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Free and Open Spaces

Small and Medium-Sized Nations Can Reshape the Modern World

James Jay Carafano and Márton Ugrósdý

What if most people are wrong about the future? The presumption—the conventional view, both in the policymaking world and in academia—is that great powers have the greatest influence in shaping geopolitics. There is also a presumption that great power competition will inevitably lead to dividing the world into hard spheres of influence, and that there will be an inevitable competition over dominating the “commons,” the routes of air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace that unite the world.

We think all these assumptions are wrong. We think there is evidence to the contrary. Indeed, when great powers compete most, this often

creates more space for other states to exercise influence.

We argue that the countries spanning the traditional pathways of the Silk Road region from Europe and Türkiye to the Caucasus and Central Asia have that power in their hands, if that is, they are wise in how they wield it. This essay will outline, in broad strokes, the genesis of our argument.

The Great Power of Small Nations

Nations are made up of people, not pawns. Citizens in these states have the same hopes, aspirations, and rights as those in world

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powers. These people have every reason to expect and demand a life of freedom, peace, and prosperity.

Moreover, it is in the interests of bigger states to help smaller ones flourish. Great powers, if wise, will support the best hopes of smaller states.

There are two keys to maximizing the power of nations—ones that great powers too often get wrong. First, one-size-fits-all never works. During the Cold War, the U.S. implemented its policy of containment by ringing the Soviet Union with collective defensive alliances. Except for NATO, all the others failed. The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), also known as the Baghdad Pact or, for a time, as the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), is a classic example. So is the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

Great powers never seem to learn. America's New Silk Road Initiative never even got off the ground. China's Belt and Road Initiative has overpromised and underdelivered. And the EU's Global Gateway project still looks suspiciously like a gateway to nowhere. At least with the latter two, the jury's still out, but the general point still holds.

Second, small- and medium-size regional cooperation is way more powerful than the pull of globalization. When states decide for themselves on collective effort, there is less regional friction against integration and thus, there is more initiative and innovation. This approach also eschews great power competition: rather than hardening great power spheres of competition, it provides free and open spaces that ameliorate conflict. Wise great powers will get behind these efforts.

A distinct argument from the foregoing is that such an approach diminishes the need for smaller nations to try to balance the interests of great powers. Rather, they can just look after their own interests.

Free and Open Spaces

The alternative to viewing interregional connectivity for trade, transport, energy, and cyber through the prism of great power competition could be the concept of “free and open spaces.” The concept of free and open spaces represents an alternative way to conceptualize strategy for likeminded nations to secure freedom, prosperity, and security in the fractious modern world, eschewing the notion that geopolitics must be viewed through the notion of

competing blocks, hard spheres of influence, and—to repeat—great power competition. The alternative to viewing interregional connectivity through the prism of great power competition could be the concept of “free and open spaces.”

Here, we argue for a proactive common strategy of reestablishing traditional pathways of commerce and connectivity—disrupted by the wars and rivalries of the twentieth century—that link can link like-minded states. This effort does not deny the realities of great power competition but seeks to balance and supplement that reality by imagining the possibilities of connectivity, open spaces, and historical pathways to deliver better outcomes for likeminded nations.

The concept of “free and open” was introduced by the Quad states (India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S.) as a vision for the Indo-Pacific. Often viewed as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road—which BRI’s detractors view as an effort to dominate global markets, and what the QUAD’s members (and others) perceive as aggressive Chinese maritime and territorial claims—the contrast

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was proposed not as an alternative system imposed by the West, but as support for open spheres that worked in common cause to preserve freedom of the seas, respect for territorial integrity (including sovereign states jurisdiction over internal waters), territorial seas, contiguous zones, and exclusive economic zones, as well as safeguarding maritime infrastructure (including shipping ports, undersea cables and pipelines, oil and gas drilling and production operations) and maritime industries (e.g., fisheries). In addition, free and open nations fostered transparent investment and commerce respecting the rule of law and national sovereignty.

The need to protect and foster free and open spaces, however, is not only relevant to the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the great value of free and open spaces comes from fostering and linking the free and open spaces that would reestablish the traditional pathways of connectivity that have crisscrossed for most of human history.

Free and open spaces are particularly crucial to small and medium nations, which rather than seeking security by aligning with great powers, have the

opportunity to control their own future in cooperation with like-minded nations—the freedom and independence to chart their own destinies.

Free and open spaces also benefit great powers, by eschewing conflict zones for great power competition and encouraging and empowering zones of stability that deliver maximum benefit to all and mitigate the need for aggressive and muscular regional policies.

