not merely an economic program but a cornerstone of China's broader geopolitical strategy. It enhances China's energy security by securing access to critical resources through pipelines in Central Asia

and projects in the South Caucasus (e.g., Georgia's first deep-sea port at Anaklia will be built by a Chinese-led consortium) and Africa while reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints.

Moreover, BRI extends China's influence into the technological realm through the Digital Silk Road, which promotes Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, satellite systems, and fintech solutions in emerging markets. This expansion into the digital domain enables China to shape technological standards globally and extend its soft power.

The success of BRI has triggered counter-initiatives by rival powers. At the June 2021 G7 Summit, the United States launched its B3W initiative, focusing on transparency and sustainability in infrastructure financing. Similarly, the EU's Global Gateway Initiative emphasizes values-based, green, and sustainable projects as an alternative to China's BRI. India and Japan's Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) seeks to counterbalance China's influence, particularly in the Indian Ocean and Africa. Even regional players like Russia and Türkiye navigate complex relationships with BRI. Russia, for instance, collaborates with China on the Northern Sea Route (NSR, also known as the "Polar Silk Road") while competing for influence in Central Asia, a region where China's dominance has grown. Türkiye's conception of the Middle Corridor overlaps with BRI (and Global Gateway) whilst reflecting Ankara's desire to carve an independent role in East-West connectivity.

The success of BRI has triggered counter-initiatives by rival powers.

The geopolitical implications of BRI extend into maritime security, where China's investments in ports like Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti strengthen its growing naval presence in key maritime regions. This has raised concerns among regional and global powers (especially Western ones) about the potential militarization of BRI infrastructure. China's dual-use projects, which serve both civilian and military purposes, illustrate the initiative's broader strategic ambitions.

Furthermore, China is leveraging BRI to reshape global governance by promoting its vision of multilateralism through platforms like the Belt and Road Forum, advocating for norms that align with its national interests.

Despite its achievements, BRI faces significant challenges, including debt sustainability, environmental concerns, and geopolitical resistance. Some host countries (and Western powers: directly and through IFIs under their control) have expressed concerns over unsustainable debt burdens, local environmental degradation, and the displacement of communities due to large-scale infrastructure projects. These issues have tarnished China's image in some theaters, providing ammunition for critics of the initiative. Nevertheless, BRI has shown resilience, adapting to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions in global supply chains by prioritizing regional projects like the China-Laos Railway.

Table 1: China's BRI and Key Corridors

Corridor Name	Key Routes	Capacity	Strategic Objectives	Challenges
Northern Corridor (China-Russia)	China to Europe via Russia	Over 100 million tons cargo capacity	Bypass sanctions and maintain trade with Europe	Geopolitical tensions (Russia-Ukraine war)
Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route)	China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye	Over 3.4 million tons cargo capacity, 34,600 TEUs	Shorter route to Europe, reduce reliance on Russian corridors	Infrastructure development and political stability
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	China (Xinjiang) to Gwadar Port (Pakistan)	Valued at $62 billion	Access to Arabian Sea, bypass Strait of Malacca	Security concerns and debt sustainability
China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)	China (Yunnan) to Kyaukpyu Port (Myanmar)	N/A - still under	Access to Indian Ocean, strengthen ties with Myanmar	Political instability in Myanmar
Maritime Silk Road	China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe via sea	Nearly 250 million TEUs	Expand maritime trade links, enhance port connectivity	Environmental concerns and maritime security

Sources: Atlantic Council, Caspian News, Brookings, and Port Technology.

Arctic Game-Changer

The Northern Sea Route (NSR, also known as the "Polar Silk Road") represents a paradigm shift in global shipping and geopolitics, offering a shorter, faster alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. By reducing transit times between Asia and Europe by 30 to 40 percent, the NSR is reshaping trade dynamics, making it particularly attractive for countries heavily invested in maintaining robust supply chains.

A sea voyage between St. Petersburg and Shanghai via NSR is approximately 20 days shorter than the Suez Canal route, making it an attractive proposition for maritime global trade. Beyond economic efficiency, NSR also mitigates geopolitical risks by bypassing vulnerable chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the Red Sea, regions frequently disrupted by piracy or political instability.

Spearheaded by the DragonBear strategic partnership between China and Russia, NSR is a cornerstone of their broader Arctic ambitions. For Russia, NSR reinforces its dominance in the Arctic region, bolstering its geopolitical clout and providing new economic lifelines amid Western sanctions. Simultaneously, China has embedded the NSR into its Polar Silk Road, a key extension of BRI, which seeks to expand Beijing's influence through Arctic trade routes and resource access.

The strategic significance of NSR is further amplified by the Arctic's untapped natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which present lucrative opportunities for energy exploration and export. Russian energy giants, such as Novatek, have already utilized NSR to ship liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Asian markets, bypassing Western-dominated maritime routes. This diversification has strengthened Russia's economic ties with non-Western partners, especially China and India.

However, leveraging NSR is not without challenges. Harsh Arctic conditions necessitate advanced infrastructure, including nuclear-powered icebreakers and robust search-and-rescue systems, all of which require significant investment. Moreover, the region's fragile environment raises concerns about the ecological consequences of increased shipping and resource extraction. Geopolitical tensions, particularly with Western countries, further complicate NSR's development, transforming the Arctic into a contested zone of strategic rivalry.

The Northern Sea Route has emerged as a geopolitical and economic game-changer, firmly placing the Arctic at the center of global competition. Linking European regions to Asian markets via the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Strait, NSR offers a transformative alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. For the DragonBear alliance, it represents far more than a logistical convenience; it is a strategic tool to challenge Western dominance in trade and transport routes. Recent disruptions in the Red Sea and broader Western decoupling efforts have accelerated their compatible Arctic ambitions, reinforcing NSR's role as a cornerstone of the emerging Polar Silk Road.

Recent developments have underscored the deepening cooperation between China and Russia in developing the NSR. In 2024, President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping announced the establishment of a joint commission to oversee the route's development. This commission will focus on infrastructure expansion, regulatory harmonization, and investments to ensure the route's reliability and year-round accessibility. Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear corporation, is leading efforts to bolster its nuclear icebreaker fleet, which is essential for Arctic navigation.

Strong demand for Russian energy exports to China has further propelled the route's viability. In 2023, cargo transit along the NSR reached record levels, with over 33 million tonnes shipped, driven largely by liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports and oil shipments facilitated by advanced icebreaking technologies. A significant milestone was reached in September 2024 when a Panamax-class container ship, *Flying Fish 1*, completed its Arctic transit from St. Petersburg to China in just three weeks, demonstrating NSR's commercial potential for large-scale shipping.

Both China and Russia have distinct yet complementary objectives in leveraging NSR. For China, the route provides an "entry ticket" to the Arctic, a region it describes as part of its Polar Silk Road, securing direct access to Arctic resources while expanding its influence in global trade (China already calls itself a "Near-Arctic State"). For Russia, the NSR supports its efforts to link Arctic resource extraction to export markets in Asia, ensuring economic resilience amid Western sanctions. Russia has also explored delivering energy resources such as oil, coal, and LNG to India via NSR, further diversifying its trade routes while strengthening its growing partnership with New Delhi.

The geopolitical implications of NSR are profound. The route provides a strategic counterweight to Western-dominated maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific and Red Sea regions. For Russia, Arctic militarization is a key priority, evidenced by its investment in military bases, radar stations, and icebreakers to project power across the region. China, meanwhile, has expanded its Arctic presence under the guise of scientific research, raising concerns about dual-use infrastructure with military applications. The exclusion of Russia from Arctic governance forums, such as the Arctic Council, has reinforced its reliance on China as a primary partner. This dynamic solidifies the DragonBear alliance and enables China to extend its influence into the Arctic, challenging Western dominance.

For Europe and the West in general, the rise of NSR presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, the route offers access to Arctic resources and alternative energy supplies from Russia. On the other hand, the EU must contend with China and Russia's growing dominance in Arctic shipping, which could undermine its influence. To maintain competitiveness, the EU must accelerate investments in alternative trade corridors, such as IMEC and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), while fostering greater collaboration with like-minded partners.

Whatever other motives may in at play with the recent revival of interest in Greenland by the Trump Administration, one is attributable to growing American concerns that the increasing vulnerabilities to the West in the Arctic theater cannot be addressed without some sort of enhanced U.S. security umbrella. It appears increasingly likely that Trump 2.0 will seek to bring the Panama Canal (another major global choke point) and Greenland under U.S. control for strategic purposes in order to confront the DragonBear in the Arctic and its immediate vicinity.

IMEC

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled at the G20 Summit in September 2023, is a landmark initiative aimed at strengthening economic, trade, and infrastructural connectivity between India, the GCC states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Israel, and the European continent. By integrating rail, sea, and digital infrastructure, IMEC seeks to transform regional trade dynamics, fostering economic cooperation, and providing a strategic alternative to BRI.

The corridor consists of two key segments: an eastern route connecting India to the Arabian Gulf via the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and a northern route linking the Middle East to the European continent through Jordan, Israel, and Greece.

At its core, IMEC has been shaped by several strategic motivations. From an economic perspective, it creates opportunities to link some of the world's fastest-growing economies—particularly India and the GCC states—with the EU market, facilitating smoother trade flows and reducing transit times. By enhancing connectivity across continents, IMEC not only bolsters supply chains but also positions GCC states as critical nodes in global trade infrastructure. The corridor also serves strategic geopolitical objectives, particularly for the United States and its partners, as it offers a transparent and sustainable alternative to China's BRI, which has faced increasing criticism for its debt-driven projects and lack of transparency.

The European Union plays a central role in IMEC, aligning the corridor with its broader Global Gateway Initiative, which prioritizes sustainable, green, and digital infrastructure development. For the EU, IMEC represents an opportunity to strengthen its economic ties with South Asia and the Middle East while supporting its own strategic goals of diversifying trade routes and reducing energy dependencies. The corridor also reflects growing alignment between India, the U.S., and the EU in counterbalancing China's influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, reinforcing geopolitical partnerships across regions.

IMEC also builds on diplomatic breakthroughs like the Abraham Accords and I2U2. The corridor is poised to strengthen ties between key Arab states and Israel, enhance regional stability, and promote economic cooperation. Diplomatic milestones, such as the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the normalization of relations between Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, provide a conducive environment for IMEC to flourish.

By fostering economic interdependence, IMEC has the potential to transform the historically volatile Middle East into a zone of peace and prosperity. Furthermore, IMEC promises to stabilize trade routes, enabling seamless logistics through established ports, rail networks, and financial systems in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the EU. It will reduce transaction costs, create additional job opportunities,

and stimulate industrial development. The corridor will facilitate the movement of goods, renewable energy, and digital information, ensuring operational efficiency and strengthening supply chains. By linking Haifa Port to ports in Western and Southeastern Europe (and beyond), IMEC enhances Israel's trade accessibility, benefiting all participating states.

However, IMEC is not without its challenges. The October 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict underscored the geopolitical volatility of the Middle East, highlighting the risks of relying on such a fragile region for a transcontinental corridor. The Hamas-Israel ceasefire signals a potential turning point for the re-launch of the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, while also advancing efforts towards IMEC. The corridor also bypasses the trans-Caspian region, which limits its scope and risks alienating potential stakeholders such as Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Thus, Ankara has responded to IMEC with its own Türkiye-Qatar-Iraq corridor (with a possible connection to Syria following Assad's ouster), a rival initiative aimed at cementing that country's influence as a critical player in East-West connectivity. Furthermore, IMEC faces stiff competition from established initiatives like BRI. While IMEC seeks to position itself as a transparent and sustainable alternative, China's deep-rooted influence in Eurasian connectivity presents a formidable challenge. Additionally, alternative projects like the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP), which also involves Türkiye (see below), and the proposed India-Iran-Armenia corridor further intensify competition.

The scale of IMEC's infrastructure projects entails high logistical and financial costs. Complex customs procedures, multimodal shipments, and coordination across diverse regulatory frameworks could hinder the corridor's economic viability—much more so than those affecting the Middle Corridor's optimization, for instance. Moreover, differences in environmental standards and emission regulations between participating countries, particularly the EU and India, could further complicate operations.

Despite these challenges, the GCC states—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE—have embraced IMEC as a means to assert their growing geopolitical clout. Positioned at the crossroads of East and West, these states view the corridor as an opportunity to expand their networks with India, key European countries, and the EU itself, while maintaining their independent foreign policies amid intensifying great power competition.

For India, IMEC is a strategic triumph, allowing it to bypass rivals like Pakistan while strengthening ties with GCC partners and securing new economic leverage against China. India's participation reflects its growing ambition to act as a bridge between the Middle East and European markets, further consolidating its position as a leading power in the emerging multipolar world order.

In conclusion, IMEC is a bold step toward reshaping global trade and connectivity in a multipolar world. It holds vast potential to deepen economic ties between South Asia, the Middle East, and the European continent while strategically countering BRI, led by rival China.

Yet its success will hinge on navigating regional geopolitical challenges, ensuring sustainable investments, and maintaining the delicate balance between competing regional powers. As GCC states assert their roles as hubs of intercontinental connectivity, IMEC represents not only an economic corridor but also a symbol of the shifting dynamics in global power and influence.

VCMC

The relaunch of the former Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor (VCMC) as a landmark initiative aims to enhance trade connectivity between India and Russia. This direct sea route connects Chennai in southeastern India to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East, significantly reducing transit times and offering a viable alternative to traditional trade routes dominated by Western influence. Originally proposed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2019 visit to Vladivostok for the Eastern Economic Forum and officially announced during the July 2024 Modi-Putin summit in Moscow, the corridor symbolizes a strategic deepening of India-Russia ties. Its operationalization marks a critical step in redefining Eurasian trade dynamics.

VCMC addresses logistical challenges that have historically hindered trade between India and Russia. Previously, goods had to traverse European routes, taking over 40 days to reach their destination. VCMC slashes this transit time to just 24 days, offering a faster, more efficient, and cost-effective option. For India, this corridor aligns with its strategic objective of diversifying trade partners and reducing its

reliance on the Suez Canal, which remains a critical chokepoint. For Russia, VCMC provides a lifeline to access Asian markets amid Western sanctions and geopolitical isolation following the war on Ukraine.

Economically, VCMC has profound implications for both states. Bilateral trade between India and Russia currently exceeds $66 billion, heavily skewed in Russia's favor due to significant energy imports by India. The corridor promises to boost trade volumes, particularly in energy, industrial goods, and fertilizers. India, a major importer of coking coal essential for steel production, stands to benefit from Russian coal, which is cheaper than Australian alternatives, as well as the cheaper Russian oil. The corridor also facilitates direct LNG shipments, enhancing India's energy security while expanding Russia's access to a stable and growing market.

Fertilizer imports further exemplify the corridor's potential. In 2022-23, India imported over 4.35 million metric tonnes of fertilizers from Russia. By reducing logistics costs, VCMC makes Russian fertilizers more competitive, even after the projected discontinuation of discounted rates. Indian exports, including textiles, machinery, and agricultural goods like eggs, are also poised to find new opportunities in Russia's Far East.

Lastly, aligning export standards with Russian requirements could help mitigate India's trade deficit with Russia and foster more balanced economic relations.

VCMC is not just a bilateral initiative; it serves as a regional enabler. Integrating Russia's Far East into broader Asian trade networks encourages investments and infrastructure development in this underutilized region. Similarly, Chennai's port facilities are expected to receive significant upgrades, driving economic growth in Tamil Nadu and enhancing India's logistical capabilities.

Geopolitically, VCMC is a critical asset in the shifting global order. For India, it complements other connectivity initiatives like INSTC, expanding its trade footprint in the "Silk Road region." It also reinforces India's strategic autonomy, balancing its growing partnership with Russia against its relationships with Western powers. For Russia, VCMC signifies a pivot toward Asia, countering its economic isolation and leveraging its Far East and Arctic regions as gateways to major Asian markets.

However, VCMC faces challenges. Infrastructure upgrades in Vladivostok and Chennai, including enhanced rail and multimodal connectivity, are essential to maximize efficiency. Western sanctions on Russia could pose risks to Indian companies operating within the corridor, although India's neutral stance and rupee-ruble trade mechanisms help mitigate these challenges. To sustain the corridor, India must focus on increasing its exports to Russia, diversifying its trade portfolio, and improving market access. India plans to begin accepting Russia's MIR card and simultaneously introduce its own payment system, RuPay, into Russia, despite Western sanctions on the MIR system being in effect since February 2024. Additionally, the increased shipping activity raises environmental concerns, necessitating compliance with international sustainability standards.

In conclusion, the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor reflects the evolving partnership between India and Russia, offering a faster and strategically significant trade route. For India, the corridor aligns with its "Act East" policy and aspirations to become a global trade leader. For Russia, it underscores a strategic shift towards Asia, leveraging its Far East to access new markets.

As VCMC gains momentum, the corridor has the potential to transform regional trade dynamics, foster economic growth, and redefine connectivity between Asia and the Arctic.

Türkiye's Strategic Role

As global powers compete to shape the future of international trade routes and infrastructure, Türkiye has emerged as a pivotal player in the connectivity race, leveraging its strategic location, infrastructure investments, and geopolitical acumen. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Türkiye occupies a unique position as a vital link in east-west and north-south trade.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's vocal opposition to IMEC underscores Türkiye's ambitions to remain indispensable in this new era of geoeconomic rivalries. This exclusion has been met with strong criticism from Erdoğan, who argues that Türkiye's economic and geographic advantages make it an irreplaceable part of any connectivity plan. In response, Türkiye has prioritized IDRP, an ambitious $17 billion initiative that aims to establish a direct route linking Gulf ports to the European continent via Iraq and Türkiye. Furthermore,

by participating in BRI through the Middle Corridor, Ankara is asserting itself as a central hub for global trade and energy transit.

IDRP is designed to provide a comprehensive multimodal solution, including a dual-track railway and modern highways spanning 1,200 kilometers, as well as high-speed trains capable of transporting goods and passengers at up to 300 km/h. The corridor is projected to connect Europe with West Asia by cutting transit times between the two continents by 12 to 15 days, compared to the existing Suez Canal route.

Plans for logistics hubs, industrial complexes, and energy pipelines integrated into the project further emphasize its strategic significance. Erdoğan has garnered strong support for IDRP from the UAE and Qatar, with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed pushing for expedited negotiations and project execution.

Türkiye's alignment with BRI, particularly through the Middle Corridor, has further solidified its position in global connectivity networks. The Middle Corridor connects China to the European continent via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye whilst bypassing Russia—a key geopolitical advantage amid Western sanctions on Moscow. By integrating this route into flagship domestic infrastructure projects like the Marmaray Tunnel and Istanbul Airport, Türkiye has strengthened its logistical capacity and attracted investments from China, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian states.

The Middle Corridor highlights Türkiye's role as a bridge between competing powers, providing a shorter and more stable alternative to northern routes while fostering economic ties with Beijing and regional neighbors. Türkiye's influence in the Middle East is central to its broader corridor strategy. In Iraq, IDRP positions Türkiye as a gateway for GCC energy exports to Europe, enhancing its role as a critical energy transit hub. The integration of oil and gas pipelines into IDRP could provide the EU and its member states with alternatives to the Suez Canal and Russian energy supplies, aligning with the EU's diversification goals.

Türkiye's current involvement in Syria further underscores its geopolitical ambitions. Military interventions in northern Syria, which almost certainly played a decisive role in the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, have bolstered Türkiye's leverage over potential energy and trade routes in the region. This is evident in competing pipeline proposals such as the Qatar-Syria-Türkiye pipeline, which competes with Iran-backed alternatives. Additionally, Türkiye's longstanding partnership with Qatar—the latest practical example is Türkiye's and Qatar's reopening of their respective embassies in Damascus within days of the old regime's fall (and within days of each other)—reflects Ankara's deepening ties with the GCC states to counterbalance regional rivals.

Türkiye's geopolitical strategy of multi-alignment allows it to maintain strong ties with NATO allies while engaging with GCC states, China, and the states of the core "Silk Road region." This balancing act enables Türkiye to maximize its influence across rival connectivity initiatives and mitigate risks of geopolitical isolation.

Despite its strengths, Türkiye faces significant challenges in asserting itself as a central player in global corridors. The rivalry between Türkiye's IDRP and the IMEC corridor project reflects competing visions for Gulf-to-Europe connectivity. The outcome will depend on factors such as project funding, geopolitical alignment, and the ability to navigate volatile regional dynamics. Security concerns in Iraq and Syria also pose risks to Türkiye's corridor ambitions. Political instability, terrorism, and unresolved conflicts could delay or derail infrastructure projects. Additionally, strained relations with Western actors, particularly the U.S. and the EU, may hinder Türkiye's ability to attract investments and partnerships for its initiatives.

Türkiye's proactive push for alternative corridors signals a broader fragmentation of global trade networks. As multipolarity reshapes international connectivity, Türkiye's efforts to integrate energy pipelines into trade routes could transform global energy markets. Its alignment with GCC states, China, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia countries positions Ankara as a key player in redefining east-west trade.

At the same time, Türkiye's ambitions expose it to increased competition and scrutiny. Successfully navigating these dynamics will require Ankara to secure investments, maintain regional stability, and balance competing interests across its geopolitical partnerships. In a fragmented global landscape, Türkiye's ability to adapt to shifting alliances and secure its relevance will be critical.

As a linchpin of global corridor politics, Türkiye is poised to play a defining role in shaping the future of trade and connectivity in an increasingly multipolar world.

Is the EU Ready for Primetime?

The European Union is at a pivotal crossroads, as global powers compete to dominate the emerging geoeconomic corridors that are reshaping global trade and influence. Connectivity initiatives like BRI, IMEC, and INSTC are redefining trade routes, creating both opportunities and challenges for the EU. In response, Brussels is leveraging tools like Global Gateway, 3SI, and its strategic engagement in volatile regions like Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. What follows examines the EU's strategy to navigate this intricate geoeconomic landscape, balance competing interests, and assert its role as a leader in sustainable and transparent global connectivity.

As a linchpin of global corridor politics, Türkiye is poised to play a defining role in shaping the future of trade and connectivity in an increasingly multipolar world.

Launched in 2021, Global Gateway is the EU's flagship response to China's BRI. With a €300 billion budget, it aims to fund sustainable infrastructure projects worldwide, focusing on digital, transport, energy, and health infrastructure. Unlike BRI, Global Gateway emphasizes transparency, accountability, and alignment with EU values such as environmental sustainability. This EU initiative is presented as providing an alternative for developing countries wary of the debt traps associated with Chinese projects. Investments in green transition projects (e.g., renewable energy networks) and digital connectivity infrastructure in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are central to this strategy.

However, Global Gateway faces numerous challenges. Its scale and budget pale in comparison to the expansive reach of BRI, and internal fragmentation among EU member states risks diluting its impact. Despite these limitations, Global Gateway aligns with the EU's broader geopolitical objectives, particularly in regions like the South Caucasus, where connectivity and energy projects intersect with its stated strategic interests.

Furthermore, 3SI complements the EU's objectives by strengthening infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity among 13 EU member states located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. While not directly led by the EU, 3SI reinforces integration efforts in Central and Eastern Europe and reduces reliance on external actors like Russia and China. Key projects under 3SI include investments in LNG terminals, energy interconnectors, and broadband infrastructure. 3SI's emphasis on North-South connectivity complements east-west corridors like IMEC, I2U2, and INSTC, furthering the ambition to establish a more integrated and resilient pan-European infrastructure network. By attempting to both stabilize Eastern Europe and bolster regional economies, 3SI aims to enhance the EU's geopolitical leverage and mitigate vulnerabilities in this strategically sensitive region.

Connectivity initiatives like BRI, IMEC, and INSTC are redefining trade routes, creating both opportunities and challenges for the EU.

The EU's role in the global corridor race involves navigating a complex web of competing and complementary initiatives. While initiatives like I2U2 and IMEC align with EU interests, others, such as BRI and Russia's ambitions (INSTC and NSR9) challenge the EU's ambition to be influential in neighboring geopolitical theaters.

Interestingly, INSTC offers an alternative to traditional maritime routes, connecting the European continent to South Asia via Azerbaijan. By integrating the trans-Caspian region into its connectivity framework, the EU can strengthen trade ties with South Asia while balancing Russian and Chinese influence. However, China's BRI dominates Eurasian connectivity, and Russia's focus on NSR and VCMC adds complexity to the EU's eastward ambitions. The EU must respond by reinforcing its strategic partnerships, particularly with India and the United States, to counter these rival initiatives.

The European Union is navigating a rapidly evolving connectivity landscape, marked by fierce competition and fragmentation. The facilitation of Free Trade Agreements with India and the GCC is of crucial geostrategic importance for the EU's interests, as these would enhance access to key external markets through the development of strategic corridors, boosting economic growth, ensuring energy security, and strengthening the EU's position in the global trade landscape.

Through initiatives like Global Gateway and 3SI, engagement in projects like IMEC, and working to extend I2U2 into the purview of the EU, Brussels would bolster the EU's quest to assert itself as a leader in sustainable and transparent connectivity. However, its success depends on strategic investments, robust partnerships, and effective diplomacy, particularly in volatile regions like Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan's Indispensability

Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have become pivotal regions in the evolving competition over global connectivity corridors, linking the European continent, Asia, and the Middle East. These areas, rich in geographic and economic potential, are at the heart of major projects such as INSTC, BRI, and the EU's energy and trade networks.

Amid this geopolitical flux and following the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has emerged as a critical player—a "keystone state of a keystone region," as the U.S. Naval War College's Nikolas K. Gvosdev put it in an earlier edition of *Baku Dialogues*—whose strategic location and investments position it as a linchpin in these initiatives, making it indispensable for regional and global connectivity.

Azerbaijan's geography places it at the crossroads of multiple major corridors, bridging the trans-Caspian region with Europe and Asia. Its role in INSTC exemplifies this importance, providing a land-based alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. By integrating its extensive rail and road networks, including the vital BTK railway that connects the country with Georgia and Türkiye, Azerbaijan has enhanced the Middle Corridor's efficiency.

Moreover, Baku's role in the direct rail link between Russia and Iran, which bypasses the inefficient Caspian Sea maritime route, further underscores its capacity to streamline transit and reinforce its status as a critical transit hub. Energy security also underlines Azerbaijan's geopolitical leverage. The Southern Gas Corridor, delivering natural gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe, has become a cornerstone of the EU's strategy to diversify energy supplies and reduce reliance on Russian imports (as has the earlier oil pipeline projects stemming from the 1994 "Contract of the Century"). This alignment with the EU's energy goals not only strengthens Azerbaijan's position as an energy hub but also reinforces its importance in the global energy transition. Given the end of the transit of Russian gas on 31 December 2024, Ukraine has stated that it is prepared to transit gas from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Despite these advantages, Azerbaijan operates in a region fraught with geopolitical and logistical challenges. The lingering tensions following the end of the conflict over Karabakh pose perceived risks to infrastructure stability, which in turn could deter foreign (read: Western) investments. Strained relations with Iran add another layer of complexity. While Tehran is a vital INSTC partner, the occasional flaring up of geopolitical tensions with Baku appear to outsiders as providing an unpredictable dynamic that complicates regional cooperation. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan must navigate the EU's support for Armenia and Georgia, whose pro-Western stances occasionally clash with Baku's broader regional ambitions.

In today's fragmented and competitive geopolitical landscape, Azerbaijan stands poised to play a pivotal role by bridging continents and influencing the emerging global order.

Against this background, Azerbaijan's strategic importance extends to its involvement in competing connectivity corridors. Its active participation in BRI and the Middle Corridor project, further highlights its commitment to diversifying trade routes. As noted above, the development of the Port of Baku and AFEZ, coupled with the expansion of the BTK rail route, bolster its capacity to handle increased trade flows. However, balancing alignment with China and strengthening its alliance with Türkiye while maintaining partnerships with the EU (and its key member states) and the U.S. is a delicate task.

Moreover, emerging initiatives such as IMEC and IDRP further complicate Azerbaijan's position. While IMEC bypasses the trans-Caspian region, diminishing Azerbaijan's role in east-west connectivity, Baku could advocate for future inclusion together with Türkiye, leveraging their strategic location. Similarly, the IDRP, with its Gulf-to-Europe focus, presents both competition and opportunities for collaboration, particularly with Türkiye and GCC states.

In addition, Azerbaijan's regional influence is also shaped by its relationships with Armenia and Georgia in South Caucasus. Armenia's participation in INSTC due to its very good relations with India balances Azerbaijan's dominance in the South Caucasus and its own efforts to capitalize on this connectivity. Conversely, Georgia's traditional alignment with the EU and its participation in BRI projects position it as a complementary partner for Azerbaijan, exemplified by its role in BTK and the region's network of oil and gas pipelines.

