

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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The Genius Legacy of Ibn Sina and Biruni

The Contemporary Fruits of a Two-Man Renaissance

S. Frederick Starr

Two of the most outstanding thinkers to have lived between ancient Greece and the European Renaissance are Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Biruni. Both were born in the tenth century within the borders of what is now Uzbekistan and spent the entirety of their lives there and surrounding areas (today's Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan). Neither ever set foot in Greece, Rome, or even Baghdad.

Neither Ibn Sina nor Biruni were Arabs; both were Central Asians of Persianate stock. This

meant that their native languages were part of the diverse group of languages that dominated Central Asia, Afghanistan, and what is now Iran. Both became known by their Arabic names because they wrote mainly in Arabic, the language of learning in the Muslim world, just as Latin was in the West.

Lastly, both were larger-than-life figures who embodied the highest achievements of a moment when Central Asia and the Middle East were the global epicenter of intellectual achievement—what some have called the Muslim Renaissance.

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Biruni and Ibn Sina were both products of the same culture of Central Asia and lifelong members of the small elite of highly educated persons who had the means and inclination to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Yet they could not have been more fundamentally dissimilar, which helps to explain how they became lifelong competitors and rivals.

In their twenties they sparred ferociously, and in their thirties, they began avoiding each other. Their temperaments could scarcely have differed more radically. Ibn Sina was a courtier and bon vivant, while Biruni spent much of his life toiling alone, benefiting from official patronage but remaining on the margins of public life. Ibn Sina was a larger-than-life personality who aspired to create a single umbrella under which all knowledge could be organized. Biruni, by contrast, reveled in every discrete phenomenon, and proceeded to generalize only on the basis of what he had observed at the level of specifics.

Ibn Sina epitomized the kind of logical and metaphysical thinking that held sway in

both the Middle East and the West for centuries. Applying them to topics as diverse as theology and medicine, he demonstrated the tools of logic that would help us to establish truth. Biruni, by contrast, was critical of proofs reached by logic alone and instead championed mathematics as the premier tool for establishing truth. At the same time, he believed that both nature and human affairs can be understood by closely examining them over time. Ibn Sina, with his focus on ultimate causes, had little use for such an approach, which he considered a diversion. It is no wonder that they emerged early as competitors.

Though vast differences in temperament, lifestyle, interests, modes of analysis, and styles of expression separated these two innovators, there are striking similarities. In geology, for example, they both held that the earth and human life itself, rather than remaining as they were at the moment of Creation, had undergone profound changes, both evolutionary and cataclysmic, over the course of millennia. They

Two of the most outstanding thinkers to have lived between ancient Greece and the European Renaissance are Ibn Sina and Biruni. Theirs is a story of breakthroughs and insights, but also of endurance and tenacity.

agreed that vast deserts had been formed by the retreat of seas, leaving alluvial deposits that dried out over time. That they explored these issues at all—both viewed geology and paleontology as secondary concerns—testifies to the fact that Ibn Sina and Biruni were intellectual omnivores. Their written output spans as many fields and subjects as those offered at a modern university. Biruni once declared that an educated person should learn the essentials of every field of knowledge. Ibn Sina bragged about having actually done so, and then linking them by means of a single philosophical construct.

Both Biruni's and Ibn Sina's lasting contributions to world civilization lay not just in *what* they did but in *how* they did it. Both believed passionately that the most fundamental mark of humanity is its ability to reason. This, they held, reflects mankind's essence and highest manifestation. In an age of profound upheaval, wars, and religious strife, both committed their lives to the exercise of reason, and both suffered

for having done so. At differing times each of them was sentenced to be beheaded. Theirs is a story of breakthroughs and insights, but also of endurance and tenacity.

Indeed, the lives of these two thinkers were packed with drama, crises, and stunning achievements. Separated from their world by a millennium, we have much to gain from reflecting upon their lives and works today. The story of Ibn Sina and Biruni transcends the centuries, offering insights into their tireless efforts to expand the realm of human knowledge, and occurred in a part of the world that today sometimes invites concerns over the role of advanced learning and science.

That these two larger-than-life figures should inform such discussions a full millennium after their deaths is appropriate, for in the end, although they were the geniuses of their age, they rise above time and place, religion, and politics to stand as citizens of the global world of ideas and giants of human achievement.

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Coming Into Their Own

The world viewed Biruni and Ibn Sina over the past thousand years in different ways. Broadly speaking, Ibn Sina's star shone brightly for most of that period, then waned in recent times. This stems from the rise of modern medicine and science, the spread of secularism in the West, and a surge of religious traditionalism in the Muslim world. Biruni, after having been neglected for half a millennium, has only recently come into his own, though mainly among specialists.

Indeed, over the past century and a half, Russian, Central Asian, European, and American scholars brought a high level of skill to the study of Biruni's most abstruse mathematical and astronomical works, and also of Ibn Sina's most impenetrable philosophical writings. Thanks to them, the heritage of both thinkers is slowly being re-integrated with the mainstream of world thought.

Symbolizing the renewed interest in their work globally were the celebrations of the thousandth anniversary of the births of Biruni and Ibn Sina in both India and Pakistan. In neighboring Afghanistan, however, this renewed interest sometimes

took on a darker tone. The Taliban tried to destroy Biruni's tomb in Ghazni in May 2019.

On the other hand, a crater on the far side of the moon bears his name, as does an asteroid, "9936-Al-Biruni," and also a university in Istanbul and other learned institutions worldwide. Ibn Sina's gleaming mausoleum dominates a plaza in Hamadan, Iran, and features a pencil-like tower patterned, ironically, after the tomb of Qabus, the ruler to whom Ibn Sina turned for help but who died before providing any. More than a dozen hospitals and medical schools worldwide bear Ibn Sina's name. They also take a joint bow at the UN's Vienna headquarters. At the center of the main courtyard stands the "Scholars' Pavilion," which features large modernistic statues of both Biruni and Ibn Sina, and also of Razi, and Omar Khayyam.

With the passage of time, our two subjects have emerged today as avatars of intellect, remembered only vaguely but blending together as the greatest minds of their region and era. But if we view them on the basis of what we now know of their lives and work, a more complex picture emerges, one that brings each one individually into sharper focus.

After his early encounter with public life, Biruni avoided it. Shortly after arriving in Ghazni, Afghanistan, he wrote, “Here, if I can control myself, I will work [only] on that which is still in my soul, and that is [astronomical] observation and scientific projects.” He succeeded at this, remaining immersed thereafter in solitary research and writing. In arguments, he was relentless but maintained no grudges and hence had no serious enemies. To the very end, he was a loner, a soloist, with few correspondents, fewer friends, and no students to carry on his work after he was gone.

Ibn Sina was born to socialize or, more precisely, to exhibit his many talents in social settings. His boundless ambition and domineering personality left him with few friends and many enemies. At the same time, his manifest skills and ardent temperament also attracted appreciative patrons and admirers.

In intellectual debates, Biruni impatiently dissected arguments he considered flawed and, in most cases, treated the authors with respect. But for those who seemed to be willfully ignoring the dictates of reason, he had an inexhaustible fund of invective. He did not differentiate between fools who were living or long dead, but he did not

nurture grudges. Most contemporaries considered him to be modest and earnest to a fault.

Ibn Sina bowed to no one in his mastery of pungent invective. He was also a self-promoter who bragged about his youthful triumphs over one of the learned scholars his father had hired to teach him—and then went on to pilfer that same scholar’s work for his own writings. Blithely ignoring those who are now known to have been his teachers in medicine, he claimed to have quickly mastered that field on his own, to the point that even as a teenager “distinguished physicians” came to watch as he opened up what he termed “indescribable possibilities of therapy.”

After his brief stint as head of foreign affairs for his native land, Biruni foreswore public service and avoided official duties. Ibn Sina, by contrast, after backing into his first assignment as a prime minister or vizier, gladly continued in that line of work through the rest of his life. And why not? He was obviously good at it and relished the platform and the benefits it afforded him. Thus, Ibn Sina immersed himself in the life of every society in which he lived, while Biruni, after tasting public service and the worldly life, retreated to his

field research, his scientific instruments, and his study.

Early in life both thinkers identified a small number of analytic problems and focused on them throughout their careers. However, Biruni added to his list throughout his life, pursuing new topics as they came to his attention and as he discovered in them a fresh challenge. In this sense, he was an opportunist. Ibn Sina, too, focused on a short list of major issues but expanded their number only when he came to understand how each new issue bore on his original concerns. As a result, his focus was more specific than Biruni’s, and his oeuvre as a whole was far more integrated.

One of the sharpest contrasts between them is reflected in their use of language. Biruni was a mediocre writer whose main interest was in getting his research findings down on paper. His *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, for example, forces the reader to shift frenetically between historical, theological, mathematical, and statistical modes of analysis. Biruni was aware of this problem and even apologetic about it, explaining that “the wish to embrace this whole field compels me to cause trouble both to myself and to the reader.” Half a millennium later Galileo, defending himself against the same

criticism, wrote, “I do not regard it as a fault to talk about many diverse things, even in those treatises which have only a single topic.” Only in his *India* and his penultimate work on mineralogy did Biruni write as if he wanted to reach a non-specialized audience.

Ibn Sina’s writings, on the other hand, were neatly organized, clear, and accessible. If his works on logic and metaphysics seem dense and off-putting, this is because he used a conceptual discourse that is familiar today only to specialists. That Ibn Sina dictated most of his works contributed to their clarity, as did his practice of vetting them orally before audiences of students and critics. For all his professional difficulties, Ibn Sina was fortunate to have as readers an immediate circle of patrons, colleagues, and students who welcomed whatever he wrote. Only during his last decades did he encounter sharp critics, to whom he responded by declaring that his writings were not for the ignorant and other closed-minded “shit-eaters.”

Biruni’s interactions with readers were rare or non-existent. Even had he been capable of writing in an accessible vein, he spent the second half of his writing life under the direct gaze of an ultra-orthodox, narrow-minded, and suspicious

patron, Mahmud of Ghazni (also known as Mahmud Ghaznavi, the Sultan of the Ghaznavid Empire who ruled much of the Silk Road region from 998 until his death in 1030). The last thing Biruni would have wanted was for Mahmud and most members of his circle actually to read his work. Like many writers in repressive societies today, he was content to write “for the drawer.”

Keys to Knowledge

At the heart of the divide between Biruni and Ibn Sina lies their very different methods of exploration. Each was convinced that he had found the key to knowledge. Ibn Sina’s emphasis on logic and the syllogism gave all of his writings, including some of his medical works, an abstract and theoretical quality. This was their fundamental strength. He boasted of having “shown by pure theory the universal traits of the ailments of the human body and the causes which produce them.” He went on to speak of specifics, but always, or so he thought, in the context of abstract theory. At the end of the day, Ibn Sina was

less interested in specifics than in what he called the “first principles” of all knowledge, “access to which can be gained only through the science [of metaphysics].”

How profoundly different is this from Biruni. In a process diametrically opposite to Ibn Sina’s, he reveled in the specific and moved from the specific to the general. As he put it in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations*: “Our duty is to proceed from what is near to the more distant, from that which is known to that which is less known, and to gather the traditions from those who have reported them, to correct them as much as possible, and to leave the rest as it is, in order to make our work help him who

seeks truth and loves wisdom in making independent researches on other subjects.”

Biruni was convinced that quantitative measures were the most reliable avenue to

truth. “Counting,” he wrote, “is innate to man.” As to geometry, he called it “the science of dimensions and quantitative relations as they relate to each other.” “Thanks to [geometry],” he proclaimed, “the study of numbers is transformed

from the particular to the general and the study of the sphere from guesses and hypotheses to Truth.” Counting is innate to man because numbers are innate to nature. Who but Biruni would notice that the petals of many flowers form a circle of isosceles triangles, their number always being 3, 4, 5, 6, or 18 but almost never 7 or 9. Such was the mentality that enabled Biruni to achieve his breakthroughs in mathematics, a landmark achievement whose full extent is only now being appreciated.

