

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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One of the geopolitical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is the acceleration of a trend that predated its onset, namely the transformation of old centers of power and the appearance of new ones. This emerging new world is characterized by greater complexity, as regionalism becomes an even more important prism through which contemporary international relations can be examined. In a growing number of places across the globe, we seem to be ending up with overlapping or conflicting interests defined by the specific characteristics of different countries and how they each approach international affairs from the standpoint of their respective national agendas. In many corners of the globe, states that were formerly mere objects of world affairs are taking steps to be taken seriously as *bona fide* subjects of the

international order, itself in the midst of a makeover—the result of which none of us can as yet reasonably predict with any degree of certainty.

The South Caucasus—one of the world's most historically and culturally diverse regions—is one of the regional nodes of the Eurasian strategic space, defined by its proximity to Russia, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The editors of *Baku Dialogues* have identified the South Caucasus as an integral part of the Silk Road region, an intriguing term that at the very least serves as a reminder of the fact that our part of the world belongs to a geographic continuum that has influenced and been influenced in turn by a plethora of actors located at all points of the compass, but also that we stand at the confluence of an untold number of historical processes that go back millennia.

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Certainly, the South Caucasus is not simply a geographical expanse, but a critical crossroads over which the regional policies of the West, Russia, and China are at loggerheads. This is not even close to the entire picture, however. Iran and Turkey are immediate neighbors. Ukraine, Iraq and the Levantine states are quite close, as are Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian states. But so too are Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, as are Afghanistan and Pakistan. And on it goes. All pursue their own interests, as do their respective allies, and in many cases there interests are not free of incompatibility. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny that the South Caucasus is a front or a theatre in the meta-conflict that contraposes several normative worlds of international relations, only one of which is democratic in character. Of the three South Caucasus states,

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one overtly aspires to NATO and EU membership as a matter of strategic priority, by all accounts the second is almost entirely dominated by Russian priorities and interests, and the third has opted to navigate the geopolitical shoals we share as a region by pursuing what is termed a multi-vector foreign policy.

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complexities arising out of the Second Karabakh War's outcome (including the quest to establish a formal peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan), and neighbouring confrontations over the rearrangement of the South Caucasus model of power and the correct redistribution of interests therein are on the list of foreign policy priorities in many capitals around the world. What makes this complex regional order even more complicated is the equal lack among interested parties of sufficient interest in the resolution of these issues, the inadequate expression of such interests, and in some cases even the total absence of such interests.

Noteworthy is that even prior to the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War, the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, extended an offer for Tbilisi to serve as a peace platform for all parties to convene and meet. That offer was reiterated by our National Security Council during the war, and it still stands in its wake. In the meantime, we have continued to play our part, demonstrating the constructive relevance of Georgian soft power to the best of our ability. Here we can reproduce the 12 June 2021 words of U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken: "the U.S. welcomes the release by Azerbaijan of 15

Armenian detainees. We're grateful to the Government of Georgia for its vital role facilitating discussions between the sides. Such steps will bring the people of the region closer to the peaceful future they deserve." The statement did not add that the prisoners were exchanged for maps of 97,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines buried in Azerbaijan's newly-liberated Aghdam district, although the corresponding Azerbaijani one did, of course, while also underscoring the role played by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. Armenia also thanked us for our successful mediation, as did various European and OSCE officials. In a significant way, Georgia's important role in this postwar humanitarian endeavor serves to frame how we see the axis of the issue and our contemporary standing in the region more broadly.

Axis of the Issue

Georgia's main political vectors in the South Caucasus are cooperation for peace and stability as well as maintaining good neighborly relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan—an approach that became even more prominent during the Second Karabakh War and one that has continued in its wake.

More precisely, I refer to the statement that Georgia's National Security Council issued near the beginning of the war—on 3 October 2020, to be precise—in which the Georgian side convincingly underlined the need to "take all necessary measures" to "stop the violence and resume dialogue" and concluded by underlining that "it is in our common interests to stop the armed confrontation and restore peace in the region as soon as possible."

On the same occasion, the National Security Council also announced that the Government of Georgia was taking specific measures in this regard: the "temporary suspension of the issuance of permits for transiting military cargo through its territory in the direction of both said countries, be it by air or land." It also offered up Tbilisi as a neutral location for negotiations between Yerevan and Baku.