While Azerbaijan's geographic and economic advantages position it as a rising power in corridor politics, several challenges remain. Regional instability, particularly persistent tensions with Armenia, threatens to disrupt transit routes and investment flows. Dependence on external partners like Russia, Iran, and China exposes Azerbaijan to geopolitical risks, limiting its autonomy in shaping the future of connectivity. Balancing relationships with competing blocs, including the West and non-Western alliances like BRICS+ (which it has applied to join), requires careful diplomacy to avoid overreliance on any single power.

To solidify its role in global connectivity, Azerbaijan must prioritize infrastructure projects within INSTC, such as fully operationalizing the rail link between Russia and Iran. Strengthening relationships with India and Iran through cultural and trade diplomacy (and further energy exports) can help mitigate tensions and deepen collaboration. Diversifying its involvement in competing corridors like IMEC and IDRP while leveraging a future BRICS+ membership to attract investments will also be critical.

To conclude, Azerbaijan's role in the global connectivity race is emblematic of the broader geopolitical dynamics reshaping Eastern Europe and the "Silk Road region." Its ability to navigate competing interests, resolve regional disputes, and align with major global players will determine its success in capitalizing on its strategic location. In today's fragmented and competitive geopolitical landscape, Azerbaijan stands poised to play a pivotal role by bridging continents and influencing the emerging global order. Its investments and strategic decisions today will shape its future as a linchpin or a "keystone" in the evolving network of geoeconomic corridors.

The New Scramble for Influence

The geopolitical scramble for corridors has emerged as a defining feature of the twenty-first century, reshaping global trade, alliances, and power dynamics. Present-day competition for these strategic routes underscores the onset of an era of connectivity where infrastructure serves not only as economic lifelines but also as an instrument of geopolitical influence. This corridor race reflects a deeper global bifurcation, driven by the rivalry between the West and the DragonBear alliance, and manifests in connectivity initiatives like NSR, IMEC, and INSTC—to name but three of those covered in this article.

The geopolitical scramble for corridors has emerged as a defining feature of the twenty-first century, reshaping global trade, alliances, and power dynamics.

The recent instability in the Red Sea region has highlighted the vulnerability of traditional trade routes like the Suez Canal, emphasizing the urgent need for alternative pathways. Piracy, regional conflicts, and logistical bottlenecks have placed this critical artery at risk, spurring interest in corridors that bypass these threats. However, this competition is not without consequences. The proliferation of parallel systems risks fragmenting the global economy, creating spheres of influence that undermine integration and cooperation amid deepening Cold War 2 between the U.S. and the DragonBear under Trump 2.0.

What its proponents call the "energy transition" will also be a cornerstone of the corridor race in the time ahead. The global shift toward renewables demands corridors capable of facilitating the trade of green technologies, hydrogen pipelines, and energy grids. Initiatives like IMEC, which incorporate renewable energy infrastructure, are reshaping the traditional functions of trade routes, aligning them with the imperative of sustainability. This new focus will play a critical role in defining the winners and losers in the energy transition, as countries invest in corridors to secure their leadership in the green economy.

The green energy Black Sea cable initiative, which involves producing and transporting electricity generated from wind and solar sources in Azerbaijan and Georgia to Romania,

Hungary, and other European electricity markets (coupled with a possible extension across the Caspian Sea to incorporate electricity from Kazakh and Uzbek renewable sources), is another example of the above.

Small and medium-sized states are increasingly leveraging their strategic geography to gain prominence in this evolving landscape. Countries like Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and the GCC states are adeptly positioning themselves as indispensable links in major corridors, using their connectivity to punch above their geopolitical weight. These countries exemplify how strategic diplomacy and infrastructure investments can transform geographic constraints into geopolitical assets, granting them significant leverage in global politics.

The race for corridors is not merely about physical connectivity; it is a race to shape the future of global power, governance, and influence.

The geopolitical implications of this corridor scramble are profound. The global bifurcation into competing blocs further challenges the longstanding norms of multilateralism and global integration brought to the fore in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. As connectivity becomes increasingly politicized, states will have to navigate a world of shifting alliances and economic dependencies. For smaller states, the challenge will be to balance competing interests, maintaining neutrality while capitalizing on opportunities presented by both the West and the DragonBear alliance.

The corridors taking shape across Eurasia, the Arctic, and the Middle East will define the contours of a multipolar world order at the meta-level of global affairs. They will influence not just trade flows but also military strategy, energy security, and technological standards. The race for corridors is not merely about physical connectivity; it is a race to shape the future of global power, governance, and influence.

In short, the modern scramble for corridors is, in essence, a race for the future—a contest that will determine the balance of power in a fragmented yet still remarkably interconnected world. As countries compete to secure their place in this evolving landscape, the corridors of today are shaping the global order of tomorrow, setting the stage for a century defined by infrastructure, alliances, and resilience. BD

Table 2: Key Corridors

Corridor Name	State Actors Participating	Key Geopolitical Data	Key Geoeconomic Data
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	China, 150+ countries globally	Enhances China's global influence, infrastructure financing criticized for debt-trap diplomacy	Investments estimated at $1 trillion+, but could reach $8 trillion in infrastructure projects across Europe, Africa, and Asia
India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)	India, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel, EU, U.S.	Counterweight to BRI, bolsters India's strategic ties with Middle East and Europe	$20 billion initial investment; cuts shipping times by 40%
International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)	India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus	Reduces dependence on Suez Canal, strengthens India-Iran-Russia ties	Cuts transit time by 40%, trade volume expected to exceed $170 billion
Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian)	China, Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, EU	Bypasses Russia, crucial for east-west trade amid sanctions	Transportation volumes surged by 68% in the first 10 months of 2024, reaching 3.8 million tonnes, while container traffic rose 2.7 times, with shipments from China increasing 25-fold
Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Russia, China,	Arctic trade shortcut, bypasses traditional sea routes like Suez Canal	Cuts transit time by 30%, reached record volumes of 79 transit voyages and an estimated 2.38 million tons of transit cargo
Vladivostok-Chennai Corridor	India, Russia	Links India and Russian Far East, mitigates reliance on Western-dominated routes	5,600 nautical miles, boosting India-Russia trade in energy and resources
Three Seas Initiative (3SI)	13 EU member states (Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea regions)	Strengthens EU connectivity and reduces dependency on external actors	3SI reached 143 grossing an estimated investment value of 111 billion euros
Global Gateway Initiative	EU and partner countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America	Promotes sustainable alternatives to BRI, focuses on green and digital projects	€300 billion budget for global projects in transport, energy, and health
Türkiye-Iraq-Qatar Corridor	Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, UAE	Provides a competitive alternative to IMEC, connects Gulf region to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, strengthens Türkiye's influence in the Middle East	Estimated $17 billion investment; includes railways, highways, and potential energy pipelines; projected to create 100,000 jobs and generate $4 billion annually

Sources: CSIS, MEI, Saudi Journal of Economics and Finance, Astana Times, Centre for High North Logistics, India Shipping News, 3Seas, European Commission, and Asia News.

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The Scientific Council of the COP29 Presidency is a distinguished scientific advisory body that brings together leading scientists, universities, and think tanks from around the world. Its mission is to provide scientific guidance, support international collaboration, and contribute to the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The Council plays a vital role in supporting the COP29 process by increasing access to scientific research and promoting meaningful academic and policy discussions on key climate issues.

Objectives of the Scientific Council of the COP29 Presidency

- Uniting leading academic institutions, research organizations, and think-tanks worldwide to raise awareness and improve access to cutting-edge climate science
- Facilitating access to scientific research to support the COP29 process and ensure that science remains at the core of climate discussions
- Strengthening cross-border research projects by fostering regional cooperation, diversifying geostrategic approach, and sharing best practices and technological advancements
- Organizing capacity-building programs for various stakeholders and actors, and enhancing cross-border cooperation
- Engaging students and young individuals in the action against climate change through education, outreach, and inclusivity

A Transforming Eurasian Order

Feng Yujun

In recent years, driven by multiple factors, the international order has been undergoing rapid adjustment, evolution, and reshaping. In Eurasia, the Russia-Ukraine war has triggered persisting upheaval, acting as a pivotal catalyst for shifts in the regional order. Its impact has prompted historic changes in power dynamics, mutual perceptions, national identities, and strategic orientations among Eurasian states—shifts unmatched since the Soviet Union's dissolution over three decades ago. These transformations are set to profoundly influence the regional order, becoming a central element in current and future global developments.

Five Challenges to Russia's Status

Though no longer a superpower since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has continued to view Eurasia (the "post-Soviet space") as a crucial sphere of influence, where it has remained the core and dominant country in the region. Russia not only possesses comprehensive national power that far outgrows other Eurasian countries, but it also continues to wield significant influence over these countries' internal and external affairs.

Particularly since 2007, under a strategic worldview emphasizing Russia's rise as a great power, the United States' inevitable decline, and the accelerating dismantling of the liberal international order, Russia has worked to expand its geopolitical influence in Eurasia through a series of regional interventions. These include the Russo-Georgian War, the Crimea crisis, the Donbass conflict, Belarus's political protests in 2020, and Kazakhstan's January Events in 2022.

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Far from isolated or incidental, these actions represent various components of Russia's broader strategy to "restore former territories." One might surmise that had Russia achieved a decisive victory in its 'special military operation' in Ukraine, it could have signaled the dawn of a "new Russian empire." However, this war, now over three years in duration and mired in prolonged attrition, has dealt Russia a historic, comprehensive setback. Russia now faces five multifaceted challenges.

In Eurasia, the Russia-Ukraine war has triggered persisting upheaval, acting as a pivotal catalyst for shifts in the regional order. Its impact has prompted historic changes in power dynamics, mutual perceptions, national identities, and strategic orientations among Eurasian states.

First, the war did not achieve the swift victory Russia had anticipated, leading to a back-and-forth struggle that extended to attacks on Russian territory.

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a 'special military operation' against Ukraine, igniting the Russia-Ukraine war. Russia initially captured large areas of Ukrainian territory in a "blitzkrieg," yet Ukraine launched a counteroffensive in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions in the fall of 2022, reclaiming significant portions of lost land. Although Ukraine's "spring counteroffensive" in June 2023 did not fully achieve its intended goals, it still managed to deal substantial blows to Russian forces, weaponry, and logistical supplies through advanced battlefield awareness and long-range precision strikes. Starting from the end of 2023, Ukraine repeatedly launched attacks on Russian military bases and strategic infrastructure within Russian territory using long-range drones. By mid-2024, these attacks had reduced Russia's oil refining capacity by 15 percent. On 6 August 2024, Ukrainian forces entered Russia's Kursk region, occupying over 1,000 square kilometers of territory within less than ten days. Various indications suggest that this Ukrainian

"surprise counter-thrust" was not a simple hit-and-run operation but rather a meticulously designed strategic counteroffensive that deliberately challenged the "red lines" Russia had continuously set.

Second, Russia has faced unprecedentedly comprehensive economic sanctions from Western countries, significantly hindering its economic development and risking further marginalization from the global supply chain and international economic governance system.

The war has forced low politics like economic cooperation to give way to high politics that take security as its core. Sanctions imposed by the U.S., the EU, and even some neutral countries have been unprecedentedly severe, ranging from financing constraints, export restrictions, and asset freezes, to energy caps and embargoes, and the removal of Russia's major banks from the SWIFT cross-border banking and financial payments system. These measures have dealt a severe blow to Russia's economic operations and its connections with the global economy.

In addition to sanctions from Western states and West-led multilateral organizations, thousands of multinational companies have withdrawn investments or ceased services in Russia. This has had an impact not only on energy, finance, and high-tech industries in Russia, but also on biotechnology and consumer services in the country. This new phenomenon in the international political and economic landscape has further deepened Russia's economic challenges, significantly affecting not only its economy but also the daily lives of its people.

In the energy sector, the U.S. and the EU have made unprecedented efforts to break their dependence on Russia. The G7 and the EU implemented price caps and embargoes on Russian seaborne crude oil and petroleum product exports on 5 December 2022, and 5 February 2023, respectively. Despite Russia's attempts to circumvent sanctions through "shadow fleets," discounted sales, and increased exports to Eastern countries, it still suffered substantial losses. Over the more than two years since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, energy trade between Russia and the EU has drastically decreased. The value of the EU's oil imports from Russia decreased from a peak of $16 billion per month at the beginning of 2022 to approximately $1 billion per month by the end of 2023. In 2021, the EU imported 155 billion cubic meters of Russian pipeline gas, but by 2023, this volume had dropped to 27 billion cubic meters.

Although Russia has gradually redirected its oil exports to Asia, the shift in natural gas exports has proven challenging due to a lack of infrastructure. Gazprom, which at its peak contributed 8 percent of Russia's industrial output and 25 percent of the national budget, recorded a historic loss of $6.8 billion in 2023, with losses reaching $5.5 billion in the first half of 2024. In the mid-term, around 122 billion cubic meters of Russian gas exports per year will have no alternative market. Even accounting for the marginal growth in Russian LNG exports (2 bcm from 2021 to 2023), the loss in volumes is substantial. Over these two years, the EU has significantly reduced its total imports of Russian crude oil and oil products, largely ending its energy dependence on Russia. The close energy relationship between Russia and Europe, established since the Cold War era, has been significantly weakened.

Although Russia reported 3.6 percent of economic growth in 2023, this figure largely reflects a "wartime boom" driven by a surge in military manufacturing and a rebound from the 2.1 percent economic contraction in 2022.

Since the beginning of 2024, sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the EU on Russia have not eased but have intensified. Moreover, Russia's economy faces significant challenges, including industrial imbalances, mounting inflationary pressures, and labor shortages. With a worsening domestic and international political and economic environment, Russia's prospects for sustained growth remain uncertain and fraught with risks. Its position within the global economic system is expected to decline further.

Third, Russia has experienced a security backdraft, with its geopolitical security environment further deteriorating. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russia has been determined to prevent NATO's eastward expansion and challenge the U.S.- and NATO-led post-Cold War European security order. However, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, NATO has swiftly revitalized itself from its Macron-proclaimed "brain death" (in November 2019) and reasserted both its presence and power.

This can be seen in several ways. One, most NATO member states have increased their defense spending to the NATO standard of 2 percent of GDP. Two, NATO has rapidly bolstered its forward presence in Eastern Europe, raising troop numbers from the previously planned 80,000 to as high as 300,000. Thirdly, Finland and

Sweden, two traditionally neutral countries, joined NATO, extending Russia's land border with NATO by over 1,000 kilometers, further worsening Russia's geopolitical environment in the Baltic region. Four, the U.S. has used the Russia-Ukraine war to reshape its influence and leadership within the transatlantic alliance. Simultaneously, the push for Europe's strategic autonomy, focused on countering the Russian security threat, has grown stronger. Germany has emerged as one of Ukraine's most committed supporters, and Emmanuel Macron has even suggested that France might consider sending troops to support Ukraine.

More importantly, Ukraine—a nation with a complex and lengthy historical relationship with Russia—has definitively severed ties with its neighbor, even becoming its adversary. In the future, Ukraine could become NATO's strategic frontline against Russia. As former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski predicted in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*,

> The loss of Ukraine was geopolitically pivotal, for it drastically limited Russia's geostrategic options. […] A Russia that retained control over Ukraine could still seek to be the leader of an assertive Eurasian empire, in which Moscow could dominate the non-Slavs in the South and Southeast of the former Soviet Union. But without Ukraine and its 52 million fellow Slavs, any attempt by Moscow to rebuild the Eurasian empire was likely to leave Russia entangled alone in protracted conflicts with the nationally and religiously aroused non-Slavs.

Fourth, Russia's international image has suffered severe damage due to its military action in Ukraine, resulting in a significant deterioration of its global standing. Since the war began, the UN General Assembly has held four related meetings on the war, each time overwhelmingly adopting resolutions "deploring in the strongest terms the Russian aggression against Ukraine in violation of the Charter of the United Nations," demanding that the "Russian Federation immediately end its invasion of Ukraine and unconditionally withdraw all its military forces from that neighboring country."

Russia's membership in the Council of Europe and the UN Human Rights Council was temporarily suspended, and the International Court of Justice ordered Russia to "immediately suspend the military operations that it commenced on 24 February [2022]." The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin on charges of "the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation." This unprecedented action against the leader of a nuclear-armed state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council significantly restricts Putin's ability to travel to states that are parties to the Rome Statute.

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction among UN member states regarding Moscow's frequent abuse of the veto in the Security Council has intensified calls for UN reform, including changes to the Security Council. On 26 April 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution—co-sponsored by 83 member states—titled "Standing Mandate for a General Assembly Debate When a Veto is Cast in the Security Council." Following this resolution, the casting of a veto by one or more permanent members of the Council will trigger a General Assembly meeting, where all UN member states can scrutinize and comment on the veto. This development effectively curtails the unchecked use of veto power by the five permanent Security Council members since the UN's establishment and reflects the shared expectation of the 83 co-sponsors that the veto power comes with the responsibility to work to achieve "the purposes and principles of the UN Charter at all times."

There is reason to believe that for the foreseeable future, Russia will likely remain in a state of widespread international isolation, with its status and influence in global politics and the international governance system further diminished.

Fifth, significant undercurrents in Russian domestic politics create considerable uncertainty about the country's future development, with the possibility of a historic turning point not to be ruled out.

When Russia initially launched its 'special military operation' against Ukraine, anti-war protests broke out across multiple locations within Russia. Although these demonstrations were subsequently suppressed by government crackdowns, the repression prompted opposition groups to adopt more radical means of expression. Over the past two years, several staunch Russian supporters of the war have been eliminated via targeted poisonings or explosive "parcel bombs." Meanwhile, anti-government armed groups such as the "Russian Volunteer Corps," the "Freedom of

Russia Legion," and the "Siberian Battalion," composed of thousands of Russian citizens, have carried out cross-border raids from Ukraine into Russian territory, including Belgorod, with Ukrainian support.

Simultaneously, intense internal political strife has unfolded at the highest levels of Russian leadership. Over the past two years, more than a dozen prominent Russian energy executives—including Ivan Sechin, the son of Igor Sechin, Russia's de facto second-in-command—have died under suspicious circumstances, highlighting the intensifying power struggles amid the ongoing war.

What had an even deeper impact occurred in June 2023, when the Wagner Group, a paramilitary force previously trusted by Putin and vital on the Ukraine front, launched a rebellion under its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and headed toward Moscow. Although the rebellion was quelled and Prigozhin later died in a plane crash, the mutiny and subsequent purges within the military highlight the fragility of Russia's political landscape, contrary to its official narrative. Looking back at Russian history, each major defeat in foreign wars has led to transformative political changes domestically. This war will also place Russia at a historical crossroads once again, more than 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The stark contrast between Russia's strategic expectations and its harsh reality lays bare many deep-seated issues within the country, particularly the significant disparity between Russia's waning comprehensive national power and its great-power aspirations. The erosion of strength and influence of this once-central power will undoubtedly precipitate major shifts in the Eurasian order.

Significant Changes in Eurasia

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Eurasian countries have embarked on a comprehensive process of social transformation, striving to forge new identities and establish new strategic orientations within the global political and economic system. However, Russia's historical rule over these states—of varying durations—and particularly its post-2008 efforts to reassert extensive geopolitical influence across Eurasia, have hindered and complicated these countries' endeavors to solidify their new identities and strategic trajectories.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, now nearing its third anniversary, is poised to become a pivotal turning point in the post-Soviet evolution of Eurasia. Amid rapidly shifting dynamics, countries in the region are taking more decisive steps to solidify their new identities and geopolitical orientations.

Ukraine is undoubtedly a prominent example of this transformation. A fundamental cause of the Russia-Ukraine war is Ukraine's rejection of the developmental trajectory imposed by Russia, as it seeks to break free from Russia's all-encompassing control over its political, economic, cultural, and security spheres—a dominance that dates back to the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement according to which the Cossack Hetmanate pledged allegiance to the Russian czar in return for security guarantees and a form of autonomy within the Russian state. Instead, Ukraine aims to integrate into the European Union and the transatlantic security framework, aspiring ultimately to become part of the "Euro-Atlantic civilization."

Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine epitomizes the culmination of this struggle between control and resistance. Nearly three years of war have devastated Ukraine, leaving a trail of widespread destruction, and have resulted in a definitive rupture—and even outright enmity—between these two historically intertwined nations. As Nina Khrushcheva—a granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev now living in the United States—remarked in a March 2022 interview in *The New Yorker*,

> There was once a closer relationship with Russians. […] I think that's over because now Ukraine is going to be absolutely Ukraine. When Putin says the West is making Ukraine anti-Russian, he did more to make Ukraine anti-Russian than any American propaganda ever possibly could, because you can't bomb a nation into loving you. […] I think Ukraine now, as a nation, is stronger than ever.

On 28 February 2022, just six days after the outbreak of the war, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy officially signed an application for Ukraine's membership in the European Union. In December 2023, President Charles Michel of the European Council announced the decision to open accession negotiations for Ukraine's membership in the EU. In early March 2024, the European Commission approved the negotiation framework for Ukraine's EU accession. In mid-April 2024, Ukraine's Deputy

Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Olha Stefanishyna, announced that the negotiation framework and the first Intergovernmental Conference on Ukraine's EU accession were expected to be approved and convened by late June 2024, marking the official start of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations. On 25 June 2024, the EU formally launched membership negotiations with Ukraine.

Ukraine's relationship with NATO dates back to the early 1990s. In 1991, Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, and in 1994, it signed on to NATO's Partnership for Peace program. In 1997, Ukraine and NATO signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, establishing the NATO-Ukraine Commission. Following the 2014 Crimea Crisis, cooperation between the two sides in key areas intensified. Since the outbreak of war in 2022, NATO has provided Ukraine with unprecedented support.

On 30 September 2022, Zelenskyy, together with Verkhovna Rada head Ruslan Stefanchuk and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, jointly signed Ukraine's application for fast-track membership in NATO. In 2023, the NATO-Ukraine Commission was replaced by the NATO-Ukraine Council, where NATO member states and Ukraine sit as equal participants. This shift signifies the strengthening of political relations and deeper integration between Ukraine and NATO. At the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, the Alliance reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine's future NATO membership, recognized Ukraine's increased interoperability and substantial progress with reforms, and pledged continued support of Ukraine's progress on interoperability. NATO foreign ministers will continue to assess through the adapted Annual National Program, and the Alliance will invite Ukraine to join when all its member states agree and conditions are met.

It is anticipated that, following the conclusion of the war and the implementation of extensive domestic reforms, Ukraine will join both the EU and NATO, integrating into the Euro-Atlantic community. This transformation will signify a new identity for Ukraine, one grounded in common interests and shared values with Europe and North America, replacing its former identity rooted in shared religion and historical ties with Russia.

Kazakhstan is also actively redefining its national identity. Unlike Ukraine, which has firmly aligned itself with the Euro-Atlantic community, Kazakhstan's focus centers on "de-Sovietization" and the revival of its "historical self-awareness." On 15 March 2024, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced a competition to redesign the national emblem, criticizing the current emblem for being overly complex and having heavily Soviet-era characteristics. He argued that it fails to represent Kazakhstan's nationhood or reflect its future aspirations and values. This is what Tokayev said:

> In order to confidently move forward, we must fully understand the scale of our national history, protecting and promoting our cultural heritage. Kazakhstan is the direct successor to the nomadic civilization of the Great Steppe. The Ulus of Jochi, world-famous as the Golden Horde, has always been the recognized pinnacle of state-building in the vast expanses of Central Eurasia. The geopolitical legacy of this medieval power served as fertile ground for the emergence of several Eurasian states, including the Kazakh Khanate. The fusion of various ethnic groups and religions has created a unique model of intercultural symbiosis and state-building in this space. […] The Ulus of Jochi, like the Roman Empire, set development standards for the states and peoples of the Great Steppe for many centuries to come, and brought public administration to a qualitatively new level. […] The Ulus of Jochi occupies a significant place in the tradition of Kazakhstan's statehood as the past, present, and future of our country are closely intertwined with our historical heritage. It is crucial that the perception of the Golden Horde in the world is inextricably linked with Kazakhstan.

Tokayev has also made clear the goal of reviving historical self-awareness in various speeches. One he gave on 23 June 2023 is illustrative: "We must engage in comprehensive promotion of our cultural heritage. To modernize the country, we need to effectively use the capabilities of soft power."

However, this initiative has sparked significant concern in Russia. As one Russian media outlet put it in March 2024, "The most anti-Russian identity is being chosen for a country that has enormous potential for confrontation since the Golden Horde did not represent anything useful for Russia but was exclusively a source of mortal danger and threat." Some commentators even warned that "If the development trends of such a project continue, then Russia will face an all-too-familiar and completely undesirable scenario [such as the prospect of a 'special military operation'] in its relations with the Central Asian republic."

This response highlights Russia's deep anxiety over Eurasian nations forging new identities and distancing themselves from its influence.

As Eurasian countries seek new identities, their geopolitical orientations are also undergoing significant shifts. On the one hand, Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine has raised deep concerns about their own security, particularly as Russian officials and lawmakers repeatedly question the independence of these states. On the other hand, these countries recognize that Russia's strength has been weakened by the war, prompting them to gradually distance themselves from Moscow in various ways while actively pursuing a more diversified and balanced foreign policy.

As Eurasian countries seek new identities, their geopolitical orientations are also undergoing significant shifts.

A case in point is Armenia. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia was considered one of Russia's most steadfast allies in Eurasia. Armenia depended on Russian military support to counterbalance Azerbaijan and Türkiye, securing a long-standing advantage, particularly in the conflict over Karabakh with Azerbaijan. In turn, Russia capitalized on Armenia as a pivotal ally to maintain its traditional strategic influence in the South Caucasus.

However, Russia's prolonged 'special military operation' in Ukraine and its diminished capacity to support its allies significantly altered this dynamic. Armenia ultimately lost its conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh, leading to an agreement to fully return the region, which it had occupied for nearly three decades, back to Azerbaijan. This outcome has fueled strong discontent toward Russia within Armenia.

Over the past two years, Armenia has repeatedly skipped summits of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Furthermore, it has directly requested the withdrawal of some Russian troop units stationed in Armenia, its leadership has opened a public debate about applying to join the European Union, and explicitly stated that Armenia is not Russia's ally in its war against Ukraine. Armenia has also reiterated its commitment to respecting the territorial integrity of all states, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

On 12 June 2024, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that he plans to withdraw the country from the CSTO. Even one of Russia's once most dependable allies is now moving away from a core national policy of complete reliance on Russia for security. This development signals that Russia's dominant position in Eurasia has reached a precarious juncture.

Central Asian states are also actively diversifying their foreign relations on all fronts to reduce dependence on Russia in political, economic, and security spheres. In recent years, they have established the "C5+1" format with countries and international organizations such as the United States, the European Union, Japan, India, China, and others. Since 2015, the C5+1 between Central Asia and the United States has convened multiple meetings.

On 19 September 2023, the first Central Asia–U.S. C5+1 Leaders' Summit was held at UN headquarters in New York on the margins of the General Assembly annual high-level General Debate. Key topics included security, trade and investment, regional connectivity, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, and reforms to the rule of law and democratic governance. During this summit, U.S. President Joe Biden announced plans to increase U.S. security assistance for Central Asia and strengthen regional economic connectivity. He also proposed initiatives such as establishing a private-sector business platform to complement the C5+1 diplomatic platform, launching a C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue to bolster energy and supply chain security, and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, economic ties between the newly independent Eurasian states and Russia have considerably weakened compared to the Soviet era, owing to the disruption and restructuring of past supply and industrial chains. Despite Russia's attempts to foster closer integration through initiatives such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the EAEU Customs Union, and the EAEU itself, these efforts have been hindered by Russia's economic fragility and patronizing approach, prompting these countries to become cautious about deeper engagement.

Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war and the imposition of stringent Western sanctions, Russia has resorted to "parallel imports" through Central Asian

and Caucasian countries to secure dual-use equipment and components urgently needed by its military manufacturing. In 2022, trade between Russia and Central Asian nations grew by 15 percent, surpassing $42 billion.

This unusual surge in trade drew increased scrutiny from the United States and the European Union. By late 2023, both the U.S. and the EU had ramped up enforcement measures against Russian sanctions evasion, prompting countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to cease processing transactions via Russia's Mir payment system. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had already discontinued acceptance of Mir cards by September 2022. These actions have further eroded financial links between Russia and Eurasian states, with potentially significant long-term effects on their broader economic cooperation.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Eurasian countries have embarked on comprehensive social transformations, aiming to establish new national identities and define strategic roles within the global political and economic framework. Nonetheless, Russia continues to wield significant influence in the region and has made concerted efforts since 2008 to reestablish its geopolitical presence.

The Russia-Ukraine war is a historically transformative event—akin in significance to the dissolution of the Soviet Union—that is poised to bring about structural changes to the Eurasian order.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war may mark a critical turning point in the evolution of post-Soviet Eurasia. In the context of accelerating changes unseen in a century, these nations face the dual challenges of consolidating their identities and navigating new geopolitical alignments.

The Future of the Eurasian Order

The Russia-Ukraine war is a historically transformative event—akin in significance to the dissolution of the Soviet Union—that is poised to bring about structural changes to the Eurasian order. Shaped by the interplay of the aforementioned factors, the future of the Eurasian order is likely to unfold along three key trends.