While suspicious of all windy theorizing, Biruni nonetheless recognized that truth could be attained by various means. Among them, he included the drawing of precise comparisons. “The measure of a thing,” he wrote, “becomes known by its being compared with another thing which belongs to the same species and is assumed as a unit by general consent.” Such a frame of mind left Biruni comfortable with the attainment of knowledge that is solid but partial. He was convinced that science is not a fixed corpus (or canon) but a process of discovery extending from the past indefinitely into the future. Biruni’s view of the world was open-ended and constantly evolving. Also, experience had taught him that observations of nature needed to be repeated again and again to ensure accuracy. He

revisited three times the important body of data he had collected at Nandana, located in the Punjab in today’s Pakistan, to measure the earth. Recognizing the inadequacy of his own instrumentation, he rued that “whole generations wouldn’t suffice to measure precisely the length of the year.” This cast of mind also led him to suggest paths for future researchers and to spell out the instruments and methods they would need to pursue these leads.

Ibn Sina had a passion for certainty. Tortured by his own doubts even on matters he had previously considered settled, he believed that his mission as a thinker was to resolve questions, not leave them open for future researchers to address. His approach was more integrative than analytic, which enabled him to discern relationships between seemingly disparate phenomena and to build whole systems based on them. It was these systems rather than the specifics they embraced that constitute his chief intellectual legacy. From first to last, the binding force that held them together was logic. Biruni, too, sought certainty but was willing to admit when he couldn’t judge between two hypotheses. He, too, sought to uncover relationships between disparate phenomena, but in contrast to Ibn Sina, his principal

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tool for doing so was mathematics. His temperament lacked Ibn Sina's passionate unease and enabled him, when necessary, even to admit that "I don't know." Ibn Sina would have considered such a conclusion unthinkable.

All of this helps explain the huge differences between Ibn Sina's two great syntheses, the *Canon of Medicine* and *The Cure*, and Biruni's *Masud's Canon* and his *Determination of the Coordinates of Positions for the Correction of Distances Between Cities*. Ibn Sina offered his works as closed systems, whole and complete, while Biruni issued his landmark studies as reports on an unending process. Nowhere in Ibn Sina's vast writings can one find any statement comparable to Biruni's oft-repeated remark that what is known today is insignificant compared with all that is knowable, and that everything we know today is but partial and unclear.

For half a millennium, thinkers throughout the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish worlds were captivated by the wholeness and completeness of Ibn Sina's *Canon* and *The Cure*. They stood in awe of his claim to have united all knowledge under an all-embracing theory, and were consoled by the possibility that here, finally, all things knowable had been gathered

under a single orderly system. They might vehemently reject his formulations on specific points and instead embrace those of Ibn Rushd or Ibn Sina's Christian critics. But for centuries they all followed Ibn Sina in believing that the core task of human thought was to achieve the kind of comprehensiveness that he had sought in his greatest works.

This process ensured that Ibn Sina's thought, in its original form or as recast by his successors, would become deeply embedded in all three of the so-called Religions of the Book. A similar process took place with respect to the *Canon of Medicine*. Down practically to the discovery of the circulation of blood in the seventeenth century, the *Canon* reigned supreme and continued to dominate medical pedagogy in the East and West for another century.

Biruni never had such good fortune. Because he presented all his findings as open-ended hypotheses, the few of his writings that survived stimulated further research that built on Biruni's achievement and advanced beyond it. It was this open-ended quality of the best science that led Isaac Newton to say that he was merely "standing on the shoulders of giants." By contrast, the comprehensive but closed-ended quality of Ibn

Sina's syntheses shut as many doors as they opened.

The French scholar Roger Arnaldez, in a brilliant comparison of the two thinkers published in 1974, argues that Ibn Sina was the more speculative and systematic, gladly embracing practical evidence but only to the extent that it related to the truths of logic and metaphysics. At bottom, Arnaldez concluded, Ibn Sina was a Neo-Platonist. Biruni, by contrast, engaged passionately with each brute fact in its concrete singularity. Only on this basis, he believed, could one attain verifiable truths. Arnaldez concluded that Biruni was therefore the epitome of the anti-Platonist.

Another way of expressing the difference would be to name Biruni the positivist and Ibn Sina, in spite of his tidy system of logic, more the idealist. As a positivist, Biruni turned his back on metaphysical explanations and embraced only what he could confirm by observation, computation, or experimentation. Ibn Sina also had phenomenal powers of observation. But from his youngest days his mind inclined

toward the general rather than the specific, the abstract but logically verifiable rather than the concrete and quantifiable.

Ibn Sina and Biruni may have both striven for unity, but their paths for achieving it differed radically. Ibn Sina, proceeding from the general to the specific, stumbled over unexplained differences, while Biruni had no difficulty in acknowledging them and found in them a challenge. Where Ibn Sina tended to brush aside the diversity to which geography, culture, and the passage of time give rise, Biruni reveled in it and devised innovative methods for studying it. More than anyone before him, he also grasped the profound differences between high and popular cultures and sought the factors that shape such differences.

Stated differently, Ibn Sina gloried in the sublime unity of Creation, while Biruni, while also conceiving Creation as unified and complete, reveled in its endless diversity. This opened his mind to explorations that vastly expanded the borders of the known world. Such reasoning enabled him even to hypothesize

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the existence of unknown but inhabitable continents where North and South America were later discovered.

Similar Ends?

Having dwelled on the differences between our two thinkers, we should also ask whether those differences ever led to similar ends. A definitive answer to this question would require exploring the daunting number of fields in which Ibn Sani and Biruni both worked, including geology, paleontology, mineralogy, geometry, and pharmacopeia.

Short of this, however, we know that they had a great deal in common. They were both Central Asians and contemporaries, born under what was arguably the world's most intellectually advanced regime at the time, the Samani empire. As such, they both spoke Persianate languages or dialects of Persian and both expected to make their way into the sophisticated Samani centers of learning. This did not happen, for just as they entered manhood, the last Samani rulers were swept from power. This geopolitical event condemned both of these rising geniuses to lives of wandering and improvisation.

Born to privilege, they received private instruction from the most knowledgeable teachers available. They received orthodox training on the Quran. By their time, readers of Arabic also had access to a wealth of translated works of ancient Greek philosophers and scientists. This prompted them not only to master what the ancient Greeks had to say but also to delve into the structure of their arguments in order to identify flaws and correct them. Not until the European Renaissance did anyone in the West subject the classical heritage to such rigorous scrutiny.

They pursued their goals through thick and thin. Neither enjoyed the collegial support that Newton found in the Royal Society. Indeed, the absence of institutions where thinkers like Ibn Sina and Biruni could be encouraged and challenged is a major failure of early Muslim intellectual life and a cause of its eventual decline. Their persistence is all the more notable in that both men suffered from the vengeful avarice of their lifelong common enemy, Mahmud of Ghazni.

It was because he judged Ibn Sina and Biruni to be the two greatest living geniuses that Mahmud ordered them both to his court in Afghanistan. Mahmud

succeeded in snaring Biruni, of course; Ibn Sina managed just barely to escape. At no point did either Biruni or Ibn Sina enjoy anything approaching normal support for their work. What a contrast with the many modern scientists who enjoy tenured research posts and secure funding. Biruni and Ibn Sina had neither; over the course of his career Ibn Sina labored under seven fickle rulers and Biruni under six. Yet they carried on.

Biruni and Ibn Sina were what we now call workaholics. Biruni is known to have worked every day of the year, taking breaks only for the winter and summer solstices. Ibn Sina's lifestyle was expansive, yet he never paused in his dictating. For both men, this was possible because neither married and neither had a family. Biruni declared that "my books are my children."

That these innovators were extremely competitive goes without saying. This became evident during their choleric exchange of letters and then continued through their dueling *Canons* and down to their final, if unacknowledged, clash over the nature of medicinal plants. It was manifest in Ibn Sina's rare but pointed ventures into mathematics and in Biruni's

equally rare but well-informed venture into medical matters.

Finally, as is inevitable in science, Ibn Sina and Biruni equally made serious mistakes in their work. Later astronomers faulted Biruni for failing to understand the cause of the steady decline of the obliquity of the sun's ecliptic that he himself had measured so precisely. Critics also took him to task for errors in computing. As to Ibn Sina, later scientists in the Middle East and Europe pointed out the instances in which loyalty to his ancient mentors led him into error. Ferreting out flaws in the *Canon of Medicine* became a cottage industry.

Political Philosophies

There are two other key areas on which their thought should be evaluated both individually and collectively—two touchstones that crystallize their outlooks on their world: one is their views on the good society; the second concerns religious faith.

To start with politics and society, the challenge is that neither developed his views in great depth. Ibn Sina said that he intended to write a book on political philosophy while Biruni claimed to have similar plans for a book on ethics. Neither

book was ever written. Despite this, numerous passages provide revealing insights into their political philosophies. Their positions reveal serious differences between them but also striking similarities.

Ibn Sina draws on Plato's *Republic*, some of the later writings of the Neoplatonists, on Farabi, and on the Baghdad philosopher Kindi to set forth his morality-based concept of the good society or, as he put it, the "good city." At the core of his concept stands his conviction that the goal of every human being is to live the contemplative life and to fulfill the immaterial and unworldly aspirations that are its essence. With Plato, he affirms, in the words of Jon McGinnis, that "one lives the virtuous or moderate life as a practice for death and dying, where 'death' is understood as the separation of the soul from the body."

Ibn Sina holds that the growth of specialization meant that early humans had to band together in communities. In that condition, they required laws that must conform to the broader scheme of things that God revealed through His prophets. The purpose of such laws was to constrain physical desires and worldly passions. Such vices are evil in themselves but also because they distract people from their true mission, which is

to perfect themselves as human beings.

It is no surprise, argues Ibn Sina, that ordinary people are incapable of formulating such laws on their own, nor are they able to do so through collective processes. Law, which is the essence of human society, can therefore arise only from God, his prophets, and those rare human beings whose wisdom enables them to fulfill this supreme function. Thus, Plato's Philosopher King reemerges in Ibn Sina's *Metaphysics* as the Philosopher Prophet, through whose wisdom alone the good society becomes possible. Besides laying down the essential laws and regulations, the all-wise ruler also sets down the obligations of members of society and assures compliance with them. Prayer is first among these duties, for good deeds are as nothing until they are sanctified by worship.

Because mankind lives not for the here and now but for eternity, Ibn Sina considers the good city to be a moral community. This called for powerful and moral leadership, the Philosopher Prophet, whose task is to prepare the community of mortals for their future by establishing firm laws against immorality. So focused is Ibn Sina on this moral agenda that he all but ignores the vast realm of economic, legal,

social, and political interactions.

Biruni based his political philosophy on the practical need for human beings to protect themselves

and their property against external threats. Not once did he suggest that the social enterprise had any purpose beyond its own welfare and betterment. Biruni believed that a good society depends on the moral qualities of its leader.

Like Ibn Sina's, his state is a top-down system, devoid of traces of what we would today call liberal democracy. Yet he acknowledged that leaders of the sort he calls for rarely appear. In all times and places, from Tibet to the Turks, leaders build fortresses to protect their wealth, become self-indulgent, make vulgar displays of vanity such as drinking water out of golden cups, and engage in all sorts of "mischief." Through their greed and hoarding, leaders lose sight of the sources of their wealth, causing all their gold and jewels "to vanish like smoke."

For all the differences between their political philosophies, however, the systems of government they espoused turned out to be strikingly similar. Ibn Sina's and

For all the differences between their political philosophies, however, the systems of government they espoused turned out to be strikingly similar.