Regarding the National Security Council's statement, one can distinguish between two principal issues. *First*, Georgia not only demonstrated its attitude towards the conflict but also expressed the country's readiness to participate

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in the process of normalizing the situation in the region. *Second*, in this statement, Georgia's government distinctly explained the importance to the country's two largest ethnic minorities (i.e. ethnic-Armenians and ethnic-Azerbaijanis) of maintaining stability and order. Thus, the National Security Council's statement and Georgia's policy towards conflicts in general could be summed up as: Tbilisi acted according to the conditions defined by the current reality in the region and was using the maximum of its abilities due to this reality.

When talking about a possible Georgian component in various efforts to normalize the new situation in Karabakh resulting from the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, it is noteworthy that in different mass media outlets the question of the quality of Tbilisi's coordination with Western partners has been considered more than once. On this topic, I should like to mention that any similar kind of coordination or communication undertaken by Georgia could only be defined by the reality of the current situation in the region and by Georgia's possibilities.

However, when discussing this specific topic it is important to clearly reiterate that Georgia's coordination with the West over issues linked to the South Caucasus should not depend solely upon the dynamics associated with the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. It is important to remember that the partnership between Georgia and the West originally began as early as during the second half of the 1990s, when large hydrocarbon transport projects—e.g. the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC), various South Caucasus gas pipelines—were initiated.

Aside from this aspect, which contributes strategically to the West's energy diversification strategy (and will do so for decades to come), another relevant issue for further discussion is the objective evaluation of how strong Western interests and influence truly are in the South Caucasus. Accordingly, when one speaks of Tbilisi's efforts to strengthen these interests, one should deliberately underline the fact that the

efforts of our Western partners are just as (if not even more) vitally important for any kind of Western-led cooperation or coordination in the South Caucasus.

Transport Component

The 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia that brought the Second Karabakh War to an end—coupled with subsequent documents signed by the same three parties derived therefrom—call for new transport corridors on the territory of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Without going into too much detail regarding these projects, next I want to discuss whether or not they pose any kind of risk to Georgia's potential for transport and transit before proceeding to the other points I wish to make.

Now, it's true that there have been some pessimistic evaluations regarding the aforementioned new transport corridors. But when it comes to the potential weakening of

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existing Georgian corridors, I believe that this pessimism is to some extent exaggerated. Here are five basic points that can be made.

One, the decision to go ahead with a large transport project cannot be merely the subject of geopolitical discussions at the level of “I want this and I don't want that”—to put it in colloquial language. It is also important to remember that any project or initiative must be carried out according to a specific investment model. In other words, if a project is not based on clear and self-sufficient financial resources, then it will be impossible to carry it out, for it might well turn into a dubious deal or a half-completed enterprise. Without a genuine readiness to provide serious financial support, managing projects such as BTC, the various South Caucasus gas pipelines, or the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line solely according to geopolitical calculations would not have been sufficient.

Two, one must also mention the need for trust in the stability of the future operation of these corridors or projects. As a general rule of thumb, it takes several years to generate such trust, and through a series of complicated processes the project acquires its characteristic geopolitical and geo-economic

image. Nowadays, one could easily say that the so-called “Georgian transport corridors” have already obtained the signatures they need.

Three, certain paragraphs of the tripartite agreement on the creation of new transport corridors with the participation of Azerbaijan and Armenia are quite ambiguous and unclear. For example, no considered interpretation of these paragraphs gives a clear feeling that the implementation of a specific transport project is once and for all pre-defined by the signatory parties of the agreement. Guaranteeing the safety of these transport links is equally important, as is the extent to which the Russian Federation can play the role of impartial guarantor in this context.

Four, we will continue to pay attention to certain aspects, including those related to transport corridors going through Georgia's active maritime ports, which ensure the passage of goods to the Black Sea region. An intermodal system such as this, in terms of investments, is no less important since it has a direct impact on the economic component of freight transportation.

Five, one must also mention the two most important elements of the attractiveness of transit corridors passing through Georgia. The first of

these is Georgia’s political system itself, which, although far from ideal, possesses indisputable advantages in terms of doing business thanks to the transparency, simplicity, and legibility of Georgian legislation.