Firstly, Russia is set to gradually lose its position as the central power in Eurasia. The prospects for Russia-led Eurasian integration have dimmed significantly, and its endeavors to restore imperial influence have encountered a major setback.

From a macro-historical perspective, the dissolution of the Soviet Union represents the collapse of an empire, a continuation of the imperial disintegration that began with the breakup of the Russian Empire after World War I. Despite this, Russia maintained substantial influence over Eurasian countries even after the Soviet Union's dissolution. Particularly, beginning in 2007 and 2008, Russia pursued a series of military operations in Eurasia, achieving incremental successes in its strategy to restore de facto imperial dominance.

However, the Russia-Ukraine war is likely to result in comprehensive and profoundly negative consequences for Russia. As its power wanes and Eurasian countries redefine their identities and strategic orientations, Russia's traditionally dominant position in the region will further erode. Its influence across political, economic, security, and cultural spheres in Eurasia will continue to diminish. Institutions of Eurasian integration led by Russia, such as the CIS, the EAEU, and the CSTO, are also likely to face increasing irrelevance and will probably struggle to produce substantive outcomes.

Secondly, Eurasian countries are likely to pursue varied development paths based on their own national conditions and interests, leading to an increasingly diverse development landscape in the region.

Although all Eurasian countries began their state-building after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, their societal transformations—particularly in foreign policy—were not always autonomous or independent. However, as Russia's control over these countries weakens in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, Eurasian states are expected to make more autonomous choices of national strategies, falling into several categories:

One, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, etc. These countries increasingly see their future aligned with Europe and are actively seeking integration into the European Union. The EU has also responded positively to these aspirations. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission adopted its 2023 Enlargement Package, recommending that the European

Council open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and grant Georgia the status of a candidate country.

Two, Azerbaijan. Baku has effectively established a comprehensive strategic alliance with Türkiye. With Ankara's support, it secured a historic victory in the conflict over Karabakh. As a result, Azerbaijan has emerged as the strongest supporter of the Organization of Turkic States championed by Türkiye. Currently, Azerbaijan's historical and practical ties to Russia have significantly weakened.

In the future, "Eurasia" as a transitional geopolitical concept might gradually fade from the spotlight in international politics.

Three, major Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These countries are striving to pursue a balanced major-country diplomacy while exploring their historical identities. Their goals are still evolving, as they continue navigating between maintaining Soviet political-cultural traditions, embracing Europeanization, and establishing identities as secular Islamic states.

Four, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These two states have historically relied heavily on Russia for economic and security support. As Russia's economic prospects dim, these two economically vulnerable countries may face increasing challenges. Concurrently, issues like the infiltration of religious extremism could further complicate their security environments.

Five, Belarus. Since the domestic political unrest of 2020 was quelled, Belarus has relied heavily on Russian support for both its internal and external policies, making it difficult for the country to pivot toward Europe and solidifying its role as Russia's most trusted and reliable ally. Nevertheless, as the Russia-Ukraine war turns against Russia, Belarus's stance has also started to waver.

Thirdly, Eurasia's frozen conflicts arising from the dissolution of the Soviet Union will be resolved in different ways.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, numerous "frozen conflicts" emerged across Eurasia, including the conflict over Karabakh, conflict on the left bank of the Dniester, and disputes over borders and water resources among Central Asian countries. While these conflicts all have complex roots, Russia's strategy of exploiting them to maintain its regional dominance has been a significant factor in their prolonged unresolved status.

However, as the Russia-Ukraine war continues and approaches its conclusion, these frozen conflicts are increasingly likely to find resolution through various means. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is expected to end through warfare—the harshest of outcomes—allowing Ukraine to break free from Russian control and pursue an independent trajectory. The conflict over Karabakh has already been resolved militarily, with Armenia agreeing to return the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven surrounding territories, where it had long exercised de facto control, to Azerbaijan, in expectation of potential reconciliation between the two nations. Meanwhile, border and water disputes among Central Asian countries are gradually being addressed through peaceful negotiations. Lastly, the conflict on the left bank of the Dniester is likely to conclude as Russia becomes unable to sustain its support for this "unrecognized republic," enabling Moldova to reclaim sovereignty over the region.

In comparison, the Georgian issue is more complicated. Although Georgia has not given up its sovereignty claims over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recent elections in that country have proven that there are still strong pro-Russian forces there, and Russia also maintains a huge influence in Georgia. This has cast a shadow on the negotiation process between Georgia and the EU and increased uncertainty regarding the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts.

As Eurasian countries increasingly choose their particular development paths, determine strategic orientations, and resolve frozen conflicts in the region, the aftershocks of the Soviet Union's dissolution may gradually subside. In the future, "Eurasia" as a transitional geopolitical concept might gradually fade from the spotlight in international politics. However, one crucial question remains unresolved for the global landscape and international order: where is Russia headed? BD

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Washington's Opportunity in Central Asia (and the South Caucasus)

Strategic Guidance to the Trump Administration

Stephen Blank

As the Trump Administration conducts a global survey of strategic opportunities for the United States, it would be well advised to view Central Asia and the South Caucasus (the core subregions of what this journal's Editorial Statement calls the "Silk Road region" and what is commonly still called "Eurasia" in some circles) as areas where a creative, new approach would yield lasting strategic gains—both for America and those states themselves.

To be sure, this region is not and will not become a major priority or a vital interest for the United States—nor is that necessary. But its importance in world politics as an area of strategic competition among many rival states, including Russia and China and several aspirant and rising middle powers, is increasing. Therefore, it should be understood to be beneficial for all the states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus that Washington both enhance and sustain at a higher level its comprehensive, multi-dimensional engagement with them because only America can provide or convene many of the public goods they need.

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But it is also no less beneficial for Washington to enhance its presence and profile throughout the core Silk Road region, because doing so would enhance America's influence not only there but elsewhere as well (and also because, frankly, it could be done on the cheap, relatively speaking). Neither should American bilateral engagement with the states of that region become a fundamentally military engagement. While there can and should be a military dimension to these relationships (because all the local governments would benefit from regular security cooperation with Washington and its allies in both Europe and Asia), that is neither necessary nor essential. Instead, this relationship should focus primarily on an agenda devoted to trade, investment, environmental cooperation, and connectivity projects—all of which are increasingly urgent in that part of the world, and in Central Asia in particular. Only on that basis can security and defense assistance be of maximum benefit to governments in the region.

> *Deepening the engagement between America and the Silk Road region would make them all safer, stronger, more prosperous, and enhance their sovereignty.*

Proceeding in this manner would be entirely consistent with advancing U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's declared "guiding mission" of the country's foreign policy: "to make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous." Not to mention more sovereign. The same could be said regarding each core state of the Silk Road region: engaging more deeply with the United States according to the terms laid out in this essay would also make the countries safer, stronger, more prosperous, and enhance their sovereignty.

There is room for security and defense cooperation with Central Asian states (in particular) beyond the existing modest level of existing programs: expanding them would likely be welcomed by Central Asian governments. But these programs are neither essential, urgent, nor currently necessary, whereas projects fulfilling this aforementioned list of priorities are. Moreover, if these priorities are synchronized with institutional and intellectual priorities previously published by this author and others like S. Frederick Starr (for the Central Asia Caucasus Initiative), and discussed below, it then becomes possible for these programs,

taken in the round, to exert U.S. and allied influence to a greater degree than has heretofore been the case. In turn, that projected heightened Western influence reinforces these local governments' independence and sovereignty. Such heightened American influence, based on the concrete and enduring success of bilateral projects, should aim at a set of objectives beneficial to both the United States (and its allies) and Central Asian governments.

Those strategic objectives are the enhancement of the security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of core Silk Road region governments, improved economic performance and governance, and the promotion of lasting and successful growth in regional cooperation. None of these objectives or projects in any of the domains listed here injure or threaten the vital interests of Central Asian states, the governments of the South Caucasus, or their great power neighbors, Russia and China. Even so, these two states' paranoia will breed their opposition to those programs. But even so, the very fact of an expanded U.S. presence will blunt that opposition. Moreover—and this conforms to the interests of both U.S. and core Silk Road region governments—these programs and policies would both restrain and constrain the imperial ambitions of both China and Russia vis-à-vis Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Furthermore, programs along these lines fully validate the choice of all the core Silk Road region states to conduct so-called multi-vector foreign policies that enhance their capabilities, standing, sovereignty, and resilience. When U.S., European and EU, Turkish, Israeli, Iranian, Qatari, Indian, Japanese, and South Korean programs in all these dimensions increase throughout the core Silk Road region, their overall impact negates or diminishes any effort to subordinate these states either to Russia or China. Furthermore, the success of multi-vector foreign policies makes it more difficult for Russia and/or China to make individual deals with any one of these other states at the expense of core Silk Road region states' freedom of choice in policy agendas.

There is no doubt that these foreign governmental programs' impacts register upon Moscow. The Russian press both in Russia and in Central Asia regularly bemoans the visibly growing impact of Turkish influence throughout the South Caucasus and Central Asia. It also is increasingly obsessed with the weakening position of Russian language use in Central Asia, a sure sign of diminishing

Russian power and influence. In addition, Moscow's longstanding mendacious campaign alleging the presence of U.S. biolabs throughout the region similarly highlights its anxiety about any foreign, especially American, influence in that part of the world.

Therefore, assuming the second Trump Administration conducts foreign and defense policy within the framework of great power competition that it postulated during the president's first term—but also bearing in mind the key foreign policy premise Trump outlined in his Second Inaugural, namely "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end, and, perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into"—enhanced interest in and cooperation with the core Silk Road region states will both advance U.S. interests and erode Russo-Chinese influence. And it will do so at a relatively small cost to U.S. taxpayers.

There are five existing trends that also comprise increasingly visible mutual interests that are now coming into view between Washington and the Silk Road region.

At the same time, many factors in operation make it both desirable and opportune for Washington to connect with Central Asian states both individually and collectively through regional organizations. Indeed, there are five existing trends that also comprise increasingly visible mutual interests that are now coming into view between Washington and the Silk Road region.

These trends reveal the potential for mutual recognition of these shared interests that should generate increased cooperation between and that reveal among these parties for the long term. These trends pertain not only to Central Asian relations with the U.S. but also to those governments' relations with both Moscow and Beijing.

Russia's Decline

Despite Russia's best efforts (primarily in the field of energy where it can pose and even act as the provider of enough energy to make up for regional energy shortages, and its ongoing efforts to uphold its role as the defender of the status quo in Central Asia), the palpable signs of its declining power are increasingly visible—most notably

in culture and economics, but also in defense and security across Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

We see these signs of Russian decline in many areas. In culture, what Kazakhstani president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called Russian "hysteria" over the increasing attraction of English and other languages as preferred foreign languages and the reduction of official use of Russian denotes its declining presence. Since in both late Tsarist and Soviet practice fluency in Russian was the official marker for identification of nationality and thus a prime pathway for Russification, the decline of Russian as the foreign language of choice is no small matter for Russia.

For this reason, language is now a key point for Russia in its negotiations with Central Asian leaders to emphasize increased opportunities for schooling and the attendant infrastructure, schools, teachers, and books in Russian. Nevertheless, the tide is running against Moscow. For instance, Putin continues to call Kazakhstan a Russian-speaking country. When he did this at a bilateral conference in 2023, Tokayev spoke in Kazakh to rebut him. Still, although Putin continues to do this; the hysteria mentioned above represents a telltale marker of imperial decline and anxiety over it.

China's Rising Profile

Despite very persistent efforts by Russia to dominate the provision of both hydrocarbons and nuclear energy to Central Asia, it is equally clear that is being supplanted by China, and potentially other states, as a provider of economic goods to Central Asia. Primary recent examples of this trend are the opening of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway that will bypass Russia and the reorientation of the Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline to go through Kazakhstan to China rather than Mongolia.

Worse yet, several Russian policies are undermining its ability to offer Central Asian states economic benefits, namely its policies toward Central Asian migrants and its wartime economic policies that all but guarantee years of economic stagnation. Similarly, its invasion of Ukraine has undermined local trust in its position as a "security manager" for Central Asia as have repeated media articles suggesting a Russian annexation of Northern Kazakhstan.

At the same time, the efflorescence of Turkish power, particularly in the South Caucasus, underlines a broader process of Russia's weakening power to dominate the

former Soviet Union's territories. Indeed, these areas are increasingly the object of growing international rivalry for influence.

Russian efforts to dominate the Central Asian energy sector have picked up steam since the formation of a gas union with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2022. Since then, Russian efforts to dominate the provision of nuclear energy to Kazakhstan and other states that will now rely more on that form of energy in Central Asia, if not globally, have become more prominent. Obviously, if those policies succeed—as is possible if competition is absent—then Moscow will retain a substantial amount of leverage over regional economies.

But this is increasingly the only economic sector in which Russia can offer Central Asia a comparative advantage, especially as the Russian economy is now becoming more militarized and less competitive as revealed by its dependence on North Korea, Iran, and China for weapons and defense technology. Moreover, given the increasingly menacing environmental challenges to Central Asia, reliance on Russian hydrocarbons may be a risky policy and, as France's interest in Kazakhstan's forthcoming nuclear project shows, rivalry with Russia is taking place here. This rivalry obviously offers Kazakhstan and other regional states real opportunities to avoid excessive dependence on any Russian form of energy.

One reason for these increasingly assertive Russian policies is the fact that it has long been increasingly clear that Chinese economic power has superseded that of Russia throughout the core Silk Road region. Moreover, Russian dependence on China for the prosecution of its war against Ukraine ensures that this process will continue. While the China-led Belt and Road Initiative moves forward, albeit not to the level that was previously expected, Russia's plans for Eurasian economic integration—including those built on Chinese participation—have not gone according to plan.

By the same token, there are palpable signs of China obliging Russia to reverse previous policies regarding arms control in Southeast and Central Asia (some countries in the latter region play host to Chinese bases near Afghanistan). Meanwhile, newer Chinese projects like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan that could ultimately connect to Europe-bound networks are moving forward while Russian-backed projects like the International North-South

Transportation Corridor have not been completed (mostly in a crucial Iranian section that remains unbuilt, due to a lack of available financing). Moreover, China has shown that it can act without negative consequence to its ties to Russia to prevent Indian and Russian joint projects traversing Central Asia from getting off the ground. Thus, the many warnings of Russia becoming China's "junior partner" growing out of this war with Ukraine could also apply to developments in the respective bilateral relationships in Central Asia and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the South Caucasus.

Growing Foreign Presence

Apart from Russo-Chinese rivalry for influence in Central Asia within the well-known framework of Russia providing security and China leading in providing trade and investment, many other governments are stepping up their interest in the core Silk Road region states. For example, Azerbaijan has made it clear that it is ready, willing, and able to sell much more gas and oil to Europe to replace Russian exports.

Japan has also stepped up its interest in Central Asia and has followed the American example of holding 5+1 summits with Central Asian governments, although this particular proposal was actually initiated by Kazakhstan.

We also are seeing a huge increase in Türkiye's overall engagement in defense and economics across the Silk Road region—on both sides of the Caspian. South Korea and India also are increasing their presence in these areas in order to increase the connectivity of these states with Asia and Europe, as are Israel and Iran.

Finally, we are also witnessing a substantial increase in the involvement of leading EU players in these areas. In the last two years President Emmanuel Macron of France, the then British Foreign Minister David Cameron, and outgoing German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have all visited and negotiated key deals. Macron, for example, sought to cut France into the dawning Kazakh nuclear energy program, an outcome that would diversify Kazakhstan's sources of nuclear energy. Scholz also agreed to host Central Asian migrants, a move that strikes at Russia's hostility to those migrants after the Crocus Hall terrorist attacks in early 2024. This German willingness also reduces unemployment pressures at home for these states while also diversifying

the sources of remittances that are extremely important to local governments, particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Thus, the increasing interest in eliciting more trade and investment from the United States takes place in an atmosphere of demonstrated stronger connections with major European and Asian governments. The growing interest in trade and investment opportunities with Washington that can readily be found in the Central Asian and South Caucasian press is, in part, both a reflection of and a part of the larger Central Asian interest and capacity to engage more freely with foreign government outside of Russia and China.

Middle Powers

As noted above, the rising foreign interest in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (e.g. French and Iranian interest in Armenia and the EU's mounting concern for a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as its anxiety about Georgian internal political developments) has been accompanied if not stimulated by the development of some of the leading powers and their interrelationships in these regions.

We may delineate three interrelated processes. First, the rise of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan as what Nikolas Gvosdev has called "keystone states" in the Silk Road region that both want and need enhanced foreign relations with major international power centers. Second, the increasing desire of all Central Asian states for regional collaboration that, in turn, whets their appetite for heightened foreign relationships conforming to multivector foreign policies. And third, the transformation of Central Asia's strategic geography to include both Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, which lends further credence to the analytical logic behind the conceptual adoption of the term "Silk Road region."

An increasingly visible tendency that has become manifest in the last five years has been the emergence of three keystone states in the core Silk Road region as genuine middle powers capable of projecting power and influence in the region and, furthermore, setting the agenda for intra-regional cooperation. Their activities show that they are both quite conscious of their leading role—supported by their economic and other capabilities—and that they are prepared to embrace the expansion of their horizons that this leadership

process entails. Furthermore, they are leading the intertwined processes of sponsoring regional collaboration, which enhances the ability of other governments in the region to reach out to foreign governments, and also simultaneously transforming the strategic geography of the Silk Road region.

Thus, Azerbaijan is now a full-fledged participant in Central Asian states' regional summits and is increasingly interested in participating in a broad agenda of regional collaboration. For example, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have recently signed an agreement on intelligence sharing, something that points to broader security cooperation in the future.

Furthermore, if Central Asia is to be able to become a link for transcontinental trade as all the many plans discussed over the last three decades for building the necessary infrastructure required, then Azerbaijan must be closely integrated into and with Central Asian economic, trade, transport, and connectivity regimes.

Likewise, at the same time, Tokayev has openly advocated a Central Asian defense union—i.e., one that excludes both Russia and China, but may well include Azerbaijan given this preceding agreement on intelligence sharing. Establishing such a union will take years but it also provides an opportunity for enhanced mutual action with the West to help provide the infrastructure for its actualization and reveals the regional thrust towards both independence and collective action.

Tokayev's advocacy and the larger regional trend towards cooperation also reflects both the transformation of the region's strategic geography and the Central Asian strategic agenda, specifically regarding efforts to bring about the integration of Afghanistan into the region now that the 2001-2021 wars are over.

While American politics precludes a recognition of the Taliban government of Afghanistan for now, Central Asian governments do not have the luxury of ignoring and ostracizing that regime. There are many reasons why this is true.

First, an Afghanistan that is left to sink into despair will furnish an excellent breeding ground for terrorists and terrorist militias, many of which hail from Central Asia and want nothing more than to wreak revenge upon local governments. If Central Asian states have no voice and/or leverage and influence in Kabul, then there will

be nothing preventing these groups from acting with or without the approval of the Taliban. Thus, the likelihood of terrorism will almost certainly grow in the absence of a regular Central Asian dialogue with the Taliban—hard as that may be to swallow in some Western policy-making circles.

A second reason why Silk Road region governments have already initiated a rapprochement with Afghanistan is that it offers them important opportunities in trade, transport, and connectivity—and not just in their part of the world but also in other parts of Asia, including India. Apart from the imperative to prevent the immiseration of the country and thereby improve regional security, there are signs of Taliban receptivity to these governments' economic overtures. Therefore, it would represent an act of supreme folly not to explore and then take advantage of these opportunities through the forging of cooperative links among Central Asian states, including Afghanistan.

This incentive applies with equal if not more force to cooperation to address pressing environmental challenges like water, climate change, and desertification, which menace all of these states—if not those beyond the immediate region. Environmental challenges mandate regional and even multilateral cooperation to address them *before* large-scale disasters make economic and living conditions more inhospitable for millions of people, with attendant consequences in every socio-political dimension, including what is classically understood as military security.

Finally, there is a third, equally compelling reason why Central Asian states are reaching out to Afghanistan—although it is one that probably cannot and almost certainly will not be articulated publicly. Readers may remember that Russia reached out to the Taliban in 2013 by sharing intelligence and providing arms to them, ostensibly to prevent ISIS-K attacks from Afghanistan-based terrorists. It has since been reported publicly that Moscow was effectually paying the Taliban to kill Americans. This confirms the fact that Russia viewed the Taliban as a prospective partner in Central Asia against the United States, whose presence in Central Asia Washington regards as anathema.

Since 2021, Moscow has continued to deal with the Taliban ostensibly and perhaps genuinely in part to forestall terrorist attacks on its own soil and in Central Asia. But this alignment also offers Russia many opportunities in

Central Asia—as it does China, which has made a similar deal with the Taliban.

Economic opportunities undoubtedly play a role here. But it is more likely that Moscow can use its ties with Kabul to accomplish two things. First, restrain or deter terrorism, or to cast a Russian defense umbrella over Central Asia to 'stop terrorism.' Second, its influence in Afghanistan also permits it to, well, threaten Central Asian states with the use of terrorist proxies from Afghanistan if they unduly assert their independence from Moscow.

This tactic epitomizes Russian behavior in conflict zones, where it presents itself as a valuable interlocutor between belligerents but actually uses the opportunity and one side as its proxy to advance its own interests at the expense of the other. Here the victim of prospective Russian interference could either be the terrorists if they attack on their own or the local government that could also be subjected to terrorist attacks if it deviates too openly from Moscow.

One suspects that every Central Asian government understands this game all too well. And that understanding and realization, especially after February 2022, that none of them can exclusively rely on Moscow's offers of security, which in turn probably colors their thinking about Russian offers.

The foregoing argument suggests that serious Western offers of meaningful security cooperation would probably be welcomed. This understanding may also be one of the motives behind Tokayev's advocacy of a defense union, for such a union might eventually be able to deal with terrorists from within or without on its own—that is to say, without needing to call in either Russia or China.

There is little doubt that Russia's somewhat dubious promises of security management here have helped diminish its standing across the Silk Road region. Not one Central Asian government has supported the war in Ukraine and both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have publicly criticized it, much to Putin and Russia's dismay. Thus, this security conundrum that grows out of the territorial expansion of Central Asia and the South

The Silk Road region's opportunities in high-tech, hydrocarbons and renewables, and connectivity are both real and growing.

Caucasus' strategic location provides Western governments with considerable latitude for engagement—if, that is, the major countries of the West handle this opportunity correctly. This last reflects the fifth major trend favoring enhanced engagement—namely, increasingly overt signs of a complementarity of interests with Western governments—to which we turn next.

Increased Regional Interest

The four trends described above, plus socio-demographic and economic trends in Central Asia as well as global great power rivalries, offer the U.S. opportunities to act more openly and extensively across the entirety of the Silk Road region.

Russia's efforts to stem its decline and continue what is in effect a policy of subordination in the Silk Road region, along with China's increasing socio-economic and potential military presence, the advent of several aspiring middle powers like Türkiye and the EU reflects the view of these external players that the field of competition in the Silk Road region is widening. This, in turn, opens up avenues for the United States to throw its own hat into this ring.

Moreover, Central Asian and South Caucasus governments have continued to advertise their interest in improved ties with Washington. And while the Biden Administration was too passive regarding opportunities here, it is apparent that American business and governmental offices have upgraded their presence and interests here—and are, in fact, negotiating more deals with these governments. Equally importantly, these governments have made clear that they would welcome an even greater American commercial and economic presence, with some extending this further by openly commenting on the positive effects of greater U.S. security assistance—namely, that this last would strengthen such countries and, indeed, the Silk Road region as a whole.

Thus, the key point here is that more American investment and a greater American presence is wanted by countries that make up the core Silk Road region, whether we are discussing Armenia or Uzbekistan. This sentiment clearly will allow the Trump Administration—if it is alert to its opportunities—to take advantage of them here. The U.S. clearly shares certain vital interests with these states, namely protecting their sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity against encroachment

and the opportunity to enter their markets.

The Silk Road region's opportunities in high-tech, hydrocarbons and renewables, and connectivity are both real and growing. Whatever variants of multi-vector policies the countries belonging to this region are pursuing, each can benefit from a commonsensical Trump Administration policy of engagement in this part of the world. The expansion of an American presence in the Silk Road region could expand the scope of each regional country's sovereignty by enabling them to balance the presence of China, Russia, and other non-Western powers (e.g., India, Iran, Türkiye).

Several major domestic factors present throughout the South Caucasus and Central Asia will also spur opportunities for the U.S. to increase its presence and influence here. For instance, the rising demand for instruction in English combined with the decline of the use of Russian as a regional lingua franca. Likewise, since independence in 1991 Central Asian states' population has grown by 60 percent (it is now around 80 million people, in total)—a sure sign of economic growth and improvement (Azerbaijan has also registered similar demographic growth, unlike Armenia and Georgia, however). Moreover, the populations are living longer and are younger in the aggregate. These trends make Central Asia a more appealing market for foreign companies, not least American ones. But the foregoing are not the only examples of a rising complementarity of interests between the United States and these countries.

Just as the U.S. is always looking for markets where it can export its goods and services, so too are Central Asian states. And the great power rivalry underway in the Silk Road region (and, of course, beyond) is now offering a significant new set of opportunities for them to do just that—not least to the United States. Specifically, as the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies, China has just now taken advantage of its possession of large quantities of rare earth to impose sanctions on selling them to America. Since rare earths are increasingly vital to the high-tech products and economies of leading actors like the U.S., these sanctions display the extent of the economic dimension of the great power rivalry that has now spread to include Central Asia. Since some of these states also possess large quantities of rare earths, they now have a golden opportunity to enhance their economic connection with other major international economic actors, including the United States. And American companies are already signing deals with some of them to explore for these rare earths and then buy them.

The Trump Administration must undertake both an intellectual rethinking of the core Silk Road region while simultaneously reforming its institutional structures and policymaking process along the lines of that rethinking.

Here too, a systematic U.S. policy would advance American interests, strengthen Central Asian states economically and politically (with positive spillover effects into the South Caucasus), and check Chinese influence over them and globally. Thus, here too Washington needs to step up its game, take advantage of the trends outlined here, and grasp the opportunities now being presented to it.

What Is To Be Done?

For Washington to take advantage of the opportunities beckoning to it, the Trump Administration must undertake both an intellectual rethinking of the core Silk Road region while simultaneously reforming its institutional structures and policymaking process along the lines of that rethinking.

Institutionally policymakers must finally recognize that Central Asia and the South Caucasus are two parts of a single whole that is, in addition not merely an appendage to China, the EU, Russia, or the war in Afghanistan. For too long, this was a primary characteristic of Washington's thinking. At the State Department, the Pentagon, the National Security Council, and other branches of U.S. executive power new bureaus of Central Asian and South Caucasus affairs must be stood up with direct access—as enjoyed by other regional bureaus—to cabinet secretaries and the National Security Advisor.

Such a reform would give the Silk Road region—and the U.S. officials that work with its countries—a stronger voice and platform from which to advocate on behalf of a deeper consideration of these states in future policymaking. It would also permit a deeper consideration of U.S. interests in the region without which pressure on behalf of civil and human rights will not advance.

Although the diplomatic class—including those who were

associated with attendant agencies like USAID—may have thought that it could have imposed democracy on these countries, three decades of experience should lead future policymakers to understand that without a mutually-beneficial relationship based on shared interests, progress on those agendas will simply not happen.

Provided these two programs reform American strategic thinking and its policymaking structures take place, it then would become possible to engage individually and collectively with the governments of the Silk Road region on a maximally fruitful agenda of mutual benefit.

The Trump Administration should utilize this opportunity. To use the 5+1 mechanism (or the 6+1 mechanism—with the additional sixth being Azerbaijan, which was reportedly rejected by the Biden Administration several times) of foreign ministerial talks more often and generate more regular bilateral engagements, would be in the national interest of the United States.

It would be equally advisable for cabinet secretaries, the Vice President, and even the President to visit the countries of the Silk Road region as well as host their leaders more often in Washington.

Such and similar structural moves would betoken America's seriousness about working with the region and encourage both its core countries and Washington to discover, formulate, and then implement programs in economics, trade, investment, all forms of energy (not just fossil fuels, but also not just renewables), rare earths, high-tech, transport, connectivity, and environmental protection that could then also lead to enhanced security cooperation. America could also take greater advantage of the growing desire for English-language instruction through teacher and cultural exchanges.

Getting the structural reforms right would not only demonstrate America's serious desire for a richer, more multi-dimensional engagement with the core countries of the Silk Road region, it would also strengthen their voice in U.S. policymaking, add strategic depth to Washington's approach to regional issues, and allow them and America to resist separate or conjoined Sino-Russian pressures.