Biruni's visions closely resemble what had long been accepted as the ideal of good governance in Central Asia and the Persianate world. This called

for a powerful and wise leader, preferably but not necessarily with inherited power, who governs in accordance with divine law and exercises wisdom and firmness for the benefit of society at large. Ibn Sina and Biruni shuddered at the prospect of men and women managing their own communities. Instead, they placed their faith in the wise leaders who inspire both awe and fear. Explicit in Biruni and implicit in Ibn Sina is the assumption that respect and fear must go together. When either is lost, the economy collapses, people are unable to pay taxes, the poor die, and the good society is no more.

How utterly different all this was from what either experienced in his own lifetime. Experience had taught them that actual governments are based instead on vanity, avarice, insecurity, and greed. Under such conditions, the idea of the good society and its government was for both of them as remote a concept as Heaven itself. Could either have survived in the "good city" each

envisioned? It is quite possible that the stolid and private Biruni could have managed to do so, although his impatience with fools and his sharp tongue likely would have done him in. Ibn Sina, by contrast, would surely have been censored by the Philosopher Prophet for his dissolute and seemingly impious style of life.

Faith and Reason

No aspect of Biruni's and Ibn Sina's thought has been more persistently debated over the millennium since their death than that regarding God and religion. For their contemporaries, their intellectual heirs and enemies, and for those in the modern era who seek to gain a rounded picture of them, the question of their faith, or absence of faith, assumes great importance. Was either of them a Muslim or at least a believer, and if so of what sort? Or, alternatively, was either of them agnostic or even an atheist? Finally, did their views of religion unite or divide them?

On one point there is no dispute: neither is known to have been particularly attentive to the canonic duties of their religion. Neither made the pilgrimage to Mecca nor is known to have fasted. It is unknown whether they donated 2.5

percent of their income to charity, as is required of all Muslims, although it seems likely they did. Regarding the five-times-daily prayers, Biruni was silent. And while Ibn Sina spoke of praying at several critical junctions of his life, and while his amanuensis Juzjani refers once to his observing evening prayers, his critics lambasted him for not doing so. They also denied that a person who lived so dissolute a life as did Ibn Sina could be considered pious. This leaves the Declaration of Faith ("There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger"). Whatever their degree of piety or impiety, for either Ibn Sina or Biruni to have provided even the slightest evidence that he questioned this central article of faith would have been unthinkable.

More than one writer makes the case that for all his writings about God, Ibn Sina was actually indifferent to religion, or at best a deist. This was the firmly stated view not only of some orthodox Muslims but also, in the modern era, of the East German scholar Ernst Bloch, who, in his 1949 volume *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, argues that Ibn Sina's system was "above faith." The case for Ibn Sina's supposed indifference turns on the fact that his principal tool for establishing truth—logic—was free of theology.

This led Bloch to argue that the line of descent from Ibn Sina leads not to Islamic theology, as Muslims maintain, or to St. Thomas Aquinas, as Christians argue, but to Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century pantheist monk who became an early disciple of Copernicus and who was martyred for denying core doctrines of his faith.

Even during Ibn Sina's lifetime, fundamentalist Muslim theologians cited the independence of his logic from theology as proof that he was irreligious. Ibn Sina was well aware of such criticism and wrote tracts and even a poem to deny it. At one point he became so exasperated by these attacks that he lashed out. "If I am a heretic, then there is not a single Muslim anywhere in the world." Not everyone was convinced. But the fact remains that for Ibn Sina the fundamental source of religious truth is revelation, and he embraced religious prophets as philosophers par excellence.

The case for Biruni's indifference to religion was made with even greater vehemence. Such arguments turn on specific statements, such as his criticism of those "who ascribe to divine wisdom whatever they cannot verify in the physical sciences. They justify their ignorant claims by declaring that 'God is all-powerful.'" A generation

of Soviet scholars, parroting their government's official atheism, touted Biruni as a secularist. Yes, they admitted, he made occasional bows to religion, but most of these were merely tactical moves to escape the wrath of his ultra-orthodox patron in Ghazni. There is truth in this, for Biruni sometimes stooped to using religious arguments for purely instrumental purposes. He would accuse astrologers of irreligion on the grounds that they placed a causal force—astrology—between God and man. In an opposite spirit, he sometimes launched his attacks as a materialist and religious skeptic. Needless to say, ideological zealots in Soviet times reveled in every such comment.

If a passionate concern over the existence and nature of the human soul is a test of faith, then Biruni fails. The most direct statement of his own views could not have been more perfunctory, to wit, than "there are living beings in the existing world. Therefore, we must assume the existence of the soul." Period. In *India*, he quotes without criticism the Hindu view of the soul as merely "the will that directs the feelings," which it accomplishes "by gaining a physical body and acting through it." In the same vein, he cites without criticism another Indian thinker who proclaimed that "*matter is the core, and everything*

else is subservient to it and only helps it to consummate actions.”

Finally, those who see Biruni as essentially secular make much of the fact that in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, he directly criticizes the prophet Muhammad for rejecting intercalation in favor of a system that caused all dates, including religious holidays, to shift throughout the year. In the same vein, in his book on geodesy, Biruni points out contradictions between widely differing statements in the Quran concerning the length of a day. Several passages in his later writings are similarly harsh on religious practice. Typical is his observation that “to bow to a divinity is like flinging oneself into deception, since divinity takes so many forms around the world.”

Summing up, those who champion Biruni’s secularism declare that Biruni was at best a deist by convenience and a Muslim by necessity. When one recent scholar, F. Jamil Ragep of Canada’s McGill University, praised Biruni for freeing astronomy from the shackles of philosophy he meant, by implication, of religion as well. On only one point do defenders of Biruni’s secularism and of his piety agree: that he was relentlessly critical of

all religions as practiced by the ignorant masses. In his *Mineralogy*, Biruni sharply ridicules “primitive worship,” which he saw as pervading all societies, including the Muslim world. Such elemental belief, he argues, is based on “no knowledge” and is on the same level as unbelief.

These arguments about their religious view cannot be denied, but by no means do they tell the whole story. For Ibn Sina, the counter-argument typically starts with his confession that even as a boy he would often retire to the mosque when stumped by a problem of logic. It might more convincingly begin with the fact that his earliest exposure to “philosophy” was to the doctrines of deeply pious but independent-minded Muslim thinkers who advanced the doctrine that “intellect” is not merely a quality of the human mind but the work of the Supreme Being—in other words, that there can be no conflict between reason and faith.

Like Biruni, Ibn Sina was a relentless critic of religious ignorance and bigotry. However, it would be a mistake to take his attacks as evidence of unbelief. Rather, they attest to his conviction that such attitudes drag true faith down to the level of superstition.

Ibn Sina offers a rational alternative to the primitive faith of the masses, and devoted a lifetime to refining it. From first to last, he focused on the human soul and its relation to God. It is revealing that his last works, *Fair Judgment* and *Pointers and Reminders*, were both saturated with his concern for mankind’s relationship to divinity and that Ibn Sina himself considered his writings on theology and cosmology to be his most consequential works. Given this, it is the more regrettable that the text of *Fair Judgment* was lost during a military rout and that the dense and complex *Pointers and Reminders* has yet to appear in an authoritative edition or translation. However, we might note that it was in this spirit of piety that during his last years he penned detailed exegeses of several Suras from the Quran, and that his surviving poetry is suffused with an ecstatic religious spirit which some consider akin to Sufism.

Biruni, like Ibn Sina, rejected the Greeks’ notion of the eternity of the world and the “foolish persuasion” that time has no terminus. Instead, he affirmed the concept of God’s mastery over the whole universe. Like Ibn Sina, too, he stood completely apart from the Sunni-Shia controversy. Rising above sectarianism,

he declares in his masterwork on geodesy that Islam as a whole had “united all the different nations in one bond of love.”

Biruni was indeed a religious believer who conceived God as the Prime Mover and whose works are largely accessible to human reason. This did not mean that he accepted the syllogistic logic of Aristotle and Ibn Sina as a tool for understanding God’s Creation. Nor did he accept the text-bound dogmas of Muslim traditionalists, even though Mahmud and his state were staunchly committed to upholding them. Nor, to repeat, did he align himself with either the Sunni or Shia Muslims: Biruni himself records that he wore a ring with two stones, one of them venerated by Sunnis and the other by Shiites.

Biruni traced the observable order and symmetry of creation to God. But what happens when things go wrong? He saw the possibility of a future crisis of overpopulation, which could cause famine and misery. He acknowledged that this could indeed occur. But were it to happen, he declared that God would send a “messenger for the purpose of reducing the too great number.” He thus affirmed God’s continuing and benign presence in human affairs and,

incidentally, anticipated Malthus's thesis on overpopulation by eight centuries. Other such observations by Biruni are too numerous to enumerate.

While Biruni respected how every religion seeks answers to the great questions of existence, he affirmed Islam because of what he considered its rationality. When he criticized the prophet Muhammad's rejection of intercalation he did so on purely rational grounds, and without expanding his critique to Islam as a whole or to religion as such. He acknowledges God as the Prime Mover and sees God as a beneficent presence in human affairs. Concluding his discussion of the danger of overpopulation, he stresses that the "messenger" of correction would be sent by God, whose "all-embracing care is apparent in every single particle on earth."

It is perhaps an exaggeration to say, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr does in *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), that Biruni "can be considered among the most Muslim of those in Islamic civilization who devoted themselves to the study of the intellectual sciences and who synthesized the achievement of pre-Islamic cultures and developed them in the spirit of Islam." Yet to ignore his abiding

religiosity would be to deny his own words, his personality, and his times.

Ibn Sina and Biruni considered themselves Muslims whose identities were inseparable from their faith. At the same time, they relied on reason to ferret out the truths of human existence and the universe. On this point Biruni was adamant, declaring that the Quran itself is totally accessible through reason, for it "speaks in terms that do not require an allegorical commentary." Here, of course, Biruni was at odds with Ibn Sina in his later years.

Whatever the differences between their faiths, neither Ibn Sina nor Biruni felt compelled to soft-pedal his findings so as not to offend mainstream preachers and scholars from the *ulema*, the body of clerics who considered themselves the guardians of the faith. They stood shoulder to shoulder in their disdain for Muslim theologians who, in their practice of *kalam*, evaluated all thought solely in terms of their narrow definition of Muslim orthodoxy. But this did not qualify the fundamental faith of either man. They saw reason not as an alternative to religious faith but as its fulfillment. Both could have agreed with Isaac Newton's declaration that God "is supreme, or supremely

perfect. He is eternal and infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient. That is, he endures from eternity to eternity; and he is present from infinity to infinity; he rules all things, and he knows all things that happen or can happen." And both would also have concurred with Newton when he said, "As a blind man has no idea of colors, so we have no idea of the manner by which the all-wise God perceives and understands all things."

No issue has more consistently challenged the faithful than the presence of evil in the affairs of mankind. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran all dwell on it. Thinkers of all three faiths have devoted seemingly endless exegesis and tracts to it. The lives of both Biruni and Ibn Sina were marked by evil. They endured under leaders who were certifiably malevolent. Yet in the end, neither viewed it as an inevitable driving force in human affairs and neither dwelled on it extensively in any of their writings. They agreed on the need for governments to exercise a strong hand to prevent crime and protect the civic order against malefactors. But beyond this, it is striking to see how dismissive both of them were of the problem of evil as such.

As Muslims, they had been taught that evil arose when Satan (Shaytan)

refused God's order to bow down to Adam, and then spent eternity seeking to lead humans astray. Evil thus became an unavoidable presence in human affairs. Yet neither Biruni nor Ibn Sina accepted this. Evil may be everywhere, but not once did Biruni mention Satan or conditions arising from the days of Adam. Rather, in his *Determination, India*, and his book on mineralogy he argued that evil arises not from our inner nature but from ignorance. Ignorance is the sole cause of evil, and knowledge is its cure. Knowledge—not piety. Indeed, Biruni often attributed the most evil of deeds to those of all cultures who were pious but ignorant.

