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Inshore Balancers and Reborn Opportunities

Middle Powers and the Silk Road Region

Christopher Mott

“The nations and builders who insist on a single order are out to bind the trickster again, hoping to stop time, hoping to get Eshu off the road. But—if there were a single unchanging order the world would be hard upon us, the government would be hard upon us, and we would long for a traveling poet to tell the old story—about how Coyote went to sleep during the council of the animals and dreamed of eating their meat.”

— Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (1998)

Scholarly commentary on the rising phenomenon of multipolarity is almost entirely focused on how this affects the current established great powers. This overlooks a more interesting question: what are the opportunities afforded to smaller countries in this now freewheeling world situation—and particularly to the countries in regions like the

Caucasus and Central Asia, which are often neglected by more established geopolitical commentary? Answers to this and related question is imperative because, as unipolarity declines, the void is not just being filled just with a handful of expected countries, but rather a growing role in regionally influential middle powers across the board.

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Middle Powers Defined

My colleagues Arta Moeini, David Polansky, Zachary Paikin, and I at the Institute of Peace and Diplomacy released the Middle Powers Project in spring 2022. This was done specifically to examine the growing role of a particular kind of country in shaping world affairs as conditions of unipolarity continue to ebb. We noticed that while the return of great power politics between the strongest states was well known (such as increasing assertiveness by Russia and especially China against what is often called the U.S.-led, rules-based liberal international order), there was still a critical lack of analysis regarding not-quite-global but still significant powers. This led us to conduct a study whose primary focus was not only to point out the critical role such countries were coming to play in geopolitics, but also to specifically define what middle powers are.

Our starting consensus was that the theoretical school of realism was the most accurate of the major international relations theories.

However, the baseline version of classical and structural realism alone was inadequate for the task at hand. Neoclassical realism, however, with its strong focus on the interplay of domestic politics in the conduct of foreign policy as well as its more nuanced understanding of state goals being not simply limited to maximalist gains, served as the core (but by no means exclusive) intellectual framework. There was also significant borrowing from the new regionalism and securitization fields. Additionally, there was a corrective corollary added to Samuel Huntington's thesis

where the future of the civilizational state was upheld, but not his assertion that it was destined that they clash based on cultural values.

By our definition, a middle power is a regionally potent state that lacks the global heft of a great power. In a specific localized context, however, it can behave as a great power. This strong regional focus leads to massive differentials in calculating its geopolitical weight based on proximity alone. Such states do not simply project power, however, but are long-term

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regional anchors that outlast any one particular government or foreign policy stance. Their geographic base is thus also one of historical rootedness, with some version of political power stretching back generations and even across different successor governments. Thus, geography and history intertwine to create favorable security opportunities for local actors with the capacity to increase their influence in their respective neighborhoods.

To quote the report directly, there are four main points to consider:

1. *Geo-regionality: they are states situated in and shaped by their particular regions within a regional security complex. These complexes are historically dynamic and can enlarge or shrink somewhat over time. Moreover, the geographic constraints and advantages that define their territorial expanse and put them in a favorable, if not inherently dominant, position vis-à-vis the RSC's other actors also inform their pride of place and sense of history, determining and locking in their vital interests across time.*

2. *Relative Material Advantage: They are states that possess a certain degree of material capability and operational resources enough to create and maintain comparative superiority—both militarily but also*

in terms of economic and human capital—allowing them to outperform their proximal neighbors in the pursuit of their goals.