It would also enable Washington to place its thumb on the scale with regard to pressing interests where it has heretofore been too absent. Three such issues immediately come to mind. First, Washington

can and should take a much greater role in bringing Armenia and Azerbaijan to a final peace treaty, now that the conflict over Karabakh is over. The Biden Administration tried but failed, in large part due to various moves it had made in the past few years that were interpreted by Baku to have gone too far in leaning in the direction of Armenia, which culminated in the signing of a Chater on Strategic Partnership literally four days before the end of the Biden Administration.

The requisite recalibration the Trump Administration would need to undertake would probably antagonize the often intransigent Armenian-American lobby, but this would need to be done for Armenia's sake, not theirs. A final peace treaty should delimit both sides' borders, terminate acts of war by both sides, provide for refugees among both protagonists, and settle the issue of trade and transport routes to ensure that Armenia can develop economically without so much reliance on Iran and Russia and be able to develop stable and rewarding economic ties with Azerbaijan as well. If this can happen with Egypt and Israel, it can certainly happen here.

But it will need strong U.S. leadership and so-called side payments to deal with the issues of refugees, transport routes, and trade. Doing so would demonstrate America's bona fides in this context, but also in Central Asia, while also giving the U.S. a lasting voice and presence in the region that benefits all the players. Such a settlement would also help strengthen both Armenian and Azerbaijani ties to the European Union, including energy ties. Lastly, this process would reduce both Tehran and Moscow's ability to preserve a latent sense of hostility that either or both could exploit in the future.

The second pressing issue confronting Washington is what is seen as Moscow's attempt to subvert Georgia's paths to membership in the European Union and NATO, as exemplified by the reports concerning the October 2024 election and its aftermath.

A strong, unified Western stance would likely produce results, because while Moscow and Tbilisi would most certainly push back, both seem vulnerable to that sort of pressure. Here again, America would be reducing Russian influence, strengthening the connectivity potential of the Silk Road region through Georgia, and both displaying and manifesting a long-term strategic interest in that part of the world.

Third, it should be evident to all observers that if Washington and its allies are to reduce or eliminate support in some Silk Road region countries for circumventing the Western-led sanctions regime against Russia since February 2022 (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are two of the most blatant examples), then they must undertake a stronger engagement with these governments.

Relying exclusively or even primarily on sanctions and threats has not and will not work in the future. A more enduring relationship with these and other Silk Road region governments cannot be driven by threats; it must also include incentives for them to move away from policies that are not in the national interest of the United States.

This may be a difficult and long-term process, but given the potential benefits these countries stand to receive from a more productive engagement with the West—that is to say, from the West's superior economic power—it ought to be possible to ensure it becomes one that has a positive outcome for both them and our allies.

As Russia's economic clout declines due to the war and because of what the West can bring to the table (both negatively and positively) for governments in Central Asia and the South Caucasus—and given the urgency of the moment in this war—America really has no time to lose.

Conclusions

Given the current trends and opportunities for the U.S. as outlined in these pages, there is no serious excuse for not taking advantage of them. Indeed, if anything, a program of structural and cognitive reform that reconceptualizes America's relationship with the core states of the Silk Road region offers the U.S., its allies, and the Silk Road region's states too many benefits not to seize the opportunities before us.

What is required, as a first step, is decision to commit to a vision of the possibilities at hand—and this commodity is often too short in supply—and to a sustained course of action to see it through. Nonetheless, and because there rarely are second chances in world politics, a failure to seize the day here not only hurts the United States. It could also inflict large and possibly irretrievable costs on the Silk Road region, which could come back to haunt the U.S., as did Afghanistan. That surely is a risk America should not take again. BD

Breaking Free from Parochial Geopolitical Complexity

Azerbaijan's Quest for a Third Path

Vasif Huseynov

Though geographically small at 186,043 square kilometers—and dwarfed by neighboring Iran, Türkiye, and especially Russia—the South Caucasus is home to over 50 distinct ethnic groups, encompassing a diverse tapestry of languages, religions, and cultures. Another unique characteristic for a region of this size is its consistent role as a microcosm of global geopolitics. This has been the case since the region's three countries regained their respective independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, with each aligning with different geopolitical centers. While Georgia pursued Euro-Atlantic integration, Armenia aligned with Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Azerbaijan, adopting a balanced foreign policy, opted for neutrality, maintaining equidistance and cultivating friendly, mutually-beneficial relations with both Russia and the West.

This status quo remained largely unchanged until recent years. This was due, in no small measure, to the fact that two territorial conflicts in the region—Armenia's occupation of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and Russia-backed secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia—had solidified the geopolitical orientations of the three regional countries. Armenia became heavily dependent on Russia across nearly all spheres in exchange for Russia's security guarantees. Georgia, seeking to solidify its pro-Western stance, pursued EU and NATO membership following the 2008 war with Russia and the secession of its two aforementioned regions. Azerbaijan, in turn, sought balance between Russia and the West, while navigating the ways to restore sovereignty over Karabakh.

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The outcome of the Second Karabakh War (2020) and the full restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over all the formerly occupied territories as a result of its "antiterrorist measure" (2023) represented the first shocks to this heretofore relatively static regional landscape. These two events, taken together, fully put an end to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and seriously undermined Armenia's faith in Russian security guarantees, which formally could not be extended into the Karabakh theater as it was *de jure* Azerbaijan's territory.

This essay examines what I take to be an evolution in Azerbaijan's foreign policy that can be called a "third path" or "alternative regionalism" approach.

In its wake, Azerbaijan began to pursue a more assertive foreign policy toward major powers. This represented a major shift in the country's political approach. Baku strengthened its geopolitical standing and began to capitalize on its key role as a hub for regional transport and connectivity corridors and as an energy supplier. The growing influence of Türkiye, Azerbaijan's closest ally in the South Caucasus following the 2020 war, added further confidence to the conduct of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

The de-occupation of Azerbaijani territories also had a transformative effect on Armenia. The country sought to move beyond its dependency on Russia for military and political support, which in large measure had been seen as part of a national strategy to maintain the illegal occupation of Karabakh. Consequently, Yerevan gained the confidence to approach the West more closely, reducing its participation in the CSTO while maintaining its active membership in the EAEU for its continued economic benefits.

Azerbaijan's success in liberating its territories also caught the attention of Georgia, whose leadership appears to have concluded that their own conflict is unlikely to be resolved unless

Tbilisi repositions itself geopolitically—namely, by balancing relations between major powers and easing tensions with Russia. The geopolitical logic of this recalibrated approach amounts to the following reasoning: the road to regaining Abkhazia and South Ossetia certainly does not pass through Brussels or Washington, but through Moscow.

The new dynamics in the South Caucasus entered a much more confrontational and potentially dangerous phase following the start of the present phase in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022. The intensification of the Russia-West rivalry, which has reached the point of a military escalation through proxy, strained tensions between them in other theaters, including, with some delay, in the South Caucasus. Armenia's newfound drift to the West began to receive more support from leading Western countries starting towards the end of 2022, with France deciding to provide military supplies and the EU deploying a monitoring mission to this country under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Russian officials clearly warn that Armenia is following the path of Ukraine that eventually ended up with a war with Russia.

The situation in Georgia has also reached a critical point. The government, led by the Georgian Dream party, became the target of Western criticism following Tbilisi's decision to compel local NGOs to reveal the sources and amounts of their foreign funding (from entities like the now-suspended USAID) and its resistance to being drawn into the Russia-Ukraine war by opting to "pick a side" in what amounts to a binary fashion. This criticism by the West escalated into a strong campaign of political pressure, economic sanctions, and further scrutiny after the party's victory in the parliamentary elections in October 2024 and its subsequent suspension of EU integration efforts.

Having signed a strategic partnership agreement with China in July 2023 and de-escalated (without, however, re-normalizing) relations with Russia, Tbilisi sought to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy approach. However, this shift has been rejected by domestic pro-Western groups, who view the suspension of efforts to move toward Euro-Atlantic integration as a step toward authoritarianism (they seem to equate a non-Western-oriented Georgia with a non-democratic Georgia). As of now, the situation in Georgia remains unstable and could potentially escalate into a

regional crisis, should the country come face to face with a campaign of enhanced external interference in its domestic affairs, or, even worse, overt external intervention.

The situation in Georgia has not only further complicated geopolitics in the South Caucasus; it has also added a new variable to the already complicated Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and various processes aiming to re-open transport and connectivity corridors in the region. Some Western officials have made it clear that they expect the South Caucasus to play a role in their attempt to reduce the dependence of Central Asian countries on Russia and China by providing an alternative transport path to world (read: Western) markets.

The United States also still seems to oppose (caveat: the position of the Trump Administration has not yet crystalized fully) broader regional cooperation proposals (e.g., Türkiye + South Caucasus + Central Asia) that would involve Iran, Russia, and China. This, along with Georgia's refusal to take part in any regional formats that include Russia, has undermined the 3+3 regional cooperation initiative that was proposed after the Second Karabakh War. In parallel, present impediments to completing the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, coupled with the overall regional situation, have also undermined intra-regional cooperation proposals involving the three South Caucasus states (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).

Azerbaijan faces an increasingly precarious position as it navigates the challenges to its traditional foreign policy balancing act, exacerbated by the intensifying geopolitical confrontation in the region.

In light of these developments, Azerbaijan faces an increasingly precarious position as it navigates the challenges to its traditional foreign policy balancing act, exacerbated by the intensifying geopolitical confrontation in the region. This pressure translates into an attempt (mostly by the West) to force regional countries to make clear choices between competing power centers.

Driven by a desire to avoid unequivocal alignment with any major power blocs and to strengthen its independent geopolitical standing, Baku is striving to chart a nuanced course aimed at securing the

viability of Azerbaijan's non-alignment. In this context, Azerbaijan is expanding its relations with alternative power centers, advocating for deeper integration within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and seeking full membership in other regional and global organizations. President Ilham Aliyev's unequivocal endorsement of the OTS during his 14 February 2024 Inauguration Address highlights Azerbaijan's commitment to the deepening integration of the Turkic world, thereby reaffirming Baku's refusal to participate in Western- or Russia-led integration initiatives. Azerbaijan's application for full BRICS+ membership in August 2024 and its accession to the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation in December 2024 are clear manifestations of this foreign policy trajectory.

I contend in this essay that the foregoing represents a "third path" (or, one could say, "alternative regionalism") in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Herein, I will examine the rationale behind this choice by Azerbaijan, which is predicated on Baku's persistent refusal to align with either the Western or Russian bloc. I will explore the opportunities and challenges that this choice presents for Azerbaijan. I will also argue that while Azerbaijan's efforts to break free from the geopolitical complexities of the South Caucasus and emerge as a regional "island of stability" are both rational and pragmatic, it remains unlikely that Azerbaijan can avoid regional threats and challenges by seeking regionalism beyond the South Caucasus.

Baku's Rationale

Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of non-alignment in international relations, although unlike, for example, Moldova, its constitution does not prohibit joining military alliances. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has been a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an international movement uniting 120 member and 17 observer countries. Predicated on the rejection of participating in military blocs, NAM was formally established by 25 states, including India, Egypt, and Yugoslavia, at the Belgrade NAM Summit in September 1961.

Azerbaijan chaired NAM from 2019 to 2024 and actively promoted the goals and principles of the movement in international relations. Based on these principles, Azerbaijan used to characterize its policy of non-alignment as an imperative conditioned by its geographical location. According to presidential adviser Hikmet Hajiyev, the geopolitical realities of the region urge Baku to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy course and develop close relations with various regional and global players.

In upholding these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid aligning with one geopolitical pole at the expense of the country's relations with other poles or players. A quick overview of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in recent years supports this contention. For example, in June 2021, Azerbaijan signed the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations with Türkiye. The countries vowed to support each other militarily if either is attacked by a third state or group of states. In February 2022, Azerbaijan and Russia signed another such document—this time with Russia: the Declaration on Allied Interaction. This move was interpreted by some Azerbaijani experts largely as a reassurance for Baku that, in the words of one commentator, Moscow will not "pursue similar policies toward Azerbaijan [as Russia has carried out against Georgia and Ukraine] in exchange for Azerbaijan recognizing Russia as a dominant power in the broader former Soviet region." However, this declaration does not bear the same legal status for Baku as the one it signed with Ankara (i.e., the Shusha Declaration has been ratified by the parliaments of both states, which effectually grants it the status of a treaty).

Such a positioning is critical for several reasons, but primarily because of the lack of any capable balancing power that would dare to openly and militarily confront Russia in the case of a challenging security situation that might involve Azerbaijan. This cautious approach is related, among other factors, to the fact that Azerbaijan-Russia relations have had problematic phases, both historically and in recent years (the downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines flight in Russian airspace in late December 2024 being the latest example). Russia's traditional support for Armenia in the conflict over Karabakh, Moscow's military supplies to Yerevan before and during the Second Karabakh War, and the deployment of Russian troops as peacekeepers in parts of Karabakh after the 2020 war constitute the rationale for Baku's vigilance in its Russia policies.

Azerbaijan continued to uphold this posture in the wake of the agreed withdrawal of the peacekeeping contingent from the Karabakh region in April 2024. This development was indeed unexpected and unprecedented as it was the first time in the South Caucasus that Russian armed units left the territory of a post-Soviet

state voluntarily and prematurely. Many analysts in the region contemplated the reasons behind this move and raised questions about how the two countries (Russia and Azerbaijan) came to terms.

For some observers, Moscow would not have withdrawn from the region in such a peaceful manner had there not been a quid pro quo deal for the Kremlin. Therefore, many analysts pointed to the possibility of Azerbaijan's membership in the EAEU, which is critically important for Moscow's geopolitical ambitions. However, on 23 April 2024 Aliyev made it clear that Baku has no such plans at the moment, although he did not rule out this possibility in the future should EAEU membership be judged to be economically beneficial to Azerbaijan.

In reality, however, this as well as similar comments about the represent nothing more than the polite rejection of alignment with *any* major geopolitical powers, including the two main pillars of the Western "rules-based" liberal international order in Europe.

This had not always been the case. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Azerbaijan did indicate a desire to turn institutionally toward the EU or NATO. Azerbaijan's 2007 National Security Concept (it has not been updated subsequently) indicated an intention to pursue "integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures," which was clearly outlined in the aforementioned document as a "main direction of national security policy." Aliyev clearly articulated the above as early as in April 2004 in an address before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

> Today, our strategic choice towards integration into Europe and into the European family—European structures—is continuing. We are strongly committed to that policy. We will do our best to ensure that Azerbaijan will meet all the standards and all the criteria that are common in the Council of Europe and in other European countries. That is our policy, which we have been conducting for a long time.

Providing a detailed genealogical account of the shift away from this position is beyond the scope of this essay. But the impact of two events in 2008 surely played a role. The first was the decision by a majority of NATO and EU member states to take the lead in supporting the secessionist drive of Kosovo's ethnic-Albanians, which culminated in a declaration of independence in February 2008, which was swiftly and enthusiastically supported by the West, thereby violating the

cornerstone international legal principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity on the pretext that Kosovo was sui generis—a unique case. The claim to "uniqueness" was directly challenged by Russia just a few months later in Georgia.

For Azerbaijan, the lessons drawn from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and, later, the developments involving Russia and Ukraine since 2014, were considerable. The tragic experience of Ukraine that came on the heels of the country's abandonment of neutrality and the launch of efforts to accede to the EU and NATO demonstrated the failure of the West to protect effectively some of the countries belonging to Azerbaijan's geopolitical theaters against the threats that their Euro-Atlantic choice brings about. Baku read this as a reaffirmation of the importance of a balanced approach to its foreign policy.

For Azerbaijan, the lessons drawn from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and, later, the developments involving Russia and Ukraine since 2014, were considerable.

That said, Baku has not abandoned its relations with the West. Quite the contrary, Azerbaijan has become a major player in European energy security and, as Damjan Krnjević Mišković has put it, "Azerbaijan has become an indispensable country for the advancement of Western strategic connectivity ambitions in the Silk Road," centered on its geographical place along the Middle Corridor route.

Today Azerbaijan is negotiating with its European partners about the possibility of increasing natural gas exports to the EU, which would help EU member states to mitigate the risk of dependence on single sources and supply routes. The two sides have forged a strategic partnership in the field of energy that is pivotal for both sides' economic prosperity and energy security. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, called Azerbaijan a "reliable [EU] partner" as she and Aliyev were signing the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy.

This partnership, as highlighted by back-to-back meetings of the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council and the Green Energy Advisory Council that took place in Baku in early March 2024, is

founded on tangible achievements and shared goals, particularly in the realm of energy cooperation. "Faced with increased Russian violence and a continued unjustified war on our doorstep, it is increasingly clear that, for [the] Europe[an Union], there will be no return to business as usual in its energy relations with Russia. That space is now filled by other trusted and reliable energy partners. And we found exactly that in Azerbaijan," said Kadri Simson, the then-EU Energy Commissioner, during her speech at that event, which was attended by the representatives of 23 countries.

The regional situation is, however, growing more tense and confrontational, which produces immense pressure on Azerbaijan's cautious balancing and non-alignment.

Azerbaijan has also been a close partner of NATO in its operations in Afghanistan and the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija. This was commended by Jens Stoltenberg, then-Secretary General of NATO, during his visit to Baku on 17-18 March 2024. "We appreciate very much your contribution to our KFOR mission in Kosovo, but also, of course, your presidency and your contributions to our mission in Afghanistan over many years were extremely important. You are absolutely right, one of the last troop contingents to leave Afghanistan was the Azerbaijani. Because you were responsible for the protection of the airport, which was a key task in the evacuation of the NATO presence in Afghanistan."

This is a clear manifestation of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy approach and Baku's keen interest to maintain friendly relations with all power centers within the framework of advancing the country's national interests. Located in the highly precarious geography neighboring Russia in the North and Iran in the South, Azerbaijan is compelled to cautiously consider geopolitical realities and the balance of power in the region. The regional situation is, however, growing more tense and confrontational, which produces immense pressure on Azerbaijan's cautious balancing and non-alignment.

For instance, on 15 November 2023, during a hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs on "the future of Nagorno-Karabakh," Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien made a series of statements that stirred significant concern in Azerbaijan. While addressing the Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes and developments in the South Caucasus, he asserted, "A future that is built around the axis of Russia and Iran as the main participants in the security of the region, the South Caucasus, is unstable and undesirable, including both for the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia. They have the opportunity to make a different decision now." This statement came in the wake of a series of developments indicating a shift towards a new security order in the South Caucasus, including the October 2023 3+3 ministerial meeting.

O'Brien made several damaging comments during this hearing, including the repeated use of variants of the phrase "no chance of a return to business as usual." On the other hand, near the end of his testimony—in response to a question—he did make the following analytical point:

> President Aliyev has traditionally tried to balance his ties to the regional players, Russia, Iran, particularly Central Asia, as well as to the West. And I think he's reaching a point, in my analysis, that if he makes peace [with Armenia], he has the opportunity to become more prosperous and to be in a stable area where there are counterweights to Russia and Iran. If he fails to make peace, he's really saying that in the future, I want to be beholden to Russia and Iran at a time when those two powers are getting much closer to one another than they are to him. And that puts him in the position of being very much the odd man out in a three-way game.

This was quickly followed by another foreign policy move by the West toward the South Caucasus that stirred concerns in Baku. On 5 April 2024, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and Antony Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State, in an unprecedented trilateral setting in Brussels. According to the readouts made public by sides, the meeting was aimed at increasing Armenia's resilience in the economic sphere. This meeting was largely interpreted in the region as a significant milestone in Armenia's foreign policy, underscoring its efforts to depart from Russia's and a shift towards seeking security support from Western nations—although the publicly known results of the meeting seemed to be insignificant.

Given the highly sensitive geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus and the context of the

Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, this meeting was closely followed in Baku. Above all, Baku expressed concerns that the meeting, which excluded Azerbaijan, would create geopolitical divisions in the South Caucasus, which by construction threatens regional peace and security.

The meeting was presented as the extension of geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West into the South Caucasus, which poses huge security risks to all the neighborhoods. On the other hand, the Armenian premier's shift towards the West at the cost of his country's relations with Russia creates expectations in the Western capitals for a similar move from the Azerbaijani government, which is somehow expected to support the actions of the Armenian leader based on the view that comes down to saying, 'what's good for Armenia is also good for Azerbaijan.' This 'wishful thinking' approach by external actors ignores Azerbaijan's calculus: to seek to maintain its traditional balanced approach in foreign policy and develop friendly relations with all major powers.

In this context, building closer bonds with alternative geopolitical centers is critical for Baku to maintain its balanced positioning and safeguard the country's interests. Bending too far in any direction would not advance that objective. It sometimes seems as though the Western powers fail to make a basic distinction, rooted in geography, between the South Caucasus and a region like the Western Balkans: the former does not belong exclusively in the Western sphere of interest whereas, arguably, the latter is or at least could.

New Avenues

Azerbaijan's foreign policy has entered a dynamic phase as the country seeks to adapt to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment while preserving its strategic autonomy. This effort is characterized by a proactive search for partnerships beyond the conventional spheres of influence as defined by Russia and the West, respectively. Azerbaijan's approach reflects a deliberate strategy to strengthen its sovereignty, diversify its partnerships, and capitalize on its geographical and economic advantages. To emphasize the point: it is not in Azerbaijan's national interest to allow itself to belong to any major power's sphere of interest, or even to be the object of major power competition—a prize to be won or lost in something resembling a binary approach to the conduct of international relations.

One of the key new avenues for Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the quest to sidestep or overcome such major power perceptions is its deepening engagement with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS offers a platform for Azerbaijan to bolster its ties with culturally and historically linked nations whilst enhancing economic and strategic collaboration (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan are OTS member states, while Hungary and Turkmenistan, and the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is only recognized by Türkiye, are observers). Aliyev's unequivocal endorsement of the OTS during his 2024 Inauguration Address marked a pivotal step in this direction: "This is the main international organization for us because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world."

By aligning itself more closely with the Turkic "family," Azerbaijan is not only reinforcing its cultural and political ties but also positioning itself as a central player in a network that spans the Silk Road region and beyond. This alignment serves to enhance Azerbaijan's regional influence while offering an alternative framework for cooperation that is distinct from the polarized, zero-sum agendas of major powers. This stance serves as a message directed towards both Euro-Atlantic military and political structures and Russia-led integration projects, indicating that Baku has no intention of aligning with either.

The OTS grants Baku significant potential to counterbalance other regional powers, assuming a more important role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Similarly, the institution holds considerable importance for other OTS member states amid escalating geopolitical tensions. Consequently, they are moving toward deeper integration in various spheres.

Simultaneously, Azerbaijan has sought to amplify its role within global organizations that align with its strategic goals. Its application for full membership in BRICS+ in August 2024 and accession to D-8 in December of the same year underscore this ambition.

While Baku's bid was not successful at the BRICS Kazan summit in October 2024—reportedly due to the intervention of India—it has not withdrawn its application. Azerbaijan views its eventual membership in BRICS+ as part of a strategy to strengthen its geopolitical standing by expanding ties with other member states in a new

and increasingly important global platform. It is important to add that this view rejects the interpretation, prevalent in some Western circles, that this bid represents a departure from the country's balanced foreign policy or its cooperation with the West.

In this context, it is worth noting that Azerbaijan's intent to join BRICS+ was first announced in the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Strategic Partnership between Azerbaijan and China. This was adopted by the two countries' leaders on 3 July 2024 during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Astana. This document highlighted Azerbaijan's intent to join BRICS+ and emphasized China's support for this initiative.

Expanding relations with China—a growing power that has traditionally not been an active actor in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus—is fully in line with Baku's strategic diversification policy. Evolving through initiatives within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor (TITR, commonly known as the Middle Corridor), heightened Baku-Beijing cooperation also supports Azerbaijan's efforts to become a key Silk Road region logistics and transit hub, capitalizing on its advantageous geographic location—the (unsanctioned) crossroads of TITR and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

The admission of Azerbaijan to the D-8 in December 2024 can also be analyzed along these lines, in addition to the economic opportunities D-8 membership offers to the country. As Inara Yagubova wrote in a recent IDD Analytical Policy Brief, "also known as the 'Islamic Eight,' the D-8 was established under Türkiye's leadership in 1997 and also includes Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan as member states—each of which is a majority-Muslim developing country that is either a middle power or a keystone state as well as a key economic player.

Membership in these organizations (BRICS+ and D-8) and expanding links with new power centers (e.g., China) will allow the country to tap into diverse economic and political networks, facilitate trade and investment, and enhance its diplomatic leverage.

Together, they constitute one-seventh of the world's population (i.e., 1.1 billion), with 60 percent of the world's Muslims residing in D-8 countries."

The D-8 represents a collective GDP of $6.4 trillion, its members account for nearly 5 percent of global trade, and the Organization aims to reach $500 billion in intra-member trade by 2030. Azerbaijan's inclusion bolsters the D-8's energy and transport capabilities, aligning with its strengths in oil and gas and its strategic location linking Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history, a point to which Aliyev referred in a wide-ranging interview on 7 January 2025: "Out of approximately 60 Muslim countries worldwide, Azerbaijan has been chosen as the newest member. This is both a great honor and a significant responsibility for us." He then enumerated the reasons why Azerbaijan was unanimously chosen: "We view the interests of all Muslim countries as our own, which is likely why Azerbaijan was the first choice after the decision to expand D-8 was made. Of course, our country's economic potential, political influence, and military strength were also considered. Additionally, our policy of Islamic solidarity, which I mentioned earlier, played a role in this decision."

Azerbaijan believes that membership in these organizations (BRICS+ and D-8) and expanding links with new power centers (e.g., China) will allow the country to tap into diverse economic and political networks, facilitate trade and investment, and enhance its diplomatic leverage. For instance, BRICS+ membership promises access to emerging markets and a multipolar dialogue platform, while the D-8 provides a framework for collaboration with some of the Muslim world's most populous and dynamic economies.

Together with its membership in more established yet still newer multi-state organizations like OTS, as well as maintaining friendly (or "friendly enough") relations with major power centers (e.g., China, the EU, Russia, the U.S., and the UK, not to mention Iran and Türkiye and others) and military blocs (e.g., NATO and SCO), highlight Azerbaijan's pursuit of a balanced approach—that is to say, its quest for the third path in foreign policy—that diversifies its international engagements without jeopardizing its established relations with existing partners.

Concluding Observations

Azerbaijan's pursuit of a "third path" in its foreign policy represents both a pragmatic and strategic effort to maintain its sovereignty and independence—but also to set the terms for the achievement of regional stability—in an increasingly complex and polarized geopolitical environment. The opportunities presented by this approach are significant, particularly in terms of diversifying partnerships with global and regional powers, strengthening economic cooperation, and enhancing Azerbaijan's role as a central player in key international organizations.

Azerbaijan's recent moves, which complement and even enhance existing priorities and relationships (as they are understood by Baku), demonstrate the country's commitment to expanding its geopolitical and economic influence while avoiding full alignment with either the Western or Russian blocs.

However, it is critical to bear in mind that while Azerbaijan's efforts to (1) break free from the geopolitical complexities of the South Caucasus, which seem in some ways to be unable to rise above parochial considerations, and (2) emerge as an "island of stability" in a region plagued by chaos and instability are both rational and pragmatic, it is unlikely that Azerbaijan can avoid regional threats by seeking regionalism beyond the South Caucasus.

A proper analysis of Baku's foreign policy since its victory in the Second Karabakh War demonstrates that Azerbaijan is fully aware of the region's delicate dynamics, which is reflected in its efforts to maintain friendly relations with neighboring countries—that is to say, to avoid direct confrontation with Russia and Iran.

Azerbaijan's support of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, which hypothetically includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia "plus" the South Caucasus's three surrounding powers (i.e., Iran, Russia, and Türkiye), is a manifestation of this foreign policy course, which is also aimed at preventing extra-regional actors from both the East and West) from intervening in the security space of the South Caucasus. On 18 October 2024, a third ministerial meeting under the 3+3 format convened in Istanbul, though again without the participation of Georgia.

Above all, that meeting reaffirmed the consensus among the three South Caucasus surrounding powers about the geopolitical order established in this part of the Silk Road region in the wake of the Second Karabakh War.

This was clearly expressed by Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan during his speech at the event: "Our perspective on the South Caucasus is […] based on a sense of regional ownership. We believe that the states of the region know the regional problems best and are capable of solving them." This formula—we can describe it as 'regional solutions to regional problems'—started to be clearly pronounced by the participating 3+3 states in the runup to the second ministerial meeting under this format, which took place in Tehran in October 2023. While this approach is in the obvious interest of Russia and Iran, as they oppose the involvement of Western players in the affairs of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia also appear to agree on this position, as does Türkiye—at least judging by Fidan's words.

