

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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## Coming to Terms with the New Afghanistan

**Stronger Together in the Greater Caspian Region**

Richard E. Hoagland

**Afghanistan and South-Central Asia Connectivity**

Edward Lemon

**Afghanistan's Place on the Silk Road**

James J. Coyle

## Landmines & Arms Control in the New Caucasus

**Post-Conflict Confidence-Building and Arms Control**

Stuart Maslen

**Setting Standards for Clearing Landmines**

David Hewitson

## Geopolitics of Post-Conflict Karabakh

**End of the War, But No Peace**

Anar Valiyev

**Karabakh and Georgia's Regional Positioning**

Victor Kipiani

## Iran and the South Caucasus

**The Fifth Element**

Jahangir Arasli

**Iran and Azerbaijan After the Second Karabakh War**

Vali Kaleji

**The Challenges of Identity Politics in Iran**

Ramin Jabbarli



# Stronger Together in the Greater Caspian Region

*Richard E. Hoagland*

On a cold December morning 30 years ago, the citizens of the 15 Soviet Socialist Republics awoke to discover that their country, the USSR, no longer existed. Some in the various republics, who had been agitating for independence, were elated. But most were simply bewildered and asked, “What now?”

On a warm September morning in the United States 20 years ago, just about a year after Vladimir Putin was first elected president of an independent Russia, members of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda ope-rating out of Afghanistan hijacked aircraft

and crashed them into the iconic twin towers in New York City and into the heart of America’s military might, the Pentagon, in Washington, DC.

In the context of these two extraordinary historic events, the countries of the Greater Caspian Region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on the western side of the sea, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on the eastern side—have lived their recent histories. And now a third historic event is shaping the region: the withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO troops from

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Afghanistan and the triumph of the Taliban. These Caspian nations do not live in their own vacuum. Like all countries, they are influenced by global powers (e.g. the United States and the European Union), including two that are their immediate neighbors (e.g. Russia and China), as well as by regional powers like Turkey and Iran and, now inevitably, by Afghanistan.

This essay will examine the influence of outside powers on the Greater Caspian Region before recommending a new path for those countries.

## Key Players

Ask any random citizen on the street in the United States, or even in Europe, what first comes to mind when they hear the words *Caspian Sea*, and, after a pause, the answer might be, “the best caviar in the world.” A small number of more knowledgeable might answer, “natural resources, like oil and gas.” But for the most part, most Westerners have little knowledge and understanding of the eight countries on the southern rim of Russia that emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union. Nor

are they likely to know that the Greater Caspian Region over centuries—think the Han Chinese and the Roman, Persian, and Ottoman empires, not to mention the Russian Empire—and into the present is a strategically important center of competition for global power and influence.

Against the greater noise of conflicts and crises always headlining the daily news around the world, the Greater Caspian Region is usually only a quiet, background hum—if it’s heard at all. And yet, it bears close attention. Why? Certainly because it’s one of the major hydrocarbon-deposit centers of the world—for example, Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak in Kazakhstan; Galkynysh in Turkmenistan; and Shah Deniz in Azerbaijan, to name only the most prominent and well-known, although there are many, many other significant ones. But also because it is the locus of four global powers vying for influence: Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—all for varying reasons and with sometimes conflicting intentions.

For the past 30 years, relations between the Greater Caspian Region countries and the West in general have been fraught; or, more

bluntly, might be described as a sometimes love-hate relationship. The one fundamental point that the United States, and the West in general, does not fully take into account is that the intellectual heritage of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus is *not* the Western heritage that developed over centuries from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment—the three great intellectual transformations that created the institutions, cultural values, political structures, and worldview of the modern West.