3. *Status as a Cultural State: They represent countries with long historical memories, often espousing distinctive values, committed to the preservation of their cultural form of life in the present and the future, and aspiring to achieve recognition and the respect of their peers. The historical and cultural continuities also breed greater solidarity and higher internal stability with an attendant and heightened level of interest in the immediate abroad that is shaped by their singular historical and cultural legacy.*

4. *Limited, Non-global Aims: Due to their comparatively limited capabilities (namely, the inability to pursue interests far beyond their regions as great powers can), and thanks to their emphasis on cultural particularity and prioritization of vital interests, these states have narrower goals and strategic concerns that are limited to the near abroad, and which do not change drastically over time, enduring even between different political regimes.*

A middle power, in short, is a state with long-term regional power projection which cannot be dominated in its own immediate

neighborhood—what the report termed its “near abroad.” Therefore, states like Canada or South Korea that, on paper, appear to have the economic and population potential to meet the mark, do not qualify: Canada’s influence is greatly overshadowed by the United States (with which it shares its only land border) and South Korea is located between the two larger states of China and Japan. But a country with the same economic and financial power as Canada or South Korea would certainly count as a middle power were it located on the African or South American continents.

There are many potential candidates for middle powers. Some of those we have not yet examined in great detail include India, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa. These states deserve much more attention in the future, but, since the conversation is a relatively new one, we wanted to start by primarily homing in on four countries that best show the transition away from unipolarity: The “revisionist” powers of Türkiye and Iran and the “status quo” powers of Japan and Germany. It was these countries

that we believe show the most obvious bifurcations in presently unfolding trends.

Status quo middle powers are those that are primarily concerned with retaining the benefits of the U.S.-led order from which they have benefited. Such states are the core players in specific regions when it comes to restraining the ambitions of rising powers hostile to this arrangement, and often serve as key economic linchpins in the global economy. Germany and Japan are the most prominent of such powers, being top tier states in the respective regions with a history of importance. Germany is threatened by Russian revisionist designs and Japan is threatened by Chinese revisionism (as well as Russian, if to a much lesser extent). Having once themselves been the primary revisionist rivals with the more established powers, the defeat of the Axis in World War II saw these countries occupied and

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restructured to become front line states in the Cold War. This ended up putting their economic advantages in the service of the unipolar moment in the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

With the end of that moment, both Tokyo and Berlin have calculated that in order to keep reaping the benefits of their close positioning with Washington, they must be more proactive in their specific regions. Japan's close (if unofficial) relations with Taiwan and desire to compete with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project with "Quality Infrastructure" programs of its own has resulted in billions of dollars of infrastructure investment in South and Southeast Asia. When it comes to military priorities, Japan has also built up a specialty in counter-submarine and coastal defense operations. Germany, meanwhile, was a bit slower on adapting to the end of unipolarity. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 has galvanized the process, with Berlin authorizing a temporary increase in defense spending, playing the key role in military aid program to Kyiv, and putting a freeze on the Nord Stream II pipeline with Russia. Additionally, Germany

has provided military hardware to Ukraine's war effort.

The revisionists, on the other hand, are those who see more opportunity in multipolarity, giving them the conditions to re-orient their regional influence through rebelling against the old status quo rather than becoming greater participants in it. Revisionists may

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or may not have worked within the confines of unipolarity perfectly well before, but now they sense a chance to alter a regional balance of power away from the old consensus. Two of the most impactful of these states today are Türkiye and Iran, who inherited the mess of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring's impact on the Middle East and decided to

work within the chaos of that situation by maximizing their own influence over neighboring countries.

Türkiye has played decisive conventional military roles in its neighborhood, most relevantly in supporting Azerbaijan's retaking

of the Karabakh region from Armenia in the Second Karabakh War as well as serving as the primary supporter of the remaining rebels in Syria. Ankara has also inserted itself into Libya and, more indirectly, in Ukraine via local connections and arms exports. Iran meanwhile expands its influence through less conventional but still as militarized means, particularly with the support of militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Both countries now are vital to the balance of power of the Middle East and must be reckoned with by their neighbors as much as any of the great powers.

Obviously, considering the proximity of these countries to each other (including a shared border area) one must also take into account the danger of both being revisionist at once. Their respective local allies often clash directly in the Syrian Civil War theater. From the Macedonian successor states on through Roman-Parthian and Roman-Sassanian enmity to the Safavid-Ottoman wars, his-

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tory is replete with powers on the Anatolian and Iranian plateaus becoming long-lasting rivals. Thus, it could be said that these powers are revisionist in the context of the present-day but are at the same time simply returning to normal from the perspective of the long term. What is important to note

here is that middle powers are often states with civilizational anchoring to a specific region, whose status can be in flux and whose policies can wield disproportionate influence because of these ambiguities. As regionalism reasserts itself over a supposedly global norm, the strategic options for local actors can increase along with their growing responsibilities.

