

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# Awakening Peripheries in the Great Power Clash Zone

## Can Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia Come Together?

*Jakub Korejba*

This essay explores the consequences of the fact that states of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia face a structural problem of the same nature: they are all located at the periphery of the main centers of global development and, for a major part of their contemporary history, were subject to external structural forces that perceived them as objects of great power rivalry (the “Eurasian Rimland,” as Halford Mackinder put it) and not as subjects of international politics.

These countries are or at least should perceive themselves as a bridge between the East, West,

North, and South due to their location between the “Eurasian Heartland” (also Mackinder) and the coastal “Sea Powers” (Nicholas Spykman). Unfortunately, this also puts them exactly in the “clash zone” of virtually every potential conflict between maritime and continental powers. This specific position has historically determined conditions for their development (or the lack thereof), and for a long time made the development of direct horizontal ties between them impossible.

For most of their history, the political, economic, and cultural ties that they could have potentially maintained with each other were

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either non-existent or vertical, effectuated through the respective geopolitical center that dominated them. Although now formally independent for more than 30 years, this still remains the case—as most of the countries located in those three areas finds themselves not strong enough to challenge the old, new, or potential hegemon interested in keeping them in a subordinated condition. From the point of view of Moscow, Beijing, Brussels, or Washington, it makes little sense to let Warsaw, Baku, or Astana elaborate the sort of horizontal ties with each other (or others in their respective neighborhoods) that could potentially make each of them more (much less fully) resistant to the pressure of great powers still intent on instrumentalizing as a playground for their ongoing power struggle.

The ultimate goal of all “Rimland” countries is (or should be) to emancipate themselves from the influence of great powers and to channel regional structural forces to advance their own interests. If the states located in the aforementioned areas are

to fulfill their obligations towards their own populations, there is no other choice than to make a try to extend their respective autonomous decisionmaking parameters. But due to the significant disproportion of potential between each one of them and their respective potential hegemon, this can hardly be realized individually. The only possible way for the Eurasian periphery to contest its actual status—to break the heretofore structural logic and durably change its own position in the system—is to establish mutual ties that would change the geopolitical nature of the externally-shaped periphery into a self-determined center. This, if made real, would potentially create a synergy effect, which would, in turn, oblige bigger players to negotiate (as opposed to simply demand and enforce) the conditions of their presence in those regions.

The geopolitical emancipation of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia from the influence of global forces would introduce a new quality of relations not only between those regions, but, due to their geographic location on

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the edge of two (or more) macroregions, would also influence relations between great powers forced to take into consideration regional and inter-regional factors. This would correspond to the logic of multipolarity and ultimately lead to the onset of what about a decade ago the likes of Charles Kupchan described as “no one’s world” and Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini described as a “G-Zero world.” But there is hardly a chance that the global guardians, who perceive the countries of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia in a very traditional way (i.e., as geopolitical objects) would agree that negotiating with each of the states in question is easier and more efficient than doing it the old-fashioned way by reaching an overall deal with the other members of the concert of powers.

The question is whether this pattern of great power behavior can be broken.

The still-present, overwhelming disproportion of potential as well as the resistance of great powers to the emancipation of the countries located on the edge of several spheres of influence leaves them no choice other than to adopt a transitional strategy that consists in institutionally joining existing or planned supra-regional projects

designed and led by one or more of the great powers (e.g., EU, NATO, EAEU, CSTO, SCO, BRI).

The one that is optimal (that is to say, the one in which the profit and loss ratio is the best) for that specific country with its geographical position and internal structure could be said to be, for example, the EU and NATO for Poland, the EAEU for Kazakhstan, and BRI for Azerbaijan. But the ultimate goal for all of them is not to dissolve their newly established (or reestablished) sovereignty inside supranational structures led by others, but the opposite—namely, to use those structures to strengthen their respective sovereignty and establish (or enlarge) their decisionmaking autonomy, both geographically and functionally.

And here we come to the core dilemma that defines the stance of countries from the Silk Road region (and beyond): *how to integrate themselves into the global economy on the best possible terms without losing their political autonomy and maximally widening their sovereign decisionmaking margin.* In another words, how to negotiate the best possible conditions for their participation in global economic and security systems.