Rather, the former Soviet states are the inheritors of the values of the Soviet and the earlier Russian Tsarist empires, with an unbroken line directly back to the Byzantine Empire overlaying their own histories as Near Eastern and Asian khanates and nomadic peoples. This “Byzantine-Soviet” worldview and its system of governance, in particular, de-emphasized the

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importance of the individual and glorified the power of the state headed by an autarchic leader. Especially during the Soviet period, this non-Western system established an unholy alliance of political leadership in the hands of the privileged few, a tolerance for and even a degree of acceptance of organized crime as an element of power, and powerful intelligence agencies to knit it all together. This system benefitted only a privileged few without the existence of any long-established institutions to challenge that power. To put it succinctly: this heritage, which continues to endure, is radically different from the heritage of the West.

To better understand the significance of the Greater Caspian Region, we need to look at the international players that vie for influence in the eight countries on the southern rim of the former Soviet Union. Each will be examined in turn.

## Russia

Russia has long declared its former republics to be its special *sphere of influence*, sometimes substituting “privileged” for “special.” Because of history, economic ties, a colonial *lingua franca*, the Russified culture embraced by the elites, and a *tsunami* of propaganda emanating from the various Russian-language broadcast and online media channels that blanket the region, Russian near-absolute dominance there should be a foregone conclusion. But it’s not. Each state in the Greater Caspian Region jealously guards its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and ever more so since Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, which was a quiet game-changer—a real wake-up call—for each of the governments in the region.

Further, Russia regularly warns leaders on the threat of the Islamic State and of the Taliban. While the threat does indeed exist because of the ISIS declaration of a sub-caliphate of

Khorasan in Afghanistan and its neighboring regions, the dire Russian admonitions purposely exaggerate the threat to try to impel the Greater Caspian Region states to turn more fully to Moscow for their own security. The catastrophe in Afghanistan, Moscow says, fully justifies its desire for a greater military presence in the countries of the Caspian region.

Russia already has a permanent military presence at Gyumri in Armenia, and in Central Asia at the Kant Airfield outside Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and with its 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base at three locations in Tajikistan: Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob. The 201<sup>st</sup> is Russia’s largest military base outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Russia also has troops on the ground in Georgia (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and now also in Azerbaijan as “peacekeepers” after the conclusion to last year’s Second Karabakh War.

By contrast, while the United States did for a time have military

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facilities in Central Asia to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, 2001-2005; the Manas Transit Center at the Bishkek International Airport, 2002-2014), and also had lesser-publicized access in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Washington repeatedly stated it had no desire for *permanent* military bases in Central Asia. While in theory it would be useful to reestablish a military presence in Central Asia, currently that is not in the cards, in part because Moscow has told the leaders in the region that it cannot happen: Moscow has insisted on a firm *nyet*.

Russia has created two multilateral structures for regional integration. The first is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in which the members pledge to support and defend each other's mutual security (the CSTO's six current members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan). Despite annual summits and regular military exercises, the CSTO is still not seen as an especially effective organization, either by its members or more broadly in the greater Eurasian region. And whether it would respond in an emergency situation, is open to question. It is useful to note that during Kyrgyzstan's ethnic

turmoil in Osh that began in June 2010, Bishkek asked for security assistance from the CSTO, as did Armenia during the Second Karabakh War, but Moscow refused to deploy the CSTO to intervene because the CSTO exists to defend member states against *outside* aggressors.

The other, and more recently established Russia-dominated multilateral organization in the region is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), comprising initially Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and now including Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. It should be noted that Moscow has been putting pressure on others to join, like Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan, arguably the weakest state in the Central Asia region, has responded to Moscow lukewarmly, so far saying neither yes nor no, and Azerbaijan continues to kick the can down the road, although the government of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan has recently expressed cautious interest.