In the end, a mutual strategy of empowering free and open spaces offers maximum benefits

for human flourishing, respects civilizational cultures, and strengthens national sovereignty. For countries that share the desire for that common end state, the framework of “free and open spaces” offers the ends, ways, and means of reaching that objective.

Testing the Proposition

The perfect pilot project for connectivity in the modern world involves the re-joining of Central Asia, the South Caucasus,

the Black Sea, the Balkans, and Central Europe. This initiative is frequently described as the Middle Corridor (also called the Trans-Caspian Corridor or, more formally, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). The Middle Corridor was once thought of as another route for China to connect to the West across the core of the Silk Road region.

It has now, more properly, evolved into a means to connect Central Asia and the South Caucasus to global markets.

There is a compelling need for this initiative now. Overland trade between Asia and Europe is becoming

more complicated. Russia is subject to a Western-led sanctions and export restrictions regime, blocking the northern transit route. Iran is subject to Western and UN Security Council sanctions, impeding the southern transit route.

Iran has also become a more contentious geopolitical challenge. The Biden Administration’s determination to normalize ties with Tehran has failed (in the event of a return of Donald Trump to the White House, this attempt will almost certainly be

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formally sidelined). With Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel, Iran's support for Hamas, and wider geopolitical implications unsettling the Middle East, the idea of championing a new east-west transportation corridor that traverses across all of Iran is collapsing fast.

As a result, the importance of Central Asia and the South Caucasus is increasing, opening up new opportunities for trade in transiting goods. There are, of course, major challenges, including transiting the Caspian Sea, the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the risk of political inconsistency in countries like Armenia and Georgia, the struggle to keep the Black Sea free and open to commercial traffic, and incongruous regulatory frameworks.

In addition to the Black Sea route, Türkiye is intent on developing overland transit opportunities. But where would the route to the east go from there? Road and rail infrastructure from Anatolia to Azerbaijan via Georgia already exists and is being expanded, so this is obviously a viable option. And there is always the Zangezur Corridor (this refers to the thin sliver of Armenian territory that divides Azerbaijan in two) as an alternative—both to the Georgia

overland route and to the Black Sea. On the other hand, this project might not materialize soon, depending on the outcome of ongoing peace and normalization talks between Baku and Yerevan. The bypass-through-Iran approach—the so-called Aras Corridor—is likely to be completed in a year or two, but for reasons noted above might not be acceptable for the West. So even with the Georgian overland route being available, there is real value to championing both the Black Sea and the Zangezur Corridor, because resilient, redundant supply chains could well be seen as the optimum objective in ensuring global connectivity and business continuity.

That said, there is still great interest in partnering with Türkiye to make the Middle Corridor a reality. The question arises how will it be connected to the European infrastructure?

This is where smaller and middle-size nations making common choices comes into play.

Bridging to Europe

Let's ask a hard but honest question: if the European Union had a real, practical vision for all this, then what has it been

doing for the past 30 years? Was the Eastern Partnership really the best it could do?

Let's ask another one: why do the EU's current plans for Global Gateway—such as they are—effectually gloss over the South Caucasus? As Azerbaijan's president put it on 6 December 2023 in answer to a question at a conference held at ADA

If successful, this endeavor could reshape the modern world.

University, "For people like Josep Borrell, it [should be] enough to look at the map and see where Azerbaijan is situated. If they want to be active in Central Asia, and we see that they do want, [...] how can they avoid Azerbaijan? Are they going to contact the Central Asia countries through Iran or through Russia? Or do they have wings?"

What northern, central, and southern European countries must do together with the core Silk Road region states is to develop real initiatives on their own to link the Middle Corridor to the southern end of the Three Seas Initiative, the joint project of thirteen EU member states launched in 2015 to develop regional infrastructure. If successful, this endeavor could reshape the modern world.

The EU countries belonging to the Three Seas Initiative—all but two (namely Austria and its newest member, Greece) belong to what Donald Rumsfeld called "new Europe," that is, formerly communist countries—are the natural conduit for the goods, services, and digital connectivity originating in Central Asia and the South Caucasus to global markets. For this reason, there

is also an argument to expand the Three Seas Initiative to include not just the recently added Greece, but also Italy (coincidentally, Italy recently withdrew from participating in the Belt and Road Initiative).

Of late, the Three Seas Initiative has lost some momentum, particularly after the Biden Administration failed to deliver on a \$1 billion investment promised by the Trump Administration into the Three Seas Initiative Fund via the U.S. International Development Finance Cooperation. The "brand" of building out the infrastructure connecting northern, central, and southern Europe, however, is well established and likely to continue to grow in the years ahead.