Ibn Sina equally refused to accept evil as part of the divine order of human nature. Ignoring the Quranic account, he defined evil simply as "the absence of perfection." Evil may infect individuals, but it isn't inherent to the species. And in a final strike against the pessimists, he argues that whatever evil exists is confined to earthly life and is therefore temporary, and that in the grand balance is far outweighed by the good.

Ibn Sina and Biruni based their arguments on different premises, but both denied that evil is part of the divine order of things, and both pointed out the path by which

individuals could overcome it. They knew from bitter experience that rulers and individuals perpetrate evil deeds, but that society can survive if it is ruled by a wise but forceful leader. Despite their own bitter experience, they were, at bottom, optimists. Neither believed that people can achieve perfection, and neither anticipated Rousseau's chilling assertion that "man is born free but is everywhere in chains." Yet they held that individuals could lead good and moral lives and, through enlightenment and divine providence, avoid evil.

Contemporary Significance

All of this seems to call out for some kind of bottom-line assessment of Ibn Sani and Biruni. Yet how impossible this seems. Every age has viewed them and their work differently, confounding any attempt to offer a truly objective balance sheet of their lives and work. We might ask instead what relevance their lives have for us today.

But such an evaluation cannot be made on the basis of their direct impact on our times, for the passage of centuries obliterated the memory of Biruni until quite recently and caused the memory of Ibn Sina to be preserved mainly among a small

band of highly specialized philosophers, theologians, and historians of medicine. The best alternative, then, is to narrow the question still further by enquiring about the significance of the two lives and their written legacy.

A place to start is by exploring their respective roles in the history of science and knowledge generally. The framework proposed by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) holds much promise. Reduced to telegraphic form, Kuhn proposed that most scientists practice what he called "normal science," in which the main parameters are set and accepted but which leaves open many unresolved questions. In the course of addressing these, researchers encounter "anomalies" for which the main thesis or "paradigm" cannot account. Eventually, these anomalies mount up to create perplexity, confusion, and eventually a crisis. The crisis is resolved only when a new framework or paradigm is put forward and accepted. This, Kuhn argued, is how scientific revolutions come about.

Viewed in this light, Biruni and Ibn Sina both identified anomalies, though each of the two men addressed the anomalies he uncovered in his own manner. Ibn Sina began as a respectful disciple

of Aristotle, correcting and refining the master's thoughts on specific points. Only later did he break free of the old paradigm and emerge as an Aristotle for a new age. By contrast, Biruni valued the work of his predecessors, yet only as a starting point. He declared his independence from the outset, and also his neutrality. He recognized many striking anomalies, explored them, and was definitely open to considering new paradigms, but only to the extent that they could be confirmed by solid evidence.

Ibn Sina may have offered new paradigms in the realm of logic, philosophy, and cosmology, but at bottom he was a conservative reformer, leaving intact and esteeming all that he didn't reformulate. Whether he was more than this in the field of medicine is at best doubtful. While he is rightly credited with many specific innovations, he left intact the Aristotle/Galen paradigm. Until specialists compare his treatment of scores of different medical issues with specific texts by his Greek and Muslim predecessors (Razi notable among them), it will be impossible to know the extent to which he was more than a diligent compiler and occasional corrector. Nonetheless, he refined the preexisting "normal" with such thoroughness and success

that his system remained largely intact for centuries.

Ibn Sina's focus was above all on identifying the overarching frameworks that linked and explained all phenomena and knowledge. Only by such a process could he have arrived at writing the *Canon of Medicine* or *The Cure*. So broad was his vision that it comprehended such starkly different areas as philosophy, medicine, geology, and music. From first to last his goal was to lay bare first principles on which each is based and to identify the manner in which those principles lead upward to God.

Biruni always began with a specific problem, cataloguing and evaluating all prior efforts to address it, and then offering his own solution. When he failed to resolve the issue, he would sketch out what had yet to be learned in order to solve the problem, thus mapping the way for future researchers. This process enabled Biruni to achieve incremental but important advances in a wide range of areas. And he achieved major breakthroughs on several issues. Thus, he proposed the first global system for measuring time, advanced a bold new way to study other societies, and introduced the transformative concept of specific gravity. Beyond all this stand his signal contributions

to mathematics, geometry, trigonometry, cartography, geography, botany, and several other fields.

Finally, Biruni’s treatment of the problem of a heliocentric universe deserves special note, not merely because he accepted the theoretical possibility that the earth rotated around the sun, but for the method he employed to evaluate this hypothesis. He did not respond to some widespread discontent with the old paradigm, as Kuhn would have it, but to his own recognition of an anomaly.

Using data that he himself generated, and employing mathematical tools that he himself had refined, he proved that a heliocentric universe was entirely possible, that is, an acceptable paradigm.

In the end, Biruni stopped short of embracing his own paradigm because he could not confirm it by observation. He left it to Galileo and his telescope to clinch the argument and validate the paradigm that he, as a mathematician, had defended. In this context, the recent discovery of the so-called God particle in particle physics seems relevant. Known as the “Higgs Boson,” it accounts for the fact that elementary particles

have mass. The “God-particle” was confirmed by observation only in 2019. However, a group of five physicists had earlier hypothesized its existence purely on the basis of mathematics. For this achievement, two members of that earlier group were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012.

Even had most of Biruni’s works been miraculously preserved, their impact might have been limited to that small group of scholars whose competence was on a par

with his own. By the same token, the very comprehensiveness of Ibn Sina’s systems in both medicine and metaphysics assured for him an audience of both specialists and generalists who

would either reject them, as did some of his Muslim and Christian critics, or seek to refine and adjust them as a new round of “normal science.” What is in the end most striking about both men is their readiness, when necessary, to take scientific, philosophical, or religious orthodoxies head-on. While not themselves full-blown revolutionaries, they were harbingers of the revolutions that gave rise to the modern mind.

The lives and work of Biruni and Ibn Sina challenge us to reconsider several of the comfortable dichotomies with which we describe our world today.

The lives and work of Biruni and Ibn Sina challenge us to reconsider several of the comfortable dichotomies with which we describe our world today. By simultaneously

embracing the past and breaking from it, they challenged the notion of Ancients versus Moderns that arose in the sixteenth-century West and persists in many forms today. By simultaneously embracing science (in the broadest sense) and religion, they confound those who see the world in terms of an eternal struggle between science and faith. Instead, they recast these and other dichotomies in terms of knowledge versus dogma, both religious and scientific, and dedicated their lives to knowledge.

Biruni and Ibn Sina were, as noted, above avowed Muslims, yet their works rose above sectarianism. As a consequence, anyone could take intellectual sustenance from them. In both philosophy and science, they ameliorated the juxtaposition of Muslim, Christian, and Jew, not by denying or avoiding differences but by engaging constructively with them. In the same spirit, while they were men of their place and time, their work came to

Biruni and Ibn Sina were undeniably both virtuosos of the mind, standing at the very peak of human achievement. Between them, they created a two-man Renaissance.

be studied in both the East and West, again dissolving what many still consider a global clash of cultures. They rejected all forms of stodgy orthodoxy. By so doing, they ended up transforming the received intellectual heritage. In this they were not alone; others had already begun moving along this path, albeit more tentatively than either Biruni or Ibn Sina. At the same time, opponents of their project were also mobilizing and would score tactical victories over the coming centuries.

Biruni and Ibn Sina were undeniably both virtuosos of the mind, standing at the very peak of human achievement. The differences between them were profound. Yet these very differences attest to the breadth and depth of the Central Asian and Persianate culture from which both sprang.

The sharp distinctions between them—in character, interests, and modes of thought—bear witness to the importance of individuals in human history. Particular nations, regions, and religious factions deserve to claim each as one of their own. But in the end, Ibn Sani and Biruni stand forth as individuals,

unique and incomparable. Their lives remind us that while advancements in knowledge can result from the progress of society as a whole, they can take place even in periods of regression and chaos.

Between them, Biruni and Ibn Sina created a two-man Renaissance. For all their manifest differences, they shared the conviction that God's Creation is orderly

and in conformity with natural laws that are accessible to human reason. This was no mere working hypothesis but a ground truth. With Virgil, they affirmed, "Happy is the man who has learned the causes of things, and who trampled beneath his feet all fears, inexorable fate, and the roar of devouring hell" (Verg. G. II.490-492). By that standard, Biruni and Ibn Sina had every right to be happy. **BD**

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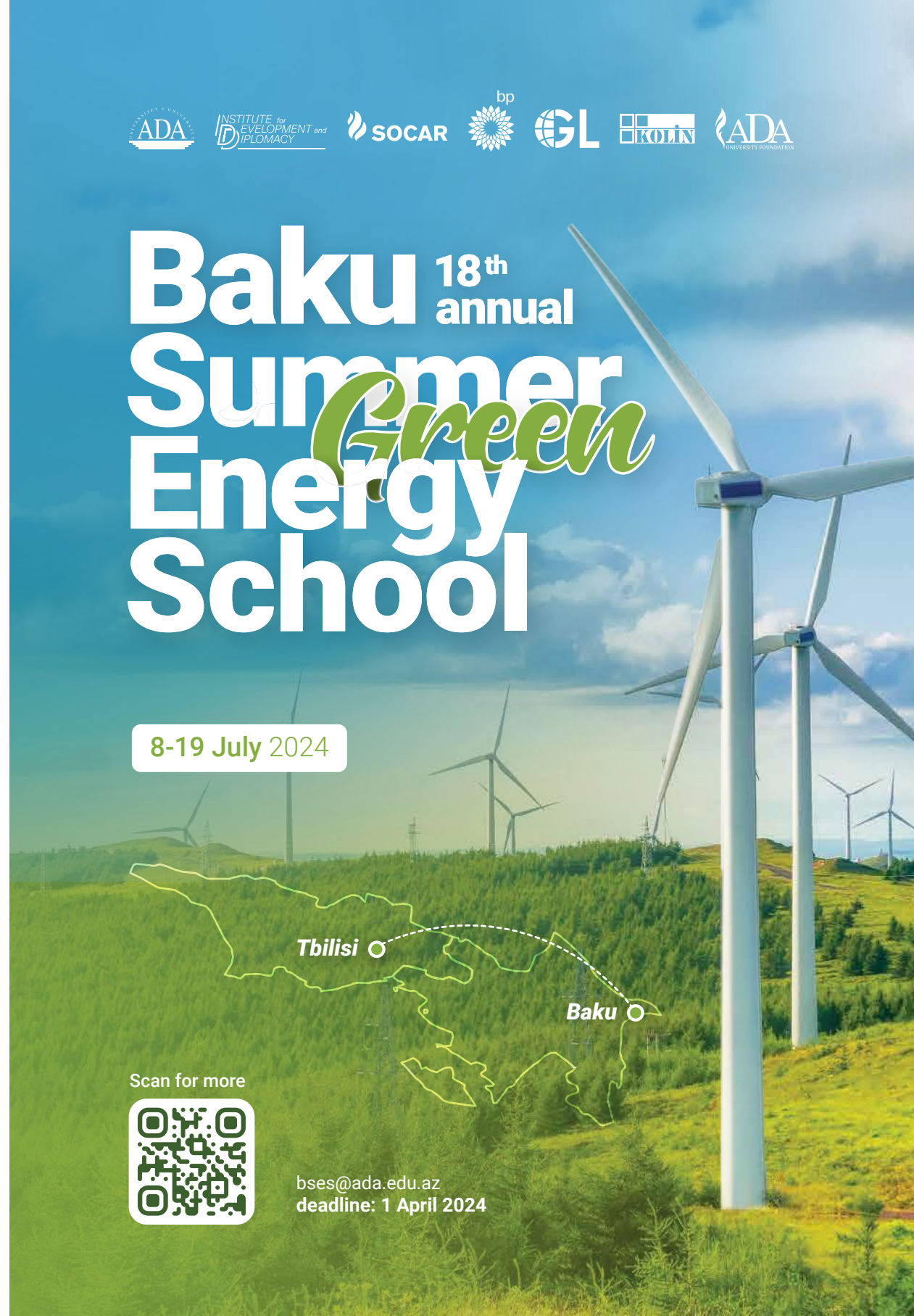
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The Battle for Green Supremacy

Carbon Markets, Artificial Intelligence, and the Problem of Climate Finance

Carlos Roa and Shubham Dwivedi

Observe the bee as it pollinates flowers, fruits, vegetables, and a wide variety of other crops; according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, around one-third of the world's food production depends on their little wings. Watch as the beaver builds its dam, shaping the landscape of its local environment. Its pond stores carbon, improves water quality, creates a suitable habitat to support biodiversity, and helps reduce climate impacts. One cannot help but conclude that some higher order guides the work of these and other

creatures; *someone* or *something* seems to be managing the delicate ecology of our world.