> *The country's ability to successfully engage in regional cooperation while safeguarding its strategic autonomy will be pivotal in determining the long-term viability of its foreign policy approach.*

In this context, Azerbaijan's third path strategy, while presenting substantial opportunities for economic and diplomatic expansion, must navigate the inherent challenges of maintaining balance in a region increasingly defined by competing external and internal pressures. The country's ability to successfully engage in regional cooperation while safeguarding its strategic autonomy will be pivotal in determining the long-term viability of its foreign policy approach. Ultimately, while the third path offers a promising alternative to the rigid alignments of the past, it will require careful diplomacy, regional cooperation, and adept handling of geopolitical tensions to ensure Azerbaijan's continued stability and growing influence in the South Caucasus and, indeed, in the entire Silk Road region and beyond. BD

Training Diplomats in Azerbaijan

Past Successes and Future Plans

Fariz Ismailzade

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Azerbaijan as one of 15 newly independent republics in 1991, the development of a sovereign and professional diplomatic service became of utmost importance and urgency. Doing so, it was understood, was a necessary attribute and instrument for pursuing a country's foreign policy agenda, which at minimum should aim to strengthen sovereignty, minimize external risks, develop bilateral and multilateral relations, and properly position a given country on the global map of nations.

Yet apart from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, Azerbaijan and the remaining 11 former Soviet republics had limited experience with a truly professional and competent diplomatic service. The Soviet Union granted little authority to the 'ethnic republics' and provided them with no autonomy in foreign relations. Consequently, the offices of the republic-level Ministries of Foreign Affairs remained quite small and primarily handled protocol responsibilities for foreign dignitaries and guests traveling from Moscow to those parts of the country. The one in Baku, for instance, was established in 1944 as the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan.

Unsurprisingly, these ethnic republics lacked professional diplomatic academies to train young cadres. A handful of professional diplomats from those parts of the Soviet Union were either trained in Moscow (carefully selected, and with very limited quotas) or had a chance to work in Soviet embassies abroad as technical support staff, such as (civilian and military) translators and service personnel. Rarely, senior members in the ethnic foreign ministries were permitted to travel abroad as members of Soviet delegations to the UN General Assembly, where they sat in on sessions and committees and here and there even participated in meetings with foreign officials. Occasionally, they and mid-level diplomats in these foreign ministries went to various types of exhibitions and participated in cultural activities in socialist bloc countries. But this was almost completely devoid of substantive, policymaking content: the centralized Soviet government did not want any provincial capital to engage actively—much less substantively—in foreign affairs, which remained in Moscow's steely grip.

Still, sometimes (and in some periods), the assignments were a little more substantive. Commenting on Soviet foreign ministry practice in the 1960s, the author of a paper published by Bilkent University's Center for Russian Studies states:

> In countries where some republics had a particular interest, due to common borders (Romania for Moldova) or ethnic bonds (Ukraine in Canada, due to the diaspora, or Armenia in Iran, in connection to the important Armenian community in the country), diplomats coming from the [ethnic] republics could be especially attached to the embassy as secretaries in the chancery, cultural attachés or consular agents. These diplomats were used for their cultural and linguistic features as part of an 'ethnic' diplomacy, of which R. Mamedov is an example, as head of the consular section of the [Soviet] embassy [in Ankara].

By and large, however, at the moment that these countries (re)gained independence thanks to the implosion of the Soviet Union, their now independent governments had significant difficulties in assembling a professionally-trained diplomatic cohort to work in their respective, newly-established foreign ministries. The available cadres from Moscow-based schools and diplomatic backgrounds lacked local language skills. Most of the personnel that staffed these new ministries came from existing (local) protocol teams; others had experience working with foreign delegations as translators, guides, and so on. Many academics and university professors with foreign language skills

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were also invited to serve and fill the staffing needs of the diplomatic services being set up in the ethnic republics now having become independent states.

The Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy was launched by President Ilham Aliyev in March 2006, under the leadership of now Rector Hafiz Pashayev, who had recently returned to Baku from Washington where he had served as the country's first ambassador to the United States.

Moreover, since Azerbaijan was located in the southwest corner of the Soviet Empire, and thus bordered Iran and NATO member state Türkiye, its capital Baku had not been completely secluded from the conduct of Soviet foreign affairs. For example, the Congress of the Peoples of the East, the first large-scale international anti-colonial conference in history, was in September 1920 in Baku, which played host to 1,900 delegates originating from all corners of the former Russian Empire and various parts of the Arab world (as far away as Algeria), the Balkans, China, India, Indochina, Iran, Japan, Korea, Mexico, South Africa, and Türkiye.

Moreover, France's Charles de Gaulle visited Baku after attending the Tehran Conference in 1943, at the height of World War II. Two separate U.S. Congressional delegations visited Baku within a week in September 1945, followed by the arrival of a U.S. Senator on the very next day. Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser came to the city in 1958, India's prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru did so in 1961, and Türkiye's president Cevdet Sunay visited in 1969. Others followed—in increasing numbers—in the decades leading to the implosion of the Soviet Union.

As part of the U.S. State Department's Cold War-era "Jazz Ambassadors" program, legends like Earl Hines and B.B. King played before engrossed Azerbaijani audiences in what was commonly known as the capital of Soviet jazz (they came in 1971 and 1979, respectively).

Starting around the mid- to late-1950s, Baku began to play host to an increasing number of Asian and, a few years later, African delegations. One such delegation was led by the future head of Zimbabwe's domestic intelligence service who went on to serve as Home Affairs Minister, Dumiso Dabengwa, who in 1964 spent weeks in Azerbaijan learning about collective agricultural cooperatives. Also, various decrees issued by Moscow also spurred a greater number of visits by foreign dignitaries to Baku. For instance, in 1958, the Secretariat of the USSR Central Committee ordered Azerbaijan to establish "Friendship Societies" with Albania, the "Arab East," China, and India. In 1961, Azerbaijan was instructed by the Presidium of the Moscow-based Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee to establish a branch in Baku.

In the 1980s, for example, Iran and Iraq opened consulates in Baku. The oil capital of the world was often visited by foreign tourists and celebrities from socialist countries. Azerbaijani universities also admitted many foreign students from developing countries. For example, the future President of Angola, Eduardo dos Santos, studied petroleum engineering and radar communications for six years at the Azerbaijan Oil and Chemistry Institute (now the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industrial University), graduating in 1969 (during much of this period, he was also the head of the Pan-African Students' Association of the USSR).

As we have since our founding in 2006, ADA will remain Azerbaijan's diplomatic training lodestar.

Yet, in almost all the instances noted above, foreign guests were served either by communist party officials or various arms of the Soviet secret police or intelligence apparatus, with very little jurisdiction or power granted to the local branch of the Foreign Ministry.

Independence Period

When Azerbaijan restored its independence in 1991, it had already been dragged into a full-scale war with Armenia over its Karabakh region. Thus, Baku was the epicenter of many foreign delegations coming to attempt to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. The number of embassies in Baku was increasing rapidly, seemingly day by day. Neighboring and faraway states were recognizing Azerbaijan's independence and seeking to establish full-scale diplomatic relationships. At the same time, the abundant oil (and later, gas) resources of the Caspian Sea quickly began drawing the interest of global energy giants. All of these activities required a large number of professional diplomatic cadres, a well-organized Foreign Ministry, and an active and able foreign service. Yet, the

country was also in the middle of several existential crises (e.g., expanding foreign occupation, floods of refugees and internally displaced persons), which produced a level of political and socio-economic instability that took on the characteristics of a failing state on the edge of full-on civil war.

Under these adverse conditions, Azerbaijan began to open its first embassies abroad and launch diplomatic activity at both multilateral and bilateral levels with very small financial resources and, as noted above, few seasoned diplomats. For some of the active members of the anti-Communist movement, called the Popular Front, which held power from spring 1992 to June 1993, the legacy of Azerbaijani statehood, including its foreign service, traced its roots to the period of the existence of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (May 1918-April 1920), the first secular republic in the Muslim world.

During this short period, nearly 20 countries operated diplomatic missions or representative offices in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), including Armenia, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Persia, Poland, Ukraine, the UK, and the United States. The ADR also managed to build an active foreign service, establishing diplomatic and consular representations in Armenia, Crimea, Dagestan, Georgia, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Ukraine, and other countries. Decisions were made (but not executed) to open more such missions in countries like Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sweden, the UK, and the United States.

The ADR also sent a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, which was led by Alimardan bey Topchubashov, chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's parliament. Thanks to the ADR's diplomatic outreach, the country was de facto recognized by the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference on 11 January 1920.

Perhaps the best assessment of the ADR's diplomatic achievement can be derived from the words spoken by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who recalled his meeting with Topchubashov's delegation thusly: "They talked the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, [and] in respect of conceptions of right and justice."

More than 70 years later, the modern independence period had its urgencies and necessities. For Azerbaijani diplomats, the learning process had to be quick and on the job. At the onset, there was no time for systematic training and education. The difficult external environment, which increased risks to the country's sovereignty and statehood, pushed Azerbaijani diplomats to seek alliances and support from foreign stakeholders. On many occasions in those first years, Azerbaijani diplomats relied on Turkish diplomats' help and/or actively used the Russian language and Russian-based texts and documents to promote Azerbaijan's agenda.

The main priorities and message of Azerbaijani foreign policy at that time were to get world powers and global policymakers to condemn the occupation of Karabakh by Armenia, seek humanitarian support for the plight of Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs, and attract investment and military aid. Another priority for the work of diplomats was engaging with the legislative bodies of their host countries to counter the lobbying activities of Armenian diaspora organizations, which included pushing for various anti-Azerbaijani resolutions and laws.

During the First Karabakh War period, which ended in May 1994 thanks to a Russian-brokered ceasefire, Azerbaijani foreign policy prioritized the promotion of the two cornerstone principles of international law: sovereignty and territorial integrity of all UN member states, starting, naturally, with its own. Focusing on this as well as on the IDP issue could gain certain geopolitical dividends and push the resolution of the conflict over Karabakh toward the desired outcome—that is, to ensure Karabakh remained within Azerbaijan.

At the same time, the country's difficult socio-economic situation also encouraged Azerbaijani diplomacy to actively use the energy card in its foreign policy messaging, thus putting the country and the core Silk Road region on the world map and drawing the interest of foreign powers, near and far, to the region. By doing so, Azerbaijan's leadership and its senior diplomatic representatives sought to attract foreign investment, which was much needed for the country's shattered economy to recover, but also to make a stronger case for the geopolitical advantages of supporting Baku's position on the Karabakh issue.

Due to the small size of the national budget in the early years of regained independence—due in part to the increasing costs of the Second Karabakh War—the

Azerbaijan foreign service lacked sufficient resources to pursue effective public diplomacy. At that time, social media was absent from the everyday use of diplomats. Emails and websites were only then in their beginning stages, and the main public diplomacy focus of diplomats was TV, radio, and newspaper reporters. Azerbaijani diplomats only began gradually to learn how to work effectively with civil society actors, universities, and think tanks, where they could make presentations about the Karabakh conflict.

Initially, Azerbaijan could afford to establish embassies only in some of the world's most important capitals (e.g., Ankara, London, Moscow, Paris, Washington) and in the most important centers of multilateral diplomacy (e.g., Geneva, New York, Vienna). Those first diplomatic missions aimed to develop essential linkages with major powers and attract their focus on Azerbaijan's situation. In those early years, Azerbaijani diplomacy neither initiated many regional, sub-regional, and international initiatives and platforms, nor did it participate broadly in the full gamut of issues being discussed multilaterally.

Due to Azerbaijan's internal instability, one can say that the initial cohort of diplomats and ambassadors appointed in the early 1990s was composed mainly of loyalists to the country's top leadership, which had changed three times in three years during the initial period of restored independence. Most of these people did not have a professional diplomatic background. Moreover, the first cohort of diplomats included professional Arabists, researchers from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, and professors from the University of Languages. Others became top diplomats because of the foreign language skills they had gained due to having previously lived and working abroad. For instance, Azerbaijan's first ambassador to the United States, Hafiz Pashayev, tells the story that he was recruited from his post as Director of the Metal Physics Laboratory at the Institute of Physics of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences and sent to Washington in large part because he had received a prestigious post-graduate research fellowship in 1975-1976 at University of California at Irvine and was thus judged to be familiar with the American way of life.

Despite these shortcomings, Azerbaijani diplomacy in the early 1990s scored numerous diplomatic victories. In 1993, for example, the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions that condemned the Armenian occupation of Karabakh and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Armenian military formations from the occupied lands. Another victory was scored at the OSCE 1996 Lisbon Summit when all participating States acknowledged the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan through a special statement by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office.

But perhaps the greatest diplomatic victory of Azerbaijan in those early difficult years of independence was the successful conclusion of talks that resulted in the "Contract of the Century"—a groundbreaking oil and gas agreement between Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, and major Western oil companies, led by BP. Although this was an energy and economic agreement, the ability of the Azerbaijani leadership and its top diplomats to attract competing nations into such an unprecedented endeavor, balancing their interests and developing a multi-vectoral approach, was a masterpiece of diplomacy. Alongside Western companies, Russian, Iranian, Japanese, Russian, and Turkish companies were also initially involved.

As Svante Cornell and Fred Starr observed in an earlier edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the Contract of the Century "placed Azerbaijan on the world map, benefiting from the country's critical geographical location and energy resources to make it a serious regional player: a sovereign and engaged subject of international politics and not just an object to be manipulated by outside forces." By ensuring that the foregoing set of players each held an interest in the success of the Contract of the Century not only made them stakeholders in the success of Azerbaijan and, thus, invested in fostering mutually-beneficial relations; but it also ensured that the country could begin to adequately finance its development, pursue administrative reforms, provide for its own security, and, ultimately, ensure the liberation of its Armenian-occupied lands.

Alongside such victories, however, Azerbaijan suffered some diplomatic losses. One prominent example was the adoption of Section 907 (entitled "Restriction on Assistance to Azerbaijan") of the Freedom Support Act (1992), which prohibited any kind of direct U.S. government-to-government aid to Azerbaijan. This effectually put the United States in the business of sanctioning Azerbaijan (and only Azerbaijan of all post-Soviet states). It should be noted that 907 was adopted by the U.S. Congress (its lead champion was then-Senator John Kerry, with then-Senator Joe Biden

also being an active supporter) and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush before Azerbaijan had even had the opportunity to establish an embassy in the United States.

Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy

As the economy of Azerbaijan began to recover from its deep recession in the late 1990s, the resources available for the development of a modern diplomatic service also increased. The Contract of the Century begat the construction and opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the establishment of the State Oil Fund, which has boosted the national budget and allowed Azerbaijan to start increasing the number of its embassies and permanent missions abroad. Between 2005 and 2010, for example, the number of its diplomatic representations tripled, increasing from 25 to 75. At the same time, Azerbaijan was now able to host many international forums, play an active role in multilateral diplomacy, initiate new regional projects and platforms, develop and promote its public diplomacy, and provide other countries with humanitarian and development assistance.

The rising number of Azerbaijani legations abroad, plus an expanding Foreign Ministry at home, resulted in growing demands for new, young, and professionally trained diplomatic cadres.

The rising number of Azerbaijani legations abroad, plus an expanding Foreign Ministry at home, resulted in growing demands for new, young, and professionally trained diplomatic cadres.

Initial training sessions at the Ministry took place on an ad hoc basis—i.e., when funds were available from outside donors or the Ministry's own projects. Of special popularity among the Ministry's diplomatic staff were training courses abroad offered by various partner diplomatic academies and foreign universities. These were fully sponsored trainings, offered by the ministries of other countries. Diplomats loved to travel internationally to attend such courses.

In the late 1990s, the United States Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) was established in Washington. That institution helped to bring together Azerbaijani and American business interests and has spearheaded countless projects to deepen various aspects of the relations between the two countries. Among its flagship projects was the establishment of the Caspian Studies Program at the Harvard Kennedy School in 1999, which included a provision to send senior Azerbaijani diplomats to Harvard for executive training programs.

In the early 2000s, UNDP had agreed with the Foreign Ministry to sponsor a more permanent training center in the latter's building, which was fully equipped with modern technology and provided space for small trainings. The Ministry and UNDP worked closely together to develop a training curriculum and bring trainers from various countries, including through NATO's Partnership for Peace Consortium of Training Centers as well as the NATO Science for Peace program. Yet, this training center remained small and underfunded.

A new system needed to be put in place for the recruitment, training, rotation, and evaluation of diplomatic personnel. As Rector Pashayev was quoted as saying to the *New York Times* in July 2007, "To spread our image in the world, we need a real presence. But we have a shortage of diplomats."

This encapsulates the logic of the decision to establish the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA), which had been launched by President Ilham Aliyev in March 2006, under Pashayev's leadership, who had recently returned to Baku from Washington. ADA was set up initially under the Foreign Ministry, and the rector was given a concurrent appointment of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. The latter was designed to indicate the importance of ADA's mission for the Ministry and, indeed, for the whole country.

The establishment of ADA and the appointment of such a prominent public figure to lead its development raised hopes among the Azerbaijani public, the intelligentsia, and top diplomats about the high quality of future professional training and the expected rise of the overall capacity of the Ministry's cadres. All expected that ADA would be able to raise significant funds and resources for a superior level of diplomatic training and education.

The initial scope of work of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy involved setting up a training program for the staff of the Foreign Ministry. These were mostly second and third secretaries from various departments dealing with

economic, political, and consular issues—both at bilateral and multilateral levels. ADA had decided to contact prominent educational centers around the world specializing in the training of diplomats. These included the Clingendael Institute, the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (also known as the Vienna School of International Studies), the École nationale d'administration (ENA), the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University's Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Türkiye's Diplomatic Academy.

Professors from these and a few similar institutions conducted week-long training courses for the staff of the Foreign Ministry on topics including bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, current trends in public diplomacy, how to run effective negotiations, communication and public speaking skills, and modern consular affairs. These courses were very informative and, most importantly, very motivating and stimulating for the Azerbaijani diplomats. They felt the Ministry's growing attention to their professional development and built hopes for ADA to play a more active role in furthering their career prospects.

In parallel to such weekly courses, ADA also established the Global Perspectives Lecture Series, featuring hour-long lectures and discussions with prominent global leaders, public opinion makers, prominent researchers, scholars, and experts, and distinguished (retired) diplomats. At the same time, language courses were launched with the help of foreign embassies based in Baku.

Of special help to the selection of partners was the International Forum on Diplomatic Training (IFDT)—an informal association of all serious diplomatic academies and graduate schools of international affairs from around the world established in 1972 as a yearly meeting of deans, directors, and rectors under the co-chairmanship of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna and Georgetown's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. Just a few years later (in 2012), ADA hosted the IFDT's 40th annual meeting under the title, "Diplomatic Training in the Twenty-First Century: Sharing Experiences, Meeting New Challenges, Opening New Frontiers." Panels featured discussions on how small states' diplomatic activity can help preserve their sovereignty and territorial integrity, energy and environment diplomacy, and the evolving diplomacy of regional organizations. Practical workshops covered topics like e-diplomacy training, content-based language instruction for diplomats, and the utility of role-playing in training diplomats to be better multilateral negotiators.

At the time of ADA's establishment, the Foreign Ministry, which at the time was led by then newly appointed foreign minister Elmar Mammadyarov, had implemented a reform program of the recruitment system. While in the 1990s, the recruitment of young diplomats was done on an ad hoc basis without any exams or other merit-based criteria, the new minister has set up a new professional system of examination and recruitment, which has led to the selection of talented and smart young diplomats.

The selection process, developed by Deputy Minister Vaqif Sadiqov, consisted of three stages: written tests, written essays, and oral interviews. Candidates with knowledge of rare languages were given special preferences.

The Ministry's emphasis on meritocracy, transparency, and accountability went so far as to remove itself from conducting the written exams. Instead, it was outsourced to the State Committee for the Admission of Students, which was widely regarded for its professionalism. The *New York Times* reported how Azerbaijan introduced a foreign service entrance exam that is "turning the system into a meritocracy. Of the 700 applicants who took the test, only eight passed; they were the only people to enter the foreign service in 2006."

The next year, the best 35 university graduates were selected out of more than 1,000 applicants—also entirely based on their results, irrespective of their social status and background. This group made significant changes in the culture, work style, and mentality of the Ministry as a whole and laid the foundation for the future strong performance of the Azerbaijani diplomatic service.

Advanced Foreign Service Program

Soon after its founding, the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy established a new program for the Ministry's fresh recruits. The program was called the Advanced Foreign Service Program (AFSP) and lasted for six months. All newly-recruited students were assigned by a ministerial decree to attend morning classes at ADA, before receiving hands-on training in the various ministerial departments in the afternoon.

AFSP's original curriculum was developed along six distinct blocks: International Law and Politics, Global Trade and Economics, Public Diplomacy, Consular Affairs, Leadership Skills, and Areas Studies and Internships. Intensive English-language lessons were also part of the curriculum from the onset.

Under the *International Law and Politics* block, the courses focused on major multilateral treaties and conventions, including a module on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. Coursework also covered globalization, regional disputes, the history of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Karabakh, the primary activities of multilateral and regional organizations, and the foreign policy priorities of global and regional powers. UN Security Council resolutions were also taught, and practical sessions were held on how to write diplomatic notes and letters. Other parts of the course were dedicated to global security challenges like terrorism, asymmetric warfare, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Human rights issues and the country's national security interests were also covered.

AFSP's original mission consisted in producing not only talented executors of papers and letters, but also world-class analysts, negotiators, and communicators in possession of a sense of initiative and fully developed dynamic personalities.

In the *Global Trade and Economics* block of the original AFSP curriculum, courses focused on integrating political knowledge into the economic field, with special attention on the WTO, energy policies, foreign economic relations, investment promotion, and trade and transport issues. Tariffs and sanctions were also discussed. And since Azerbaijan is a producer and exporter of hydrocarbon sources of energy, students learned to develop presentations on the history of this industry in Azerbaijan and present-day major regional energy projects. Alternative and renewable sources of energy were also the focus of these discussions. Students were also taught to work on the development of the non-hydrocarbon sector of the economy by promoting connectivity corridors and regional hub projects.

The third block of the original AFSP curriculum was *Public Diplomacy*, an entirely novel element for a diplomatic culture rooted in the Soviet model. Courses focused on working with civil society organizations (including those devoted to human rights work), youth and advocacy groups, religious entities, think tanks, and traditional, web-based, and social media outlets. Mock press conferences were organized. Debates with civil society and diaspora activists were also included in the program, as were visits to IDP and refugee camps. Students and lecturers actively discussed the growing role of technology and digital media in diplomatic activities, with sessions also geared to learning how to write effective press releases, organizing media events, and so on.

The fourth block was *Consular Affairs*, which consisted mainly of a classical approach to the current legal frameworks on the protection of citizens, providing various services to them, details and articles of the Vienna Convention, visa and travel procedures, and assisting citizens after incidents of crime. Mock simulations were organized, and special practical sessions were held with experienced consular officers, including from the foreign embassies based in Baku. The approach may have been familiar, but the tone was different: students were taught to approach consular matters with the aim of "getting to yes" through a "serving-your-fellow-citizens" approach, which was not exactly a hallmark of the Soviet model of diplomacy.

The fifth block, *Leadership Skills*, was in many ways the most rewarding part of the original AFSP curriculum. One segment was devoted to public speaking and communication skills, negotiation abilities, effective presentation skills, teamwork, and so on. Another focused on communication with embassies, government officials, and international organizations, but also on communication across various cultures and religions.

A special leadership training program for more senior diplomats was established in parallel to AFSP, which focused on first secretaries and above. Thanks to the support of the Norwegian embassy, ADA worked with a prominent workforce management company based in Oslo, Right Management, to design and implement a tailor-made leadership development program for Azerbaijani diplomats and civil servants. Particular emphasis was placed on developing managerial skills that were not common in a typical Azerbaijani work environment at the time: effective communication, time management, running effective meetings, providing

feedback, and active listening. Crisis management and change management also became integral parts of the course.

The sixth block of the original AFSP curriculum was devoted to *Area Studies and Internships*. The main focus was on important geopolitical theaters and geographies like Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and the post-Soviet space. ADA came up with the innovative idea to select the top ten performers in this block of the AFSP program to participate in a one-month, fully-funded internship program in key Azerbaijani embassies. The interest expressed by aspiring diplomats was very high and the competition to secure a coveted spot was fierce. The list of participating embassies was carefully selected to provide a personal mentorship opportunity for the ambassador and to make sure that the young attachés would be provided with an interesting and unique portfolio of tasks. ADA took care of visa, travel, and lodging issues. As it turned out, the internship-at-embassies program became one of ADA's best (and most popular) initiatives.

The training provided by each block was important for young Azerbaijani diplomats to master in order to become successful in their everyday work, but also to learn how to act as proactive leaders in championing the country's foreign policy priorities abroad as well as become producers of serious diplomatic analyses. AFSP's original mission consisted in producing not only talented executors of papers and letters, but also world-class analysts, negotiators, and communicators in possession of a sense of initiative and fully developed dynamic personalities.

The classes were held in an interactive manner, with lectures and discussions enhanced with practical skills development through simulations, case studies, role-playing exercises, peer-to-peer learning sessions, and field visits. Young diplomats were also taken to such important governmental and private institutions as Parliament, SOCAR, religious entities, oil fields, the Central Bank, and so on.

ADA also actively involved foreign teachers and trainers not only from the list of educational centers specializing in the training of diplomats, as provided above, but from other universities and centers, as well. These have included the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the Joint Vienna Institute, the Moscow State Institute of International

Relations (MGIMO), Oxford University, and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

At the end of their AFSP course of study, all participants of the course were ranked according to their performance in the class and attendance records. The top performers received honor certificates. Others were given attendance certificates. Several low performers were identified as such and thus failed out of the Foreign Ministry's overall recruitment process.

Other Interesting Projects

The Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy continued to organize young recruits' training programs on an annual basis whilst increasing its focus on mid-career diplomats. The changing context and environment pushed all working professionals to seek new knowledge, information, skills, and competencies. Thus, while ADA organized regular courses for mid-career diplomats, it often invited representatives from other state agencies, such as the Ministry of Economy, Parliament, the IT Ministry, the Transport Ministry, the Tourism and Culture Ministry, the Presidential Administration, and others to create better communication between various stakeholders and foster interagency dialogue.

Seeing the initial success of the Diplomatic Academy, foreign embassies and donor agencies started to invest in building the capacity of the new diplomatic academy and offered various partnership programs.

Seeing the initial success of the Diplomatic Academy, foreign embassies and donor agencies started to invest in building the capacity of the new diplomatic academy and offered various partnership programs. As noted above, the Norwegian embassy offered to sponsor a year-long project to develop the leadership and management capacity of more senior Azerbaijani diplomats. Modules were taught both in Baku and Oslo. Again, ADA involved officials and civil servants from beyond the Foreign Ministry, to further the atmosphere of interagency dialogue. The trainers from Norway were so much liked by the Azerbaijani participants that they have continued to be employed by ADA for two more years at the expense of the state budget.

In addition to training the country's diplomats, ADA began to offer its first accredited graduate-level university program in September 2009, the Master of Arts in Diplomacy and International Affairs. MADIA, as it is known commonly, was the first university-level degree program in the country taught entirely in English. Moreover, the MADIA curriculum was consciously modeled on similar programs taught at the Fletcher School and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna and thus became the first in the country to purposefully break from the post-Soviet education model inherited by the Azerbaijani system, which over-emphasized rote learning and memorization. With MADIA, ADA sought to bring the comparative advantages of the best universities from abroad to Azerbaijan: teaching students to develop critical analysis and complex reasoning skills as well as communication, negotiations, public speaking, problem-solving, teamwork, and writing skills.

The inherent pedagogical logic of MADIA was predicated on rejecting the study of international affairs in an insular environment, with the student body being composed exclusively of Azerbaijani citizens. As such, a special scholarship program—the Topchubashov International Fellowship—was established by the Foreign Ministry to attract and retain high-quality foreign students (a clear sign of booming public diplomacy efforts in Azerbaijan). Out of 32 matriculating students of the first MADIA class, 16 were Azerbaijanis and 16 were foreigners from Afghanistan, Argentina, the Czech Republic, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, Poland, and Russia.

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In September 2011, ADA began to offer an undergraduate version of MADIA: the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) program. More than 120 exchange agreements have been signed with leading universities from all over the world, which ensures that both programs (as well as others) retain their international, outward-looking perspective.

ADA also began running its flagship Baku Summer Energy School (BSES), which will mark its nineteenth year later this year. This prestigious two-week certificate program continues brings together world-renowned scholars, academics, and policymakers to examine and gain a better understanding of global energy and environmental issues and their practical application. A special focus of the program remains the Caspian basin, which is the Silk Road region's major source of oil, gas, wind, and solar energy.

Today, Azerbaijan's annual Ambassadors' Conference is hosted at ADA University, which also frequently serves as the venue for briefings conducted by the Presidential Administration and various ministers, deputy ministers, and other senior officials.

Although the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy was conceived from the very beginning to evolve into a fully-fledged university, this only became a reality in early 2014 by presidential decree. Since then, now ADA University has continued to play a constantly-evolving role in strengthening the conduct of Azerbaijani diplomacy, including additional tailor-made training programs to go along with AFSP.

