

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 6 | No. 4 | Summer 2023

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On Some Conceptual Advantages of the Term ‘Silk Road Region’

Heralding Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Emancipation

Damjan Krnjević Mišković

One part of the internal deliberations involving the re-launch of *Baku Dialogues* that took place in the second and third quarters of 2020 focused on the journal’s subtitle; another revolved around the language of our Editorial Statement, which we published in the Fall 2020 edition that ended the publication’s hiatus. What substantively held together these two threads was the question of what to call the part of the world in which Azerbaijan is located.

Since *Baku Dialogues* was not at any point envisioned to be an academic journal, we chose to

emphasize this fact by employing the term ‘policy perspectives’ in the subtitle. And we chose the term ‘Silk Road region’ to cover as broadly and non-preconceptionally as possible the geographic space that we expected the essays we would feature in our pages to perustrate.

The Silk Road Region Defined

As we put it in our Editorial Statement, the ‘Silk Road region’ comprises 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.

As far as we were aware, neither the term nor its definition has been used in quite the same way by other publications, scholars, or practitioners.

That being said, the term ‘Silk Road’ is not new. In both its singular and plural forms, it is a German-language neologism whose author is commonly misidentified as Ferdinand von Richthofen. Although he did use it as early as 1877, a recent article by Matthias Mertens traces its first usage back to 1838 (by Carl Ritter). But it was only in the 1930s that the term gained popularity, thanks largely to the writings of Sven Hedin. The term began to be widely used on

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the other side of the Atlantic decades later, with the United States adopting the Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999 (a bit more on this below). Then, in 2011, David Petraeus conceived, and Hillary Clinton fleetingly championed, a New Silk Road Strategy, whose primary purpose was to integrate Afghanistan into a wider regional framework with U.S. tutelage (the “idea was to build infrastructure through Afghanistan, which in turn would strengthen the Afghan economy and foster transcontinental shared security,” in the words of one of the Strategy’s authors, Leif Rosenberger). Peter Frankopan, in his 2017 magisterial work *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, defined the scope of the region that is the subject of his book as “the halfway point between east and west, running broadly from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the Himalayas.” And so on.

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Be that as it may, *our* choice of term and corresponding definition reflected, as we put it, a triple intention. “First, to cover broadly topics of geopolitical relevance to the overlapping set of regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong.” This sentence was followed by the purposefully ambiguous geographical definition reproduced above. Our second intention, as indicated in the *Baku Dialogues* Editorial Statement, was to “focus on contemporary cross-cutting issues that impact on the international position of what we view as one of the few keystone regions of global affairs, ranging from energy politics and infrastructure security to economic development and cultural heritage.” And our third and final reason for choosing the subtitle that we did was to indicate our “deep-seated conviction that the comprehensive rejuvenation of a vast region that stood for centuries at the fulcrum of trade, innovation, and refinement requires both a healthy respect of frontiers as sovereign markers of territorial integrity and a farsighted predisposition to ensure the region can continue to grow as a strategic center of attraction for capital, goods, talent, and technologies.”

The foregoing was sublimated in what we called the “editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues*,” namely

that “the Silk Road region is and will remain an important seam of international relations, continuing to serve as (i) a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies; (ii) an important intercessor between major powers; and (iii) an unavoidable gateway between different blocks of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.”

Subsequent events, near and far, as well as their multiplying geopolitical and geo-economic consequences, have strengthened *my* conviction that our choice was both correct and prudent: no other term is at once more holistic and less riddled with semantic baggage. It is not perfect, of course, but then few monikers truly are. (We have actively encouraged our authors to use the term ‘Silk Road region’ in the essays that appear in *Baku Dialogues* or other publications under the auspices of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy.)

Alternative Monikers

Consider the main alternative terms to ‘Silk Road region’ now in circulation: ‘Greater Central Asia,’ ‘Inner Asia,’ ‘Middle Asia,’ ‘Caspian Basin,’ ‘Caspian Sea Region,’ ‘South Caucasus and Central Asia,’ and, of course,

‘Central’ or ‘Core Eurasia’ (or, simply, ‘Eurasia’).

Some of the foregoing terms identify one prominent physical marker (e.g., the Caucasus mountains, the Caspian Sea) as a focal point; these choices consciously limit their geographical scope and, in turn, their geopolitical and geo-economic reach. Others are constraining in similar ways; for instance, ‘Greater Central Asia,’ which Starr indicates is a “convenient way of denoting the larger cultural zone of which the five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—are a part, along with Afghanistan.”