Keystone Dialogues

After completing our Middle Powers project, my colleagues and I were made aware of the ongoing discussions in Baku-based journals like *Baku Dialogues* (published by ADA University) and *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*

(published by the Center of Analysis of International Relations) about overlapping topics. For instance, in the Winter 2020 edition of the latter publication, Damjan Krnjević Mišković wrote of the “existence of a number of states of substantially equal strength” in what he calls the “Silk Road region,” which could enable the core states of what amounts to Inner Eurasia to “maintain and possibly deepen its own balance of power system.” In this and subsequent writings, he has developed possible strategic trajectories of this burgeoning geopolitical phenomenon by anchoring it in an analysis of the growing role of “keystone states” like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in that part of the world and the concurrently decreasing ability of any single outside power to dominate the region. The Second Karabakh War effectually undid the result of the First Karabakh War, which was characterized by an Armenian land grab, and so was particularly enlightening in this regard. While Russia’s position as regional arbiter was confirmed, it was responding

to rather than driving events. And it was Azerbaijan, acting with support from Türkiye, that had upset the old post-Soviet status quo that had favored Armenia.

These themes were further built upon by Nikolas Gvosdev in the Fall 2020 issue of *Baku Dialogues*, entitled “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region.” Here the concept of “transactional neutrality”—a strategy of non-aligned economic integration

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originally proposed by Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova in a February 2019 article—comes into play. This stipulates that the best path forward for the security of the region is for every outside great power to understand that the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia are going to have relations with every other great power but not be beholden to any of them—a consequence of Inner Eurasia’s “heightened geopolitical heterogeneity,” as Krnjević has put it. This could mean that the Silk Road region itself is a keystone, given its resource

richness and ability to carve out a space between other more established maritime nations.

Gregory Gleason, in his Winter 2020-2021 *Baku Dialogues* essay “Grand Strategy Along the Silk Road” also touches on this line of thinking. Middle powers can outperform great powers in specific regional roles and the bulk shipping trade advantages of maritime states might decrease due to more advanced land-based infrastructure and the increasing nationalization of trade routes by territorializing choke points like the Straits of Malacca. To quote the author: “In the logic of the situation of today’s world, the states and regions that are situated territorially or conceptually between the competing visions of world order are of pivotal significance. Keystone states are significant for this reason.”

Many of the common themes in past discussions taking place within Baku Dialogues and Caucasus Strategic Perspectives are clearly independently converging with IPD’s analysis regarding the rise of middle powers as among the most important aspect of the present era of geopolitics. All of us agree that regionalism and divergence, rather than the implied uniformity of the post-Cold-War era (or, for that matter, the bipo-

larity of the Cold War itself) is now the order of the day. This opens up opportunities in particular to the strongest states of otherwise neglected regions.

There are, however, still differences between the trends in *Baku Dialogues* and those found in IPD’s Middle Powers project. The most obvious one revolves around the question of what exactly constitutes a middle power. A running theme in the aforementioned articles is that Azerbaijan either already is or is rapidly becoming a middle power. This is a question of scale: if one takes the South Caucasus states by themselves, Azerbaijan is unquestionably the one with the strongest economy and geopolitical position. While Azerbaijan’s position is enviable compared to Georgia and Armenia, it still does not meet the criteria to a middle power as set out by IPD’s recent research. This is primarily because it shares a direct border with Russia and extremely close but not quite equal ties with Türkiye. And it is Türkiye (and Iran) that meet IPD’s present definition of a middle power precisely because of the pull they have in regions like the Caucasus. Specifically, their status as long-lived cultural anchor-states within the region. Still, it should be noted that both Krnjević and Gvosdev, writing both together and separately, make the

point that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan taken together constitute the anchors of a nascent regional order: “none by itself is indispensable, but together they provide equilibrium whilst setting the tone, pace, and scope of the overall [regional] cooperation agenda.” As of now, however, each of the three states remains peripheral to nearby regional and great powers. To become what the Middle Powers Project calls “regional balancers,” some circumstances would have to change. But this is certainly within the realm of possibility.