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In March 2022, ADA University established an in-house think tank, the Institute for Development and Diplomacy, to deepen its engagement and outreach with expert, research, diplomatic, and policymaking communities, both in Azerbaijan and abroad. Modeled on the best practices of leading world-class, university-affiliated research institutes and think tanks, IDD serves as ADA University's hub of policy-oriented, interdisciplinary research and analysis.

IDD published this policy journal every quarter, as well as scores of Analytical Policy Papers and Working Papers every year. It oversees the work of ADA University Press, whose history goes back to the very first years of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Some early monograph titles include *Crafting Foreign Policy: Azerbaijan in Global Politics* (2009) and *Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Asia* (2011), while *Liberated Karabakh: Policy Perspectives by the ADA*

University Community (2021) is the title of a more recent book.

In addition, it leverages ADA's unique and unmatched convening power and influence to serve as Azerbaijan's leading focal point for high-level, policy-oriented conferences, lectures, briefings, workshops, and other impactful events. IDD also hosts the Center of Excellence in EU Studies, which provides a further opportunity to train civil servants and diplomats in EU affairs and expand EU-Azerbaijani relations.

Future Plans

The world is becoming a much more complex and uncertain place in which to live, and thus both the topics of diplomatic training courses and the competencies of the modern diplomats are also changing. We have to understand, face, manage, and overcome new risks and threats, which means that the capacity of diplomats to deal with these new emerging problems must also increase. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic created new realities on the ground. As never before, diplomats must now understand the details of public health issues and how to assist citizens during times of pandemics or other emergencies.

At the same time, the development of new technologies has changed the reality of diplomatic correspondence. One no longer needs to wait so much for the official notes and letters to pass through the general departments of the embassies and ministries. Signal and WhatsApp messaging and social media have made diplomatic correspondence easier, faster, and more accessible. On the other hand, these and other technological trends heighten the risks of information security, confidentiality, leakage of sensitive data, and improper usage of social media for daily work.

Cybersecurity courses and data analytics are becoming increasingly integral parts of diplomatic training programs. The spread of "fake news" and disinformation is already a problem we all face. Diplomats need to learn how to detect and counter such threats, as well as to properly use credible sources for data analysis and reporting.

Moreover, the volume of incoming information is increasing day by day, and modern diplomats need to upgrade their time management skills, but also to acquire the ability to process information, analyze it, report it, and filter the most urgent and important information. Faced with a constant flood of large amounts of information, some diplomats might feel either overburdened or isolated from the main flow of information.

ADA University is leading in the development of unique training courses for diplomats and civil servants on the foregoing topics, as well as others. We will also deepen our focus on interdisciplinary courses, programs, and skills. In an increasingly globalized and complex world, such courses will help young diplomats get a general and broad view of the world's problems and offer creative solutions.

In the wake of Azerbaijan having finally liberated Karabakh in 2020, messaging about the country's development plans, as well as the ongoing peace process, has taken pride of place in the conduct of the country's diplomacy. While for the last 30 years, we focused on the Armenian occupation and the plight of our one million IDPs and refugees, the region's new geopolitical reality dictates that Azerbaijani diplomats must continue to learn how to craft new, different, and even more attractive messages to promote the country's independent foreign policy agenda.

We are therefore encouraged by the leadership of Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov in improving and remodeling the admission testing system. For two years running, prospective new diplomats are again undergoing a rigorous, transparent, and highly-competitive process (in three stages), which resulted in 40 new hires in the most recent cohort. ADA played a role in this rejuvenation, and we expect to play an even greater one, given our past track record and the country's updated legislative framework. To wit: at the end of 2024, the Milli Mejlis (Azerbaijan's parliament) adopted a new Law on Diplomatic Service. This law set higher standards of conduct, more stringent eligibility requirements, made promotion criteria more transparent and meritocratic, modernized compensation packages as well as social and pension benefits, defined term limits on postings abroad, regularized rotation schedules, toughened accountability and disciplinary provisions, and so on.

These and other measures should be understood as crucial for ensuring Azerbaijan continues being a strong, self-reliant country with much increased economic capacity, a broad regional agenda, heightened international respect and recognition, and an ambitious vision for the future. As we have since 2006, ADA will remain Azerbaijan's diplomatic training lodestar by helping our foreign service effectively and persuasively present all this to counterparts based in Baku and around the world, whilst simultaneously entering into the necessary partnerships to match those ambitions. BD

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PfP Enters its Fourth Decade

A Journey Undertaken with Azerbaijan

Rick Fawn

Azerbaijan was one of the first countries to join NATO's major outreach program, Partnership for Peace (PfP), upon its establishment at the Alliance's summit in Brussels on 10-11 January 1994—a year that also marked the fifty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Alliance itself. This happened on 4 May 1994, when President Heydar Aliyev came to Brussels to sign the Partnership for Peace Framework Document, an event that took place about a year after he returned to Baku to begin pulling the country back from the edge of total collapse.

Surely there was an element of deliberate sequencing involved, for the very next day after signing this document, on 5 May 1994, a final agreement was reached on a Russian-brokered ceasefire to end the First Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And only four months later, in September 1994, the negotiations on the Contract of the Century were successfully concluded that would facilitate the export westwards of Azerbaijan's hydrocarbons rather than through Russia. This last development had been predicated—and again unlikely to be coincidental timing—by the Clinton Administration's abandonment of its "Russia First" policy, which had elevated Moscow's interests above those of other post-Soviet successor states.

Seen from Baku, this period of a few months in 1994 represents the moment of the inauguration of Azerbaijan's grand strategy, an integral component of which was strategic geopolitical and geoeconomic outreach to the West and its anchoring military alliance. Azerbaijan's military cooperation with NATO member state Türkiye ought to be better appreciated as being an integral part of this narrative. Much of their cooperation occurred within the PfP framework and was instrumental in advancing Azerbaijan's military preparedness, which in turn helped to enable it to restore fully its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

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Heydar Aliyev came to Brussels to sign the NATO Partnership for Peace Framework Document about a year after he returned to Baku to begin pulling the country back from the edge of total collapse.

NATO Responds

Since it came into existence, PfP has been a highly innovative engagement mechanism. It nevertheless was a belated response to the seismic geopolitical changes in Europe and Eurasia following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in late 1989 and of the Soviet Union itself in late 1991.

This article contends that PfP was an adaptable form of new relations for the Atlantic Alliance, seeing that it was dealing through the Partnership's launch with over two dozen countries that stretched from Estonia in the northeast, across the Balkans, out to the South Caucasus (including Azerbaijan), and all the way to some Central Asian states—right up to the borders of Afghanistan and China. Included also—and receiving some specific attention later in this article—were Ukraine and the Russian Federation. PfP has been adaptable and adapted, but it nevertheless raised expectations—especially of political status—that were, in some important cases, unfulfillable.

PfP's launch in 1994 coincided with other major policy developments, foremost the U.S.-led decision to allow and then actively to encourage NATO enlargement, which further undid the "Russia First" policy. Despite ambiguities regarding PfP, especially in the formative period of post-Cold War relations in the 1990s, the article argues that PfP's later evolution into more tailored, bilateral arrangements with partner countries has given both of them perhaps less public but certainly

more directly useful engagement, not least when the foreign policy agendas of countries that have not joined the Alliance have themselves evolved also.

When transformative political change came with the East-Central European revolutions of 1989, NATO had to find responses. This was both an unexpected and gigantic "ask." We should not take that for granted as we reflect over 30 years of the life and adaptations of PfP and, I add, on the 35 years since the breaching of the Berlin Wall—that seemingly permanent symbol of the division of Europe.

Indeed, when PfP was launched in January 1994, British Prime Minister John Major said that NATO was "seeking to build a stable framework for the most profound changes in modern history." That was not undue political hyperbole—building a "stable framework" for European security needed to deal with multiple conflicts when Major spoke, including in the former Yugoslavia and many parts of the former Soviet Union, such as in Moldova, Georgia, Tajikistan, and the continued Armenian occupation of internationally-recognized Azerbaijani territory).

Fundamentally—and, especially with historical hindsight, the greatest challenge—was the need to find a compromise between post-communist states that wanted full NATO membership and a Russia that wanted to continue to be recognized as a great power, including having a veto on the foreign and security policy choices of its former vassal states. On such and similar questions, NATO took time to decide even tentatively what to do, and, in fact, initially kept those countries at arms' length. PfP would be the cornerstone compromise.

NATO's first response to the post-Cold War changes came with the Alliance's London Summit, held on 5-6 July 1990. NATO recognized the geopolitical impact of the 1989 revolutions. That was already colossal, and no one then expected that the Soviet Union had but 18 more months to live. So unanticipated was that that all parties were perfectly content to end the Cold War in November 1990 at the Paris Summit of the CSCE. Margaret Thatcher even called its closing document the "Magna Carta" of Europe, ushering in a new European history – with the Soviet Union integral to it.

In the beginning, PfP represented the cornerstone compromise institution between post-communist states that wanted full NATO membership and a Russia that wanted to continue to be recognized as a great power.

NATO's approach at that time to Moscow's former socialist allies was not in any way to suggest the possibility of Alliance membership. Instead, if it had one perspective, NATO's view was of alarm. Far from opening its doors, NATO was deeply concerned about security risks from this region—and again, at a time that still *preceded* the ferocious disassembly of Yugoslavia.

In May 1990 NATO Secretary General, Germany's Manfred Wörner, warned that "there are old national and ethnic rivalries that we thought had been overcome; border and minority questions are again rearing their heads." In that context—and, again, let us keep in mind how far we have come—well before PfP, NATO wanted a level of engagement that was literally about finding only some means of talking with these countries. The London NATO Summit in July 1990 issued its "Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance." What did NATO offer to these newly freed countries—countries that thought of themselves as European that had been forcibly taken away from the West and, through their hard and peaceful work managed to return themselves to the European fold?

The Atlantic Alliance told the governments on the other side of the European continent that they could "come to NATO, *not just to visit*, but to establish regular diplomatic liaison with NATO." In retrospect, this stance appears less surprising. A little more than a year later, on 1 August 1991, U.S. President George H.W. Bush gave what is now known as his "Chicken Kiev" speech in the Ukrainian capital. There, he emphatically cautioned against the unbridled pursuit of national self-determination: "Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred." Be that as it may, the point is that the conduct of regular diplomatic relations is, of course, the thinnest form of formal international engagement. It then took NATO another 18 months to establish the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). This mechanism further solidified the means for discussion, but not actual, let alone meaningful interactions.

This was extraordinary timing, as the founding of NACC was pronounced on 20 December 1991—that is to say, at the very moment of the implosion of the Soviet Union. During that meeting, and as the final communiqué was being prepared, the Soviet Ambassador exited the session and returned 30 minutes later. NATO's website even includes a participant's recollection of him re-entering "white-faced," to announce that he was no longer the Ambassador of the USSR, but that of the Russian Federation. He asked that references to the USSR be removed from the communiqué, but it had already been released.

Historic metamorphoses continued the next day when leaders of Soviet republics met in Kazakhstan's then-capital to sign the Alma-Ata Protocols. These gave substance to the more informal agreement made three weeks prior by the three leaders of the predominantly Slavic Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, marking the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The offer of participation in NACC was immediately extended to these now "post-Soviet," states (excluding the Baltic republics, whose annexation into the USSR was not recognized by Western governments and who were not parties to the Alma-Ata document.)

Nevertheless, at this point NACC was still, in NATO's words, a "manifestation of *extending the hand of friendship*" (emphasis added) that was offered the year before. Charming as these expressions may have been, they were insufficient for the Visegrad countries who, already by February 1991 at their "Visegrad Summit," had made it adamantly clear that they sought full NATO membership. NACC was still tentative cooperation, and largely political, but with signs of that flexibility that later became so important for the PfP mechanism.

That capacity for flexibility—for different or updated diplomatic signaling—was shown early within the context of PfP. As an example, we might be reminded that Romania—very much now an Atlanticist country—was excluded from NACC in 1991 for its lack of democratic transition. But Romania's experience showed how PfP could gesture NATO's own changes in approach. An initially-excluded Romania became the second country to sign PfP in 1994 (even if Romania's post-1989 political transition was generally not considered consolidated until new elections in 1996). PfP served to change and could accelerate some relations in the post-communist space.

More importantly, PfP was launching what we can call "sovereign egalitarianism"—a principle of fundamental importance to the NATO variable in Europe's post-Cold War order. That is, irrespective of demographic, geographic, economic, or military size, every country is to be considered equal. Probably a few countries, or one in particular, namely Russia, have been unhappy and have even deeply contested this idea of the political and diplomatic equality of states. PfP, however, was clearly demonstrating that it was building mutual relations with each and every country, regardless of their strategic heft.

Another process was also developing alongside PfP. The game-changing nature of that other process in some ways undermined PfP whilst in others made PfP even more important. At the same time as the launch of PfP, four Central European countries had been advocating for three years for full NATO (and EU) membership. Those four countries were the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, and they were endowed with the new successful collective name brand of "Visegrad" and the resources of two charismatic, distinguished, and moral heavyweights.

These two personalities had unbeatable stature to begin with, reinforced by having each been unjustly jailed by their communist-era regimes, and thereafter ascending to their countries' presidencies: the former dissident Václav Havel as President of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic; and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Lech Wałęsa, as President of Poland. They also managed to use their moral suasion on an interpersonal level to make a very hesitant Clinton Administration change its thinking. After all, that presidency won against incumbent George H.W. Bush, who had overseen the end of communism in Eastern Europe and thus had had a fantastically successful foreign policy. Clinton's campaign eschewed foreign policy and focused on domestic matters, to the point that its electoral catchphrase became "It's the economy, stupid."

Be that as it may, the Visegrad Group and its two leading personalities made a diffident NATO (and the EU) change initial thinking of standoffishness in the post-Cold War world. To my mind, those four countries collectively as the Visegrad Group succeeded in projecting not only a positive image of their region (and to define it as one distinct from its neighbors both to the east and south) to their

new-found Western partners, but also managed to remind and to convince those interlocuters that they had been historically contributors to the values that made the "West" and "Europe" what they were. (For my part, I have traced Visegrad's choreography of that historical argument and its impact on Western governments and institutions in *Castle on a Hill: The Visegrad Group, Regionalism and the Remaking of Europe*, published in December 2004 by Georgetown University Press).

Such a reframing and projection of a new history was fundamental. Prominent Westerners such as former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned of "post-communist nationalism," and scholar John Mearsheimer thought Eastern Europe would revert back to the 1930s and drag major powers into what apparently would be their myriads of conflicts with each other.

The launch of PfP needs to be seen in the complex light of uncertainty and multiple competing political interests. Think also of timeframes. The pivotal year of 1994 now seems long gone, or to younger readers, merely ancient history. It is important to recall the sense of waiting that post-communist countries and societies had. Take the year of the 1989 revolutions as the year 2024. Central Europeans wanted "in" to NATO and the then-European Community (EC) immediately—that is, in 2025 in this thought experiment. They only got a signal from the EC in the equivalent of 2028 (and already having achieved under their own steam what the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria were asking of them), then notice of accession in 2032 (with Agenda 2000 that established terms of accession negotiations), and then actual entry a total of 15 years later, in 2039. Who of us knows what we might be doing 15 years from now?

The launch of PfP needs to be seen in the complex light of uncertainty and multiple competing political interests. Think also of timeframes.

That being said, NATO became a little faster in signaling to some post-communist countries about the prospects of membership—and that ultimately was what was intended when Western governments moved to the idea of some accession—that is, one-half of the two cornerstone Western organizations—in order both to stabilize Europe and to reward the major reformist post-communist governments. The initial thinking was that EU accession could come first, but then could not and, in the end, did not.

NATO outreach therefore also helped the EU by giving some of these countries tangible benefits in their longer waiting period. Again, this is largely because the Visegrad countries pressed very hard and loudly while also showing that they could and did work with NATO at every opportunity—including in emerging NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia. Even so, when U.S. President Bill Clinton gave only an open-ended statement that NATO membership was "no longer a question of whether but when," that was in 1994. We should ask our own minds—as if we were the ones seeking NATO membership now—how we would react to receiving a message five years from today that, at some unspecified, future time we would secure membership. Central European university-aged demonstrators in 1989 would be middle-aged by the time that their aspirations would be fulfilled.

There are at least two matters regarding the exact timing of when PfP was launched in 1994 that need attention. The first was that PfP was said—and this I believe was genuinely meant and still today—to be based on mutual respect and benefit, and it was envisioned to enhance stability between the Alliance and its partners.

This is, one has to admit, rather atypical behavior for a collective defense military alliance. And yet, those aspirations then satisfied few and likely even alarmed others. It was certainly insufficient for the Central Europeans who wanted nothing short of full membership of NATO, and who defined that membership both in terms of their historico-cultural right to join and also to fulfill a security need. That security need may not have been (and to a significant degree was not) about Russia. The break-up of the USSR meant that the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary no longer bordered Russia, although Poland adjoined Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast. In other words, the post-1991 geography was very different from the 1989 geography. And for Poland and Czechoslovakia (and, later, its two successor states), NATO membership was often cast in terms not of the present but of the past: avoiding forever their cataclysmic vulnerabilities of 1938 and 1939.

Additionally, 1994 marked the final withdrawal of all Soviet-cum-Russian military forces from the region: those that were still

stationed in eastern Germany and which Moscow could not even afford to rehouse. And knowing that, the Czechoslovaks pointedly offered in 1990-1991 to go to the USSR and build accommodation to rehouse these troops. And that both Czechoslovakia and Hungary had seen the Soviet forces stationed in their countries fully withdraw already in 1991.

Even so, the Central European states wanted full NATO membership. For them, PfP was wholly insufficient, even perhaps insulting. Those countries often re-labeled "Partnership for Peace," with, again, the abbreviation PfP, as denoting instead "Policy for Postponement."

So, it is not surprising in itself—but astonishing for the overall geopolitics of post-Cold War Europe—that at the very time that the "respectful" nature of PfP was being rolled out, including to Russia, the Clinton Administration had changed course. It was in January 1994, in Prague, when meeting with the leaders of the four Visegrad countries that Clinton said, as noted above, that Alliance membership was no longer a question of happening but only of its timing. And this he did just after having attended the NATO Heads of State summit in Brussels that launched PfP. The NATO Brussels Summit, for its part, only had a brief mention of something called a NATO Enlargement Study—a thin, and arguably even still theoretical start to the vague idea of eventually opening Alliance doors to others.

The second irony was that consideration of inclusion in a highly innovative security mechanism (i.e., PfP) was extended in 1994 to almost every post-communist country—including also post-Soviet states. Only countries embroiled in outright war at that time, like Tajikistan, Bosnia, and Croatia (plus Serbia and Montenegro, states that at the time belonged to a rump Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that was under UN and Western sanctions), were not initially included (the former joined NACC in 1992, but PfP only in 2002, having endured a five-year civil war; Croatia joined in 2000, after the death of its controversial president; and the remaining three in 2006).

PfP effectively made countries equal participants, including Russia and other states from the Soviet Union (like Armenia, which had entered into both bilateral and multilateral security commitments with Russia by 1994), as well as all of those from across Eastern Europe: Estonia in the north down to Bulgaria in the south. Importantly, PfP made countries equal because they each had the same relations with NATO, being treated to the same approach by and with the same access to the Alliance.

Demanding and Expanding Roles

In principle, therefore, in 1994 and onwards PfP should be seen as even more important because it rendered public and tangible a fundamental international political value. It was enacting some of the virtues of the post-Cold War order by treating all states as equals—irrespective of physical size and any previous or current perceived status. On a practical level, there were some natural limits to this generalized outreach: tailoring within PfP to distinctly individual country needs came later, and rather successfully. But in 1994, PfP seemed to intend to work with and even bridge differences among a disparate group of countries with divergent foreign and security policy aims: some that were deeply interested in NATO but would not be offered membership whilst the prospect for the foregoing did not even exist and decades later would still not. At the same time, through PfP, NATO could now accelerate and intensify relations with certain countries, allowing them to fulfill their sovereign right to make foreign policy and security choices of their own. NATO's public documentation notes that the seven countries that joined the PfP program in 1999 and 2004 all did so "soon after its creation in 1994 and have subsequently forged ever closer and deeper relations with the Alliance with a view to becoming NATO member states." Not all countries wanted, or could get, that.

In 1994, PfP seemed to intend to work with and even bridge differences among a disparate group of countries with divergent foreign and security policy aims.

Nor would one country in particular remain content to be bracketed with all of these others.

NATO knew these issues as it prepared to announce another enlargement at its 2002 Prague Summit, with accession to occur in 2004 for Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. That again was the fulfillment of the clear desires of countries that wanted membership and met NATO's criteria. But it was also at the Prague Summit

that a new mechanism and another enhancement of outreach was introduced: the Individual Partnership Action Plan. Azerbaijan, located afar on the Caspian Sea, attended that summit as a PfP partner, and was an early country to express its interest in this new mechanism.

Since then and through various PfP programs, NATO has been able to determine specific areas of cooperation with specific partners. To reinforce the argument for PfP's ability to adapt, let us consider the diversity, after the 2004 enlargement, of countries with which NATO was "partnering."

Jeffrey Simon, a dedicated chronicler of NATO's post-Cold War adaptions and its enlargement processes, identified eight categories in 2004. With slight modifications, they are:

- Five "advanced" partners (Simon's term), of European neutrals and which he said had no interest then to join the Alliance (of course Finland and Sweden reversed their policies of neutrality in the face of Russia's full-scale Ukrainian invasion. NATO's website today notes that Finland and Sweden joined PfP in 1994 and each became "one of NATO's most active partners" before joining in 2022 and 2024);
- Three Membership Action Plan partners of Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia (all of which would gain membership);
- Three South Caucasus partners (without designating whether any sought NATO membership, although Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze had said such as early as 1999);
- Five Central Asian partners (again not indicating membership intention, but highly unlikely then or since);
- Two relatively inactive partners—Belarus and Moldova (the former being Russia's close military ally, even before allowing its territory to launch attacks on Ukraine in 2022; Moldova remaining "neutral" militarily);
- Ukraine, which at that time claimed to be aspiring to having an "Action Plan;"
- The Russian Federation; and
- Two of what he called "Balkan PfP Aspirants"—Bosnia and Serbia, both of which joined PfP in December 2006 (Montenegro gained independence from the latter in June 2006 and joined PfF in December of that year, obtaining NATO membership in 2017).

That is an extraordinary list, most of whom have continued engagement under PfP, or as the list indicates, went on to join the Alliance. In that way, the Individual Partnership Action Plan (launched in 2002, as noted above) was very

foresighted to acknowledge both the entry (and termination) of PfP for many European countries in 2004, and then the diversity of needs and desires of those remaining. Within that—and recalling that the 2002 NATO Summit took place merely months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks—PfP provided means for developing cooperation on combating international terrorism and supporting the very multinational collaboration that NATO came to lead on the ground in Afghanistan.

But all of this could not be a sufficient measure for the Russian Federation, a country whose dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led post-Cold War order (and whose imperial ambitions) became clearer since. From Moscow's early perspective, perhaps, it saw itself as willing to work, even integrate with the West. Russian President Boris Yeltsin spoke of the end of the Cold War as a victory for all. To that end, that Russia was the first country to sign up for PfP in 1994 is historically symbolic. Thereafter, however, the thought at that time that its major engagement with NATO was through a mechanism shared by the littlest of states surely could not satisfy what has become—regardless of any debate regarding the legitimacy of such perspectives—a demand to be treated as a great and global power.

Despite and probably because of the "not whether but when" Clintonesque message on NATO enlargement in 1994, U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry maintained on 30 May 1995 that focus on NATO membership "missed the point," and that the real platform remained PfP. Still, at that point NATO had extended no other, let alone distinctive outreach to Moscow. Moscow had also expressly said that it wanted "special status" in some form of cooperative mechanism with NATO, in addition to PfP, which simply was unforthcoming. And broadening the security perspective for the official Russian mind away from NATO, the year 1994 had the optimism of the transformation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe into a formal institution, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Although lacking a legal foundation, the OSCE's consensus nature meant that any country, foremost Russia, retained a de facto decisionmaking veto. Russia was, at that time, highly supportive of the OSCE. The Organization extolled and embodied "comprehensive security," which combined attention holistically to all security needs—in the OSCE's parlance, this is called the military-political dimension, the economic and environmental

dimension, and the human dimension. And the OSCE saw security as an indivisible and common undertaking.

But how could collective security work alongside what was also clearly—and a heavily armed one, to boot—a collective *defense* body in the form of NATO that was at that same time expanding (not forgetting its effective first post-Cold War enlargement with eastern Germany in October 1990)? Russian requests for a veto on NATO policy—including and especially enlargement—were naturally dismissed. At least on 7 May 1997 (i.e., six years from now if you were a Soviet strategic planner having witnessed the end of your USSR), NATO granted Russia seemingly unique status with it.

The NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed at the 1997 Paris NATO Summit, which established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (NRPJC). Two issues arose with that seeming individual, respectful treatment of Russia. First, a similar agreement was signed at the same time with Ukraine. If we did not know then, we certainly do know now how official Moscow deems the rights, the status, and arguably even the very ability to exist of Ukrainians and Ukraine in its present borders. In other words, NRPJC could provide insufficient recognition (if indeed anything could) of Russian great power status. Second, once NATO commenced the bombing of Serbia in 1999, Moscow ceased its involvement in NRPJC. It would take a still pro-Western Russian president and three years to enact a replacement. Russia's Vladimir Putin came to NATO's Rome Summit in May 2002 to sign the agreement for the new NATO-Russia Council.

A few months later, at the NATO Summit in Prague (which also launched the Individual Partnership Action Plans for countries not gaining Alliance membership), NATO enlargement across Eastern Europe was declared. At that summit, U.S. President George W. Bush announced that—literally—he would in a few days explain to his "friend" that:

> A larger NATO is good for Russia, as well. […] I will tell my friend, Vladimir Putin, and the Russian people that they, too, will gain from the security and stability of nations to Russia's west. Russia does not require a buffer zone of protection; it needs peaceful and prosperous neighbors who are also friends.

In these circumstances, PfP could not feel satisfactory to Russia—nor could it have been intended to do.

What, however, then and since remains important is how PfP could still work and reach so many other countries. A brief final consideration of PfP's achievements, with some examples, might help to illustrate that.

"One Partner, One Plan"

Going now into its fourth decade, Partnership for Peace has contributed to the historical restructuring of pan-European institutional architecture. NATO's own documentation states that PfP was fundamental to preparing countries for its two biggest enlargements. Knowing in 2002 that NATO in 2004 would broaden to states on the Baltic and the Black Seas, while still having relations with so many other post-communist and post-Soviet states, the Atlantic Alliance refashioned PfP to work individually with each of those.

It was already mentioned that Bosnia, having endured over three years of civil war, came to join PfP. And at the other of the Eurasian landmass, Tajikistan which had joined NACC in 1992 just as it was descending into five years of civil war, could enlist in PfP in 2002 as the twenty-seventh partner, and as the final post-Soviet to do so. Turkmenistan, whose status of "permanent neutrality" was unanimously recognized by UN member states in December 1995 and which is referred to by media outlets like CNN as "the hermit nation," nevertheless joined NACC in 1992 and PfP in 1994. The Alliance formally states that "Turkmenistan's cooperation with NATO is mutually beneficial" and points to various engagements and its response to a NATO request for assistance to Bosnia for natural disaster relief in 2014.

To a county such as Azerbaijan—an early signatory of PfP—the prospects for continued and indeed expanded assistance with de-mining in Karabakh seems a particularly urgent and auspicious area of cooperation in the time ahead.

Aside from other forms of cooperation under PfP, the country has also received some assistance in dealing with a horrendous human and security legacy. This would be both a project and a means for both parties every tangibly to expand cooperation, including between Azerbaijan's National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) and the NATO Trust Fund.

PfP remains a great means to develop meaningful interactions with NATO. It remains extremely important especially for

countries without membership aspirations or prospects, and we are in an age when countries most certainly can and must choose their foreign policy orientations that may have their own priorities and outlooks. Many countries have different approaches to their security. The regularized engagement, on always a jointly devised basis, of PfP county officials and NATO personnel may be too low-key for media but provides irreplaceable mutual familiarity and bonds, let alone (in many cases) very tangible cooperation. No better a term is what NATO has come to use for this bespoke set of cooperation: "One Partner, One Plan." The PfP has been over decades the means to integrate PfP personnel in NATO peacekeeping operations and the means to secure assistance in civilian disaster relief.

Among the achievements of PfP over its now-thirty-year lifespan must be the fact (and character) of adaptability. That intrinsic flexibility means that countries can find their own niche and have tailor-made ways of maintaining—and, especially, of enhancing—their relations with the Alliance. NATO's programs generally, and PfP with them, "build on different but invaluable perspectives and find common solutions to common challenges."