The term ‘South Caucasus and Central Asia’ has the advantage of technical accuracy but contains two main disadvantages. First, the use of the conjunction “and” implies a joining that is somehow synthetic, implying some sort of artifice (one part is in ‘Asia’ while the other is presumably not, otherwise it would be called ‘West Asia’). Second, the subtext of the term is that it’s the best available, polite euphemism for something like ‘newly-independent non-European former Soviet republics.’

The implications of this last introduce a discussion of the most

commonly used term, ‘Eurasia’ (and its cognate qualifiers), which happens to be the most problematic of all.

As far as I can tell, the first scholar to use of the term ‘Eurasia’ was an Austrian geologist, Eduard Suess, who did so in 1885. Then, about 20 years later, Halford Mackinder for the first time used the term ‘Eurasia’ in a geopolitical context. He famously referred to ‘Eurasia’ as the world’s “heartland”—the globe’s “pivot area.” This introduced the idea into Western discourse that ‘Eurasia’ is the world’s ultimate geopolitical playground—the key to the acquisition and maintenance of global power. Some 20 years later, Mackinder expanded his original thesis into a book and sublimated his teaching into a sort of combination of warning and prescription. This is what he wrote:

Who rules East Europe
commands the Heartland:
Who rules the Heartland
commands the World-Island:
Who rules the World-Island
commands the World.

The foregoing is a very short account of the Western origin of the term ‘Eurasia’; but there is also a Russia connotation: it was used commonly in the 1920s and 1930s in émigrés circles in Paris and elsewhere. Here the writings

of Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy are a good reference point. He defined 'Eurasia' as a "self-contained geographical [and] economic whole, distinguishable from both Europe and Asia proper," adding that it is the "natural environment itself that teaches the peoples of Eurasia [today] to recognize the need to [...] create their own national cultures while working co-operatively with one another." Another Russian reference point is Petr Savitskii. Consciously echoing Mackinder, he wrote that "whoever dominates the [Eurasian] steppes will easily become the political unifier of all Eurasia."

But the *conceptual* roots of the term 'Eurasia,' in the Russian context, ultimately go back to the famous debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers in czarist times, as can be found in the works of Pyotr Chaadayev, various writings by Dostoyevsky, and those of Mackinder's Russian contemporary, Vladimir Lamansky. The latter did not use the term 'Eurasia,' but he did write of the concept of a "Middle World" located on the "Asian-European continent." This "Middle World" was its own "special type" with its own "special character," which is "not real Europe, not real Asia." Lamansky elaborated on this last point thusly: "Entering the limits of this Middle

World from Asia, we must say that here Asia ends, but Europe does not begin yet; in the same way, entering it from Europe, we have the right to say: Europe ends here and Asia does not begin yet."

At bottom, Lamansky's was a geostrategic concept, concerning the spread of Russia's smart power and influence on the world stage. It also had cultural and civilizational connotations, and contained in some cases quite a bit more than a whiff of colonial haughtiness. Thus, for Lamansky, the goal was to bring 'Eurasia' into Russia's expanding orbit, by "quite sharply" distinguishing the countries of the 'Middle World' "from their own Europe and from their own Asia," since Europe, the Middle World, and Asia had their own, "exclusively peculiar, geographical, ethnological, and historico-cultural features." The Russian Eurasianists mentioned above drew heavily on the ideas that informed Lamansky's writings, as cited in this and the previous paragraph.

Both the Western and Russian conceptions of 'Eurasia' were laid dormant during the Cold War, only to be revived—with modifications—after the breakup of the Soviet Union. In Russia, it was updated and expanded by various shapers of Russian policymaking

and public opinion, ranging from Dmitri Trenin and Sergey Karaganov to Aleksandr Dugin, Alexander Panarin, and Alexander Prokhanov. In the West, a new version of the idea of 'Eurasia' was promoted by people like Zbigniew Brzezinski.

I will skip over the Russian angle and focus on what follows on the argument made by the former U.S. National Security Adviser. At the height of his own intellectual authority and in the midst of the "unipolar moment," Brzezinski came up with a famous definition of 'Eurasia,' which he argued extended from "Lisbon to Vladivostok" in a 1997 book titled *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. (This definition of 'Eurasia'—from "Lisbon to Vladivostok"—corresponds, more or less, to the present-day OSCE space, minus North America. It also just about matches the boundaries of the superstate Eurasia as depicted in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.)