This is a disagreement on specific definitions and present economic dispositions rather than the overall concepts. The discussions that have been unfolding in *Baku Dialogues*, in particular, are primarily focused on the future geopolitical potential of both the Caucasus and Central Asia (the core of the “Silk Road region,” understood as a “single geopolitical theater with multiple stages”). And it is the future of these regions that indeed hold the correct combination of ingredients to one day produce a new middle power region if certain policy strategies are met. This is not far-fetched, because the potential to exploit the conditions of middle power multipolarity are there, and because the region already has a rich history, going back many centuries, of

leveraging its geography between other power poles to its own massive benefit.

Opportunity Returns to the Inshore Balancers

Taking the long-term historical perspective, landlocked Eurasia is certainly not a remote and sidelined region of the world, as stereotyped by people in many outside places. In fact, at virtually any point in history before the eighteenth century, it was one of the key regions in driving world history and geopolitical events—a point convincingly made in the relevant writings of scholars like Christopher Beckwith, S. Frederick Starr, and Peter Frankopan. And in both late antiquity and the Middle Ages, specifically, the Silk Road region was arguably the most important place in the world for international trade and military power projection.

Despite almost always having smaller populations from which to draw than surrounding regions like South and East Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, Central Asia in particular was nearly always a military and cultural innovator when it came to using space and mobility to project power and influence. The high

proportion of the populace that once lived a nomadic horse-and-herding lifestyle provided natural recruits for cavalry and logistical networks, meaning the average speed of a military column or a trading caravan was increased compared to many other regions. The existence of cities like Samarkand and Bukhara within these vast inland spaces in turn meant that not only trade goods could be acquired from within, but manufactured materials as well—if at a lower volume than elsewhere. Logistics and geographic mastery thus came together in a place difficult to attack from the outside, but extremely able to project power outwards in reverse.

It is easy to forget the importance of this historical legacy, but even parts of the world about which we are used to thinking today as littoral and ocean-focused once used their proximity to Central Asian networks crossing the overland routes of the steppe as their primary leverage of international power. Both Han and Tang Dynasty China, for in-

stance—representing what some consider to be the (premodern) peak of Chinese civilization—were heavily involved in the region and located their capital, Xi’an, in the far west of their territories to reflect this Central Asian focus. The Eastern Roman Empire (known in the West as the Byzantine Empire), turning more towards West Asia once the European portion of its realm began to decline and lose its central location in Roman grand strategy, gradually adopted more of

the military innovations and frontier management strategies of peoples to their north and east. I refer here not just to Persian-style heavy cavalry, though this is perhaps the most famous, but also to Hunnic auxiliaries and the geopolitical logic of diplomatic integration with the Turkic world. It was by adopting a more fluid concept of diplomacy and geopolitics that the East could prosper even as the West faded.

In 2015, I wrote a book, *The Formless Empire: A Short History of Diplomacy and Warfare in Central Asia*, based on my

Just as technological changes in the early modern era stemming from the rise of larger and more sophisticated naval vessels had moved the main trade routes away from the Eurasian hinterland and towards the oceans, so too could the process be at least partially reversible in the future.

doctoral thesis at the University of St. Andrews, which was completed the year before. My primary purpose was to mine Central Asian history for examples of indigenous geopolitical understanding from a criminally overlooked region of the world. The reason I did this was not simply my long-held historical fascination with the subject, but also because the unique geographic and cultural circumstances at play were well worth examining. The Turko-Mongolian and Iranian worlds, it turned out, were prime examples of adaptive Neoclassical Realism at work, for various states belonging to those worlds showed how landlocked and deep-interior societies—which we in the North Atlantic are taught to assume are doomed to be economically and politically blighted—could, with the right circumstances, be central to economic development and political security.