## Poland's Posture

Although Poland may seem to be a distant place from Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, the basic strategic calculation behind Warsaw's foreign policy posture is based on premises very similar to those present in the capitals of the countries that make up the core Silk Road region. The paramount strategic objective is conditioned by the historical experience of the loss of sovereignty and a strong conviction that doing what is necessary to prevent its repetition is an imperative.

Poland's location in a transitional region in which the interests of great powers collide has made that country—more than once—an object of geopolitical horse-trading that completely disregarded local national interests and often overtly violated its sovereignty. More than once, this resulted in the complete disappearance of Poland from the political map. This experience implies an overall distrust towards the games and machinations of great powers as well as skepticism

towards supranational structures often seen as a fig leaf designed to elegantly mask the dictate of stronger partners. And this makes the underlying Polish stance towards the international system similar to the one represented by the core states of the Silk Road region: all of them try to fix their place in the system in a way to durably move from the category of objects of international politics to one of subjects. All major decisions, be they military or economic, are made with regard to this crucial criterion; all major systemic shifts are also rated according to it.

As a consequence, the countries located in the “Eurasian Rimland” are natural allies in a struggle to limit the margin of the expansionist activity of great powers (potential dominators) and to durably transform the international system into a multipolar one. This is the primary reason (i.e., *not* emotional sentiment) that Poland is massively supportive of Ukraine, critical of Belarus (although only up to the point where Polish criticism could not potentially harm its independent statehood),

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supportive of Azerbaijan (perceived as a driver of multipolarity, the bottom-up force), and critical of Armenia (seen as a Moscow's proxy and an executor of the top-down trends).

The same logic applies to the Polish position towards the EU, the United States, and China with their existing or potential influence in all parts of the “clash zone.” From Warsaw's rational perspective, being pro-American is a product of an assessment that Washington can make the best play to ensure that the “Eurasian Rimland”—historically dominated by Russia in a virtually absolute way—becomes geopolitically more plural by attracting an alternative force. Poland sees the United States as crucial in preventing the restoration of a geopolitical monopoly that was the reality for that part of the world for the past two centuries—uncoincidentally, its initial appearance corresponds to the period in which both Poland and Türkiye lost their regional power status together with the ability to balance the expanding continental power from the northwest and southwest, respectively.

In today's reality, the rise of American and Chinese influence is seen as a function of Russian weakness and thus perceived as a guarantee to enlarge the space for

regional and local junior-partners to conduct their own affairs in accordance with an understanding of their own national interests. Having to deal with two distant powers is perceived as less risky (by far) than being left in an eye-to-eye stance with a directly expansionist force. From the Polish perspective, whenever Washington or Beijing grows more powerful anywhere in the “Rimland” at Moscow's expense, this is seen as progressive in relation to Poland's previous position as a part of the Russian sphere of influence, when Warsaw's foreign policy was subordinated to Moscow's strategic aims. The problem—increasingly discussed in Warsaw but still unsolved—is how Poland can balance the respective influence of the great powers in a situation in which an evidently approaching clash between China and the U.S. is the emerging reality.

For now, neither Eastern Europe nor the South Caucasus are direct objects of Sino-American rivalry, but as tensions in other parts of the world increase, it is quite likely that the countries in the aforementioned regions may easily come to be perceived by both antagonists in a way doubly harmful for those who actually live there: both as a battleground for conflict and as a currency (an object) of something that in the future may amount to

an understanding on respective spheres of influence.

What makes the situation even more risky, from the Polish point of view, is the fact that both the U.S. and China will, in the time ahead, act in accordance with “Kissingerian” triangular logic by trying to convince Russia to join them as an ally (or at least to secure Moscow's neutrality) in a forthcoming global collision. Russia's alignment with either would certainly change the bilateral balance of power and possibly determinate the final result of the main global struggle of the twenty-first century. But any possible deal would require rewarding Moscow and, obviously, this would be made manifest in the regions that Russia perceives as its exclusive “zone of responsibility.” And the longer the conflict between America and China stays unsolved, the wider Russia's decisionmaking margin becomes: as tensions rise between Beijing and Washington, Moscow may demand more in exchange for its friendship or neutrality, furthering Polish fears about a “new Yalta” arrangement that would affect Russia's direct neighbors.