In an ever-more complicated and challenging world, that approach is needed even more. It is worthwhile to contemplate if and how PfP might have operated differently in the 1990s and also how it might have worked alongside other developing policies. PfP was operating in very challenging circumstances. I certainly think that we would all have been worse off in the 1990s without PfP; it helped smooth some difficult geopolitical folds, and we benefit from it today. That it might not—and could not have—ultimately satisfied the growing demands of Russia was beyond its described intentions. But it did serve as another form of outreach to Moscow, while also signaling that Europe and Eurasia were in a historical age where countries of all sizes were entitled to, and should share, equal international rights and obligations. That remains a message and a practice of the highest value for today. BD

Countries can find their own niche and have tailor-made ways of maintaining—and, especially, of enhancing—their relations with the Alliance.

Achieving Minimum Viable Cyber Resilience

A Leadership Top Ten "To-Do" List

Steve Hill

It is a reflection of the growing maturity of the cybersecurity industry that when the UK's Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Pat McFadden, a senior cabinet minister responsible for national security, claimed in a speech to the November 2024 NATO Cyber Defence Conference that Russia "can turn the lights off for millions," he was roundly criticized for hyperbole. Pragmatism has replaced alarmism as the driver for persuading the state and the C-suite to invest in cybersecurity.

The world has neither ever been more complex nor more fast-moving. But that is not the same as saying that the world is more dangerous. The same inter-connectedness that creates supply-chain fragility also acts as a disincentive for governments whose priorities are primarily inward-looking (domestic stability and growth) to escalate conflicts to outright regional or global warfare that will likely undermine that domestic agenda. We see therefore brinkmanship and "grey conflict" taking place throughout the world. This includes targeted assassinations, arson attacks, disruption of underseas cables, drone activity, social media election influence campaigns, and all kinds of cyber-attacks.

Questioning our Current Response

For years, Chief Information Security Officers frightened corporate board members about ever-increasing cyber threats from hostile governments and organized criminal gangs, drawing upon anecdotes of sophisticated hacking attacks that paralyzed businesses and resulted in damaging headlines about the victim's own shortcomings that enabled the attacks. The cybersecurity industry was complicit in painting a picture of an overwhelming threat from new zero-day exploits exploiting a growing number of critical vulnerabilities. The picture was evidenced by often self-serving statistics and trend graphics. The result was an increase in the amount of money spent on global cybersecurity over the last decades to over $166 billion in 2023, with projections reaching $562 billion by 2032.

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This essay does not seek to question whether threats have actually increased, because the answer is (or should be) obvious: they have. At the same time, our attack surface (the internet-facing digital assets that provide an entry to attackers) has widened and our reliance on digital infrastructure means that the real-world and business impact of cyber-attacks can be debilitating. I agree that the current market-driven approach to cybersecurity and resilience has not been a success. But, I argue, we need to maintain a sense of context: cyber is just one of the risks that corporate boards and governments manage.

> *Pragmatism has replaced alarmism as the driver for persuading the state and the C-suite to invest in cybersecurity, which has evolved from a conceptual challenge to an execution challenge.*

My argument is that our focus needs to change from accumulating increasing numbers of specialized preventative technical fixes to making greater practical progress in implementing the "cyber basics" to enhance operational resilience. *Cybersecurity has evolved from a conceptual challenge to an execution challenge.* We know what best practice looks like, but we often fail to act with sufficient speed and determination.

This change of focus will have the most impact in addressing the "cyber poverty gap." There is an imbalance between cybersecurity 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' In a world characterized by cross-border supply-chain dependencies and inter-connectedness, a successful attack on a weaker target can debilitate enterprises and states alike. We need to invest more effort

in reducing the risks to those countries and enterprises that have under-invested and need to be given help in reaching a minimum level of cyber resilience.

Exaggeration Is As Bad As Underestimation

Recent headlines will have left few in any doubt about the relentless threats we face in the digital domain. Successive U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) statements demonstrated the degree to which the U.S. government is concerned about government penetration of their critical national infrastructure, both for espionage and potential destructive purposes. Three examples will suffice to make this point: American gas flows were disrupted for several days in May 2021 following an attack by what sources say are Russian criminal hackers; healthcare services for 100 million Americans were disrupted by the Change Healthcare ransomware attack; and an attack on Synnovis, a pathology laboratory, led to disruption in blood testing services in the UK. North Korean hackers reportedly stole an estimated $1.34 billion in cryptocurrency. Some estimates suggest that global cybersecurity losses in 2024 may have reached $9.5 trillion, including $30 billion in ransomware damages.

We may achieve tactical victories by taking down specific criminal gangs or dark web marketplaces, but we are not winning the war. The broader trends are all in the wrong direction.

Yet these figures need to be considered with caution. Is it really credible to suggest that losses from cyber-attacks may account for almost 10 percent of global GDP, which in 2024 is projected to reach $108.6 trillion?

Look at insurance industry loss metrics. Cyber claims are not even in the top ten. The five top causes of insurance claims were all weather-related (including losses of $115 billion following hurricanes Milton and Helene in the United States) or as a result accidental damage. Faulty workmanship accounted for approximately 9 percent of losses by value. The headline-grabbing CrowdStrike incident in July 2024, which caused global IT outages to an estimated 8.5 million Microsoft Windows users across the world, originated in a flawed software update and is probably best viewed under this heading rather than, as was frequently the case, presented in a cybersecurity context.

The hyperbole, fueled by Hollywood-style anecdotes, can be both misleading and damaging to holistic risk management and risk mitigation prioritization. The perfect becomes the enemy of the good. Corporate boards and governments either shy away from what can seem a technical and futile effort or rush to prescriptive regulatory or technical spends on the back of an attention-grabbing attack.

We need to invest more effort in reducing the risks to those countries and enterprises that have under-invested and need to be given help in reaching a minimum level of cyber resilience.

Aiming for Minimum Cyber Viability

The UK's National Cybersecurity Centre (NSCS), established in 2016, was the first national body globally to integrate government, intelligence, and the private sector to promote better national cybersecurity and incident response. Its mandate included publishing a national cybersecurity strategy and providing coordinated governmental support in the event of a severe cyberattack. The model has been replicated across the globe, including CISA in the United States, CERT-In in India, and 27 national cybersecurity coordination centers in the European Union. 132 countries have now published national security strategies according to the ITU's Global Cybersecurity Index. 177 have implemented at least one cybersecurity regulation addressing the protection of personal data, privacy, or breach notifications.

A brief survey across these publications demonstrates an astonishing degree of consensus around what the NCSC calls the Cyber Essentials: the minimum standard of security that stops the vast majority of cyber-attacks. These essentials typically comprise implementing technical measures such as firewalls, secure configurations, access controls, malware protection, and vulnerability management (patching). They may add requirements for installing updates (ideally automatically), multi-factor authentication, awareness training, offline backups, and cyber incident response exercises.

That's it. These ten measures foil over 90 percent of attacks. Some institutions, such as banks or

sensitive government departments supplement these 'basics' with additional measures to address the remaining 10 percent of more sophisticated and targeted attacks. Some may even aspire to implement a gold-standard "zero trust architecture" model.

Through these pragmatic protective measures, most small and medium-sized enterprises across the world will be able to achieve a standard of cybersecurity and cyber resilience that will reduce the current risk to them to a sensible level. The recently appointed CEO of the UK NCSC, Richard Horne, acknowledged this at the end of 2024:

> In recent years, the NCSC has produced world-leading cybersecurity guidance and frameworks. The reality is: not enough organizations are *implementing* our guidance, nor *applying* these frameworks.

The NCSC launched its Cyber Essentials scheme in 2014 to provide support in bolstering the UK's cyber defenses and fostering a culture of cybersecurity awareness by providing a minimum cybersecurity standard for businesses. Yet it issued only 30,000 Cyber Essentials certificates to UK enterprises in 2024 and less than 200,000 since its inception. This is a drop in the ocean. As Horne noted, millions of organizations in the UK are leaving themselves open to cyber-attacks that we know how to prevent. This applies more broadly across the globe.

We have a common interest in bolstering collective standards of cyber resilience. America's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) defines resilience as "the ability to prepare for and adapt to changing conditions and withstand and recover rapidly from disruption." The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defines it as "the ability of an organization to respond and adapt to change […] to anticipate and respond to threats and opportunities from sudden or gradual changes in their internal and external context."

What these definitions do not fully capture is the degree to which any organization's resilience and security is dependent on an ecosystem of supply chain and third-party enterprises, both to protect their sensitive data and to continue operating. The fallout from the botched CrowdStrike software update on 19 July 2024 was felt around the world and insurers estimate it may have cost U.S. Fortune 500 companies alone around $5.4 billion.

Whether of a commercial enterprise or country, leaders are overwhelmed with short-term challenges and problems to be resolved. The infamous Eisenhower Matrix, graphically demonstrating the tension between the important and the urgent, reminds us of the trap of prioritizing the latter over the following in terms of time, money, and attention.

We need to recognize the self-evident truth that noting a new risk on a corporate or a national risk register will not in itself fix anything. It is a precursor. Like recording "lessons learned" after a major incident, real practical value arises if these identified "lessons" translate into actual actions to mitigate the impact or address the weaknesses.

Top Ten "To-Do" List

Whether at systemic national or enterprise levels, the prime responsibility of leadership is to assess and balance risks and opportunities in order to best steer their charges forward towards greater prosperity and long-term success. This will involve navigating complexity and making tricky trade-offs. And it will necessitate not allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good.

The following—which I draw from multiple industry and governmental sources—would be my Top Ten "To-Do" List for a typical leadership structure to achieve minimum cyber resiliency.

One, *understand the threat landscape*. Leaders should understand, at a strategic level, who might want to harm their organizations (or countries), the capabilities of those hostile actors, and how they typically operate. This should cover insider threats as well as external actors.

Such an approach will enable leaders to better understand defensive prioritizations rather than trying to defend against everyone and everything. Leaders should be confident that those working to defend their organization have feeds from government agencies or private organizations of the latest techniques, tactics, and procedures being used by hostile actors.

Leaders will want to insist upon regular system security testing by friendly "white hats" who assume the roles of the adversaries.

Two, *implement access controls*. We will always need to prevent unauthorized persons from entering our systems and, once within, from having complete free rein as to where to wander. Access controls are essential, both to the estate and particularly to those

privileged administrative accounts that have greater rights and powers.

Even as we demand longer and more complex passwords no longer suffice to provide sufficient security (even if they are clearly better than no passwords). Multi-factor authentication, in which two separate points of reference are needed to validate the right to enter, should be mandatory.

Three, *implement firewalls.* The adoption of cloud platforms, either completely or in combination with on-premises databases, undermines the idea of an external "firewall."

However, some form of protection of the endpoints (the laptops and other devices) of any network will remain critical to detect and counter known computer viruses and other malicious behavior.

Four, *patching.* There will always be some vulnerabilities in the IT systems on which we all rely—open or unlocked doors through which bad guys can enter our personal and organizational networks. On average, there may be 15-50 defects per 1,000 lines of delivered code.

While most enterprises may not rely on as many lines of coding as Google (code base of around two billion lines), they will have more vulnerabilities than they can ever fix. Organizations such as NASA may be able to reduce defects to near zero—but they are doing so at a huge cost.

Most of the defects will not be exploitable by adversaries, but every organization needs to have a program to address the most critical—ideally using automation. The replacement of assets that are no longer supported or updated by those who originally sold them ("end of life") is important in this context.

Five, *asset management and network segmentation.* Leaders would rightly expect their human resources directors and all their senior executives to know how many people they employ, and what each of them is tasked to achieve. This same principle should extend to the technical estate and internal data.

It is impossible to prioritize protection if you don't know what is critical to operating critical business services or where the most sensitive data is to be found. That may be the secret Coca-Cola recipe or the personal health data of employees or clients. This extends to preventing unauthorized

applications and devices onto your estate ("Shadow IT").

Six, *culture and awareness training.* Cybersecurity professionals break down their work into three categories: people, technology, and process. The individuals sitting behind the keyboard will always be the weakest—and the strongest—security link. Leaders should both ensure that their workforces have sufficient knowledge and understanding of key attack vectors such as phishing emails and bogus calls, but also that they are incentivized to recognize the critical importance of responsibly managing risks.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella sent a memo to all 228,000 Microsoft employees in August 2024 instructing them that "if you're faced with the trade-off between security and another priority, your answer is clear: do security." This sets the right tone, although it was a shame that it took a report by the U.S. Cyber Safety Review Board following two significant breaches before it was issued. In their actions as well as their words, leaders will always set the risk culture.

Seven, *perform prioritized backups.* The criminal ransomware endemic that has mushroomed in recent years has largely taken the form of organizational or personal data being encrypted and held to ransom. Operations are halted unless a ransom is paid for a decryption key from the criminals.

An obvious defense is to retain separate backups of the systems and data from which operations can resume without those keys. But again, the devil is in the details—and the sheer volume of data and systems for most organizations would make it financially ruinous to try to back up everything.

Hence the importance of understanding critical business services and critical data to underpin prioritization and how often different data might need to be copied and stored.

Eight, *incident response simulations.* The single most effective tool for achieving C-suite buy-in to a cybersecurity and resilience program is to run a tabletop cyber incident response exercise that demonstrates the impact and complexities of responding to a criminal ransomware attack.

The simple act of asking senior executives, corporate board members, or government policymakers whether they would pay a ransom or issue a press statement will likely transform their appreciation of the

potential financial, legal, and reputational harm that might follow from one such attack. When Mike Tyson said that "everyone has a plan until they are punched in the face," he surely did not mean that preparation was worthless, just that agility and flexibility were equally vital.

Nine, *manage the supply chain.* No organization is an island. Few operate without reliance on external suppliers, whether it is those who write the code for the information technology systems or those who produce or ship the components from which products are constructed. When Kojima Industries Corp., a little-known Japanese company that produces cup-holders for car interiors, was hacked in February 2022, it brought the production lines at Toyota's 14 factories to a complete stop.

Leaders need to have some confidence that third parties connecting to their internal systems, or on whom critical business services depend, are assessed to establish their levels of cybersecurity and resilience. This should ideally include some understanding of their critical subcontractors. Concentration risks should be understood. Leaders should be clear that accountability for data protection or continuing operations cannot be delegated externally.

Ten, *govern cyber risk.* Technology and cybersecurity risk governance should be integrated into broader enterprise operational risk management. Board-level update briefings should be heard regularly (at least quarterly): they should be data-driven and delivered in risk language rather than technical babble.

Senior leadership should expect a clear and pragmatic strategy to take an organization, or a country, towards a more resilient and secure future that transparently acknowledges the current state of play—including its weaknesses—and plots a prioritized course towards a better one. This will not be nirvana, nor promise 100 percent protection, but be proportionate to resources available and comparable to peers. There will be milestones and success metrics. Accountability, for the risks and the delivery, should be clear.

Future Resilience

The above 'to-do' list of ten basic topics is designed for corporate or country leaders to achieve a *minimum viable level of cyber resiliency* and to address the *cybersecurity poverty gap* that undermines our collective security. This is certainly necessary, but it is hardly sufficient.

Looking ahead, it will take more than these minimum steps to change the balance of advantage away from attack to defense.

Leaders invest for the future. This may mean adopting some of the best practices that are taking hold of leading-edge industries like banking. In finance, there is more of a shift towards "security by design" in which new technologies are future-proofed against attacks rather than having security imperfectly retrofitted to a product that was raced out of the door to be cheap and convenient. There is also a shift towards zero-trust architecture: a philosophy of "never trust, always verify" in which all users, devices, and applications are assumed to be untrustworthy until they have provided new authentication and validation.

Yet what is most likely to be genuinely disruptive in terms of turning the advantage from attack to defense will be the adoption of new AI-fueled technologies by the cybersecurity industry to tackle the systemic challenges of a global cyber skills gap. Rapid progress is currently being made in terms of developing agentic AI models able to supplement our struggling human workforces. This moves beyond machine learning technology that relieves skilled humans of the more mundane and routine tasks towards "virtual employees"—areas covered in the latter category of AI models include identity management or patching—improving over time and beginning to learn and work in the same ways that we expect from human employees (except being willing to work 24/7 within the parameters we have set them).

For example, agentic AI employees will scan our entire environment to find all registered accounts and establish who should be accountable for the security and recovery of each and every one, before then turning to help to address any shortcomings.

Defenders Have Agency

Our current approach toward enhancing cyber resilience has not worked. While reliance on digital infrastructure and the external threat has increased, we have failed to match that with consistently improved systemic defenses.

In the short to medium term, this means an effort to "level up," with a priority being placed on helping less developed industries and regions to catch up to the resilience best

practice that is being demonstrated by, for example, the global banks.

In this essay, I have outlined ten practical "cyber basics" for leaders that are necessary for their organizations to climb out of the cyber poverty gap, which taken together represent a roadmap towards a minimum cyber viability. And this Top Ten list is only a first step—a foundation. Nothing more.

Looking ahead, we will need to embrace new philosophies (i.e., secure by design and zero trust) and new technologies (i.e., agentic AI) if we are ultimately to win this new type of war as well as the current battles being fought. BD

Assessing the Achievements of COP29

Elnur Soltanov

Baku Dialogues:

Azerbaijan became the first country from the Silk Road region to host an annual session of the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—in this case, the 29th session. Hence, COP29. This took place in Baku between 11 and 22 November 2024 and had something like 76,000 registered participants. And Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry has a document that says that COP29 "was attended by representatives of 196 countries and nearly 200 international, regional, and other organizations. More than 80 heads of state and government participated at the World Leaders' Climate Action Summit organized within the framework of COP29 on 12-13 November 2024." So, evidently, this was hard to pull-off successfully.

Furthermore, President Aliyev characterized COP29 as the "largest international event in the history of our independence." To this, we could add that it was the largest multilateral event to take place in this part of the world in the period that begins with regain of independence, and certainly in the twenty-first century.

We're honored to feature an interview with Dr. Elnur Soltanov, who has a long a storied association with ADA University, and who still today is a Trustee of our Institute for Development and Diplomacy. He is also a Deputy Minister of Energy of Azerbaijan and, most relevantly, is Chief Executive Officer of COP29.

Thank you, Dr. Soltanov, for taking the time to have this conversation.

Dr. Elnur Soltanov *is Chief Executive Officer of COP29 and Deputy Minister of Energy of Azerbaijan. He is a former Dean at the School of Public and International Affairs at ADA University where he also served as Director of the Caspian Energy and Environment Center. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University. The interview was conducted in late January 2025 by* ***Damjan Krnjević Mišković****. The views expressed in this conversation are solely those of the participants.*

Soltanov:

You're welcome. Thank you for the opportunity.

Baku Dialogues:

So, let's start with two very basic questions. Number one: What is the role of the Chief Executive Officer of COP29?

Soltanov:

My task was very clearly set from the very start: To support the President of COP29, H.E. Mr. Mukhtar Babayev, and implement every task he asked of me.

Baku Dialogues:

Ok, that's clear enough. The answer, basically, is "everything and anything." I know how that is. Let's now turn to basic question number two—which in a way gets us into the heart of things: How did the COP29 Presidency come about?

Soltanov:

As always in such matters, there have been structural factors *not* in our control and those *in* our control. Azerbaijan had expressed its willingness to host this event, and we had put forward our candidacy. So, the possibility was there. This

possibility was a known quantity, and we had done preliminary planning to prepare our bid, and then we put it forward.

The background here is the way these things work in the UN universe: There's a rotation among five regional groups, with each UN member state belong to one of those five. And it was the turn of our region: The regional group known as Eastern European States. And there were issues related to some countries in our group supporting or blocking the candidacies of various other countries in our group—this had to do with political preferences, especially in light of the war in Ukraine.

And Azerbaijan was very willing to make this happen: We conducted some very successful shuttle diplomacy, both physically and virtually. And we ultimately ended up receiving the unanimous support of the group of Eastern European States, and then of the rest of the COP Parties, after we worked out the terms with different stakeholder countries, including Armenia.

Baku Dialogues:

Yes, there was this agreement between the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia that was announced on 7 December 2023, which involved—I will focus on what's most relevant, in the context of our topic—the public expression of support by Armenia for Azerbaijan's bid to host COP29, as well as the withdrawal of Yerevan's own COP29 candidacy. This agreement—which very few saw coming—broke the deadlock in the group of Eastern European States, which then paved the way for Azerbaijan to secure the bid.

Soltanov:

I wouldn't say that the final decision was in the hands of any single country. In fact, if there is any actor to credit for this achievement, then it is Azerbaijan itself. If you take out Azerbaijan's very creative and capable diplomacy—which was

also tied to the ongoing peace process with Armenia—it simply wouldn't have happened.

Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our Ministry of Ecology were there on the ground from the very start. But the creative drive that came from the state's top leadership was, I believe, very crucial in securing our bid to host but also represented a great push forward in terms of the peace process. It represented a new confidence-building measure, a trust-building measure—and, of course, it also represented a great honor for us that the world agreed we should host COP29.

It cemented, I think, this longstanding view that Azerbaijan is a reliable partner in whatever endeavor we commit ourselves to.

Baku Dialogues:

Azerbaijan had a record amount of time—in the negative sense—of being able to prepare for this, right? It was 11 months. There were a lot of sceptics that you could pull it off, logistically and otherwise. But then, at COP29, everybody I talked to—people who have been going to COPs for 20 years, ranging from Chief Negotiators to support staff—said to me in the hallways that this COP was, in a technical sense, the best organized. Full stop.

Now, in terms of substance—and ultimately, of outcome—surely you know that the reaction in some quarters was mixed, right? Now, to a very great extent, that's unfair: There's only so much any COP Presidency can do—irrespective of the amount of preparation time—if the Parties are themselves unwilling to make the compromises or to take the visionary steps.

Soltanov:

As you said, there are two major aspects of any COP. And the most important one is the negotiation process itself. Even the 14 Global Initiatives advanced by the COP29 Presidency were really in the service of supporting the negotiation process per se, because that is basically the output that matters more than anything else.

The logistics component is there to serve the negotiation process, since all these matters—visas, travel, accommodation, ground transport—are crucial in making sure that the participants feel good enough, relaxed enough, so that they can focus on the gist of the matter, which, again, is the negotiation process itself and, ultimately, reaching consensus-based outcomes. Of course, the logistics part is very important in and of itself, as we, Azerbaijanis, take our hospitality seriously. We have a responsibility to our guests: Anyone who enters our country should feel welcome.

Now, this relatively short time to prepare—11 months—was a challenge mainly regarding meeting logistical expectations. Yet, fortunately enough, we had the best experience specifically in this area. We had organized events similar to this one—not as large, but still logistically quite complex.

Yet in terms of the substance, as you put it, 11 months was not probably too short for these issues—especially the negotiation items. There, the challenge was not time per se—it was about bringing the Parties together, creating momentum, and coming up with a successful deal.

So, regarding the outcome of the negotiations, I think COP29 was successful. Maybe there was not as much fanfare in the press as in some previous COPs, but historically speaking, the outcome was quite good.

In 2009, at COP15 in Copenhagen, developed countries decided to commit to a goal of mobilizing a minimum of $100 billion a year by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries. Yet this was not an outcome of negotiations. It was more a statement by a country or group of countries.

Therefore, the climate finance quantum had never been negotiated at COPs, and thus we were in uncharted territory in terms of the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG). And

finance is what really keeps UNFCC and Paris Agreement together: You could say, “no finance, no climate agreement”—at least in a substantive sense. So, to me, climate finance is really the most difficult issue ever to be discussed in the context of the COP process.

Baku Dialogues:

Right, because the credibility of the whole UNFCCC framework, including UNFCCC and Paris and so on—the whole climate change conversation—stands or falls on how much money is going to be put in the pot, and when, and under what sort of conditions.

Soltanov:

Yes, it’s about money. Climate money.

Baku Dialogues:

Right. You take out finance, and the Paris Agreement largely collapses. Or at least it collapses in a political sense, right? Not in a literal sense of collapse, but in terms of ambition and ability to truly move the needle on climate action.

Soltanov:

The global climate architecture is really built on finance, and within this, what the texts call “common but differentiated responsibilities.” With finance, this is where the promises start being felt—where the promises made start hurting the checkbook. Otherwise, it’s easy to fly around to conferences, to throw out numbers, to give speeches. But COP29 was the start of the phase where the rubber met the road for the first time. So, therefore, the climate finance issue—as it was addressed and negotiated at COP29—was unprecedented.

Our position from the very start was that, in line with the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC process more generally, this is a Party-driven process. Azerbaijan was leading the process in the sense of establishing the best possible enabling environment for the Parties to make a decision. But Azerbaijan was not there to decide. We could not do that. It was up to the Parties to make a decision.

And to me, tripling the figure of $100 billion per year to $300 billion per year is a good outcome. It's less than what most of the developing countries wanted, but it's definitely more than what most developed countries were willing to pay.

I was, so to say, kind of scientifically siding more with the developing countries, since the Commission that was established by earlier COP presidencies had calculated slightly different numbers. In light of the best scientific evidence, the number was not $300 billion but $350 billion, and the deadline for it was not 2035 but 2030. The developing countries had more "science" behind their position. All in all, however, tripling the existing amount was a very significant step forward, particularly given the geopolitical environment.

That being said, decisions are decisions. But now, our major task is implementation. In fact, a successful implementation could turn the good outcome of COP29 into a great one. The decision says $300 billion by 2035, but nothing in this decision prevents us from achieving this amount as early as possible. Say, technically, the next year.

The faster we achieve that $300 billion amount, and the faster we achieve a higher amount, the closer we will get to make better off every single country out there in the developing world—and definitely the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing Countries. And so, our COP29 Presidency's goal, which we will be passing over to the next presidencies, is about achieving the $300 billion goal as soon as possible.

The decision has been taken. Let's now focus on delivering the highest quantum possible as early as possible. This is

how we can end up actually delivering what everybody in the developing world wants.

Baku Dialogues:

But there are two numbers that were agreed, as far as I understand. There's the $300 billion per year by 2035, and then there's the idea of scaling up finance to $1.3 trillion per year by 2025.

Soltanov:

Yes.

Baku Dialogues:

So, in other words, am I correct in understanding this, that we're talking about $300 billion in what we in Canada call "transfer payments," right? Cash. Cash with some conditions, but cash—not loans. And then the rest—the other stuff. So, in other words, $1 trillion of various types of finance.

Soltanov:

The Paris Agreement is sufficiently clear that the direction should be from developed countries to developing countries.

If you look at the language of the decision on this $300 billion and this $1.3 trillion, this $300 billion is clear in terms of that direction. And $1.3 trillion is more of a call to the entire world community. I'm happy that the $1.3 trillion number ended up being part of the decision, because that is really the number that is needed.

But in the latter context, you don't really have clear borders of responsibility. So, mentioning $1.3 trillion is a first good step,

but I think we need to work it out further. For me, therefore, $300 billion is a more important number because it is more concrete in terms of directionality and responsibility.

Baku Dialogues:

Okay, but can I just stick to $1.3 billion for a moment so as to get to what being called the Baku Breakthrough? And as far as I understand, this has to do with Article 6, a single carbon market, operationalizing it, making it a single global unified market under the auspices of the United Nations, which, as you can imagine, is not at first—when you hear it for the first time—you don't think efficiency and transparency what you think of the UN.

So, the question then is: How does all of this Article 6 stuff—but particularly operationalizing the global carbon market, getting it to actually work and be accepted by the private sector—does that fall within the $1.3 trillion and the $300 billion, or is it distinct? What's the holistic picture of all the moving parts, in the context of the outcomes of COP29.

Soltanov:

The way I would put this forward is that we achieved significant results, in terms of all three issues we placed front and center: Climate finance, Article 6, and the Loss and Damage Fund.

When you look at UNFCCC from 1992 and then, eventually, the Paris Agreement, you see that the reason why it's not just one region of the world—the entire world convening and signing up to these set of documents—is because there is a delineation of responsibilities. The gist of it is expressed in the celebrated phrase "common but differentiated responsibilities."

One of the greatest debates and negotiations is the interpretation of this phrase and the boundaries of responsibilities across developed and developing countries. This is fine only to a certain extent. Yet, various actors try to push for looser interpretations, and this could result in a breakdown: We could

see the entire architecture starts to break down. Therefore, I personally focus more on the $300 billion figure.

So, $1.3 trillion is great, but unless numbers and responsibilities overlap to a certain extent, they eventual might not come to mean much.

And about the agreement we reached at COP29 on Article 6 regarding its operationalization—here we mainly brought to life the last dormant part of the Paris Agreement. This too was a great success. Because we set the foundation for unleashing the global forces of the global carbon market in terms of reducing and removing the emission of greenhouse gasses in the most efficient way possible, but also in terms of opening the gates of financial tools—of technology flow and capacity-building flow—from the developed to the developing countries.

So, in that sense, I'm very happy—all the Parties were very happy—especially regarding Article 6.4.

As to Loss and Damage, all the groundwork is done for it to be up and running in 2025.

At the same time, there's still some work to be done for Article 6 and Loss and Damage to really get off the ground. Moreover, in the case the Loss and Damage Fund—this is Article 8 of the Paris Agreement—I would like to mention that its donor base, its financial sustainability, remains a challenge, since around $1 billion is not even scratching the topsoil of what is needed in this realm.