Historically, Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the EEU in the 1990s, but Moscow tended to pooh-pooh it until Putin's third presidential term, when he apparently saw it as potentially an effective tool of

*Putinism*, which some go so far as to dub *neo-Sovietism*. Some suspect that Moscow sees the EEU as a *bloc* structure—led by Moscow—that will inevitably take on a political dimension. So far, however, Kazakhstan has politely said *nyet* to any kind of political dimension—or, to go even further, a common currency—for the EEU. Why Kazakhstan? Because it rigorously guards its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, especially because its population, unlike the populations of the four other Central Asia states, is still just under 25 percent Slavic, concentrated largely in the northern part of the country bordering Russia and around the former capital, Almaty. It's especially the north that concerns Nur-Sultan (and why Nazarbayev moved the capital of his country from Almaty to Brezhnev's "Virgin Lands" city of Tselinograd on the southern Siberian steppe, located truly in the middle of nowhere). He did so because, from the 1990s to this very day, influential voices in Russia (and not just the clownish Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, himself born in Almaty) continue to call for the annexation of the northern third of Kazakhstan that some insist was always historically a part of Russia (Kazakhstan's present-day border with Russia was established in 1936).

## China

The looming elephant in the Greater Caspian Region is increasingly China, and Beijing's speeches and deeds deserves close observation. China's presence in the region has generally been politically benign as it has sought to gain access to Central Asia's hydrocarbon and mineral wealth to fuel its own economic growth. Even as China increasingly bought into Kazakhstan's oil sector and Turkmenistan's natural-gas sector (where it is the only foreign state allowed to operate the country's gas wells and pipelines directly on Turkmenistan's sovereign soil), the West, including the United States, saw no problem with Beijing's role, because there was no perceived political threat.

The West, however, perked up its ears in September 2013 when China's president Xi Jinping announced at Nazarbayev University in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) its New Silk Road Economic Belt running from east to west across Central Asia, through the Southern Caucasus, and on to the territory of the European Union. Initially, the United States, with its own New Silk Road Initiative of the early Obama Administration (that, in reality, existed only on paper), paid little attention because the American version of the

new Silk Road focused on forging north-south links from Russia's southern border into India, whereas China's stated goal was to facilitate transport of its industrial production, especially from western China, overland to the European continent.

China, as we now know, was making it up as it went along, and by 2014 had mostly formulated and finally announced its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. The Chinese plan is an essential part of Beijing's emergence onto the world stage as a global player and goes far beyond Central Asia to include elements in Pakistan now known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (from the Karakorum Mountains to the warm-water port of Gwadar), Southeast Asia, and maritime lanes through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to all its littoral ports, including those in East Africa. By March 2015, China had released a comprehensive action plan for what it had by then come to call the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing that it "is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence."

The initial American response to China's New Silk Road Economic Belt was a rather simplistic shrug: "They do hardware; we do software," was the prevailing view in Washington, meaning that Beijing would probably focus on upgrading the east-west highways and rail lines along the southern rim of the former Soviet Union, while Washington focused on technical capacity-building for things such as customs modernization and border security. As China's BRI policy emerged, and as it began to buy up industries all the way from Xinjiang to the Black Sea, it became apparent that China was actually creating more of an industrial investment scheme, in part to stimulate economic growth among its western neighbors. Further, as never before, China began to emphasize the value of greatly expanded people-to-people engagement, a fundamental element in any superpower's foreign policy.

Near the end of 2014, U.S. diplomats met for the first time with appropriate contacts in Beijing to compare notes on each other's New Silk Road policies (I led that U.S. delegation). Those initial meetings were friendly and, to some participants and observers, surprisingly forthcoming, but they only scratched the surface. Follow-up came in May 2015,

again in Beijing, where the United States offered a short list of possibilities for concrete cooperation in Central Asia and beyond. Not much came of this at that time for at least three reasons: China was not sure of American intentions, the United States was only "testing the waters" but was not fully committed to cooperation, and, probably more important, because China had by that time already nominally allied its New Silk Road Economic Belt with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Because American policy was not fully invested in seeking Chinese collaboration in Central Asia and beyond, Washington let these initial forays fall by the wayside. And yet, the potential certainly does exist even now, at least theoretically, for Sino-American cooperation in the Greater Caspian Region. Whatever role China will now play in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan bears close watching. Should China gain a real foothold in Kabul, theoretically Beijing could become one of

the new back-channel lines of communication for Washington to the Taliban.