Specifically, I argued that there was a form of “inshore balancing” (my specific term for the Inland

Eurasian context that is congruent with IPD’s present term of “regional balancer”) that continuously re-occurred in the histories of Central Asian states, where the steppe-based societies (be they nomadic confederacies or formal empires) used their mastery of what other people would consider remote geopolitical locations in order to wield disproportionate influence over their near-abroad. In this analogy, which is a kind of inversion of the more famous “offshore balancing” practiced by naval powers, mastery of vast yet traversable interior space functions a bit like modern-day naval power, with the steppe acting as a kind of inland highway not totally different from sea lanes. Greater mobility around spaces where commerce concentrates gives the regional power great sway over strategic options. This was once Central Asia’s default setting, and its success led to many states from further afield that came into contact with the region—e.g., Russia and China—to selectively adopt frontier policies from these experiences.

With the rise of increased militarization of sea-lanes in places like the South China Sea, as well as the maritime nations of the North Atlantic wielding ever more sanctions as part of their foreign policy, alternative routes and markets are inevitably going to be explored.

This may seem like an abstract argument more suited for historians than the field of international relations. However, it was and remains my contention that just as technological changes in the early modern era stemming from the rise of larger and more sophisticated naval vessels had moved the main trade routes away from the Eurasian hinterland and towards the oceans, so too could the process be at least partially reversible in the future. The rise of the littoral world was based on the growth of port cities and the connection of sources of wealth abroad to these places. This undermined the inland trade networks that had thrived in earlier centuries by redirecting so much of economic activity away from them (and taking much tax revenue and technological innovation with them). However, with the rise of increased militarization of sea-lanes in places like the South China Sea, as well as the maritime nations of the North Atlantic wielding ever more sanctions as part of their foreign policy, alternative routes and markets are inevitably going to be explored.

While bulk shipping at sea obviously isn’t going anywhere, opportunities for inland trade networks are growing, and the overlooking of Central Asia by many of the present world powers gives the region the opportunity to grow its

overall global profile in the long term. As mentioned previously, we at IPD are skeptical that any middle powers currently exist in Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, the opportunities for them to eventually arise certainly do. Indeed, one could say the growth potential of the region is immense. However, the political conditions needed to bring this about would first need to be met. And here, premodern history once again becomes useful.

The concepts of “transactional neutrality” and “Silk Road region balancing systems” are the modern revival of the old Turkic understanding of geopolitics, even if the balance of forces is no longer as favorable towards the region as they once were. What would be required for this to work would be greater regional integration as well as a dedicated forum to smooth over local disputes before they can be capitalized on by outside powers. There is some evidence that more than embryonic steps are being taken in this direction, under the framework of a process that began formally in 2018, called the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia. No stranger to being outnumbered by littoral societies, the core states of the Silk Road region can only maximize their potential when

presenting a largely unified front to outside societies. Ethnic conflict along the border with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for instance, should not be allowed to drive either of those countries' foreign policy stances so much as standardized trade practices and flow of commerce do. Such regional integration may also help diminish such territorial flare ups. The present war in Ukraine has directly shown the utility of following such a path, as NATO member states impose massive sanctions on Russia in response to Moscow's initiation of a potentially destabilizing conflict in its near-abroad. There is clearly room to eke out a space between these poles, where commerce and regional stability take precedence over conflicts that involve other powers.

The clear desire to reboot the Silk Road trade network that is shown by the openness throughout the region to BRI-style projects presents both dangers and opportunities. The fact that the Belt and Road Initiative, in particular,

is primarily a Beijing-funded and Beijing-directed project presents concerns—to some extent to the core states of the Silk Road region itself, of course, and, more so to great power centers like Russia and the West. But it is also worth noting that the more trade is conducted through Central Asia, the better the region's prosperity and connectedness. The middle corridor of the old Silk Road states could sell themselves as a safer alternative for trans-Eurasian trade and pipelines in light of recent events. Should everything go according to plan, this strengthens the hand of the participant states not only by increasing the overall amount of trade and infrastructure dependent on them, but also because it makes the region more attractive to investment for further abroad powers. China might be the primary investor, but anyone can use the new facilities they help fund and construct. A true New Silk Road recaptures the essence of the old by going beyond the immediate near-abroad when developing trade and connectivity links.