The greatest geopolitical fear existing in Warsaw applies not only to Ukraine but to all former Soviet republics. It consists of a suspicion

that Washington (as well as Berlin and Paris) does not perceive them as durably independent and, in turn, conditions its strategy towards them in the context of its own relations with Moscow—in other words, that the American (and the Western in general) stance towards the “newly independent states” still remains a function of its relations with Russia. Thus, if Moscow proposes a deal that is truly attractive to Washington, the fear is that the latter would quickly drop its support for liberal internationalist principles and values for the sake of advancing its *Realpolitik* strategic interests, in the same way that Churchill and Roosevelt did when they needed Stalin to keep fighting Hitler.

### *Geopolitical Aspect*

This is but the latest manifestation of the sempiternal fate of small and mid-sized countries located in the middle of a “clash zone” where the interests of great powers collide. But the foregoing should in no way be understood as an argument for such countries to give up their sovereignty and passively wait for the result of the next round of the Great Game that would, once again, place those countries on the side of a new geopolitical partition—one that they never chose themselves.

In the context of what we can call the “Eurasian puzzle,” the only choice for such states—driven by decisionmaking that properly understands national interest—is to join the game at the right time and each to assign to itself the right role so as to be able to bargain for an optimal position in the new order that will result from the actual struggle (analogous to the way Italy did during World War I and France during World War II). And the optimal strategy for each is to find allies among countries with a similar perception of the situation, which means, in practice, those located in similar geopolitical conditions. And, again, this points to the countries that make up the core of the Silk Road region (the term is certainly imperfect, but as it describes reality in the making—there is no better one).

In the twentieth century, whenever Poland was a sovereign country and able to exercise its foreign policy according to its own sovereign priorities, it perceived the subordinated nations of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as its potential allies to contain the imperial threat that was common for all of them. For both objective and subjective reasons, the response from those

countries or nations was not always optimal (they either could not or would not form any kind of serious alliance with Poland), but Warsaw never dropped the conception of changing the Russian-dominated geopolitically grey East into a plethora of glowing multicolored independent states. And, after 1991, the dream came true: the former Soviet republics became independent states—and with this, potential Polish allies.

Regretfully, for different reasons, not all of them decided to fill their formal independence with real sovereign decision-making—at least not at once and not for good. The case of Armenia is an obvious example, but there are others. The influence of a former metropolis is not something a “newly independent state” may safely ignore, and this was also true for Poland itself, whose path to non-dependence from “newly independent” Russia was neither linear nor rapid. Hence Poland’s main foreign policy criteria towards those post-Soviet states was and remains the degree of independence that each is able to manifest towards Russia—and not, for instance, the degree to which these countries embrace Western-style visions of liberal democracy, or the technicalities of their electoral systems.

The Polish stance towards the countries that make up the core of the Silk Road region is determined, on the one hand, by a vision of all those states becoming a durable element of a regional political arrangement predicated on some sort of institutional bond (so as to avoid becoming “seasonal states”), and, on the other, by the fear that one day they may lose their independence—either by losing control over a part of their territory (e.g., Georgia or Ukraine) or effectually relinquishing their sovereignty (e.g., Belarus or Armenia). That is why (and this is a distinct question that could be explored in detail in a separate essay), the case of Azerbaijan re-gaining its sovereignty over Karabakh forms a crucially positive example of how a “periphery state” can strengthen its position against its former metropolis as well as enforce a post-imperial order and the territorial status quo without provoking a large-scale war and even without spoiling the bilateral relationship.

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### *Socio-Economic Aspect*

From Warsaw, as well as from all the other post-communist capitals of Central and Eastern Europe, the simple fact of the independent existence of the eight countries that make up the core of the Silk Road region is a value in itself. But, in the long term, their sovereignty may be guaranteed only by the rising quality of their statehood measured by economic and social indicators. To put this simply: the value of independence for ordinary people (those who will defend their country in case of a post-imperial paroxysm) demands that everyday life in post-imperial circumstances needs to be better than it was under the Russian-dominated period of socialism.