The narrower, everyday contemporary definition of 'Eurasia'

corresponds to what Brzezinski termed the "Eurasian Balkans" or, less polemically, "Eurasia's vast middle space." The sentence Brzezinski uses is this: "stretching between the western and eastern extremities [of Eurasia] is a sparsely populated and currently politically fluid and organizationally fragmented vast middle space."

In that context, Brzezinski famously advocated for "benign American hegemony" in the "vast middle space" of the "Eurasian Balkans"—with the United States playing the role of "Eurasia's arbiter."

It would be hard not to conclude from the above references, including his choice of the 'chessboard' metaphor, that Brzezinski thought that 'Eurasia' was, is, and will continue to be an object (a "chessboard"), with the countries belonging to the region itself understood as pieces to be moved around (i.e., manipulated) by those with actual agency.

The critical point is that the term 'Eurasia' and the concepts that lie behind it are inescapably and, in my view, irredeemably

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To my knowledge, the most succinctly persuasive articulation of the foregoing assessment is made by Starr, in the context of advocating for his own preferred term:

it does not define the region in terms of any external power or national ideology. Instead, it focuses discussion where it should be focused: namely on the character of the region itself; on its distinctive geographical, cultural, and economic features; and on the question of whether those features may be the keys to its future.

Starr's argument is even more persuasive in making the case for the term 'Silk Road region,' since, as noted above, it has none of the disadvantages of the geographically constricted term 'Greater Central Asia.'

It should be noted, in this context, that the closest approximation to the definition adopted by *Baku Dialogues*—the one I reproduced at the beginning of this essay—was produced by the Central Eurasian Studies Society and published in the Spring 2009 edition of its *Central Eurasian Studies Review*: "We define the Central Eurasian region broadly to include Turkic,

Mongolian, Iranian, Caucasian, Tibetan and other peoples. Geographically, Central Eurasia extends from the Black Sea region, the Crimea, and the Caucasus in the west, through the Middle Volga region, Central Asia and Afghanistan, and on to Siberia, Mongolia, and Tibet in the east."

In the conception outlined in the Editorial Statement of *Baku Dialogues*, the core of the 'Silk Road region,' in terms of the political map, comprises eight UN member states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Some, like Starr, add Afghanistan to the latter category; others, like the authors of the 1999 U.S. Silk Road Strategy Act, do not (for them, 'Silk Road' was simply a preferred term to describe what at the time were called the eight "newly-independent states"). But none of the alternative terms to 'Silk Road region' give (sufficient) credence to the fact that there are various other countries that are bound, in whole or in part, to this region. Those ties are genuine, which is why in some real sense, these too belong to the Silk Road region; but they certainly don't belong in the same way as do its core states.

Accordingly, we can think of the Silk Road region as a single

geopolitical theater with multiple stages, the exits from which are very purposefully not defined with precision. We could say, finally, that only the term launched by *Baku Dialogues* in its Editorial Statement has the advantage of being imbued with a Pascalian *esprit de finesse*, in contradistinction to what he called an *esprit de géométrie*.

Increasingly Important Geopolitical Theater

Having been properly discursively equipped, we can now turn to more directly substantive matters. As a whole, the Silk Road region is becoming an increasingly important geopolitical theater. In fact, I contend that its global importance today is greater than it has been in centuries. It may even be enough simply to point to one obvious piece of evidence that speaks to its singular and growing importance: no other part of the world is has more nuclear-armed states on its geographic frontiers than the Silk Road region (i.e., China, India, Pakistan, Russia).

But its importance is also much more than that, and this is largely due to the myriad and multiplying geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of three main events that have taken place in the past three years in that part of the world: the U.S.-led

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withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Azerbaijani victory in the Second Karabakh War, and the escalation of the conflict over Ukraine due to the launch of the Kremlin's "special military operation" and the subsequent choice by the West and a few of its allies to impose an increasingly punitive sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia in response.

Space does not permit me to enter into a detailed explanation of how the consequences of these three events have precipitated a great revival of the importance of the Silk Road region. Suffice it to say that, in my view, the cumulative effect of the foregoing can be summarized thusly: *regionally-driven economic connectivity is on the way in; outside power agenda-setting is on the way out; and although some outsiders are seeing their relative power decline while others are seeing an increase, in the aggregate, the power of outsiders is likely to*

be reduced overall over the course of the next decade or so.

All told, the balance of power in the Silk Road region is in the midst of a transformative shift. It is a balance of power that favors home-grown integration—with both its main architects and core participants belonging to the region itself.