More broadly, the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays a certain role in Central Asia, certainly more so than the Russia-dominated CSTO. For many years, the SCO was seen by outsiders (and

even by some participants) as just one more international "talk shop." Soon after the SCO was founded, member state Uzbekistan recommended that the United States be granted observer status. Before the SCO could decide on this recommendation, however, Washington rejected the offer,

ideologically unwilling to be associated, even as an observer, with an organization comprised of Russia, China, and "unreformed" former Soviet states. This rejection was, perhaps, understandable but was short-sighted and typical of ideological decision-making in Washington. Now that the Taliban rule Afghanistan, it's unlikely that the SCO will play

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## Iran

Although Iran has common borders with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, it is still a bit of a wildcard in the Greater Caspian Region. Tehran has long been interested in its former-Soviet neighbors but has been economically constrained by the international sanctions that have crippled its economy, and it has largely pursued its interests in the region through a foreign policy posture devoid of strictly ideological concerns of the sort that drives its policies in the Middle East. If international sanctions against Iran are significantly reduced—certainly a big *if*—its limited influence could begin to grow, perhaps even in a constructive manner. Still, Iranian-Caspian infrastructure continues to emerge, like the

Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railroad and Iran's upgrading of its port of Charbahar, in part for the use of landlocked Central Asia.

Nevertheless, Iran will have an uphill slog to gain any significant political influence in the Greater Caspian Region. The most natural affinities should exist between Dushanbe and Tehran, because, unlike the other Central Asian states that are generally Mongol-culture and Turkic-speaking by heritage, Tajikistan is a Persian-culture nation, having once in the long-distant past been an outpost of the ancient Persian Empire; the Tajik and Farsi languages are mutually intelligible. But even Dushanbe is more than a little leery of Tehran because Tajikistan's population is majority Sunni, except for the large but remote and sparsely populated Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast where Ismaili Shia predominate.

Likewise, Iran and Azerbaijan, two Shia-majority states, possess one important prerequisite for becoming natural allies, but secular

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Azerbaijan has kept its relations with Iran to the “correct” level at best, and Iran keeps a wary eye on its significant ethnic-Azerbaijani population in northern Iran.

All of the Greater Caspian Region states cast a wary eye toward Iran because it is a self-proclaimed Islamic revolutionary state, a fact that alienates the determinedly secular leaders elsewhere in the region. Still, Iran can expect to gain more influence in the region in coming years—even if slowly and incrementally—especially on the economic front, as its trade and energy linkages increase with the Caspian-littoral states.

## Turkey

Ankara should be a major player in the Greater Caspian Region, but it never really reached its full potential, especially in Central Asia, and, currently, seems more focused on its own internal issues. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey made a full-court press effort to become a major player in Central Asia because four of the region's five states (minus Tajikistan) are Turkic. However, it overplayed its hand and

was perceived as a state seeking domination rather than one offering to be a helpful partner. More recently, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has caused caution throughout the region with his occasional musings about the reestablishment of the Ottoman Empire. Kazakhstan, however, has found a way to pay symbolic tribute to Turkey and to Turkic culture by designating its Silk Road city of Turkistan as the current Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World and reorganizing its regional state university there as Khodja Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University.

In the Southern Caucasus, Turkey and Armenia maintain their post-Ottoman Empire standoff. Ankara is allied with Baku, primarily against Yerevan, but is not a dominant and decisive partner for Azerbaijan, despite their public rhetoric. Indeed, Israel is as much a key partner for Azerbaijan as Turkey is. So long as Turkey remains inward looking because of its own unresolved struggle to determine whether it will truly become European or if it will pursue its own neo-Ottoman (and increasingly authoritarian) course, Ankara will remain a player, but not a major one, in the region.