Had the economic, social, and institutional reality in Ukraine unequivocally represented something similar to European standards (or was at least positively contrasted with the Russian reality) before 2014, then there would have been little popular support for any

kind of successful separatism in Crimea or Donbass. This lesson from Ukraine (there are obviously others) suggests that it is crucial for the core states that make up the Silk Road region to avoid the adoption of policies that could turn into a source of discontent for their own citizens. And for that, a strong and durable driver of economic growth is needed. And, due to the effects of centuries of what was effectually a colonial status that resulted in a suboptimal level of harnessing internal potential, may realistically come only from an outside power.

In the case of Poland, that outside power has been the European Union; in the case of the South Caucasus, it seemed, at least for some time, that it might be Türkiye; and in case of Central Asia, the most obvious outside power is now China. The lack of economic self-sufficiency (let alone the lack of potential for growth in size and intensity to make up for lost time) forces all those countries to seek a wider economic framework.

This puts all of them into a fragile situation that, in turn, forces them to confront a crucial dilemma, which can be put in the form of a question: how to assure economic growth without renouncing political sovereignty? In other words, how to integrate into existing formats of economic cooperation in a way that strengthens independence rather than blurs it through membership in a wider block (this time a geo-economic rather than a geopolitical one, but this makes little difference in practice)?

Seemingly, the only way to make global economic integration work towards strengthening the independent legal and institutional orders of countries placed between the great powers is for them to demonstrate that their independence represents a kind of a public good from the point of view of the international system as a whole.

This is obvious for the political elites and populations of the interested countries, but it may seem not evident for former, actual, and

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would-be hegemons (or empires) that tend to pursue, as a matter of course, a policy of “geopolitical optimization”—a policy that means, in practice, that the fewer partners they need to arrange this or that project, the better. The unsurpassed ideal is the American “unipolar era” of the 1990s and 2000s in which the world’s sole superpower truly did not need to consult with any other country; still, the relative simplicity of the Cold War era’s bipolarity—managing the world by reaching out to a single other superpower—is also a tempting one.

Needless to say, both models are (or should be) unacceptable for the countries located between the great powers. That is why the task of the Silk Road countries is to maximize the pluralization of their own political and economic environment. This, in turn, requires them to attract as many partners as possible to take part in economic projects realized in the part of the world located between China, Russia, and the EU—put in corporate terms, their task is to make the shareholding structure of the post-Soviet order pluralistic enough to avoid a hostile takeover by any of the major partners.

Thus, from the point of view of countries like Poland, it is absolutely fundamental for the Silk Road region’s economic

development not to turn into (or be perceived as) a “Chinese project” that is seen by the U.S. and the EU as being in opposition to their own interests. Seeing the economic development of the “Eurasian Rimland” as a zero-sum game will result in a lack of economic development as such, which is exactly what happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Cold War, for example, both the U.S. and the USSR preferred to leave those places abandoned and underdeveloped rather than to permit any activity that would potentially change the fragile balance of power between them. The only exception—Afghanistan—twice demonstrated that any attempt at socio-economic development imposed by outsiders and subordinated to the logic of great power competition (and with complete disregard for the internal structure of the concerned society and its national interests) results in a world-class fiasco.

If what used to be known as the ‘Eurasian periphery’ (i.e., Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia) wants to be both politically independent and prosperous, it has to prove that its own independence and prosperity is an integral part of the global agenda—a matter of universal

profit for all potentially interested players. That is why it is crucial to present (and sincerely think of) the Silk Road region in a maximally broad way—even to push the limits of how this (imperfect term, as noted above) is defined in the Editorial Statement of *Baku Dialogues*: “that part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley; and then looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.” In other words, the Silk Road region does not just include parts of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, but also Türkiye, Afghanistan, and parts of South Asia and the Middle East, and even parts of the Mediterranean basin.

Only by turning what Zbigniew Brzezinski liked to call the “Eurasian Balkans” into a zone of prosperity and cooperation will it be possible to avoid the two historically most common scenarios: a chaotic “war of all against all” or imperial partition.