This, in turn, suggests that the Silk Road region stands a chance of no longer remaining merely an *object* of major power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others; it is, rather, on the cusp of becoming a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated *subject* of international order. This can become clearer through an examination of some of the Silk Road region's emerging set of initiatives and proto-institutions that, taken together, may herald the onset of a stable and lasting order in that part of the world.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to do so at length, what can be noted is perhaps the most important one, which at the moment is limited in scope to the

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five easternmost states that comprise the core of the Silk Road region: the ongoing text-based process of economic connectivity and regionalization, which began in November 2017 in Samarkand and resulted in the adoption of a formal document of institutionalized cooperation, titled Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the Twenty-First Century during a summit in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, in July 2022.

Indeed, the strategic logic informing the admittedly embryonic plans now being laid call to mind older arrangements in other geographies: ASEAN, the Nordic Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the original European Economic Community.

I believe that, in the time ahead, one can expect Azerbaijan to acknowledge in one way or another the relevance of the strategic logic informing both the spirit and text of that Treaty for the furtherance of its national interests. A first step in this regard may involve the inception

of a trilateral meeting format between the leaders of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

The salience of such an anticipated development is directly related to my next point, namely that it is precisely these three countries which are the 'middle powers' or 'keystone states' of the Silk Road region. I predict that their shared power and influence will greatly increase as the region's multifaceted connectivity infrastructure increases in both scale and scope and, in turn, becomes indispensable to the fulfillment of the strategic ambitions of the major powers that surround it on all sides (one need only look at a map: if the northern east-west connectivity route via Russia and the southern one via Iran are both impeded if not blocked by Western sanctions that will almost certainly remain in place for the foreseeable future, then the only game in town, so to speak, remains the middle corridor that traverses the Silk Road region).

In fact, the uniqueness of the Silk Road region geopolitical theater is such that each of the major powers are in the process of recognizing that the maximalization of their

respective interests is predicated on the abandonment of a zero-sum or hegemonic or imperial posture towards the region itself as well as towards each other in the context of their activities therein. This is all the more fascinating given that many of those same major powers are rejecting or abandoning anything resembling the pursuit of a system of world order predicated on the adoption of a contemporary variant of classical balance of power principles: in the unique geopolitical theater that is the Silk Road region, they will precisely do that.

All this is predicated on the acceptance of the possibility of the autonomous geopolitical and geo-economic development of the states that geographically belong to the core of the Silk Road region itself. This conforms to the overarching reality of strategic heterogeneity that is emerging in this part of the world today—a whole that I predict will be far greater than the present sum of the Silk Road region's nascent set of initiatives and institutions.

This reality is characterized by the fact that none of the Silk Road

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region's leading states are major global powers; rather, as noted above, they are all 'middle powers' or 'keystone states.'

Middle Powers, Keystone States

The concept of 'middle powers' was first introduced by the Piedmont-born thinker Giovanni Botero in 1589. In a book titled *The Reason of State*, he defined 'middle powers' as states that have "sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others." In Botero's telling, leaders of middle powers tend to be acutely aware of the dexterity required to maintain security and project influence in a prudential manner beyond their immediate borders; and, because of that, middle powers are apt to have facility in promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbors and their neighbors' neighbors.

Unquestionably, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are such middle powers or keystone states—a term first put forward by Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College in a 2015 article for the journal *Horizons* and subsequently developed in the pages of *Baku Dialogues* and elsewhere by

him and others, writing together or separately.

Keystone states are understood to be trusted interlocutors, reliable intermediaries, and critical mediators that can act as buffers between major power centers. This integrative power is supplemented by the fact that an effective keystone state can serve as a pressure-release valve in a system of world order, particularly as the transition to conditions of non-polarity continues, by acting as a buffer and reducing the potential for conflict between major power centers. (Non-polarity, as Gvosdev has noted, is an active approach in which constant engagement with all the major stakeholders is a *sine qua non*. The concept of non-polarity is thus predicated on the assumption that no major power can establish and guarantee absolute security or impose a uniform set of preferences; and that no current or aspirant keystone state should choose to align itself exclusively with one major power—to do so, he has pointed out, increases rather than reduces insecurity, by incentivizing one or more of the major powers to take action detrimental to a keystone state's ability to pursue its national interests along the lines outlined above.)

Silk Road Values

Thus, one characteristic of the Silk Road region is that it is anchored by three keystone states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) that are committed to building a region with more partners and fewer enemies. None by itself is dominant, but together they provide equilibrium whilst setting the tone, pace, and scope of the overall cooperation agenda. Outside actors exert some influence, but developments in the Silk Road region are unlikely to keep being decisively driven, much less determined, by the oftentimes clashing agendas, preferences, objectives, and priorities of the major external powers.