Unfortunately, human beings are not as adept at such complex environmental management. As the world increasingly bears witness to the dramatic effects of climate change, the urgency for decisive action has never been more critical. With the planet's average temperature continuing to rise, resulting in more frequent, severe, and unusual weather events, the global community faces a stark reminder of the imperative

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to mitigate this environmental degradation. The upcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Baku (COP29) represents a pivotal moment for states to commit to ambitious strategies and deepen international collaboration in the fight against climate change. At the forefront is the pressing need to explore and affordably implement effective mechanisms that can significantly reduce carbon emissions on a global scale.

Among the myriad strategies and mechanisms proposed, carbon pricing emerges as a notable solution to the climate finance challenge, offering a market-driven approach to achieving carbon neutrality. More specifically, carbon trading—which allows countries and corporations to buy and sell permits to emit carbon dioxide—aims to cap total carbon emissions and gradually reduce the amount of global

greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions released into the atmosphere. This mechanism not only incentivizes the reduction of emissions but also encourages the development of cleaner technologies. It is here that

the recent arrival of artificial intelligence (AI) takes the spotlight, as the technology promises to revolutionize this process, enhancing the efficiency, transparency, and scalability of carbon markets. AI-driven analytics can optimize emissions reduction strategies, predict market trends, and vastly facilitate compliance, in turn propelling carbon pricing and trading into a new era of effectiveness.

Moreover, the significance of carbon trading extends beyond its impact in environmental terms, encompassing greater possibilities as a potent geopolitical tool. As states navigate the complex dynamics of an increasingly multipolar world, carbon trading schemes can become instruments of diplomacy, economic influence, and even strategic advantage. Countries leading in the development and implementation of sophisticated carbon

markets and AI technologies can and will position themselves as frontrunners in the global effort to combat climate change, thereby attaining noteworthy geopolitical leverage. Conversely, those states

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lagging in these initiatives risk not only the detrimental effects of environmental degradation but also diminished influence upon the world stage. This transformation thus compels states and policymakers to pay closer attention to how carbon markets are shaped and utilized as strategic assets.

Foundations

Understanding carbon trading's maturation from a mere conceptual framework to a pivotal instrument of climate policy is critical for grasping the difficulties that come with pursuing a collective endeavor (environmental stewardship of the earth) while simultaneously achieving economic development—a challenge that is increasingly urgent as the impact of climate change manifests more and more around the world.

Carbon trading's inception can be traced back to economic principles of the mid-late twentieth century, where the idea of using market mechanisms to control pollution was posited as an alternative to traditional regulatory approaches. This view, rooted in the work of economists like Ronald Coase and later refined by John H. Dales, suggested that creating a market for pollution rights could effectively

allocate resources to reduce emissions at the lowest possible cost.

The real-world application of these ideas began to take shape with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), established at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Yet it was the 1997 Kyoto Protocol that marked the first significant milestone by introducing the first binding emission reduction targets for developed countries. The Protocol's innovative mechanisms—e.g., the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), the Joint Implementation (JI), and the International Emissions Trading (IET)—provided the initial blueprint for carbon markets. These mechanisms allowed countries to meet their emission targets through the trade of emission reduction credits, thereby fostering a nascent global carbon market.

After the Kyoto Protocol came the Paris Climate Agreement, adopted in 2015, which significantly expanded the scope and ambition of international efforts to combat climate change. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, which imposed binding targets on developed countries only, the Paris Agreement required *all* signatories to submit nationally determined contributions (NDCs)

outlining their plans to reduce emissions. This notable shift underscored the importance of flexibility and cooperation in achieving GHG emission reduction goals, setting the stage for a more inclusive and dynamic carbon market.

At present, numerous well-developed carbon pricing mechanisms are used to leverage market forces. The simplest of these are carbon taxes, which impose a fixed price on carbon emissions, thereby charging emitters a set fee per ton of carbon dioxide emitted. Unsurprisingly, however, carbon taxes tend to be fantastically unpopular with voters and are therefore politically unviable in practice, if not in principle. This is often regarded as the primary reason why carbon trading mechanisms are preferred over straightforward taxation.

Given the failings of outright taxation, the most commonly used mechanism is referred to as “cap and trade.” This system sets a cap on the total amount of greenhouse gases that can be emitted by covered entities. Allowances, otherwise known as “carbon credits,” representing

The significance of carbon trading extends beyond its impact in environmental terms, encompassing greater possibilities as a potent geopolitical tool.

the right to emit a specific amount, are distributed to these entities. Those entities can then trade these allowances among themselves. This system—taking

place within a government-regulated market, more broadly known as “compliance carbon markets”—incentivizes reductions where they are the most cost-effective, as companies that can reduce emissions at lower costs can in turn sell their excess allowances to those facing higher reduction costs.

In addition to compliance with carbon markets, there are also “voluntary carbon markets,” which enable companies and even individuals to purchase carbon credits to offset their emissions. These increased in importance thanks to the Paris Agreement, which emphasized the role of non-state actors and the private sector in achieving its objectives; a development that highlights the growing importance of voluntary carbon markets alongside regulatory ones. “Voluntary offsets,” as these carbon credits are called, typically support projects that either reduce emissions (e.g., renewable energy) or remove carbon from the atmosphere (e.g., reforestation).

As of early 2024, the landscape of carbon markets has grown both in complexity and scale in comparison to previous decades, reflecting their increased importance in the global fight against climate change. The European Union's Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), established in 2005, remains the world's largest and most mature carbon market, setting a benchmark for cap and trade systems globally. Other regions, including the countries of North America, China, and various developing countries, have also implemented or are in the process of developing their own carbon trading schemes. The voluntary carbon market in particular has experienced significant growth, driven by increasing corporate commitments to achieve carbon neutrality. This growth highlights the need for greater standardization and transparency to ensure the integrity of carbon credits and their contribution to emission reductions.

Indeed, despite challenges—such as price volatility, regulatory uncertainties, and concerns over the environmental integrity of some

credits—carbon markets are increasingly recognized as essential instruments in the toolbox against climate change. They provide a flexible and scalable mechanism to reduce emissions across sectors and geographies, aligning economic incentives with environmental goals. Moreover, as technological developments enhance the efficiency of these markets (particularly the advent of AI in the private sector), their role is set to become even more critical.

Carbon markets' truly geopolitical transformational effect, however, is coming about due to the developments at recent UN climate change conferences.

The Road to COP29

Over the past few years, petrostates—countries whose economies are heavily dependent on the extraction and export of oil or natural gas—have taken the lead in hosting UN climate change conferences. COP27 in 2022, for instance, was held in Egypt, which is a top energy producer in Africa and a key player in international

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energy flows owing to its control over the Suez Canal. Sequentially, COP28 was held in the UAE, the seventh-largest producer of oil globally. Similarly, this year's conference, COP29, is being held in Azerbaijan, a major exporter of oil and gas to Türkiye and the European continent.

The trend of COP being stewarded by oil-and-gas-producing states has drawn fire from some quarters. Yet despite such criticism, it is energy-producing countries—given their involvement and thorough understanding of energy dynamics—that are the most strategically situated to address the climate change agenda pragmatically.

What these states understand quite well is how critical fossil fuels are to the basic functioning of the modern world. Beyond being used to generate electricity and fuel transportation—as fundamental as these sectors may be—fossil fuels form the basis of all global industrial production. Consider that natural gas is processed into natural gas liquid and methane, which is then converted into

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butadiene, methanol, benzene, toluene, and xylene. Similarly, crude oil is refined into naphtha and associated gases such as ethane, liquefied petroleum gas, and methane, which are then converted into ethylene, propylene, and pyrolysis gasoline (pygas). All of these myriad petrochemicals are key ingredients and are ubiquitously used in the production of electronics, plastics, food packaging, agro-chemicals, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, chemical synthesis, automobiles, tires, engine coolants, engine lubricants, construction, thermal insulation, unbreakable glass, textiles, kitchen appliances, detergents, sports equipment, footwear, disposables, cosmetics, and so on and so forth.

In short, even if modern civilization's need for electricity were to be addressed by the use of renewables such as solar, wind, and nuclear energy—and if electric vehicles (EVs) were to supplant traditional fossil fuel-reliant transportation—fossil fuels are still overwhelmingly essential to modern life. This is an incontrovertible fact that is unlikely to change soon. This holistic

view, deeply appreciated by fossil fuel energy producers, is a matter of delicacy and careful management, rather than something to be pursued recklessly at the risk of causing enormous disruption to national economies and societies. This is the context in which the now famous formulation on the future of hydrocarbon-based energy systems that was agreed at COP28 needs to be understood (“to transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science”); and this is the context in which the rejected, more radical formulation also needs to be understood (“phasing out”).

Compounding this delicate balancing of problems and interests is the fact that the vast majority of the world’s fossil fuel producers are located in what is called the Global South: countries, primarily located in the southern hemisphere and constituting the vast majority of the world’s sovereign states as well as its overall population, characterized by their lower economic development in comparison to the wealthier states of the Global North.

Historically, the small number of industrialized states of the

Global North (namely, North America and Western Europe) have been responsible for half of global carbon dioxide emissions since the Industrial Revolution. The North’s carbon footprint is 100 times greater than the rest of the world’s states combined. In fact, according to the World Inequality Database, in 2019 the top 10 percent of global emitters (around 771 million individuals) single-handedly emit nearly 48 percent of the world’s emissions, while the bottom 50 percent (around 3.8 billion individuals) emit only about 12 percent of all emissions. A closer look at these figures reveals that the global top 1 percent by themselves contribute to 17 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions in a year.

A look at per capita carbon dioxide emissions paints a similar picture. On a per capita basis, the Global North still has a much higher average rate of emissions compared to the rest of the world. The United States, for instance, stands at nearly 14.9 tons of carbon dioxide per capita (tpc). Other developed countries such as Canada (14.2 tons), Australia (15 tons), and Germany (15.7 tons) provide similar numbers.

It ought to be noted that fossil fuel-producing states, such as

Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, also rank among the highest global carbon dioxide emitters. Qatar, for instance, emits an enormous 37.6 tpc. Though its neighbors emit less, they nonetheless stand out: the UAE emits 25.8, Bahrain emits 25.7, Kuwait emits 25.6, Saudi Arabia emits 18.2, and Oman emits 15.7 tpc. These fossil fuel-producing states, however, argue that relying upon per capita metrics presents a distorted view of the situation: they are emitting a greater amount of carbon dioxide on behalf of other states, which benefit from the messy and dirty business of fossil fuel extraction. Moreover, most fossil fuel-producing states are themselves still in a transitioning development phase, and as such ample consideration should be given for these circumstances.

This vast asymmetry when it comes to carbon emissions is the primary point of contention between the Global North and the Global South when it comes to tackling climate change. Global South countries, whose economies are still developing and thus remain behind practically every single lifestyle metric, argue that their overall carbon dioxide contribution is far less than the Global North’s, and as such, they remain lesser beneficiaries of the use of fossil fuels.