### *Strategic Aspect*

But economic development rarely happens without strategic stability. No rational market player is ready to invest full-on into a region full of existing and potential security threats and risks. This implies the question about who will guarantee security in a region that was traditionally an arena for all possible internal, local, regional, and global conflicts.

Here, again, the logic of the countries of the region clashes with that of the great powers: if the states that make up the core of the Silk Road region are unable to establish security conditions for economic development and, instead, need to reach out to external forces in that regard, then in what way is their independent existence a better option than the imperial order that existed beforehand?

Regional security issues in this part of the world can be understood on three basic levels: internal, inter-state, and external. Internal peace and social cohesion are essential conditions for each state to develop itself, but also to take an active part in regional and supra-regional projects. If a country is plunged into internal conflicts of an ethnic, national, or

economic nature, then it is unable to become a reliable partner to both its immediate neighbors and global actors.

Afghanistan is the best example of this type of internal disfunction, which paralyses any opportunity to take advantage of the country’s potential. Being located in the exact middle of ‘Eurasia,’ Afghanistan disposes of a potential to host and operate all kinds of infrastructure and connectivity projects. It could become the world’s ultimate crossroads. But due to long-lasting and never-ending internal disorder (caused inter alia by external factors, but every country in the “clash zone” is permanently exposed to such interference), it is a country whose role is likely to remain a buffer between great power’s spheres of influence rather than a link between them (and, in parallel, adjacent regions).

The Afghanistan example clearly demonstrates the dreadful alternative to peace and development that is valid for all the countries located in the “Eurasian Rimland.”

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Due to the permanent geopolitical pressure exercised by the great powers, all the countries belonging to the Silk Road region may either play a connecting role (in case they are internally apt to operate it) or will be forced to play the role of a buffer (in case they are unable to establish internal order). In the latter case, their unpredictable internal situation is used by the Great Game players to create a barrier to the possible expansion of their actual rival. This was true for Great Britain versus Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and it remains true in the context of the America-versus-China game of the twenty-first century.

Had Afghanistan not been invaded by the United States in the first years of our century, the country would have most probably entered the Chinese orbit several decades earlier. This would have strengthened China’s potential to spread its influence westwards and southwards all across the “Eurasian Heartland.” That is why, in my opinion, from the point of view of considerations having to do with the strategic balance of power, it

is not accurate to qualify the 20-year American presence in Kabul as strategic failure. Certainly, the Americans did not manage to turn Afghanistan into an American ally, but at the same time they prevented the Chinese from doing the equivalent. And, after their departure, the country is in a condition that will not let it become a viable partner for any supra-national project for the foreseeable perspective—whether led by China or anyone else.

The Afghanistan lesson for all the other Silk Road region countries is that if a country goes through internal turbulence, it always—intentionally or not—confronts external powers with a temptation to use the situation to its advantage (or, at least, in the event that an advantage is unrealizable, to the detriment of its actual or potential rival). In a geopolitically fragile region, the internal peace and stability of a state is even more crucial for assessing its chances to survive and develop than elsewhere.

The second level of regional security issues is the inter-state one—that is, between countries located in the geopolitically transitional Silk Road region itself. When countries fight with each other (e.g., Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan, or Armenia-Azerbaijan), this not only has a

negative impact on bilateral relations but also paralyzes (at least partially) the realization of supra-national projects. The transitional nature of the region affects all the states located in it, and the full realization of the region's potential may be acquired only by a common and inclusive cooperation effort. This means that if two (or more) countries belonging to the Silk Road region are in conflict with one another, the ambitions of all the others are put on hold (at least partially). The “one for all, all for one” principle applies, and as long as frozen and potential conflicts exist between the countries of the Silk Road region, full strategic cooperation is impossible—and, again, not only between the two (or more) hostile sides. The specter of conflict impacts negatively upon the region as a whole; it makes all the states therein more fragile.

The most evident example of how bilateral conflicts may delay economic growth is certainly the case of Armenia—i.e., its attempt to perpetuate the occupation of around 20 percent of sovereign territory belonging to Azerbaijan. By refusing to understand what it would take to become a constructive element of regional cooperation, Armenia not only set in motion events that prevented its own development for

three decades (not to mention, of course, the loss of territory it had illegally occupied).