In addition to this, what should also be taken into consideration in the big picture is the high level of Georgia’s integration with Western markets compared to its South Caucasian neighbors. And it could even be asserted that such a steady political and economic integration with Western partners is an important question not only for Georgia but would also be in the respective interest of Baku and Yerevan.

A Factor of Regional Power

The next interesting question to examine is the respective roles of Russia and Turkey in the Second Karabakh War and subsequently—the Russian factor, in this case, is a very specific one. Since Russia and Armenia maintain close relations

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through various agreements—whereas Moscow’s links to Azerbaijan follow a more cooperational format—Russia was obliged to maintain a very delicate balance between the two warring parties.

Basically, neither of the parties to the Karabakh conflict was “hostile” towards Russia, and therefore Moscow’s actions needed to be more weighed and complex compared to other conflicts and wars in the post-Soviet space. It was this specific factor that supposedly defined a certain number of “flexible” formulations that were included in the ceasefire agreement, as noted above.

Another defining and extremely important aspect should also be mentioned: the dyophysite or perhaps even triphysite factor of Moscow’s involvement in the conflict. What is implied here is the general background of Russia-Turkey relations that intersect not only in the South Caucasus but in other parts around the world as well.

Despite Moscow’s tactical interests in cooperating with Ankara, Russia did its best to limit Turkey’s role in the post-conflict period. For example, the agreement is tripartite in nature, not quadrilateral. Russia also tried hard to neutralize Turkey’s attempts to widen its role in the OSCE Minsk Group format (as well as those of Azerbaijan).

And let me now use Georgia’s point of view in order to briefly discuss what attitude Turkey can have towards this issue. Firstly, Turkey is one of Georgia’s main partners. Secondly, Ankara plays a significant role in issues of regional safety and consistently and openly supports Georgia’s NATO membership ambitions.

What is also defined in the context of this issue is the presumed specificity of Georgia-Turkey relations with regards to limiting the spread of Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus. Here I should also mention Ankara’s desire to further deepen the country’s close partnership with Azerbaijan as well as Turkey’s practical interests in stabilizing

relations with Yerevan. The subsequent treatment of Turkey as an equal to Russia in observing the terms of the tripartite agreement (to which, I reiterate, Turkey was not a signatory) at the Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh, located in the Qiyameddinli village near Agdam, speaks to this point. On the other hand, so does the fact that Turkish troops play no operational role on the ground in what is now understood to be the Russian peacekeeping zone in Karabakh (the area not under the direct military control of Azerbaijan in the wake of the Second Karabakh War, as defined in the aforementioned trilateral agreement).

Trilateral Format?

It is almost not even worth asking what benefits any format of trilateral cooperation between Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan would bring to the three countries of the South Caucasus. Besides questions of peace and safety, some sort of trilateral partnership within the framework of the emerging new world order would give the South Caucasus

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qualitatively different characteristics and would make the region more interesting and appealing to foreign, especially Western, investors.

Unfortunately, the reality of the current situation in the short and medium term does not give much cause for optimism. Overall, the geopolitical paradigm of the South Caucasus is mostly limited to bilateral relations between Georgia and Armenia and Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Based on that, the quality of cooperation among the South Caucasus triangle of states for the foreseeable future will be defined by the quality of cooperation between Tbilisi and Yerevan, on the one hand, and Tbilisi and Baku, on the other. At this stage, one must repeat that this is the current state of the region's geopolitical reality—its Realpolitik, if a region can be said to have one—and that there seems to be little chance of this reality changing any time soon. These conditions underline Georgia's most important role as a potential pillar of the South Caucasus's overall

economic space. Consequently, the results of the country's internal reforms are becoming as important as the quality of Georgia's integration with international civilized society.

Issues in Perspective

Many key issues are being accumulated in the context of discussions regarding regional processes in the short to medium term. The answers to some questions are slowly taking shape with more or less focus and clarity, and some might be made the subject of hypothetical modeling—at this stage, at any rate—whilst taking existing conditions into consideration.

For example, the quality and durability of the current geopolitical cohabitation enjoyed by Russia and Turkey in the South-

Caucasus is questionable, particularly as the two states come into contact in other parts of the world as well. No one can exclude that in what can be termed the “arrangement of priorities,” the South Caucasus might turn into an

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The basic challenge of the overall task remains the role of the West in the South Caucasus and the projection of Western interests onto the regional fabric. An unequivocal answer must be found to this question at this stage, especially given the noticeable deficit of clear geopolitical Western lines with regard to the Black Sea region—one of whose natural components I believe the South Caucasus to be. The most compelling factor of the overall Western vector is the United States, whereas globally Washington's recent zig-zag geopolitical signature unintentionally helps to create the aforementioned problem.