In addition, the initiative we propose—again, to link the Middle Corridor to the southern end of the Three Seas Initiative—could well attract partners from beyond the region (in addition to re-engaging with the United States), including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and India.

The potential for reengineering the Three Seas Initiative and linking the project to the Middle Corridor is geopolitically and geoeconomically game-changing. We believe, for instance, that the 13 EU member states that belong to the Three Seas Initiatives—all of which are smaller or middle-size nations—would find a willing partner in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which includes Azerbaijan and four Central Asian states, as well as Türkiye and Hungary. This organization could help mobilize regional backing and political support. Indeed, Hungary can play the role of keystone state in this context, since it is the only Three Seas Initiative country that is a part of the OTS.

Further, these states should expect support from both the U.S. and the EU, since the project would both

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strengthen transatlantic energy security and add to the resiliency and redundancy of supply chains. It would also make U.S. and EU engagement with the South Caucasus and Central Asia much easier and cheaper, both enhancing economic opportunity and reducing security concerns.

The Great Pivot

What would give the Middle Corridor and the strategy of free and open spaces even greater relevance is connecting this project with expanding transshipping capacity through the Middle East. With the dramatically expanding role of the Indian economy—not to mention the interests of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the ASEAN states in broadening their connections to global markets—this makes perfect sense.

Recent developments around the Gulf of Aden and Houthi attacks on civilian maritime traffic in the Red Sea underscore the importance of redundancy in global transit routes, notwithstanding the volatility of key maritime chokepoints

like the Bab-el Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, as well as both major maritime canals. Furthermore, based on the pre-Houthi traffic flows, there is no way that the Suez Canal can support the exponential increase in traffic projected to occur in the time ahead.

Here again, small and medium-sized nations could play a leading role in reshaping the future. The Abraham Accords were seen once, and will likely be seen again, to be a driving force in promoting the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab world. The war with Hamas will not kill this initiative, although it may delay it for a time.

The Abraham Accords, in turn, could facilitate the development of new transit for goods, people, services, and digital traffic. Another initiative—the planned India-Middle East-Europe (IMEC) corridor—could add tremendous resilience, redundancy, and expansion to the Middle East transit corridor. Another option is the recently announced \$17 billion expansion of the Baghdad to Basra transportation network stretching 1,200 kilometers from the Gulf in the south to the northern border with Türkiye (from where it would connect to the European continent).

In turn, these projects could not only serve to link the Indo-Pacific to Europe, but also provide connectivity links to the Middle Corridor. As Parag Khanna put it in a January 2024 article in *Foreign Policy*, “Build more pathways for supply to meet demand. The solution to supply shocks is more supply chains.”

Look South

The potential of the aforementioned projects to link free and open spaces extends beyond bringing Europe and Asia closer together. They also present the opportunity for new engagements and partnerships in Africa.

Partnering with Africa is already central to the Italian vision of building interregional cooperation with North Africa. The Italian government has articulated a positive vision for engagement with the Mattei Plan—named after the late Enrico Mattei, who founded Italy’s state oil company Eni—a model that calls for “non-predatory cooperation.” In a December 2022 speech, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called for an end to “predatory posture towards other nations,” tying the planning explicitly to building a strong family of distinct national identities, “collaborative, valuing the identities, and

specificities of each.” Linking free and open spaces will create new opportunities to extend the empowerment of small and medium nations to the south. In a January 2024 speech, she indicated that the Mattei Plan will be developed along five main pillars: education and training; agriculture; health; water; and energy. The first four speak to the empowerment issue whilst the fifth speaks to Italy’s ambition to serve as an EU energy hub to transport natural gas supplies from Africa to the rest of the continent.

While the Italian plan focuses on North Africa, there is a case to be made that the same advantages could be extended to East Africa, particularly states like Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. Already part of the Indo-Pacific community, they could also benefit from IMEC in providing an opportunity to gain greater access to global markets. For instance, rare earth mining and processing in East Africa could become a reliable strategic resource for the community of free and open nations with more robust transportation networks put in place.

Apart from Italy’s proposals, the Three Seas Initiative-Middle Corridor countries could also pool their own resources to come

up with small-scale, yet impactful projects to deliver public goods focused on connectivity in Africa as well. Small as they might be, these projects might present an alternative to the great power games in the Indian Ocean basin, especially in East African countries. These projects would enhance connectivity and promote the idea of free and open spaces in a region that has been often overlooked by the great powers.