The ongoing process of Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization (in which Russia is understood by the parties to be the “mediator”—in distinction to the EU's role as “facilitator” and that of the United States as “supporter”) is, in my opinion, ultimately a result of Chinese pressure exercised on Moscow. As long as Yerevan saw itself as an element of a wider coalition of revisionist forces, it could continue to paralyze the development of alternative (to Russia) connectivity projects. But once the balance of power between Moscow and Beijing changed (in favor of the latter), Armenia found itself overwhelmed by the structural forces that encourage the transitional potential of the region to be realized.

In this context, the Polish example clearly demonstrates the positive alternative: the dynamic economic growth of the country in the last three decades is a direct result of the fact that after regaining its sovereignty, Poland immediately

and permanently fixed its borders with all its neighbors, although (or, possibly because) there was space for potential territorial dispute with literally each of them. The post-Soviet territorial status quo may sometimes seem strategically suboptimal and historically unjust,

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but the fact is that durable economic development can only be based on the existing territorial framework. The case of all disputed territories in the post-Soviet space—left with virtually no investment and suffering depopulation—is a clear message that

in the strategic perspective, a “bad” peace is always more profitable than any “good” war.

But security risks in the Silk Road region may also come from the outside—the third and final level of regional security issues, as noted above: any potential conflict, whether internal or bilateral, risks being turned into an opportunity for external actors to use their destructive potential in the service of their own interests. Contestation of the territorial status quo in the region was more than once an instrument of a great power's playing



the game of shrinking a junior partner's decisionmaking maneuverability, diverting the latter's resources from developing horizontal ties to fighting with each other, and keeping the region inaccessible for their geopolitical rivals.

Ensuring that the territorial issues of countries like Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine remained unresolved was seen as the best guarantee that those countries could not join any serious international projects that might enable them to become autonomous parts of global economic processes that were not controlled by Moscow. The same logic applies to the United States, which intervened in Iraq to prevent the country from becoming a part of a potential Shia integration project that would have involved Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, and the current attempts by France to encourage Armenia to continue acting as a brake to regional cooperation so as to restrain the rise of Turkish influence in the Silk Road region. (Note that the above sentences explain motivation, not necessarily describe success.) Here, again, from the point of view of global players, no development turns out to be a better option than non-controlled development, or one controlled by an actor seen as a global or regional rival.

And here, again, the functional linkage between economic development and security reveals its immanent nature: if China is to push forward its Belt and Road Initiative, then it has no choice but to provide the core states of the Silk Road region with security guarantees (or at least to offer them) and to be ready to actively engage its own resources to enforce these in case a security risk turns into a danger. For many years, taking responsibility for the security of other countries—and its corollary, the direct projection of power—seemed to be incompatible with the Chinese development project, which constantly kept its isolationist nature. But what we are apparently seeing now, after Russia's diminishing capacity to guarantee stability in Central Asia, is an evident tendency of Chinese diplomacy (as it applies to Central Asia, at least) to support its own economic projects by offering up its own security guarantees. And this may be understood as a major shift of Chinese perception of its own presence in the region: simple realism drives Beijing to the constataion that there will be no BRI without the formalization of Chinese responsibilities for ensuring peace and security in Central Asia and, perhaps, points further to the west.

The problem, from the perspective of countries actually lying in it, is that it historically happened to the “Eurasian Rimland” that the onset of a ‘hard’ presence by one of the global powers was often seen through a zero-sum lens by other global protagonists, and thus often provoked attempts to destabilize the situation. In the case discussed in the previous paragraph, this would involve, say, the Americans escalating the destructive potential up to the point where Chinese projects would become unfit for purpose. And here, again, the only alternative to turning the countries of the region into Great Game instruments is to elaborate peacekeeping mechanisms based on multilateral arrangements between the Central Asian states themselves—that is, not to depend on one (or more) external power(s).