Another very important issue is the overall framework of the new world order that is currently being formed. Many of us Georgians believe that there are two fundamental trends that define its basic nature: the first of these is the counterweight parameter between the United States and China as well as how this is reflected on different geopolitical geographies. Here I can refer to President Joe Biden's recent statement effectively rejecting nation-building (the context was Afghanistan, with the rejected concept defined as “trying

to create a democratic, cohesive, and unified” country, something that has never been done over the many centuries of [its] history”), which is of course not the same as the rejection of the use of force there or anywhere else when a “vital national interest” is at stake. A few days later, at an event held at MGIMO in Moscow, the Russian foreign minister interpreted this statement, as well as one made by French president Emmanuel Macron around the same time, as being tantamount to saying “that it was time to give up on interfering in other countries' internal affairs in order to impose Western-style democracy on them.” He noted that if these statements “are a true reflection of their hard-won understanding of the matter,” then “our planet will be a safer place in the future.” In my view, this interpretation is not exactly persuasive, to put it diplomatically.

The second fundamental trend that defines the basic nature of the framework of the new order that is currently being formed is, in my opinion, the novel understanding of this new world order's multilateral characteristics as well as bringing regionalism to the fore. From this point of view, the geopolitical geography of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea—along with the South Caucasus lying in between—is

being established as an important regional center of this new world order.

To complete this analysis I can indicate that the South Caucasus and the Middle East are closely linked issues, as Svante Cornell writing in a previous edition of *Baku Dialogues* has

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elaborated. Despite differences on the surface, it is a fact that a number of measurable factors are leading these two regions' geopolitics to increasingly merge.

Of course, the above-mentioned questions imply several subsidiary questions and a certain depth of inquiry. I have only mentioned those basic lines of thought that will become fields for endless research by analysts over the coming years and will become routine responses for policymakers.

The Caucasian Puzzle

The fact is that the South Caucasus is once again at the center of global attention, while the modern structure of relationships

between the countries of the region has evolved over the past few years from a bilateral model to a more complex multi-layered system. In any case, the collapse of the Soviet Union left a legacy that the three countries of the region are still trying to overcome. Also, it is important

to note that the so-called "ethnic conflicts" of the South Caucasus are primarily related to the shifting sands of geopolitics in the region. The latter point is especially true when speaking about the conflicts in Georgia and Azerbaijan, whose reduction to the category of "ethnicity" reflects either a lack of knowledge or an attempt to distort their essence. At bottom, each is ultimately about territory and international law.

To this I wish to add that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have reverberated with major shifts to what used to be commonly referred as the liberal international order—the culmination of the development of a Modern World Order, one could say—and have borne us ever more

swiftly towards an even more contemporaneous term I can call "World 2.0." When it comes to the destiny of small nations like Georgia, the question is one of two worlds: beyond simply maintaining oneself on the map, one must become a distinctive and unique contributor to the global community, acting as a *sui generis* participant in world affairs on an equal and non-discriminatory basis.

It is also worth emphasizing that it is relatively simple to opt for international or overseas reliance, but much harder and trickier to define a right balance without tilting towards either complete dependency or absurd self-determination: both options promise nothing but self-inflicted wounds and much suffering. Various historical examples of such blunders can illustrate the depth and complexity of the choice. Besides, it is even more worth remembering that abiding by strategic values while rationalizing reality is the hardest mission a small nation must face. Doing so is reminiscent of F. Scott

Fitzgerald's 1936 statement: "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." But it is precisely that first-rate intelligence that we need—and we Georgians, as a small nation, certainly do need to retain the ability to function. The remainder of Fitzgerald's statement is worth reproducing: "One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the 'impossible' come true."

As a result of all of this, the Caucasian puzzle raises more questions than it provides answers—which is hardly surprising since the region's importance is felt far beyond its boundaries and since the diversity of the Caucasus is truly a contributor to the grand design of Eurasian security. In addition to a general toolkit, ours is a region that also requires a very tailor-made approach. **BD**

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