As a result, climate debates frequently become mired in extraneous discourses revolving around matters of equity and justice between the rich, postindustrial states of the Global North in opposition to the still-developing emerging countries of the Global South. How can India, Brazil, and Africa—which have historically emitted 3 percent, 1 percent, and 3 percent (respectively) of historical carbon dioxide emissions—be expected to shoulder the same burden as the United States (responsible for around 25 percent of historical emissions) and the member states of the European Union (22 percent)? Such questions have yet to receive satisfactory answers on the geopolitical stage.

The aforementioned line of thinking came to a head at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, where it was argued that developed and developing countries—which differ in situations, capabilities, and political and economic priorities—have different responsibilities for mitigating carbon emissions. Yet even on this point, there was contention; countries amid industrialization, such as China and India, were reluctant to accept implied greater responsibility for reducing their carbon dioxide emissions. Nonetheless, progress has been achieved. In September 2020,

China announced its intention to reach carbon neutrality by 2060. India followed by declaring in late 2021 that it would achieve the same by 2070.

At last year's COP28, governments achieved substantial progress: the adoption of a transitioning-away-from-fossil-fuels-in-energy-systems agreement, with an emphasis on doing so in a "just, orderly, and equitable manner," represents a strategic marker on the road to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

The fulfillment of this commitment, however, hinges decisively on the availability, scalability, and accessibility of sufficient funds to support the transition. That is why this year's conference (i.e., COP29) holds paramount significance: governments must establish a fresh finance target for the period beyond 2025, with far-reaching implications for all.

But this, in turn, raises an uncomfortable question: in an age of limited budgets, mounting

tensions, and competing economic priorities, where will the money for this endeavor come from?

The Climate Finance Dilemma

These monies that seek to support mitigation and adaptation actions addressing climate change are internationally known as "climate finance." The term itself has something of a history; as far back as the 1992 UNFCCC that took place in Rio, it was estimated that between \$340 billion to \$640 billion a year would be needed to protect the environment. The 1994

UNFCCC included proposed financial flows from developed to developing countries, with estimates putting the figure between \$40 billion and \$175 billion annually. These flows were to be divided into two segments: between \$30 billion to \$50 billion was sup-

posed to be granted through public institutions—such as developed country governments, bilateral finance institutions, multilateral development banks, and multilateral climate funds—and around \$125

The fulfillment of the net-zero emissions commitment hinges decisively on the availability, scalability, and accessibility of sufficient funds to support the transition. But where will this money come from?

billion was supposed to come from private sources.

Despite widespread agreement on this issue, however, the matter was quietly dropped and remained relatively ignored until COP15, which was held in Copenhagen in 2009 against the backdrop of the Western-triggered global economic crisis, the establishment of the G20, and (arguably) the beginning of the end of the U.S.-led unipolar era.

At COP15, developed economies committed to mobilizing nearly \$100 billion of climate finance to developing countries by 2020. Further progress was achieved five years later at COP21, which resulted in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement; a long-term agreement, targeting the limitation of global warming to between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius, and achieving universal net-zero emissions between 2050 and 2100. As indicated above, the Paris Agreement required all signatories to submit nationally determined contributions (NDCs) outlining their plans to reduce carbon emissions, with provisions that these be updated every five years. Notably, Article 6 of the Agreement defined the international carbon market mechanism, noting these could be used to reach NDC targets.

Though further detailed rules for implementation were agreed upon in 2018, policymakers and their climate negotiators came to realize that these figures would need to be revised—given the significant gap between the carbon dioxide emissions cuts required to limit global warming to between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius and the cuts proposed by the NDCs. As such, the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact, drafted at the UK-hosted COP26, called upon countries to revisit and reinforce their NDC targets in 2022, with the expectation that subsequent updates would push for steeper emissions cuts and stronger measures. As a component of the Glasgow Pact, more fleshed-out details on international carbon markets were defined.

As a result, the NDCs have become a matter of international importance, recognized as "essential to ensuring a liveable future for everyone on the planet," to borrow from language contained on a UN website. Yet this importance also means that, for many countries, meeting their own climate targets now depends upon the receipt of sufficient international climate finance. Specifically, the estimated amount of capital requested to implement all NDCs has risen from \$100 billion a year to \$350 billion. More recently, at COP28,

the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimated that \$500 billion should be channeled to developing countries in 2025. Around the same time, the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance estimated that the developed world will need to provide \$2.4 trillion of support a year by 2030 to the developing world (not including China).

It is perhaps useful to consider, as Arta Moeini has shown in a recent *Compact* article, that the developed world (“Washington and Brussels”) has “now spent more than \$200 billion on the [Ukraine] war—a figure that, adjusted for inflation, far exceeds the entire cost of the [U.S.-led] Marshall Plan, which rebuilt [Western] Europe in the wake of World War II.” The point here is simply to draw attention to unprecedented amounts that are at stake.

Further complicating this situation is the fact that “climate finance” is itself—purposefully—extremely loosely defined. For instance, the UNFCCC provides a broad definition: “local, national or transnational financing from public, private and alternative

sources of financing that seek to support mitigation and adaptation.” Such vagaries have provided sufficient scope for other actors—the OECD, multilateral banks, policy think-tanks, etc.—to come up with their own interpretations of the term and, from there, differing metrics for measuring climate finance flows.

As a result, figures that are supposed to present an improving picture of the situation sometimes serve to highlight the gaping inequalities between rich and poor countries.

Rather than being directed towards the developing economies of the Global South, a super-majority of climate finance is staying in the Global North.

The Climate Policy Initiative (CPI), for instance, estimated in a report published in late 2023 that global climate finance reached close to \$1.3 trillion in the 2021-2022 period. However, this figure came about due to significant increases in clean energy investments—China, the United States, EU member states, Brazil, Japan, and India received 90 percent of these funds. More specifically, the energy and transportation sectors, which are the two largest carbon dioxide emitters and are dominated by private finance, attracted the majority of these finance flows: energy received 44 percent

of CPI-defined total mitigation finance, while transportation received 29 percent. The rise of electronic vehicle usage, led by China, EU member states, and the United States, is the primary driver of this trend. Similarly, advancements in climate-friendly technologies—battery storage, green hydrogen, etc.—account for an increasing amount of climate finance, thanks to consistent policy support, increasing consumption, and falling production costs.

This report, and others like it, only further highlights the gap between the Global North and South by demonstrating that, rather than being directed towards the developing economies of the Global South, a super-majority of climate finance is staying in the Global North. In addition, the countries of the Global North can mobilize their domestic sources of investment toward the green economy, only further widening the gap between North and South.

The resulting figures make for an uncomfortable reading; per the aforementioned CPI report, less than 3 percent of the global total in the 2021-2022 period—around \$30 billion—went to the least developed countries, while emerging markets and developing countries (sans China) received only 15 percent.

This means that, to reach their climate goals (as per the NDCs), the emerging and developing countries of the Global South need at the very least to *double and perhaps even quadruple* their spending on clean energy investments. Such funding can only realistically come from the Global North.

Yet the gap between Global North and South might only worsen, given ongoing efforts to address carbon-intensive sectoral emissions in a manner that puts the two in direct conflict. Consider that the European Union last year announced its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), to go into effect on 1 January 2026. This scheme—the first phase of the EU’s attempt to introduce a carbon border tax to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 (as identified in EU climate legislation) is well-intentioned yet raises numerous issues. In practice, CBAM imposes taxes on high-carbon imports in key industries such as steel, cement, aluminum, fertilizers, electricity, and hydrogen, with plans to expand this provision to other sectors of the European economy by 2034. Such is the burden the Mechanism imposes that it has already claimed a victim: the EU-India free trade agreement currently being discussed (the failure to reach such a landmark deal risks, inter alia, setting back

the EU's ambition to be a first-tier geopolitical actor). More worrying for the Global South, the EU's centrality in Western regulatory practices (the EU likes to identify itself as a "regulatory superpower") means that the United States, Canada, and Japan could follow suit, albeit in a less aggressive manner.

Overall, the escalating engagement in climate finance—and the resulting rush to secure funding for researching and producing clean energy technologies—has de facto unveiled a new frontier in international politics, magnifying the already complex relationship between the Global North and the Global South. This dynamic, layered with historical inequities and differing developmental trajectories, now extends into the realm of environmental policy and action, carrying at least five significant geopolitical implications.

First, *the structure of climate finance, as it currently stands, can be perceived as a mechanism through which the Global North seeks to maintain a certain degree of influence—or even "containment"—over the Global South.* Given the historical context, where Global North industrialized states' carbon emissions significantly contributed to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the

expectation (and even financial obligation, some would say) for these countries to lead in providing climate finance is high. However, the reality of climate finance distribution suggests a situation where funds are often tied to technologies and solutions developed in the Global North, requiring licensing fees and fostering dependencies rather than fostering genuine partnership and autonomy.

This arrangement could subtly perpetuate what is regarded as a form of economic and technological hegemony, whereby the Global South remains tethered to the innovations and whims of the Global North.

Second, *control over clean energy technologies and their development has emerged as an essential geostrategic instrument in the global effort to combat climate change.* Countries leading the development and deployment of such technologies—such as the United States, and, more notably, China—not only stand to gain economically through exports and intellectual property rights but also acquire substantial geopolitical leverage. For instance, China's dominance in the production of solar panels, controlling over 70 percent of the global market, not only bolsters its economy through

exports but also allows it to exert significant influence over global renewable energy adoption rates and policies. Similarly, competition over the production of EVs, with U.S. company Tesla facing off against Chinese competitors, will play a key role in shaping international standards and infrastructure for electric transportation.

As countries around the world strive to meet their NDC climate targets, access to these various technologies becomes crucial, turning them into bargaining chips in international negotiations and diplomacy. This control can shape global energy landscapes, influence political alliances, and determine the pace and direction of the global transition to a low-carbon economy.

Third, *Global South countries, with their own pressing developmental needs, face the challenge of balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship.* The path of carbon-emitting industrialization, taken by today's developed states over the past several hundred years, remains the primary, established avenue for rapid economic development. However, in the context of global climate commitments, that path is fraught with international criticism and potential sanctions.

Absent sufficient climate financing and access to affordable clean energy technologies, countries in the Global South may find themselves cornered into having to choose between immediate developmental needs and long-term climate obligations. This tension not only exacerbates existing global inequalities but also highlights a critical fault line in international climate policy—a divide that, if left unaddressed, could undermine collective efforts to address climate change.

Fourth, *the evolving landscape of climate finance and the control over green technologies possess the potential to exacerbate trade conflicts, thereby threatening an already fragile global economic order.* The introduction of policies such as the European Union's CBAM underscores this emerging trend, where efforts to mitigate climate change intersect with trade policy, potentially disadvantaging products from countries with less stringent environmental regulations.

This sets the stage for a proliferation of trade disputes, as states retaliate against perceived unfair trade practices with their own tariffs or regulations, thereby escalating into a cycle of protectionism and countermeasures. The World

Trade Organization, traditionally a forum for negotiating trade disagreements and fostering global trade cooperation, could find itself at the center of these conflicts, becoming a battleground for a new kind of geoeconomic contest centered around climate policies and technologies.

Fifth, *the above dynamics hint at the possibility of new geopolitical bloc formations, as countries align themselves based on their stances and capabilities concerning climate finance, technology transfers, and environmental standards.* These blocs could potentially divide along the existing fault lines of the Global North and the Global South (with some variations)—but with added complexities reflecting the nuances of climate policy, technological advancement, and economic interests.

Such a division risks further fragmenting the global trade system, along with undermining the principles of multilateralism and cooperation that have, despite challenges, contributed to decades of relative global stability and economic growth.

Carbon trading holds a pivotal role in addressing the current problem of climate finance.