If China replaces Russia as Central Asia's security guarantor, this will not pacify but rather activate countermeasures introduced by Beijing's global rival—with potentially disastrous consequences for the region itself. This is arguably

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what happened to Ukraine and has resulted not only in the physical devastation of parts of the country but also in its (indeterminate) exclusion from any wider progress-driving economic projects. And given the disproportion of forces between the countries occupying the “Rimland” and the great powers, this may potentially happen to another of the “Rimland” states.

### *Premises of a Common Strategy*

The awareness of existing as well as potential risks, together with historical experience, should lead all of the countries located in the “clash zone” to the constataion that the elaboration of a common strategy is an optimal response to the actual situation. If those countries are not satisfied with their position of being seen as operating on the periphery of existing geopolitical and geo-economic realities (presumably, they are not satisfied), then the best

option is to take collective measures become the center of a new reality. And this requires the elaboration of a new international identity that would be inclusive of *all* the states of the “Eurasian Rimland”—perhaps even pushing beyond the maximally broad interpretation of the definition of the Silk Road region as reproduced above.

The traditional conceptual division of “Eurasia” championed by the Great Game’s players—of which the notions of ‘Eastern Europe,’ the ‘South Caucasus,’ and ‘Central Asia’ are the products—should be replaced by a common perception of all its constituent states that they are, in fact, each integral parts of a unique and autonomous area, whose role in the international system ought to be defined independently of the power relations between the great powers.

Poland’s development model as a periphery of the West has already reached its limits, and the same is true for, say, Azerbaijan or Georgia as somehow belonging to the Russian “near abroad.” In parallel,

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*Political, strategic, and economic subjectivity is a mere expression of a mentally enrooted complex of geopolitical provinciality that results from a historical experience of helplessness in confrontation with overwhelming external pressure.*

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the Central Asian republics ought to have no desire to become passive elements of a future Chinese sphere of influence. This double rejection of subordinated status opens the door to the establishment of a community of interests that predestines the core

countries of the Silk Road region to undertake a common effort of emancipation. The basic condition for this vision to come to fruition is to avoid two major historical scenarios: domination by any single external power or becoming a conflict zone between two or more great powers.

To avoid being dominated by any single power, it will be necessary to balance against it with other actors, and this, in turn, will require attracting their attention and then assuring their presence. It follows that the ongoing and planned infrastructure ought to be designed in a different way than it had been previously, when the Silk Road region’s economic function was subordinated to the strategic considerations of others: roads and railways served great powers to either exploit local resources or

approach rivals and make potential expeditions technically easier, or both. Nowadays, it is important to build roads, railways, pipelines, and ports in a way that none of the interested great powers consider this development in terms of security risks or as being incompatible with their own national interests.

To avoid being turned into an arena of great power clash requires that no reason is produced by those belonging to the region that would serve as pretext for external powers to intervene. That is one reason why true inclusiveness is required to make all the countries of the “Rimland” see their interest in terms of being part of a common project, and to avoid turning one or several of them into a “fifth columnist” or an instrument of a hostile external power. That is why it is so crucial for, say, Azerbaijan not only to ensure it signs a formal peace treaty with Armenia but to actually convince Yerevan to transform its unconstructive stance towards its immediate neighbors into one of genuine and active cooperation. The Turkish carrot here is likely to be important, and Baku seems to be very much aware of this.

But avoiding the two negative scenarios outlined above does not automatically mean that the Silk Road region will transform itself into a

flourishing panacea of connectivity. Political, strategic, and economic subjectivity is a mere expression of a mentally enrooted complex of geopolitical provinciality that results from a historical experience of helplessness in confrontation with overwhelming external pressure.

The project to emancipate the Eurasian periphery—if it is to be realized—will require a change of the mental map; if it is to succeed to motivate political elites and populations in terms long enough to be made real, it must become a genuine expression of the true aspirations of its inhabitants. When a project is realized apart from the existing social and cultural trends, it may very well end up like in Iran in 1979 or Ukraine in 2014. The political will of the governments to form a new geopolitical reality must be based in an overwhelmingly popular conviction that its content and aim reflect the way that people of the “Eurasian Rimland” actually want to live.

It is a vast understatement to say that formulating—much less executing—a single, unified vision of a shared future is a complicated task in a region where different identities competed and fought with each other for ages.