## The European Union

To one degree or another, all eight Greater Caspian states practice what Kazakhstan was the first to term a *multi-vector foreign policy*, meaning they seek generally to balance their relations with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Balance, yes, but sometimes they also seek to play one off against the other. This is especially the case with Kyrgyzstan, which in recent years has lurched between Moscow and Washington in an attempt to instigate a bidding war for Bishkek's love.

Some Central Asian officials, as well as leaders in the Southern Caucasus states, will readily admit that Russia and China are immediate neighbors; the EU and the United States, though important, are rather far away. The European Union, as an entity that is a grouping of 27 member states and must make policy decisions by consensus, is not as big a player in the Greater Caspian Region as are some of

its individual members, like the United Kingdom, Germany, sometimes some of the Scandinavian countries, and even, quietly but effectively, Latvia. Even so, the EU has significantly increased its attention to and development assistance for the Greater Caspian Region since 2015. And so, clearly, the EU sees the region to its southeast as one that deserves considered attention.

## The United States

American policy immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of 15 new independent states was colored by a bit of *irrational exuberance*

that assumed, through Washington's rose-colored glasses, that of course the peoples of the former Soviet Union were naturally yearning to breathe the air of freedom and capitalism and that, with appropriate assistance, they would quickly become free-market liberal democracies. Using the authorities of

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the 1992 FREEDOM Support Act—in which FREEDOM is one of those quirky Congressional acronyms that stands for “Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets”-Washington dedicated considerable resources to support the former Soviet republics as they transitioned, over a relatively short time (it was assumed, at least by the Washington ideologues), from communism and central planning toward the Western ideals of democracy and free markets. As we now know, it didn't turn out to be as simple as transitioning from one ideology to another.

From the beginning, U.S. policy for the Greater Caspian Region has been remarkably consistent. Fundamentally—and this has never changed in 30 years—it has been to preserve and protect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of each state in the region. From the beginning, this has included supporting independent, sovereign states that uphold regional security, increase their economic integration with regional and global markets, and demonstrate respect for human rights and democratic governance, while not becoming sources of transnational threats to the United States or to any other nation.

From the onset, the United States has had embassies in every country in the region and has established a full range of programs, including humanitarian and developmental assistance. The implementation of U.S. policy in the Greater Caspian Region, as in other parts of the world, is not always readily visible and is almost never front-page news. America's military assistance in the region—quiet but effective—has been of real value. Russia is still the primary security partner for almost all of the nations in the region. But where it is welcome, the United States works with the countries' militaries and other security structures, especially the border guards, to modernize militaries and to ensure that border guards are increasingly capable of preventing the flow of contraband across borders, including narcotics and the components of weapons of mass destruction, while facilitating the passage of legitimate travelers and enhancing trade and commerce.

Over time, Washington has learned to take each country as it is, even if it occasionally falls into fits of finger-wagging and naming-and-shaming because of endemic corruption and human-rights violations. Still, policy-makers in Washington generally understand that the countries

of the Greater Caspian Region have now differentiated their own paths and, to be blunt, sometimes jostle against each other. The interests of one sometimes conflict with the interests of another: Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were mostly at loggerheads after the Tajikistan civil war of the early to mid-1990s, although that is now significantly changing with the new government in Tashkent. The animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan needs no elaboration, although the outcome of the Second Karabakh War had briefly raised hopes for their eventual reconciliation and even cooperation. Upstream and downstream countries throughout the region are still working to sort out what they see as nearly existential water rights. At the beginning of independence, borders were ill-defined, especially with the unusual system of enclaves and exclaves in the sensitive Fergana Valley that the Soviets carved up among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in a classic “divide and conquer” cartographic and ethnographic exercise in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the significant Azerbaijani

exclave of Nakhchivan that is totally surrounded by Armenia, Iran, and Turkey.