Given the challenges and geopolitical implications of the current structure of climate finance, the way in which policymakers address these issues at COP29 will play a detrimental role in shaping the international political environment. Innovative, flexible, and relatively cost-affordable solutions that can adapt to the varied economic and environmental landscapes across the globe are urgently needed.

Bridging the Gap

Building upon the comprehensive foundation laid out in the initial sections of this essay, it is evident that carbon trading holds a pivotal role in addressing the current problem of climate finance. The inherent design of carbon trading systems—wherein emissions are capped, and allowances are traded—provides a dual benefit of reducing greenhouse gas emissions while generating financial flows that can support climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives. This market-driven approach incentivizes companies and countries to invest in cleaner technologies and practices, turning the reduction of carbon emissions into not

just an environmental duty but a financially sound decision.

Carbon trading thus acts as a critical conduit for channeling funds from developed states (often the buyers of carbon credits) to developing countries (typically the sellers), providing much-needed financial resources for sustainable development projects in the Global South. These projects, which include reforestation, renewable energy installations, and energy efficiency improvements, not only contribute to carbon sequestration or avoidance but also bring about local environmental and socio-economic benefits.

The effectiveness of carbon trading stems from its capacity to pinpoint and leverage the most economical opportunities for reducing emissions. By putting a price on carbon, market mechanisms send a clear economic signal that encourages investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and other low-carbon technologies. This not only facilitates a transition towards a more sustainable economy but also stimulates innovation and technological advancement in the quest to reduce emissions, simply by transforming carbon emissions from an economic externality into a conventional economic good

that can be transferred on an open market.

Moreover, carbon trading schemes can be designed to support adaptation and mitigation efforts in developing countries, specifically through mechanisms like the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) included under the Kyoto Protocol. Such initiatives promote sustainable development and climate resilience, highlighting the potential of carbon markets to contribute to global climate action.

It is in this context that recent advancements in artificial intelligence, or AI, must be taken into account: the mainstreaming of this incredible technology opens up numerous new opportunities for carbon trading and finance, having the potential to infuse these systems with unprecedented efficiency, accuracy, and potential.

Through sophisticated algorithms, AI can analyze vast amounts of data to identify patterns and inefficiencies in energy consumption that are not immediately apparent to human operators. This capability can be applied on all scales, from city-wide power grids down to the level of individual buildings, enabling precision in energy management that allows for significant reductions

in carbon emissions. For instance, AI systems can be used to dynamically adjust the energy consumption of buildings based on occupancy patterns, weather forecasts, and energy prices, ensuring that energy is used in the most efficient way possible. Similarly, on a larger scale, AI can optimize the distribution of renewable energy across a power grid, reducing reliance on fossil fuels and enhancing the resilience and sustainability of energy systems. In fact, according to a report released in late 2023 by Google and the Boston Consulting Group, AI “has the potential to unlock insights that could help mitigate [between] 5 percent to 10 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030”—the equivalent of the total annual emissions of the European Union.”

Beyond optimizing energy usage, AI also plays a pivotal role in enhancing the carbon trading mechanism itself. Here we can outline three ways in which this can take place.

Firstly, AI can improve the monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) processes that underpin carbon markets, ensuring that emissions reductions are accurately measured and verifiable. This is achieved through AI-driven analytics that can process satellite

imagery, sensory data, as well as other forms of environmental data to track changes in carbon stocks and flows with high precision. For example, AI can monitor deforestation rates and reforestation efforts, providing reliable data that can be used to issue or validate carbon credits. This level of accuracy and transparency is crucial for building trust in carbon markets and addresses one of the main critiques of carbon trading: the question of the actual environmental integrity of various carbon credits, ensuring that they effectively contribute to global emissions reduction efforts. An Indian company with which we are both affiliated, Ecohodo, is actively engaged in this endeavor: it uses advanced technologies—AI-enabled digital MRV software, geo-sensing, LiDAR, thermal imaging, etc.—to accurately measure and reduce carbon emissions for enterprises.

Secondly, AI can address one of the most significant challenges in climate finance: identifying and evaluating the most impactful investments. Through predictive analytics and machine learning models, AI can assess the potential carbon reduction impact of various projects, enabling investors and policymakers to allocate funds more effectively. This capability is particularly important in the

context of voluntary carbon markets, where the environmental integrity and additionality of projects are key concerns. By leveraging AI, stakeholders can better navigate the complex landscape of carbon offset projects, supporting those that offer genuine sustainability benefits.

Thirdly, the integration of AI into carbon trading and finance also opens up new avenues for innovation and collaboration. The development of blockchain technology, combined with AI, for instance, offers a secure and transparent platform for carbon credit transactions, potentially increasing participation in carbon markets. Such endeavors are already underway: a Swiss-based blockchain startup known as Toucan, for example, already offers automated, on-demand buying and selling of biochar carbon credits.

The Road Ahead

As carbon trading ascends in prominence as both a tool for combating climate change and a geopolitical lever, its implications for countries in the Global South warrant a deeper examination. While carbon trading presents an opportunity for all countries to engage in the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the

disparity in resources, technology, and infrastructure between the Global South and the Global North poses significant challenges.

To start, the complexity and cost of establishing and participating in carbon markets can be prohibitive for these countries. Setting up the necessary legal, financial, and monitoring frameworks requires significant investment, expertise, and technology, resources that are often scarce in the Global South. Moreover, the lack of robust regulatory frameworks and governance structures can deter investment and participation in carbon trading, complicating these countries’ efforts to engage in these markets effectively.

Another critical challenge is the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities through carbon trading. Without careful design, carbon markets can lead to situations where the benefits of trading accrue to wealthier states and corporations, leaving vulnerable communities in the Global South to bear the environmental and social costs. For instance, large-scale afforestation projects aimed at generating carbon credits can lead to land displacement without adequate compensation or consideration of local communities’ rights and livelihoods.

Additionally, the reliance on carbon trading may divert attention and resources away from direct emissions reductions within the Global South, focusing instead on selling carbon credits to the Global North. This dynamic could hinder the development of sustainable, low-carbon infrastructure and industries in these countries, perpetuating dependency and slowing progress toward environmental sustainability.

Yet despite these challenges, carbon trading holds significant potential as a vehicle for the Global North to finance the Global South's transition towards reducing their carbon emissions. By creating a market that values emissions reductions, carbon trading can mobilize substantial financial resources towards climate action in the Global South. The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) under the Kyoto Protocol, for instance, has demonstrated how carbon markets can facilitate technology transfer and financial flows from developed to developing countries, albeit with room for improvement in terms of equity and sustainability outcomes.

To maximize the benefits of carbon trading for the Global South, several strategies can be employed. *Enhancing transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in carbon markets is crucial.* This involves ensuring that projects funded through carbon trading genuinely contribute to sustainable development goals and do not harm local communities or ecosystems. Developing countries need more support in building the capacity to participate effectively in carbon markets. This support could come in the form of technical assistance, technology transfer, and financial resources to establish the necessary infrastructure and regulatory frameworks.

Moreover, *innovative approaches to carbon trading, such as pooled funds or regional carbon markets, could offer more accessible entry points for Global South countries.* These mechanisms could provide smaller countries with the leverage and scale needed to attract investment and negotiate more favorable terms, ensuring that the benefits of carbon trading are more equitably distributed.

Carbon trading holds significant potential as a vehicle for the Global North to finance the Global South's transition towards reducing their carbon emissions.

Finally, *the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, enshrined in international climate agreements, must guide the evolution of carbon markets.* This principle acknowledges the historical responsibility of the Global North for the bulk of GHG emissions and underscores the need for wealthier states to support the Global South in the transition to a low-carbon future. By aligning carbon trading mechanisms with this principle, the Global North can finance the Global South's climate action in a way that is fair, sustainable, and conducive to long-term global cooperation.

At the end of the day, what the authors of the U.S. Declaration of Independence called "Nature and Nature's God" remains unsurpassed in its management of our planet's ecology, as illustrated by the examples of the industrious bee and the architecturally adept beaver with which this essay began. The natural system is underpinned by harmony, efficiency, and an intrinsic value for each creature's role—a set of principles that states

and the human beings that inhabit them ought to emulate.

As stewards of this earth, humanity's journey towards combating climate change—a journey paved with the complexities of carbon trading, the transformative potential of AI, and the criticality of climate finance—calls for collaboration, innovation, and strong, moral leadership. The challenge before us is not merely a technical or financial one; it is a profound moral imperative to safeguard our planet for future generations, ensuring that the beauty, diversity, and life-supporting systems of our world are preserved.

This year's COP29 in Baku represents a test as to whether we human beings, like those creatures that manage their environments with such effortless grace, can also become architects of a world where the delicate balance of nature is restored and maintained. Crucial to this success is the question of climate finance and the understanding that each must contribute to the solution according to their ability and means. ^{BD}

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Carbons of War

The Environmental Impact of Military Activity in Conflict and Peace

Jahangir E. Arasli

“The environment is always a casualty of war. Always. When the guns fall silent, people are left to shoulder the burden of a toxic legacy for generations”

– Inger Anderson, UNEP Executive Director,
6 November 2023

Climate change is the supreme challenge of our times, poised for human civilization. Its facets are diverse: the rise of temperatures, trending natural disasters and enduring weather extremes, droughts and floods, fluctuations of the sea level and hydrographic regimes, distressed ecosystem balances, and other aberrations. Climate change affects human health and demography, increases food and water insecurity, accelerates environmental degradation (such as deterioration of arable and grazing lands, deforestation, or desertification), shrinks biodiversity, and produces other

similar effects. Climate change escalates competition for dwindling resources and, subsequently, generates frictions and tensions between states and within individual groups of populations, thus forming a stage for geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry as well as potential violent conflicts and wars. The snowballing impact of climate change on a global scale steadily approaches the point of irreversibility.

The grim irony is that climate change, in many ways, represents a result of different forms of anthropogenic activity, including increased carbon emissions.

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Although the climatic transformation is already acknowledged as the ultimate challenge of global magnitude, one particular aspect remains often overlooked. Warfare is one of the countless varieties of human performance. Wars and armed conflicts naturally yield an enormous impact on the atmosphere and habitat. Beyond that, the existing military forces and their routine activities unwillingly affect the environment even in peacetime.

Therefore, this essay examines different patterns related to the damaging impact of wars and military activities on the climate and the environment, with a particular focus on carbon emissions. Furthermore, it addresses the subject of climate change-driven conflicts and evaluates measures taken at the international and national level to mitigate the effects projected by military forces on the environment. The overall objective of this paper is to provide analytical support in the course of preparations for the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Azerbaijan.

From Pre-Industrial Wars to Nukes

Since ancient times, wars have always led to the devastation of the environment. Appropriate examples are found in various holy books and numerous historical chronicles that refer to the “scorched earth” approach to warfare as a ravaging military tactic. The deliberate or unintended collateral damage of this approach to war-making became increasingly amplified with the advent of the industrial age, the development of technologies, and the globalization of conflict cycles. World War I introduced high explosives and motor warfare; more than a century after its end, there are the “red zones” remaining in northwest France, where people still cannot live or implement economic activity.

World War II witnessed the extensive application of airpower and firepower. As a result, myriad particles from the debris of ruined cities and towns went up into the atmosphere, together with carbon

This essay examines different patterns related to the damaging impact of wars and military activities on the climate and the environment, with a particular focus on carbon emissions.

dioxide produced by fires. Besides, motors and engines of military hardware added the mammoth volumes of that gas. The final accord of that war, in the form of the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, manifested the beginning of the nuclear era.

The devastation caused by World War II compelled the postwar international community to consider measures for codifying and limiting the impact of war on the environment. The clauses of the 1949 Geneva Convention and its additional protocols envisage a responsibility of the warring parties for the protection of the environment

during armed conflicts. However, the zero-sum game logic of the Cold War and the deployment of massive armed forces by two opposing coalitions increasingly affected the environment, notwithstanding the absence of direct military confrontation.