## The Role of Connectivity

The consciousness of a common destiny is a product of subjective human perception; and this is, in turn, formed by a number of cultural, psychological, and confessional factors that vary in every society according to its own unique historical experience. In the past, those factors not only prevented peoples located in the “Rimland” from seeing each other as partners, they also disincentivized them to develop horizontal ties of cooperation. If all the states concerned are to change their peripheric status, then a single, shared geopolitical and geo-economic logic must come to characterize the decisionmaking process of each.

Obviously, such a mental shift does not occur in a moment: it is a process that requires different timing in each of those countries. But having in mind the extreme heterogeneity of this to-be region (and of the geopolitical unit to come), the only way to create a common consciousness is to concentrate on connectivity.

If the rebellion of the peripheries is to succeed, then it must serve the real needs of the people who actually inhabit the region itself. And if the “Rimland” states are to act

according to a common logic, then they must grasp their common interest, which is, in turn, impossible without getting to truly know and understand each other.

It took several centuries and more than a few catastrophic wars for Europe to come to a conclusion that, independently of which country takes the most part of the advantage coming from the process of integration in the short term, in the long term, it is the most rational and successful choice for all of them. Modern communications and transportation networks may make this process faster for the “Rimland” countries, but, nevertheless, a strategic plan is required to make the foregoing workable. The only way to acknowledge a common geopolitical position for people coming from different cultures is to enable them to grasp that, independently of all possible differences, people from Warsaw, Baku, Astana, and all other capitals of the “Rimland” states perceive the overall “Eurasian” structure in the same way.

This task may be fulfilled only by the rapid and intense development of person-to-person contacts between up-to-this-point relatively isolated societies. This can hardly be acquired by exclusive recourse to traditional diplomatic

instruments; it will also require the development of more land, air, and maritime communications, the maximally possible simplification of visa regimes, and the intensification of contacts between business, students, academics, and tourists. This

will require the overcoming of multi-century geopolitical inertness and, at least at the first stage, quite a bit of political voluntarism—sometimes even to the detriment of immediate economic gains.

Does this mean we should conclude that all of this amounts to a “mission impossible” scenario?

## Conclusion

Certainly, breaking the geopolitical curse that has entrenched the peripheric status of the “Eurasian Rimland” for centuries is not only an attractive vision; it could represent the best way to overcome the effects of what amounts to a state of “arrested development.”

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*The decline of Russia in “Middle Eurasia” does not automatically mean that it will be replaced by Chinese influence; rather, it opens space for regional states to emancipate themselves and change the overall role of the region—to transform it from a periphery to a core.*

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The actual timing of the ongoing crisis on the Western flank of the “Eurasian Rimland” constitutes a useful opportunity to acknowledge the common fate of the countries located in a similar position to that of Ukraine, and to start elaborating on ideas that would serve as a conceptual basis for the new, postwar architecture of, let’s call it, “Middle Eurasia.” If countries like Poland, Azerbaijan, or Kazakhstan are to use the geopolitical shift underway globally to ameliorate their position in the new emerging international order by changing their peripheric status, then they need to acknowledge where they should be heading and act proactively to get there.

A window of geopolitical opportunity has opened up—and action must be taken before the great powers once again redraw the map of Eurasia without asking the interested people for their opinion or input. As Milton Friedman famously said: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real

change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

The war in Ukraine activated several geopolitical shifts whose consequences will remodel Eurasian architecture far beyond Donbass and Crimea. The visible end of Russian domination over its “outer empire” in the western part of Eurasia will invariably have consequences for its southern and eastern components, as well. The deep and seemingly durable isolation of the Northern (that is to say, Russian) Corridor that linked East Asia to

Europe is causing difficulties in the short term, yet opens new perspectives in the longer term. In between these two periods—that is, all the time between the start of the present crisis and the establishment of a new order—is a window of opportunity for all the “Rimland” countries. The decline of Russia in “Middle Eurasia” does not automatically mean that it will be replaced by Chinese influence; rather, it opens space for regional states to emancipate themselves and change the overall role of the region—to transform it from a periphery to a core. **BD**

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