Partnerships

During the Cold War, nations focused on their alliance partners. In the post-Cold War era, cooperation was extended to “friends,” who while not treaty allies shared a sufficient number of common interests. The contemporary world has added a third category of cooperation: “partner”—a term suggesting more than ‘mere’ friendship. Partners together achieve the level of joint action equal to a treaty nation but without the straitjacket and politics of signing a piece of paper. The way the OTS operates in practice—which could be influential in building out the Middle Corridor and linking the project to other connectivity initiatives—is an example of nations operating on the partnership model.

What makes the strategy of free and open spaces realistic is the number of reliable and responsible partners that potentially could cooperate with the initiative of small and medium nations that elect to determine their own future and take the initiative.

The United States, for instance, stands to benefit from the success of all these projects. While American leadership in all of these areas has wavered in recent years, that trend is unlikely to continue. The U.S. needs new opportunities for foreign direct investment. Further, as a global power with global interests and global responsibilities, America benefits most from the surety of the “commons,” and free and open spaces facilitate building more resilient and redundant corridors.

To be frank, it is fair to be skeptical of the EU as an institution delivering on Global Gateway or serving as a robust partner for building free and open spaces. The EU is likely to be consumed for years in an internecine struggle to overcome the challenges of yet further expansion (not only in the Western Balkans but in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—assuming promises are kept) and squabbling over the future direction of the “European

project.” More integration may well not deliver a stronger partner for the expansion of free and open spaces. On the other hand, there are a number of northern, central, and southern European states that have a deep strategic interest in empowering and expanding the free and open concept.

The key potential partners in the Greater Middle East include Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Israel, and Morocco. All are important stakeholders—not only for reasons having to do with geography but for the key capabilities and leadership they can provide to a larger effort to increase stability in the region and the contributions they can each make to empowering free and open spaces.

From the Indo-Pacific region, indispensable partners would include Japan, South Korea, and India. There are other important potential partners as well, including Australia and the ASEAN states.

There is a multiplicity of multinational frameworks that could facilitate cooperation or participate in joint action initiatives, including the OTS and the QUAD.

Call to Action

The time to act is right now. Here are two examples of voices we should listen to. “For the first time in three decades, the establishment of formidable Trans-Caspian infrastructure has become viable,” Svante E. Cornell and Brenda Shaffer said in a recent article. Likewise, Kamran Bokhari and Eugene Chausovsky argue that the “Trans-Caspian Corridor is a viable way to create sustainable trade connectivity between East Asia and Europe.”

In addition, as Cornell and Shaffer point out, “strategic cooperation between the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus has grown significantly, enabling the consolidation of foreign policies that focus on strengthening their independence and direct links to the outside world. The rise of Turkish strategic cooperation with the states of the region has further strengthened the impetus for the Trans-Caspian.” We could not agree more.

We also underscore that the governments of the small and medium-sized nations that make up the Three Seas Initiative and Middle Corridor region should not expect outside powers to grasp this strategic opportunity. Russia,

Iran, and China have their own objectives—more focused on protecting their regional dominance than empowering those nations that fall within their perceived purview.

The U.S. and EU each seem at best ambivalent. Joe Biden did recently meet with Central Asian leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, but the proposals he offered did not indicate that America was in the business of championing transformative change. A formal summit between the U.S. and the Central Asians has never taken place. Neither has one involving the U.S. president and the South Caucasus leaders. The first formal summit between the EU (represented by the presidents of the EU Council and the EU Commission) and Central Asian presidents will take place in Uzbekistan soon, but there are no plans to replicate this for South Caucasus leaders. It goes without saying that neither the two top EU leaders nor the U.S. president have any plans to conduct a summit with OTS top leaders.

While top leaders from the Three Seas Initiative countries have called for cooperation on enabling infrastructure with (at least some of) the core Silk Road region countries, there has been too much talk and little action.

Governments need to take the lead, placing connectivity to the South Caucasus and Central Asia near the peak of their agenda. Partnership with Türkiye should also become part of the plan—as should then challenging the great powers to follow their lead.

In the Middle East, nations need to look beyond the issue of Gaza, recognizing that a brighter future for all, including the Palestinians, requires embracing the path of peace, prosperity, and stability that comes from being a strategic bridge between Europe and Asia with the

capacity to carry the material and digital traffic uniting the free and open spaces.

The nations of Africa, including Morocco, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, Ghana, and Nigeria, need to see themselves as integral members of the global family of free and open nations, not Balkanized countries trapped in the Global South.

This is truly a time for choosing, but also a time when small and medium nations may take the lead in pointing to a better way. **BD**

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