If the region's strongest military powers were allies rather than rivals with each other, there would be no question that they could dictate the terms of their economic links with the various littoral powers.

As commerce increases, so too could its various states think about how they, collectively, could bargain from a position of greater strength. The individual states in both the Caucasus and Central Asia must choose between bandwagoning with each other to form a proximate regional power, or act in some kind of less centralized but still coordinated neutral non-aligned league. There is certainly an opportunity in Central Asia for an insular security treaty/organization in the mode of the Abraham Accords to protect these states from future interference from outside powers. Doing so, however, requires prudent and sober leadership and strategic nuance. A discussion of the opportunities and challenges for a Silk Road Security Initiative (SRSA) in light of these factors could be well received. As it would be more profitable to trade with a leagued regional alliance than attempt to dominate it, outsider powers capable of doing a cost/benefit analysis would quickly come to the realization that a New Silk Road was rising for the same reason that the old one once did: apparent inaccessibility can be leveraged by locals to grow new opportunities that outside powers are unwilling or incapable of pursuing directly. If the region's strongest military powers were allies rather than rivals with each other, there would be no question that

they could dictate the terms of their economic links with the various littoral powers.

Febrile Zone?

While there is no single country that yet meets the criteria for being a regionally decisive middle power in Central Asia or the Caucasus, the region itself contains vast amounts of potential for the future. This is understood by many people who reside in the core states of the Silk Road region but by relatively few outside of its geography. China's BRI and Russia's longstanding security arrangements, as well as their proximity to the core of the Silk Road region, mean their interest is a given. Yet, facing few direct rivalries as of now, they often prioritize Europe (for Moscow) and East and Southeast Asia (for Beijing).

Central Asia is a place far too distant to be a core interest of the United States, and the relative late-comer status of India's growing world economic power implies that while its impact in the region will be felt, it will most likely not be in a game-changing capacity anytime soon. However, as the infrastructure of the Silk Road network countries develops and their importance rises accordingly, more investment and connections from places even

far afield will become inevitable. Particularly key is increasing levels of regional consensus-building among states like Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, given that they have disproportionate influence among their most immediate neighbors. It is quite possible that a mutual consensus between Baku and Tashkent could be the start of a new regional geopolitical realignment, as Krnjević, Gvosdev, and others have argued.

As long as the core countries of the Silk Road region can work more in partnership rather than rivalry, not only could they reap the benefits of middle power multipolarity but could also return to something resembling their former status as geopolitical poles of import—one capable of leveraging trade routes, the manufacturing of value-added goods, transactional relations between littoral power poles, and a supposedly “remote” location into a sovereignty-defending, inshore balancing position of regional power to which outside forces must agree in order to successfully do business. Even acknowledging the very real local differences between countries

and the differing levels of foreign intervention in the Caucasus compared to Central Asia, this still remains a regionally-achievable strategic goal worth pursuing.

This is a long-term prognosis to be sure—and one that requires an avoidance of inter-regional strife that cannot be guaranteed; and yet, the opportunity is as real a potential recurrence as the premodern history of the old Silk Road shows it once was. Much of history, especially that of geopolitical history, is one of long-term cycles. In times of rapid change some states rise while others decline. But this is never a permanent state of affairs, and often, as the nomad-admiring scholar Ibn Khaldun was fond of pointing out, it is precisely those who have been on top for too long who are at the greatest risk of losing their position to others who have had their meddle tested by being exiled from the poles of power. There is a very real possibility that a fatal complacency has set in with many of the established powers, and that the supposedly peripheral space between them is about to become a febrile zone of growth for those they assume their lesser. **BD**

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