A second characteristic of the Silk Road region is that these keystone states embrace elements of both strategic autonomy and strategic restraint—one of the scholarly terms for this is "soft-balancing."

It is perhaps the third characteristic of the Silk Road region that is most noteworthy, an examination of which begins by acknowledging the salience of a twenty-first century version of what in the 1990s was called "Asian values."

This earlier concept was developed in practice by statesmen like Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad and propounded in documents like the Bangkok Declaration of the Regional Meeting for Asia for the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Its intellectual origins arose at least in part in thinking through the strategic implications of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, itself a response to the worldview contained in Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" hypothesis. In contrast, my instigation of the term 'Silk Road values' is a by-product of my deliberations about the ongoing cumulation of the geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of three main events that have taken place in the past three years in that part of the world, as noted above.

So far, the term 'Silk Road values' has not been utilized explicitly by any Silk Road region decision-maker. Regardless, I believe that the implicitly shared values of the leaders of the core Silk Road region states have made a significant yet unacknowledged contribution to the ongoing revival of the importance of the Silk Road region.

Although the provision of a full typology of these values is beyond the scope of this essay, it seems

important to identify five inter-related traits that can help illustrate the merits of the concept.

One, Silk Road values are more compatible with the strict observance of universally recognized international law (including the purposes and principles of the UN Charter) than with conducting affairs of state in accordance with what is effectually a situational ethics paradigm that its proponents call a “rules-based liberal international order.” This critical distinction can perhaps be best illustrated by reference to policies that reject the claim that equivocation regarding (much less support for) any secessionist entity can be proclaimed by any power as somehow being *sui generis*, since this inevitably leads to the establishment of a dangerous precedent that weakens respect for the territorial integrity of *all* UN member states.

Two, Silk Road values are broadly suspicious of outsiders placing soft law-driven limitations on national sovereignty. One example is the narrowing of the scope of the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of UN member states. Another is the expanded conception of individual liberty that prioritizes the political dimension of the doctrine of human rights. A third example of soft-law limitations on

national sovereignty is any doctrine that considers it to be legitimate to penalize a state for not enforcing economic sanctions unilaterally adopted by a second state (or group of countries) against a third—i.e., sanctions that have not been ratified by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter

Trait number *three*: Silk Road values prioritize allegiance to a strong state with an economically interventionist government. The logic here is that—at least in the Silk Road region—a weak state could more easily result in a failing (or even failed) state. And a weak state can also more easily allow foreign capital to leverage national economic decisionmaking, which necessarily limits the scope of governmental power. This also explains the increasing emphasis on *meritocratic governance* as opposed to the mainstream contemporary understanding in the West of what constitutes a ‘liberal democracy.’

Trait number *four*: Silk Road values generally downplay ethnic and even civil nationalism in favor of what Anatol Lieven calls “state nationalism”—that is, fidelity to the state as embodied by loyalty to its leadership.

And trait number *five*: Silk Road values do not entail the sublimation

of distinct state identities in the name of formally institutionalizing cooperation. This particularly applies to its political dimension.

Of, By, and For

Ironically, Brzezinski can be understood to be the step-grandfather of the idea that the core of the Silk Road region could become an “assertive single entity” in “axial Eurasia.” This is ironic because he explicitly opposed it on U.S. strategic grounds: in the event the Silk Road region would come together, “America’s primacy in Eurasia shrinks dramatically,” as he put it in 1997.

But the truth is that the contemporary followers of Brzezinski and likeminded strategists—Western or non-Western—who still subscribe to some version of his argument with respect to the Silk Road region stand on the wrong side of history. To their credit, decisionmakers in Ankara, Beijing, Brussels, Moscow, Washington, and other major power capitals with interests in the

Silk Road region, have all effectually ceased to harbor aspirations of domination, primacy, hegemony, sphere of interest, or whatever other term may be employed to paint over what amount to imperial ambition.

I already made the foregoing point earlier in this essay, but it bears repeating now because, if, in fact, the states that make up the core of the Silk Road region are able to institutionalize their cooperation in the time ahead; and if this institutionalization is anchored by its three keystone states; then this opens the door to the Silk Road region becoming an “assertive single entity” capable of repelling *any* attempt at decisive interference by major powers.

A synoptic formulation of my argument is that construction is already underway on a genuinely stable and lasting regional order whose as yet not fully articulated goal is to advance, first and foremost, the interests and values *of* the Silk Road region, *by* the Silk Road region, and *for* the Silk Road region. **BD**

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