All in all, I think legacy-wise, COP29 will be known as the moment when the Paris Agreement was made fully operational.

Baku Dialogues:

Right, all this speaks to the point about not laying everything into one pot of $1.3 trillion. There's a logic to the differentiation—to the various pillars,

or silos, or whatever the term is for that. But I think that behind all of this stands, in a way, a more philosophical argument. So, Loss and Damage aside—because this is the argument that such and so set of countries need the money because they're never going to be able to fix what's already destroyed irreparably—we have a more philosophical argument, with serious policy implications, regarding adaptation and mitigation.

Conceptually, adaptation and mitigation are actually two very different things, right? There's this provision in the Paris Agreement—Article 9.4, I think—that speaks of scaled-up financial resources aiming to achieve a balance between adaptation and mitigation. In fact, it mandates a 50:50 balance between mitigation and adaptation funding, with a greater share of the adaptation funding going to most vulnerable countries.

And this has never been achieved. It's not even close. Even the most creative accounting mechanisms produce a figure of around 25 percent for adaptation, because the developed world favors mitigation—and they're the ones with the money. So, they're basically saying—the minority—they're basically saying, "If you want the cash, then focus more on mitigation." And the developing world—the majority, the ones dealing the most with all this, with fewer resources to deal with it—is saying, "Look, we favor adaptation."

So, mitigation is, more or less, about reducing emissions, and it involves, by and large, stabilizing or even trying to reduce the flow of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Whereas adaptation is, well, about adapting to climate change—it's about accepting the reality and adapting to life in circumstances of a changed climate in various ways. So, with adaptation, the goal is to reduce our risks from the harmful effects of climate change.

And at COP29, the needle was moved in terms of adaptation. For instance, the Baku Adaptation Road Map was adopted, and you held a High-Level Baku Dialogue on Adaptation. And some other things happened, to the credit of the COP29 Presidency—this needs to be emphasized. Anyway, could you get into all of this a little bit? You know, mitigation versus adaptation?

Soltanov:

Well, here is the logic: There is no way we can reach the North Star of 1.5 or 2.0 without mitigation, right? Because the tackling of climate crisis and its solution involves reaching net-zero by 2050, in line with the Paris Agreement's formulation of "well below 2.0 degrees Celsius." This, in turn, means that we need to decrease the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere by more than 50 billion tons. Without that, the world will keep increasing its temperature to beyond 3 degrees Celsius by the end of this century.

But at the same time, when someone from the developed world says, "Otherwise, the world is going to be destroyed," some developing countries—the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing Countries in particular, which are at the forefront of the impact—they say in response, "Hey, we don't have to wait until 2100 to see this destruction. For us, it's now, it's here. And guess who did this to us? Definitely, we didn't do this to ourselves."

And so, these developing countries argue that there is no moral argument to tell them—to tell those countries that are, for example, gradually being submerged by rising sea levels without really having contributed in any meaningful way to this—the GHG footprint of Small Island Developing Countries is less than 1 percent—there is no moral argument to tell those countries that, well, "Favor mitigation." The developing world says, "Help us now. We need to adapt now."

The OECD gives a number of $116 billion reached in 2022—and not everybody agrees, for reasons having to do with, as you point out, creative accounting methodologies—but of that figure, only about $20 billion is allocated to adaptation.

Adaptation, as you said, is about how to build resilient economies and resilient societies in the face of the climate crisis.

Baku Dialogues:

Do you mean that it's like cashing in an insurance policy?

Soltanov:

> Well, it's like saying "Save what can be saved of the house and rebuild the rest to prevent the next fire by adapting to the reality, using better construction materials, and so on." That's adaptation.
>
> And adaptation has really been trailing behind, because those who are supposed to provide the financing are also the ones that come up with the financing mechanisms, and these mechanisms are more aligned with the mitigation approach.
>
> Having a 50:50 ration between mitigation and adaptation should not mean decreasing the absolute numbers for mitigation for the sake of adaptation. The right argument should be, "Let's increase the amount of mitigation, but that of adaptation much more, so that we have parity within $300 billion."
>
> At the same time, currently we are spending about $20 billion on adaptation, but the need of the developing world is around at least $300 billion, and so the money devoted to this needs to be increased by a factor of more than ten.
>
> And although there were decisions made in Glasgow at COP26 in 2021 to at least double it, and this was repeated in Dubai during COP28 in 2023, we are still trailing way behind.

Baku Dialogues:

There are a number of reasons why I raised this distinction between adaptation and mitigation, and why I think it's important to get into it a bit more, and one of them has to do with how this applies to the formulation from the COP28 decision text, in which the Parties called upon themselves to "contribute […], in a nationally determined manner, taking into account the Paris Agreement and their different national circumstances, pathways and approaches [to transition] away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net-zero by 2050 in keeping with the science."

So, here I want to refer to the distinction between "transitioning away" from fossil fuels, in contradistinction to the term "phasing out," which was rejected by the Parties as being too radical because it presupposed bringing about fossil fuel burning down to zero. And this formulation that was adopted at COP28—so, not the more radical one—it was not repeated explicitly at COP29.

And while I don't want to get into the reasons for this, I do want to get into the following argument: The choice of the phrase "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems," and the caveats that envelop that formulation, seems to me to at least keep open the door ajar for the cleanest of fossil fuels—namely, natural gas—to remain an integral part of the global energy mix for the foreseeable future, including beyond 2050. And particularly in the context of the developing world, in the context of adaptation, because energy demand is surging exponentially. And that's not going to change.

So, the argument is, basically, abundant and reliable and affordable energy fuels growth—you can't have real and sustainable growth with a low energy economy, without a source of energy that's heavily subsidized, and so on.

And so, it seems highly, highly unlikely that any of that can happen without natural gas at least being a baseload fuel. Particularly in the context of the wild ambitions to get to net-zero by 2050 and to get to stay as close to 1.5 and as far away from 2.0 as possible. Because in much of the developing world, the enemy at the gates is coal and biomass. And the most trusted way to replace coal and biomass is with natural gas—at least in much of the developing world. This reduces emissions, but it also does it in a sustainable way in terms of economic growth. Right? You take out

coal and you replace it with gas, you're still doing something. You're not making the perfect the enemy of the good, as goes the aphorism.

Sure, natural gas is not wind or solar, but it's way better than burning coal or wood or dung. Or paying way more for the installation of wind and solar infrastructure, and hoping that cutting-edge storage technology becomes a reality—and an affordable and reliable one, at that.

So, the adoption of natural gas—replacing coal with gas—is here seen as part of the adaptation conversation. But in the mitigation conversation, that way of thinking is unacceptable. Allowance versus condemnatory—you know, rejecting the idea—even that fossil fuels in general and natural gas in particular can remain an integral part of the global energy mix. Certainly before 2050, and even after that date.

Soltanov:

> As the CEO of COP29, and as a Deputy Energy Minister of Azerbaijan, I'm not an apologist for fossil fuels. I never had any instruction to do this—or anything along those lines. There were some Parties that were making the case for fossil fuels at COP29, but it wasn't us. This is mainly related to the fact that we have been the impartial leader and host of the negotiation process at COP29. Yet, it also needs to be noted that Azerbaijan produces less than 1 percent of the oil and gas in the world. It's very clear that the scientific community tells us that fossil fuels are accountable for about 70 percent of current anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, with coal being the largest emitter, followed by oil, and then natural gas. But fossil fuels are not all that is producing GHGs. The rest—the 30 percent—is coming from agriculture, industrial processes, and waste sectors.
>
> Moreover, certain Parties underline that the Paris Agreement does not talk at all about fossil fuels. It talks about emissions—as does the UNFCCC. And so, these Parties argue, that the focus should be on emissions.

Baku Dialogues:

Right, something like the way that the Montreal Protocol for reducing CFCs in response to ozone depletion adopted a logic of "policy blindness" regarding the means and technologies used to achieve the targets that were set forth. This is the "whatever works" argument.

Soltanov:

> And so, there is an argument that we should focus on curbing emissions, such that we reach 1.5. This makes theoretical sense. But technologically, we are not there. Maybe we will get there in the future—maybe we will have technology that could, in fact, take all the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases coming from fossil fuels and other sources, like agriculture, and bury them underground—although there are geological limitations to this approach. But we don't have those technologies today. And it would be a luxury we can't afford to wait for—and to say, "Okay, let's continue with a business-as-usual approach to fossil fuels because at one point we will have the technology to remove the emissions." Therefore, there is no option but to decrease the consumption of oil coal, oil and gas significantly to attain net-zero by 2050.
>
> Now, in terms of emissions, you are very correct that coal is—in terms of per unit of energy produced—about 80 percent more polluting than natural gas. And there was a decision at previous COPs about phasing out "unabated" coal. But again, coal today—if you look at the combusted fossil fuels—produces more greenhouse gasses than oil and gas (thankfully, Azerbaijan is neither a producer nor consumer of coal). And then comes oil. And then comes natural gas, in terms of pollution rates.
>
> Following this line of thinking, natural gas might have a specific place in the overall decarbonization process for two reasons.

First, because it's the cleanest fossil fuel. And therefore, if, in the case of Azerbaijan, for instance, our gas replaces coal in Türkiye and some European markets—as it does—that constitutes partial decarbonization.

Let also underline that net-zero is not the same thing as absolute-zero. It's important to make this clear. That means that whatever we do—even in 2050—the world is still going to be burning some oil and gas, and even some coal. But we will find a way to remove all these greenhouse gases out of the combustion process, and we will find a way to get rid of them one way or another. But more gas—more gas replacing oil and coal—that is already decarbonization.

The second reason that natural gas can play a specific role in the overall decarbonization process is the ability of gas-fired-power plants in balancing the intermittency of renewable energy—specifically solar and wind. Currently, it is the best available technology there is.

Yet, at the same time, the constructive role of natural gas in helping to achieve net-zero is conditioned by two factors: The elimination of its emissions and the avoidance of what's called the lock-in effect. Natural gas is a 28 times more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Therefore, as long as we make sure that natural gas is not locked-in forever, and as long as we understand that it's about partial decarbonization, and that its emissions need to be captured and offset, it could and does help us in our drive towards a net-zero world. This must be the reason why there are COP decisions referring to natural gas as a "transitional fuel."

The COP28 decision—to which you referred—on "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner," well, is a COP decision to be taken seriously by all Parties, including Azerbaijan. And the fact that the Parties didn't agree to repeat that formulation at

COP29 does not dilute the importance of the decision taken at COP28. It stands, and we have to adhere to it.

Baku Dialogues:

And you're committed to that?

Soltanov:

Of course. I'm very glad that Azerbaijan became a Party to the Global Methane Pledge. Moreover, our state-owned energy company, SOCAR, became a Party to the OGDC—the Oil & Gas Decarbonization Charter and to OGMP 2.0—the Oil & Gas Methane Partnership 2.0. This is the flagship methane reporting standard in the world, led by the United Nations Environment Programme. These indicate that we take our responsibility seriously in terms of natural gas emissions, as well as fossil fuels in general.

Baku Dialogues:

But there's another thing that Azerbaijan is doing—that your country is, in some sense, at the vanguard of—and that is your green electricity cable megaproject: This idea of linking electricity generated by wind and solar sources in the Caspian and transporting it via Georgia, which is to contribute some electricity generated from hydro sources, and then via undersea cable across the Black Sea, to markets on the European continent.

And this brings to my mind something about which President Aliyev has spoken several times, namely the attempts to politicize or boycott the COP29 Presidency, which didn't succeed in any serious way, but one of the potential casualties—if I can put it that way—of that attempt, was that there wasn't this expected announcement, or side event, that was supposed to highlight the Black Sea Green Energy Corridor—this potentially game-changing undersea cable megaproject, which involves two EU member

states, Romania and Hungary (and there may be more), and which enjoys the support of the European Commission.

And it casts a bit of a shadow on the likelihood of extending it east—of making the megaproject more mega, if I can put it this way—by involving the generation of electricity by wind and solar sources in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and then transmitting this via an undersea cable across the Caspian into Azerbaijan, before latching onto the other megaproject.

And, well, for me at least, it was unfortunate that this didn't happen. It was a missed opportunity. And, frankly, it's hard to understand why whoever makes these sorts of decisions in Brussels and elsewhere made the decision that they made. Simply put: It goes against their interests, their plans, and their vision—at least as they in Brussels and the member states understand all this.

It certainly would have added to Azerbaijan's narrative that it is working in partnership with the EU and its member states into becoming a strategic *energy* producer and exporter, and not just an oil and gas producer and exporter. And that this narrative—this vision—is fully supported by the EU, particularly in the context of what the EU has been seeking to achieve in terms of the energy "transition." And that the financing is going to happen, because this is in the EU's interest, and so on. And you'd think, therefore, that the EU would jump at the opportunity to show what an exemplary global citizen it's being, and how forging green energy partnerships with a key country in the next geopolitical theater over really is the wave of the future, it's not just pie in the sky, and so on.

And yet…

Soltanov:

> I don't feel that Azerbaijan has any special responsibility, because I don't feel like there's any difference between producing, exporting, and consuming fossil fuels. Any transaction regarding fossil fuels happens voluntarily within the context of a global free market. Nobody forces anybody to buy them. If there's a country that decides not to use or buy coal, oil, and gas, then it is free to do so. The same applies to corporations and individuals.
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> There's this unfair emphasis on production. I think the emphasis should be put as much, if not more, on consumption.
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> Consumers in the developed world get out of their heated or air-conditioned homes and offices, drive their cars, use all sorts of electronic gadgets and the internet, hop on planes, burning through fossil fuels at a much higher rate than consumers in the developing world, and then claim to be climate-warriors. Who is the scapegoat? Of course, producers. I do not find this attitude scientifically and morally valid, nor is it sincere and constructive. Take Azerbaijan. We are a developing country as per UNFCCC, and—as I've already pointed out—we produce less than 1 percent of the world's oil and gas. And we produce and consume zero percent of the world's coal.
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> Our oil production has been decreasing since 2010—and not just because of geological factors. It's a conscious policy choice we have made. Our gas is plateauing, although it could increase. But if there is any increase, it will be most likely be due to a deal with the European Union, which is probably the most stringent climate negotiator in the world.

Baku Dialogues:

Can I interrupt to ask: What about Türkiye? Would it not work just to do it with Azerbaijan's ally Türkiye, because the Turks have this ambition to be a regional and maybe even a global gas hub—a storage and distribution hub—and now, with some of their own discoveries, they will probably also become also a producer.

Soltanov:

> Definitely, our options are open. What I meant was that we currently have this MoU with the EU from July 2022 that refers

to the potential to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor—so, about 10 bcm per year. And they asked for that. And sure, Türkiye would be an integral part of the process, but chances are it will happen together with the EU. My main point is that that, in case our gas production goes up, it will be in line with the world's decarbonization efforts.

Now, regarding the Black Sea Green Energy Corridor, we are not championing this because of some feeling of special responsibility—and I know you weren't suggesting that.

Azerbaijan has been at the forefront of energy revolutions, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. And we accumulated enough experience, enough know-how, enough connections, and enough business savvy to be at the forefront of the next energy revolution—and this time, its color is green.

The Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Green Energy Corridor initiative was made possible by the discovery of huge offshore wind resources in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian, and we started this process with Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, as well as with the European Commission. We also hope to extend the megaproject forward by expanding it eastward, to Central Asian countries: To our Uzbek and Kazakh brothers. Currently the Central Asia-Azerbaijan Green Energy Corridor is conceptually and legally a separate project, but the chances are that in the future they could get merged.

Baku Dialogues:

Let's turn now to another aspect of Azerbaijan's COP29 Presidency—the 14 Global Initiatives. This is part of what was called the COP29 Presidential Action Agenda. And I want to put that together with this Green Energy Corridor, in a conceptual sense, and with what you said earlier about Azerbaijan having been at the forefront of various energy revolutions, including now, with this megaproject, the green energy revolution.

Soltanov:

Yes, one of our 14 Global Initiatives was our COP29 Green Energy Pledge on Green Energy Zones and Corridors. Another one was the COP29 Global Storage and Grids Pledge, which emphasized grid scale battery storage systems.

I think all of our Global Initiatives got very good traction. We had a lot of Parties and a lot of corporations signing onto them.

Now, regarding our Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Green Energy Corridor initiative, I want to mention that there are some similar projects between Egypt and Greece, between Italy and North Africa, and between the UK and Morocco. But the bottom line is that there are not that many projects in the world like ours, and so we are one of the harbingers of this latest energy and technological revolution. And we are very happy about that.

The cross-border electricity business is both financially and technically more complex than other similar energy businesses. First and foremost, electricity is a very capricious commodity: It has to be consumed as soon as it's produced. Transmitting green electricity across the grids or territories of different countries— to eventually end up in the EU's grid system is going to be a real challenge—you know that some of the most conservative entities in the world are grid operators. And add to that the expense of the project.

But again, we have significant experience—we have put together several projects of similar complexity in other fields of energy, like the Contract of the Century and the Southern Gas Corridor, which has many moving parts. And these experiences really work in our favor regarding the green energy revolution. We have every intention to utilize this experience—to apply it to this megaproject. We need to wait for the feasibility study to be completed.

By the way, Azerbaijan already established JVs—the first one with Georgia, Romania, and Hungary—and a second one with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This second one will be headquartered in Azerbaijan, while the first one will be headquartered in Romania. Both will be led by an Azerbaijani during their first terms.

We have received a lot of support, including from the European Commission. Everyone understands the strategic issues at play—besides the commercial ones. So, at this point, it's really just a matter of making it work.

Baku Dialogues:

But here the adequate financing of this project is obviously an integral part of making it work, as you put it. And the EU should be part of the financing—directly, and through the banks and other financing mechanisms they control.

And I want to bring that back to the question of general climate financing. Because it seems as though, if one were to pick projects that would make sense to be put in the general category of climate financing, this green cable project ought to be a natural fit—at least, that's how a layman would see it—it's certainly how I see it. So even if the Black Seas Green Energy Corridor could not, for technical reasons, draw on NCQG funds, it seems to me that just the idea is what the Americans call a "slam dunk" project or initiative.

And yet, it doesn't seem to be moving as fast as one would otherwise think it ought to move. And—I mentioned this already—Azerbaijan wanted to have an event that was focused on this, in the context of COP29, because it really is a success story in waiting. And yet, that didn't happen. There were geopolitical factors, there were other factors, too. Nonetheless, it was a missed opportunity. Now, that's on those who didn't want to make it happen. And there's not much use in crying over spilt milk, so let's not. But I would like you to comment on whether you think these kinds of green megaprojects should be highlighted at future COPs.

Soltanov:

Offshore wind projects are very complex technologically and financially. You have to take measurements for at least a year, which we are already starting to do. And from the very start, we made it very clear that we want investors to come in, to invest, and eventually mainly to export this green electricity generated by offshore wind. Most of such investors will be headquartered in other countries, but they are expected to be joined by domestic corporations too. We believe our experience with earlier Production Sharing Agreements could provide a certain business model here as well.

In our northern part of the Caspian, we already delineated five offshore regions, and the measurements are starting. In water bodies you need to coordinate and clarify aviation, fisheries, navigation issues, and so on. Eventually, this project will be viable on the basis of the cost of production, the price of electricity in the EU markets, and how much of a margin remains in the middle.

We believe that it will work, and the pace of moving forward is conditional on the outcome of the full feasibility study—as I've mentioned—and on the investors' proposals that will come out in its wake. I think there are really interesting tools and synergies that could be put together making sure that this works.

But on the financing issue you asked about, the answer is yes. I do believe that significant portions of our Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Green Energy Corridor project will eventually qualify for climate finance. I think we can get really good loans from multilateral development banks for this project.

Baku Dialogues:

The Azerbaijani COP29 Presidency had, as you mentioned, 14 Global Initiatives, among which were the COP29 Green Energy Pledge on Green

Energy Zones and Corridors and the COP29 Global Storage and Grids Pledge.

And you said that they all got very good traction. Now, at the same time, some clearly had more visibility and buy-in than others. Can you highlight two or three of them that you thought really have wings—that can become an integral part of the COP process for many years to come? So, for instance, one or two that the forthcoming Brazilian COP30 Presidency might consider taking on as a matter of continuity?

Soltanov:

In the decarbonization process, there are seven sectors of the economy that we deal with. Regarding these seven sectors, there are low-hanging fruits and there are not so low-hanging fruits.

For instance, agriculture is difficult to decarbonize, and it's about food and livelihood, and so this makes it a very sensitive area to decarbonize. Likewise, greening the industrial processes will take time—it's not impossible, but it will be very expensive, and the technologies are not all there yet.

But there are lower-hanging fruits. The power sector probably tops them. It is also one of the most polluting ones among the seven sectors I mentioned.

Another low-hanging fruit is transportation. And perhaps also about buildings—you know, heating and cooling.

The point is, for all of these three lower-hanging fruit sectors, there is a need for very resilient and interconnected grid systems, which have a lot of battery storage systems and are tied into green power production facilities.

Therefore, I think the most memorable and consequential COP29 Presidency Global Initiatives are those related to grid interconnections, battery storage systems, and how we make

domestic grids resilient. These are the bottlenecks, in terms of collecting the low-hanging fruits. That's why the corresponding Initiatives our Presidency put forward to deal with them are so important. International interconnectors are not just about commerce or about getting the most efficient green energy; They are also about making domestic grids more resilient with the help of external support systems. Balancing the green energy problems could thus be outsourced, increasing the overall share of green energy for all.

I would also like to mention the COP29 Declaration on Water for Climate Action. In fact, I've never seen as much support for any other Initiative. Water is an issue—a medium—through which the climate crisis is being felt and experienced all over the world. Moreover, the water issue is mostly about adaptation.

The next Global Initiative to mention is the Baku Global Climate Transparency Platform, or BTP. Since one of the major issues, both in terms of climate finance and climate action—the two issues that will take us out of this climate crisis—is lack of trust. Are donors really paying what they promised to pay? Are beneficiaries really doing what they promised to do? This brings us to the issue of transparency. Currently, this is supposed to be realized through so called Biannual Transparency Reports—getting this right is crucial for the climate deal to work. This is what Azerbaijan has been doing throughout 2024 and, currently, and this is what we will continue to do for years to come.

Baku Dialogues:

I'd like to follow up on this by bringing up the Troika—the mechanism of the COP Presidency Troika. This is an innovation in the work of COP, and it was conceived by Azerbaijan. It helps provide institutional continuity and institutional memory of COP Presidencies, but through the Parties that hold them, and not just through the UNFCCC Secretariat, which is its own bureaucratic animal.

And the Troika seems to be a good invasion introduced by the COP29 Presidency, and I would like to see if you could link that to the BTP and some of the Azerbaijani Presidency's other COP29 Global Initiatives that increase the likelihood that they will really assume a life of their own, which, presumably, is one of the reasons why you proposed the Troika mechanism.

Soltanov:

> COP28 was about diagnosis in terms of whether we are on course to achieve 1.5 or well below 2.0 degrees Celsius. The result? No, we are not. What do we need for that to happen? Well, new action plans, which are mainly reflected in Nationally Determined Contributions or, as we say, NDCs—there are others, like National Adaptation Plans or NAPs, Long Term Strategies or LTSs, and Biennial Transparency Report or BTRs. But the main focus is on NDCs. New and more ambitious NDCs are needed for course correction, which is going to be the focus of COP30 in Brazil. Then, the question is: What is needed for such ambitious NDCs to be submitted by the Parties? And the answer is: Definitely, climate finance—and this was the central issue to be decided at COP29.
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> Therefore, the Troika was about building this golden triangle to achieve timely net-zero for a 1.5 world. And so, this was logic behind establishing the Troika.

Baku Dialogues:

With its COP29 Presidency and with the hosting of the actual COP29, let's take it that Azerbaijan exceeded expectations—both technically and substantively. But this brings us to the $64,000 question, so to speak. Can the COP process go ahead without sufficient money?

Let me lay it out. Of the Annex 1 states—and these are more or less the OECD states—the United States is now effectually out, because President Trump has withdrawn his country from the Paris Agreement. Whenever

Canada holds its next election—later this year, probably—it seems quite likely that Ottawa will be, let's say, half-out of Paris—in the sense that I doubt Ottawa will contribute much to the NCQG pot if the election goes as expected, for example. Certainly, the new government will put less in than the current government pledged to do.

And is likely to put Japan on the fence, because they'll want to do more of their own thing—or, better put, at the end of the day, they will not want to be the only other G7 country—or the only serious OECD country or the only serious Annex 1 country—standing with the European Union and its relevant member states.

And part of that is that they don't want to spend the money—or a disproportionate amount of, say, the $300 billion, if the Americans are out and stay out. Another is that they don't want to transform their economies if other major players won't be doing that, because it will kill their comparative advantage.

Anyway, my point is that, basically, you could argue that, effectually, the EU is all that's left. Another way of saying that is that the EU is isolated—or EU member states being isolated in terms of the Annex 1 countries, in terms of really going all-in with climate finance, the NCQG, and so on.

And sure, there are other donors out there—here we can mention China, GCC states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and so on—but they too will probably do their own thing. They certainly won't want to volunteer to become Annex 1 countries, for instance.

So, this really does raise the question: Is the COP process viable going forward? Because without the money, all you're left with is the pessimistic diagnosis from COP28, the commitments that were agreed at COP29 not being fulfilled—or at least not the ambition to fulfill them rapidly, and to scale up, and to really push for breakthrough climate financing is, well, the momentum is not there. I'm simplifying, but you get my point.

Now, this has nothing to do with the with the ability of the COP29 Presidency. I'm just describing a likely trajectory. Sure, the Brazilians will put on a great COP30, but it really does look like we might be moving back into the domain of wishful thinking in terms of concrete outcomes.

And so, the question really is, in this particular geopolitical moment, how optimistic are you?

Soltanov:

There are things we can control, and there are things we cannot control. And we are consciously choosing to focus on things that we can control, and especially on things for which we have a mandate to tackle.

To be honest with you, I think we should do our best and understand that there is no other option but net-zero as soon as possible, meaning 2050. Anything that will push us towards this goal is worth supporting. The UNFCCC and its extensions, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, are the legitimate global frameworks for action. Upward and forward.

The world didn't move—starting in the mid- to late nineteenth century—from coal to oil, which is a better fuel in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, because governments came together with a decision. No, the world made that move because it made technological and economic sense to do so.

I increasingly believe that that the solution is really in technology and the cost of green solutions, as compared to traditional/polluting solutions.

Why do we have difficulties in transitioning to a green economy? Well, because green technologies are more expensive and simply not there yet—although there are an increasing number of exceptions. Therefore, as soon as the green way of doing business becomes cheaper than the traditional ways, the game is going to be over—to the benefit of saving the world from the climate crisis.

Today, we're not at that "game over" point. Yet, we're getting close. Too slowly, but we're moving in the right direction. To me, all these COPs are there for the Parties to come together

and give a political push to the process—a push that is powerful enough to reach that crucial point. After that, market forces will do wonders, and it will be a matter of time before this crisis is over.

This is, I think, our mission.

Baku Dialogues:

That's a very good way of putting it, because the pushing, which never happened before in previous transitions from one fuel to another—certainly not with the incredibly large amounts of money, subsidies—but in this case, right now, you could at least make a plausible argument that that this pushing is necessary now, precisely because of the impact that climate change is having. But also, it's important for this interventionism not to be more than just a push. In other words, you push until the market forces are able to really take over.

Soltanov:

Exactly.

Baku Dialogues:

Because if all the Parties and the philanthropies and the other donors do between now and 2050 is basically to subsidize this shift, then it will work, right? That's the argument.

On the other hand, you know as well as I do—actually, you probably know this much better than me—that that we're not actually yet in an energy "transition." The world is actually not "transitioning." We're talking a lot about it, and the developing world is putting a whole lot of money into it—including in R&D. But it hasn't happened in the way that at least some would like. Not yet, anyway.

So, this raises the following question: How do you push to get to that point?

Soltanov:

It's slower than we need, but it's faster than we expected.

Let me give you an example: In 2023, renewable energy capacity globally increased by 500 GW. This is equal to the total electricity generation capacity of India, which is third behind China and the United States. That's not enough. But in and of itself, that's amazing. Things like this keep happening.

My personal opinion is that we have reached the point of no return in terms of the green transition. That there's no going back.

The issue for me, therefore, is about how we speed up the process even more—not whether the process will succeed.

All this being said, we should make sure that this green transition is—at the same time—a just transition.

Baku Dialogues:

Well, yes, we mustn't downplay the importance of the question of justice. I'm afraid getting into it further would require much more time than we have. In some sense, we've touched already on it in the context of talking about the COP28 decision text, which references "different national circumstances, pathways and approaches [to transition] away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner." And, also, when we spoke about the various textual references to "common but differentiated responsibilities."

Regretfully, Dr. Soltanov, we need to leave it at that. Thank you very much for this insightful and wide-ranging conversation.

Soltanov:

You're very welcome. I appreciated this opportunity.

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION