

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 5 | No. 2 | Winter 2021-2022

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# The Strategic Implications of the Tashkent Conference

*Urs Unkauf*

This essay is devoted to a consideration of a matter of fundamental geopolitical importance that has gone largely unnoticed in the West, to its detriment. The trigger event, so to speak, was a remarkable conference that took place not in Washington, Brussels, or Moscow—but in Tashkent. On 15-16 July 2021, Uzbekistan's capital hosted delegations from nearly 50 countries, among them China, Russia, India, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and all the Central Asia countries, at the level of foreign ministers or above.

To understand the issues at play and the consequences thereof, we will need to spend some time discussing what actually took place during the conference itself, which was entitled “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity: Challenges and Opportunities.”

In addition to relating the explicit agenda of the conference, we will also examine its broader agenda (whether intended or not) and conclude with an examination of its potentially far-reaching geostrategic implications.

The Tashkent conference was geared not only to government officials, but also towards leading scholars, experts, and media representatives from all over the world who follow developments in at least one of these two regions. In his opening address, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev affirmed his country's readiness to take up new leadership responsibilities in the region, which aligns with the domestic economic and social reform agenda he launched upon coming to power following the death of his predecessor, Islam Karimov, in September

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2016. The host's speech was followed by opening statements from Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose delegations also exchanged informal views during the conference.

Here a somewhat digressive remark is in order. When the conference was in its planning stage, the fall of the Ghani government in Afghanistan had not been anticipated. Still, one of the conference's working group sessions was devoted to the devolving situation in Afghanistan. By that stage, the conference's more astute participants were seeing the writing on the wall. Those who could not, of course, came to their senses less than a month later.

Either way, the Taliban's takeover of the country has put both Central and South Asia more firmly on the international geopolitical agenda—the recent events in Kazakhstan, which began as

this issue of *Baku Dialogues* was being finalized, have also played a role in drawing attention back to the Silk Road region.

But to come back to Mirziyoyev's opening address. In the context of announcing a new, open foreign policy strategy for the country, Uzbekistan's President made it clear that his country is centrally focused on strengthening regional connectivity. His announcement stressed that the focus would be on further deepening economic and cultural cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia—two regions that are linked historically as well as economically yet have not so far been able to transform this inherited potential towards proper policymaking in recent years.

The Tashkent conference was advertised as being about enhancing regional interconnectivity, trade, and cooperation between

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Central Asia and South Asia—as well as presenting the host country's new cross-regional foreign policy strategy. But as Edward Lemon wrote in the Fall 2021 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the conference also served to demon-

strate that the emerging regionalism—a topic raised by the concerning countries themselves and not from outside—will be a leit-

*motif* for future geostrategic developments in the Silk Road region.

This is significant because these two regions—namely, Central Asia and South Asia—are presently integrated into different groupings that open up completely new spheres of geopolitical interaction. Although there are overlaps in membership—as in, for instance, between the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—interaction between the five Central Asian states with the countries of South Asia is taking place in a completely new dimension that goes beyond simply forging a new connection between the two regions named in the title of the conference.

### *Emerging Regionalism*

In the three decades since (re)gaining independence, the Central Asian states have gone through particular development paths. What they all have in common—in terms of foreign and regional policy—is that their respective relationships with Russia continue to play a central role in the way in which they manage their external relations. This is due to the perpetuation of longstanding

sociological, historical, and logistical ties—hardly unusual or unexpected.

That being said, the Central Asian states should not be viewed through a narrowly calibrated lens or a one-size-fits-all approach. Under the decades-long leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan succeeded in establishing itself as the leading economic power in the region, which was neither seriously threatened by substantial internal or external conflicts (this proposition still stands notwithstanding the tumultuous events that took place in early January 2022). During Uzbekistan's Karimov period, on the other hand, the country pursued a policy that was consistently oriented towards the maintenance of internal stability, due in part to wanting to prevent the experiences of the civil war in neighboring Tajikistan as well as those related to dealing with radical Islamist groups in the eastern part of the country. From a Western perspective, Kyrgyzstan is often praised as a “beacon of democracy in the region,” but this is a problematic assessment since the country is characterized by weak state power and frequent changes of government compared to its neighborhood. Finally, there is Turkmenistan—a country whose external relations are based on the principle of “per-

petual neutrality.” This posture that has made the country traditionally reluctant to engage deeply in regional integration and obtain full membership in most multilateral organizations.

To this brief survey can be added the fact that there have been various conflicts of interest and border disputes between the Central Asian states themselves, which has made it difficult for them to present themselves in the past as a region that is more than a mere object of great power politics and rivalries. But this is now fundamentally changing.

Another sign of the development of regional cooperation is the establishment of the International Institute for Central Asia. This may seem trivial, but this is hardly the case. Its opening ceremony took place on the afternoon of 15 July 2021, that is to say, right before the main session of the Tashkent conference. It was opened by the Chairperson of the Uzbek Senate, Tanzila Narbaeva, who read Mirziyoyev's message of greeting. The main thrust of the message was that the institute's establishment is necessitated by the realities of regional development—that is to say, by the present historical moment projected into the likely future—or, at least, into the future towards which the region

aims to attain. This is another confirmation, the presidential message said, that Uzbekistan firmly intends to continue its course of deepening regional cooperation in foreign policy.

This was followed by a speech from Uzbekistan's foreign minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov. He emphasized that the institute's establishment reflects an important trend in international relations: the growing importance and interconnectedness of regional political and economic processes. This trend, he said, is particularly evident in Central Asia. Historically, he underscored, this region had been a crucial link in the Great Silk Road and represented a common cultural and civilizational space of formative importance for global economic, scientific, and cultural exchanges. He announced that the research center's activities of focus will be the study of regional processes and international relations in the context of Central Asia, which, he stressed, is Uzbekistan's main foreign policy priority. And he concluded by expressing confidence that the institute will serve as a flagship platform for what he called “substantive expert discussion about the prospects for regional cooperation and the development of specific and sci-

entifically substantiated proposals for multilateral projects in various fields.”

Let us now turn to South Asia, where the situation with regards to the advancement of regionalism is different. There, the unstable situation in Afghanistan and the ongoing confrontation between nuclear powered India and Pakistan are two reasons why increased regional cooperation has so far been held back. South Asia’s smaller countries—i.e., Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—are mostly overshadowed by their larger neighbors. China and India also compete economically for hegemony in this region, which further complicates joint action on the world stage. Since (re)gaining independence as part of the global process of decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century, the region’s states have each striven to advance their economic development and usually directed their respective foreign policies on this aspect. Countries with a growing

middle class, such as India and Bangladesh, still find themselves focusing their foreign policy postures primarily on domestic poverty reduction and prosperity promotion. South Asian states are interested in increased cooperation with those of Central Asia not only due to economic motives but also because they seek both to solve regional security challenges jointly and establish new options for action by pooling resources.

It is thus within such a context that the Tashkent conference was convened. Its bottom-line intention was to lay the foundation for the establishment of a political and technical platform for serious multilateral discussions on a mutually beneficial strategic model of interregional cooperation in the fields of transport and logistics, energy, trade, industry, investment, technology, culture, humanitarian affairs, and beyond. To get into the subject-matter in more detail, we will now examine what took place during the conference itself.

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## *Impetus to Revitalize and Strengthen*

The plenary session of the Tashkent conference on 16 July 2021 was dedicated to the status and perspectives of interregional cooperation in Central and South Asia, the provision of successful examples of the same, and a discussion of promising interconnected regional infrastructure projects. In the context of the conference, numerous bilateral meetings also took place between delegations and participants. Of particular note was the exchange between the President of Afghanistan and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, who, thanks to Uzbekistan’s mediation, were able to engage in a serious discussion on issues having to do with regional security architecture.

The conference’s first working group, entitled “Trade and Transport: Connectivity for Sustainable Growth,” was devoted to prospects for modernizing the economies of Central and South Asia in the context of strengthening interregional connectivity. In addition, new opportunities for developing transport and communication connectivity in Central and South Asia were discussed, including projects to expand existing transport corridors and build new

ones. An important part of the proceedings focused on the topic of cooperation with foreign and international financial and investment institutions to realize such projects.

In the conference’s second working group, entitled “Reviving Cultural and Humanitarian Relations as a Way to Strengthen Friendship and Mutual Trust,” a no less broad range of topics was discussed. For example, speakers placed emphasis on cooperation in the research, preservation, and promotion of Central and South Asia’s historical and cultural heritage. Likewise, joint projects in the fields of education, social support and protection of the interests of young people, healthcare, science and technology, ecology, and tourism were discussed.

The conference’s third working group, entitled “Regional Security: Challenges and Threats,” dealt with how greater regional coordination could help combat new threats and challenges to regional stability as well as ensure the security of cross-border infrastructure. A central point of discussion concerned the new responsibility of regional actors in the stabilization of Afghanistan in the wake of the Western withdrawal from the country. Over the course of the debate, it became clear that the prospects for imple-

menting a foreign system of governance and society in Afghanistan were quite low. Instead, speakers emphasized that coordinated steps would need to be taken in the time ahead to bring about peace within Afghan society, which would need to involve negotiations between the country's various factions in order to figure out how to ensure at least a basic level of humanitarian and social stability throughout the country. Several participants referred to Uzbekistan's ambitious policy, which, in addition to its domestic reforms component, is also oriented towards executing a new foreign policy with regional aspirations. This, in turn suggests that Tashkent will need to keep engaging in Afghanistan in a constructive manner and, in so doing, make an important contribution to regional and even global security.

### *Geopolitical Turn Towards Asia*

In the closing plenary of the conference, Uzbekistan's foreign minister Kamilov usefully summed up the central results of the meeting. In addition to having forged numerous concrete agreements and provided for space to conduct various informal meetings and exchanges on the sidelines

of official events, he said that the Tashkent conference can rightly be called a milestone in the revival of international relations after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He underscored that "this high-level, world-class conference, and the establishment of the International Institute of Central Asia, illustrate Uzbekistan's willingness to promote close regional and inter-regional relations in all respects, to strengthen multilateral dialogue, and to address the key issues of the day in a constructive and forward-looking manner." He further noted that the conference represented a key achievement for Mirziyoyev in 2021, for he had been able to bring together senior policymakers not only from Central and South Asia but also those belonging to other global and regional powers to seriously address many strategic and pressing foreign policy issues beyond controlling the pandemic.

The fact that this conference was not held in Washington, Brussels, or Moscow, but rather in the heart of the Silk Road region also offered a clear view of the reality of a polycentric world order and, more importantly, the preferences of the actors shaping it. China, Russia, India, the states of Central Asia, and the Arab world together represent a solid majority of the world's population, in both demographic and

economic terms. Clearly, the EU and its member states, including Germany, will need to adjust their respective foreign policy strategies and, in turn, start playing stronger and more active roles in such initiatives at senior, political decision-making levels. Otherwise, they will lose their cultural and economic capital in the region, which will invariably affect their standing on the global stage.

The Tashkent conference can also be seen as tangible evidence that various transformation processes are currently taking place at the global level—too little noticed in the shadow of the pandemic, at least by most Western observers. Thus, it could be said that the central issue of world politics no longer revolves around direct confrontation between major powers (e.g., China, Russia, the U.S.), but rather concerns their establishing and further developing zones of influence in various regions. This remains an accurate statement notwithstanding the ratcheting up of tensions in the

Ukrainian and Taiwanese geopolitical theaters. One consequence of this change is that the major world powers now find themselves interacting and competing on a more equal level with various regional powers (e.g., Turkey, Iran, Israel, India, Pakistan) for political, economic, and cultural spheres of influence.

This became particularly clear from the almost fluid transition from regional to geopolitical issues during the three working group sessions at the conference, on the margins of which numerous informal discussions were held—discussions

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that had been more or less frozen for almost a year and a half due to the pandemic. European countries such as Italy, Latvia, and Belarus also sent senior government representatives to the high-level forum, which was attended by a total of over 250 participants. While the EU itself was represented by the High

Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the absence of a state secretary, Central Asia coordinator, or min-

ister from, say, the German side did not go unnoticed by many conference participants. If Germany and other serious EU member states do not wish to abandon their perceived strategic role(s) in this part of the world—something that still may be possible to retain—then they will need to make their respective presences felt much more strongly.

The United States, for its own part, also did not appear to put its most influential foot forward at the conference. The American delegation was led by Joe Biden's homeland security adviser. This was interpreted as an additional sign that the U.S. was taking steps away from the region—by the time the conference took place, its withdrawal from Afghanistan was well underway. Certainly, America continues to be engaged in South Asia with, for example, India—both bilaterally and in the context of, say, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, although it seems that Delhi is less willing to go all-in than Washington may wish.

On the other hand, the strategic approach of the United States in the west-of-the-Caspian part of the Silk Road region, for example, seems to be rhetorically focused on providing political support to Ukraine and Georgia in the context of NATO membership prospects, EU association initiatives, and fostering economic and energy cooperation in accordance with its own interests. But how these are precisely defined is not easily understood. In terms of America's energy policy, for example, the rise of Russia and Iran

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as crucial regional powers should be sufficient reason for America to rethink its strategic orientation. It seems rather obvious that, from Washington's perspective, Azerbaijan and other states in the region (e.g., Turkmenistan), could form a valid counterweight both to Russian dominance of the European energy market and a potential strengthening of the Iranian political position in the Caspian Region. And yet, American foreign decisionmakers do not seem to be doing enough to advance such a foreign policy.

## Prospects for the Future

The Tashkent conference was not simply about connecting two major emerging regions; rather, it should be seen as representing a turning point in twenty-first-century international relations—especially when coupled with the West's exodus from Afghanistan and the consequent restoration of Taliban rule. This is not to say that all the actors present in Tashkent last summer grasped

this dimension in the fullness of the consequences in play. But it should now be clear that what was launched during the conference will have fundamental geopolitical implications for the years and perhaps decades to come.

Nazarbayev coined the phrase “multivectoral foreign policy” in the 1990s, and his historical achievement is to have provided the impetus for the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union as an organizing structure in the post-Soviet space. However, multilateralism as understood and received in most mainstream Western circles

is not congruent with this term. In this understanding, the concept of multilateralism is primarily about the establishment of rules-based mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution. But this falls of the mark. Multivectoral foreign policy, which is practiced not only by

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Kazakhstan, refers less to structures for organizing political processes than to the geopolitical realities that exist throughout the Silk Road region—especially as seen in Central Asia but also Azerbaijan. A pragmatic policy of balance vis-à-vis

global and regional powers, which at the same time self-confidently articulates and represents a country's own national interests, is a model that seems desirable to many states under current conditions and likely future trajectories—and not only in that part of the world.

China, Russia, and India each have a decisive advantage over the West in this regard, as Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi are not in any serious way interested in the internal affairs of other states, the degree with which these other states transform themselves in accordance with Western governance models, and individual

lifestyle questions like gender, culture, and religion as aspects of the political. This pragmatic approach, which takes appropriate account of the multicultural and multivectoral realities of the countries of the Silk Road region in general and Central and South Asia in particular, gives these actors a decisive advantage.

If the West does not want to see itself limited to being merely a trade and economic partner in the future, it will need to redevelop its art of diplomacy under these conditions and distance itself from some cherished maxims of postmodern thinking that are becoming increasingly unapplicable beyond the confines of the West itself.

The Tashkent conference is a prime example of what such majority-driven agenda-setting is going to look like for future global formats. Perhaps not in the immediate future, but almost certainly in a decade or two, if not sooner.

Purposefully or not, by hosting the Tashkent conference, Uzbekistan has contributed to the emergence

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of a new global order—or at least a significant part of one—through the configuration of participants, topics, and timing of the event held under its auspices in July 2021. Thus far, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that this sort of event had taken place only under the auspices of the

G7 or the G20. At the same time, there is the question of the so far insufficient reception—much less its geopolitical consequences—of this conference in Western policy-making circles.

### *After Tashkent*

Those who might think that the medium- to long-term results of the Tashkent conference are overestimated at this point would have to provide practical proof to the contrary and name a format that practically reaches a comparable spectrum of topics and target groups when it is first held. Currently, such a format does not exist in the Americas, Africa, or elsewhere in Asia.

The twentieth century was described as the “Atlantic century” by German historian Heinrich-August Winkler or the “American century” by American magazine magnate Henry Luce. The twenty-first century will definitely be an Asian century, as accurately analyzed inter alia by German lawyer and political scientist Karl Pilny in a trilogy of books beginning with *The Asian Century* (2005). Uzbekistan has already announced

several other formats in the coming years at a similar level, and it remains to be expected that this newly created dimension of multivectoral interactions will not be limited exclusively to Central Asia’s most populous country. The Arab world countries represented in Tashkent

(e.g., Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar) are also showing clear ambitions to take more active foreign policy roles beyond one-off opportunities such as Dubai’s Expo 2021 or the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. So is Turkey, of which nothing more needs to be said given the sophisticated understanding of Ankara’s role in the Silk Road region we can assume most readers of this journal possess.

A central merit of the Tashkent conference is that it made a fundamental contribution to the reactivation of international diplomacy based on personal encounters. Another is that it brought not only regional but global political actors to the table—thus transcending existing lines of confrontation. With the establishment of the International Institute for Central Asia, regional identity is being

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structurally institutionalized for the first time under Uzbek leadership. This, in turn, offers Uzbekistan further prospects to act as a model for other regions and, if necessary, to assume the role of an incubator for regional actors. The immediate aspiration is, admittedly, more

modest: it focuses on increased integration and deepening interaction among the five countries of Central Asia, plus, perhaps, Afghanistan (Uzbekistan has repeatedly stressed that Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia). This, too, could constitute a new kind of policymaking: contrary to the approach favored by those that profess holistic and universal

claims, regional dynamics develop *sui generis*—that is to say, without being confronted with either direct intention or external accountability.

In this regard, a close eye will need to be kept on how global powers will react, in practical terms, to the impulses emanating from the Tashkent conference. *First*, both leading western European powers—i.e., Germany and France—are currently facing a reconfiguration of foreign policy decisionmakers, resulting from a change in strategy as well as generation. *Second*, despite surface appearances to the contrary, Russia is currently focusing primarily on the internal consolidation of its society. *Third*, China is pursuing the expansion of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative while remaining relatively isolated from the outside world, in the sense that it has not provided even a hint of wanting to play the sort of leadership role internationally that, say, the United States has played since 1945.

### *Dealing with Geopolitical Realities*

The Western response to these current processes of change as illustrated by the Tashkent conference found expression in the Summit for Democracy, an online conference held at the initiative of the White House on 9-10 December 2021. The

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conference website proclaims that “renewing democracy in the United States and around the world is essential to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time.” The Biden Administration persists with the premise that the Western way of

organizing and governing a society—market economy and liberal values—is the template for solving developmental challenges in all parts of the world.

But as Stephen M. Walt argued in an early December 2021 essay for *Foreign Policy*, the open and hidden agenda of the Summit for Democracy offers more potential for exacerbating conflicts rather than charting new lines of cooperation. In addition to arguing for

the weakening of American domestic democratic institutions as a consequence of the Trump Administration’s policies, Walt accurately calls the selection of guests “arbitrary and inconsistent.” If the intentions of the U.S. government are measured against its own standards, which any consistent argumentation should presuppose, then this reveals a lack of self-reflection regarding the actual constellations of power in world politics. Walt also raises the pertinent question of the agenda of current U.S. foreign policy, which, in addition to the purely virtual format of this summit, points to a key difference from the Tashkent conference. In his own words, “the summit’s guest list would be a lot smaller, but at least it would be ideologically consistent.”