And now, with the historic—and troubling—developments taking place in Afghanistan, the United States is once again quietly increasing its interest in the region. It has no intention to displace Russia or China, but it does want to provide an alternative and a stronger partnership, where welcome, primarily because it will need these nations’ enhanced help to manage, initially, flows of refugees from Afghanistan and, more broadly, to prevent homegrown Islamic militant groups, especially in the Central Asian countries, from forging quiet links with the ideologically committed Taliban that would endanger the entire region.

### *Stronger Together*

At the dawn of the independence of the Greater Caspian Region states 30 years ago, it was said that “all roads led to Moscow.” That meant that supply chains for essentials like food and electricity were suddenly split among

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separate sovereign entities that had little desire to cooperate laterally, at least at first, simply because they had to focus on establishing the fundamentals of their own national independence. Nevertheless, the passage of time and a healthy dose of strategic patience suggest that regional cooperation in the Greater Caspian Region might possibly be just a bit more than a schematic and idealistic gleam in Western eyes. Indeed, desires and concrete actions for connectivity are emerging.

During the 2015 General Debate of the UN General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met in a collective setting with the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian states—an historic first—in a format called the C5+1. To the surprise of many, and without any sharp elbows having been thrown about, the region’s five foreign ministers discussed with Kerry potentials for regional cooperation and wider responsibilities, including countering violent extremism in responsible ways. To his credit, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson continued the C5+1 format at the 2017 UN General Debate. Other countries like Japan and South Korea have also established C5-format meetings. And now, with Uzbekistan having emerged from its quarter century of isolation, the top leaders in the region are

beginning to meet on their own in a C5 format *without* the “+1.”

Their first summit took place in Astana in 2018, followed by a second summit in Tashkent in 2019. But the unexpected “retirement” of Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev and the eventual election of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to that country’s presidency, followed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, put a temporary halt to these summits. However, the five had agreed to study regional blocs like ASEAN and the Nordic Council, and they have considered the idea of establishing a permanent secretariat to begin working on formally establishing a Central Asian bloc. In August 2021, the five resumed their meetings and held a “third consultative meeting” in Avaza, Turkmenistan.

The flowering of this process should be strongly encouraged. Furthermore, the five should add a sixth, Azerbaijan, and they should even hold the door open for the eventual membership, when they are ready, of Armenia and Georgia, although that is likely to be further into the future: perhaps for the moment some sort of “observer status” would be more appropriate.

Such a bloc, whatever the members would choose to call it—the Association of Caspian Nations?—



would work to fully modernize and harmonize its members' customs regulations to stimulate economic growth and international trade. Working for the common good, the bloc would, over time, improve and strengthen border security to facilitate the legitimate movement of people and goods while guarding against the illicit smuggling of contraband of all sorts, including the elements of weapons of mass destruction and the illegal transit of terrorists and of trafficking in persons. The resulting new bloc would work, over time, to build associations of mutual trust and respect with existing international organizations.

Currently, the Greater Caspian Region is one of the most isolated and least connected regions of the world: it could significantly benefit by creating the conditions that would enhance its participation in the global economy. China understands this, and through BRI's Central Asian portion, Beijing has stated that this is a priority. Moscow

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would likely not be pleased by the emergence of such a bloc on its southern border. Washington, however, should state explicitly that it strongly supports the emergence of such a bloc. Such a bloc would not weaken its members' sovereignty and independence it would *strengthen* its individual members and increase its citizens' security and prosperity.

At their early-August 2021 meeting in Avaza, Turkmenistan, the five Central Asian leaders floated the idea of meeting soon once again, perhaps as early as December 2021. The Taliban conquest of Afghanistan makes such a meeting all the more necessary and even urgent, since it would provide an international platform for the five to join ranks to stand against the Taliban's theocratic state and against ISIS-Khorasan that threatens all of Central Asia. The silver lining of the disaster in Afghanistan might just possibly be the emergence of an official political bloc for the nations of the Greater Caspian Region. **BD**

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