Compared to the elaborately prepared Tashkent conference, Biden’s online summit can be understood as a last expression of marking the meaning of a still perceived “unilateral moment,” which everyone sensible knows fell by the wayside some time ago. However, the lack of substantive results deriving from the Biden summit show that significant geopolitical trends are not understood—neither by its organizers nor its champions. Three of the most important are: *one*, strengthening regional co-

operation without external influences; *two*, pragmatic cooperation on concrete issues of politics and economics beyond intervention in each other’s domestic affairs; and *three*, regional resolution of conflicts without unilateral U.S. intervention by means of ‘R2P’ or its functional equivalent. Each by itself and all together show how outdated and out of touch the Summit for Democracy turned out to be.

In short, the Biden Administration’s event was an attempt to let all actual and perceived friends-by-values speak without actually having to make a statement of any real substance. If strategists in Washington seriously believe they can make use of such a format to seriously impact the course of international politics, then at least some of them suffer either from a lack of awareness of current realities in many parts of the world or from an overestimation of their own ability to shape the globe after the disaster in Afghanistan.

That being said, it can certainly make sense for states with a shared understanding of values and politics to exchange views with each other. But it truly bears asking: does an event whose primary outcome seemed to consist in the repetition of a single mantra happen out of the self-image of an end in



itself, from which in turn it follows that this end ultimately justifies the means of politics? A remarkable text by Anne Applebaum published on 15 November 2021 in *The Atlantic* certainly supports this view. Entitled “The Bad Guys Are Winning,” it draws a dark image of a “liberal world order” threatened from all sides while conveniently ignoring the fact that it never existed in the form described.

### *From Multilateralism to Multipolarity*

The current situation particularly demands of any substantive foreign policy the ability to look at the world through the eyes of others, without framing and labeling this view from an a priori point of view. A primarily ‘value-oriented’ foreign policy, as it is currently being pursued in some parts of the Western world, for its own sake always hides that part of reality that does not fit into its own image. It thus fails to align itself with the requirements needed to shape changes in real life instead of only on paper.

Furthermore, it will be of importance to use existing formats and geopolitical stakeholders—e.g., SCO, OIC, CICA, CSTO, and

others—as pillars for prospective synergies towards the most urgent topics on the global agenda. It is therefore crucial to agree on shared priorities, which also allow for the inclusion of EU and NATO member states as well as the U.S. in a joint agenda that could finally reach out to what has been promised by various formats but not yet been practically performed. Bearing in mind the imperative of overcoming the pandemic, it will also be of utmost importance to face the challenges of global inequalities—not only between North and South and East and West, but also within societies themselves and, as a precondition, to provide an international framework for peaceful development based on the principle of non-interference in the internal issues of other states.

Hence, it will be of geostrategic importance to follow the further developments of interaction between Central and South Asia introduced at the Tashkent conference as a possible model with which to shape regional potentials that can face all such challenges. A constructive role of the U.S. and the EU within this open process is to be recommended also to better pursue their own interests and to arrive at a new stage of global understanding of inter-

est-based policymaking, which of course always aligns with national traditions, values, and cultures.

The fact that, even now—after the Western defeat in Afghanistan—the political shift towards Asia in terms of security and stability matters is non-negotiable, makes it somehow clear that there should have been a much more modest approach to well-established but in various cases less productive formats in world politics. The benchmark that

was set up by the Tashkent conference very well may end up being regarded by future historians as one of the founding pillars of a new global order that is, indeed, both multipolar and based on a process of interaction between states that have in common a growing self-confidence as sovereign actors in specific regional frameworks.

Woe to us in the West if we continue to fail to pay attention to all of this. **BD**

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