Nuclear weapons introduced a new hazardous dimension. Over 2,000 nuclear detonations in 1945-1992 conducted by the United States, the Soviet Union, the UK,

France, and China contaminated the soil, air, and ocean waters at test sites in places like Nevada, the Marshall Islands atolls, the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the Arctic, French Polynesia, China's Xinjiang, and other parts of the globe. Furthermore, several incidents and catastrophes involving nuclear weapons took place. In the U.S. only, there were 32 nuclear-related incidents (the code name "Broken Arrow"); six nukes are

still unaccounted for. Nine sunken nuclear-powered submarines (two American and seven Soviet or Russian) lie in the ocean bed with their reactors not recovered; one of them (the Soviet K-219), which sank

in 1986 not far from the U.S. East Coast, had 16 ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads onboard.

The conventional warfare of the Cold War period also produced environmental impacts. During its long war in Indochina, the U.S. and its allies dropped over 7.5 million tons of aerial ordnance—double the amount released by all belligerents during the entirety of World War II. The application of firepower and the use of

both napalm and herbicide defoliants further amplified the collateral damage to the environment.

During the Cold War, thousands of square kilometers of valuable land (especially in Central Europe) were alienated for military disposal to accommodate bases, firing ranges, training grounds, and storage facilities. That period left a legacy in the form of contamination, radiation, and pollution that continues to affect soil, air, water, and aquifers. The need for the utilization of surplus weapons, equipment, and ammunition stocks placed another burden on the post-Cold War states, as is explained below.

The first post-Cold War era conflict—Operation "Desert Storm," which ended the illegal Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1991—displayed a grandiose consumption of ammunition. In addition, the retreating Iraqi troops set ablaze hundreds of oil wells out of revenge and in order to obscure the U.S.-led coalition forces' targeting with a smoke-screen. According to some published accounts, the 43 days of fighting resulted in the emission of

133 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

In addition, the Iraqis released many thousands of tons of crude oil into the Persian Gulf to deter a potential amphibious landing of the U.S.-led coalition forces. The latter, in turn, extensively used tank cannon shells with depleted uranium (DU) rods with higher armor-piercing capacity (something similar took place in 1999 during the NATO bombing campaign of Yugoslavia). That war provided a clear illustration of how military operational logic negates the environmental impact, which is seen as inevitable collateral damage.

The war in Ukraine provides a prime example of how a contemporary war contributes to mounting global environmental degradation.

Technology and Recklessness

At the current stage, ongoing wars and armed conflicts continue to contribute to the mounting global environmental degradation. The war in Ukraine provides a prime example of such an impact. This war is distinguished by an enormous ammunition consumption rate (artillery shells, rockets, bombs, and missiles), whose detonation generates

carbon dioxide emissions. The open burning of destroyed buildings and military hardware, movements of troops and engine-powered equipment, logistic sustainment operations, and aviation activity (especially jets, which are conducting hundreds of sorties daily) add more releases.

According to some accounts, **120 million tons** of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions were released into the air in the first year of conflict only; that amount is equal to the combined yearly GHG output of Singapore, Switzerland, and Syria (it should be noted, though, that it is hard to independently verify the methodology of this research). In addition to CO₂, explosions and fires release harmful chemical particles, such as methane, hydrogen cyanide, silica, benzene, nitrogen dioxide, and other ingredients, which cause the exposure of combatants and civilians in the war zone and beyond.

The fighting reduced many areas to what looks like a lunar landscape and produced hundreds of thousands of tons of rubble and debris. Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) infest the more than 1,000 kilometer-long frontline and the adjacent areas. An illustrative example: a single salvo of a Smerch multiple launch rocket

system (MLRS) in its cluster munition variation contains 12 artillery rockets, each fitted with up to 588 shaped fragmentation sub-munitions; thus, an MLRS battery consisting of four launchers can cover an area of almost 70 hectares with 31,008 (!) bomblets (the calculation is mine). As a statistical rule, 5 to 10 percent of the fired munitions do not detonate. The postwar demining and UXO disposal in that theater of operations will take one generation, at least.

The destruction of the dam on the Dnieper River in June 2023 (for which the adversaries are blaming each other) has led to a large-scale natural disaster. Over ten cubic kilometers of water released from the Kakhovka reservoir by the demolition of the dam caused flooding across an area of **600 square kilometers** of the adjacent lands downstream. Consequently, the level of water in the reservoir decreased by 80 percent, thus affecting the water supply to the nearby region.

At the same time, over 80,000 hectares of the protected areas—including three natural reserves that served the habitats of various endemic species—became swamped. That catastrophe has also affected the sensitive ecosystem of the Black Sea. The indiscriminate targeting by

the Russian military forces against critical infrastructure, such as the Dnipro hydroelectric power plant and high dam, and the military activities near the Zaporizhzhia and Chernobyl nuclear power stations (the former is in active mode, the latter is mothballed) threaten to instigate potential catastrophes of the same or even larger scale.

In total, almost 30 percent of the internationally-recognized territory of Ukraine is directly affected by the war, and the estimated damage to the environment is over **\$54 billion**, as of the end of 2023. The restoration of the environmental balance in the aftermath of that war will take many decades, while urban rebuilding and reconstruction will require the release of more volumes of GHG.

The environmental effects of the war in Ukraine are widespread in areas beyond the direct theatre of operations. The mysterious sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 seabed gas pipelines in September 2022 led to the outflow of quantities of natural gas into the Baltic Sea. In the Caspian Sea, the indirect impact of Russian military operations reportedly left thousands of seals dead, as malfunctioning aerial cruise missiles launched from over that area towards Ukraine fell into the

seawater, contaminating it with leaked fuel. Intensive dredging in the Volga delta, port construction works, and increased shipping facilitating the strategic bridge between Russia and Iran further affect the already fragile and encapsulated Caspian ecosystem, which is already suffering from the decreasing sea level.

Moreover, Russia has contracted a “grey fleet” of aged oil tankers, which now sail the world’s seas and oceans to facilitate the export of its sanctioned oil; the technical conditions of most of these vessels are below standards and may end in catastrophe eventually.

The Armenian military forces, during their occupation of parts of the territory of Azerbaijan (1992-2023), also actively practiced “scorched earth” tactics. These included, inter alia, the indiscriminate use of landmines, engineered earthworks, illegal geological mining, deforestation, abuse of water resources, and other environment-damaging practices.

After the liberation of the occupied territories in 2020-2023, Azerbaijan faces an enormous task of rebuilding and rehabilitation, including demining, unexploded ordnance disposal, and the restoration of damaged ecosystems.

The undertaking of managing the consequences of the three-decade-long ecocide will take decades and multibillion-dollar investments.

Violent non-state actors around the world—a category that by definition does not observe international law, rules, and ethical norms—also aggressively harm the environment during intrastate conflicts. Some governments are also contributing to it with the disproportional use of force: the Ethiopian army, during its 2023 counterinsurgency campaign, actively used “scorched earth” techniques in the rebellious region of Tigray, which had just started to recover from the ecological disaster caused by fighting in the previous decades.

According to the UN Environmental Program, no less than 40 percent of intra-state armed conflicts in the past 60 years were associated with the exploitation or abuse of natural resources (not incidentally, the UN General Assembly declared 6 November the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict). A predatory abuse of those resources by all warring parties is a hallmark of multiple African wars: mined timber, ivory, and rhino horns sustain arms supplies.

Uncontrolled poaching heightened by fighting is distressing many African wildlife species in danger of extinction, such as gorillas. Poppy and coca leaf cultivation by armed groups in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and parts of South America violate natural balances in those areas, while the rapacious exploitation of oil wells by armed groups pollutes vast plots of the Syrian Desert.

A very illustrative example of how a violent non-state party could cause a manmade disaster is the sinking of the merchant vessel *Rubymar*. In February 2024, that UK-owned and Belize-flagged vessel was hit by a missile launched by the Yemeni Houthi militants. It quickly sank in the Red Sea, leaving a 29-kilometer-long oil slick on the surface and 41,000 tons of chemical fertilizers in its cargo hold in the seabed. That incident endangered the unique ecosystem of the Red Sea, particularly its coral reefs.

The secondary impacts of wars and conflicts on the environment are also immense. Human displacement—an unavoidable product of most armed hostilities—also causes environmental stress in the areas where displaced people find refuge. Furthermore, post-conflict rebuilding, reconstruction, and rehabilitation activities upsurge the carbon trail too.

According to think tank guesstimates, the U.S. war-related military operations in 2001-2018 produced 440 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂ equivalent, or CO₂e), of the total amount of 1,267 million CO₂e left by the U.S. military in that period. The first two months of the 2023-2024 middle-intensity war in Gaza caused by the Hamas terrorist attack against Israel led to the emission of 281,000 metric tons of CO₂e. It is important to note, though, that those accounts are constructed on theoretical models that cannot be verified independently and could be politically biased. However, the mere fact that wars critically harm the environment and contribute to carbon dioxide emissions is undeniable.

In the War Loop

There is an evident nexus between climate change and the likelihood of armed conflicts. Although getting into the details of this aspect is beyond the scope of this essay, it is possible to briefly outline its key points.

Climate change expands windows of vulnerability by worsening existing geopolitical frictions, tensions, and conflicts while bringing new ones into being. The ice melt in the Arctic illustrates how new climate change-related realities are materializing. Along with the emerging geoeconomic and connectivity opportunities, that thaw phenomenon is instigating geopolitical competition in that region between the Western powers, Russia, China, and other states. Mineral and biological resources combined with assuming control over the shipping lines are at stake. One of the particular outcomes of that now heightened competition is a remarkable increase in military activity in the Arctic, which produces additional stress on the region's environment—one of the few places on Earth not too touched by human enterprise.

Meanwhile, in the African regions of the Sahel, Darfur, and the Horn of Africa, climate change and higher temperatures produce water scarcity, which in turn reduces opportunities for agriculture and cattle breeding and aggravates the competition

Climate change expands windows of vulnerability by worsening existing geopolitical frictions, tensions, and conflicts while bringing new ones into being.

for shrinking resources between different population groups.

Water and food insecurity are among the principal causal factors

contributing to the occurrence of civil wars and the spread of terrorism. The ensuing displacement and migration of populations cause pressure on resources in other places where refugees go, arrest economic growth, and produce social instability, thus making the initial consequences further widen. One of the underlying causes behind the start of the ongoing civil war in Syria that began in 2011 was that it was preceded by a two-year-long period of drought and bad harvests. This led to an internal migration of rural populations to cities where jobs and housing were scarce, inadequate, or too far out of reach. The result was a critical explosive mass that could not be controlled.

In addition to intrastate conflicts, environment-related encounters produce interstate tensions too. The Middle East is particularly vulnerable. As the late King Hussein of Jordan once explicitly warned, “Water is the one issue that could drive the nations of this region to war.”

Taken together, the militaries of the world are the fourth-largest GHG emitter on a global scale, behind only the United States, China, and India.

Since the late 1980s, the Turkish construction projects of 22 high dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have continued to generate controversy between

Türkiye and downstream-placed Syria and Iraq. Likewise, Egypt and Sudan have protested and even threatened to use force against Ethiopia to prevent the construction of the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam](#) on the Blue Nile, a tributary of the Nile River. This project would benefit Ethiopia but deprive Egypt and Sudan of much of the water used for agricultural, industrial, and public needs.

All of the abovementioned cases clearly illustrate both an intersection and a causal chain between climate, conflicts, and human (in) security.

Harmful Peacetime Military Routines

The planet’s combined military forces produce [5.5 percent of global GHG emissions](#) (2022 figures). This means that, taken together, the militaries of the world are the fourth-largest GHG emitter

on a global scale, behind only the United States, China, and India. The nature of military activity (it operates 24/7), such as training and drills, live firing exercises, and equipment maintenance, means that this category of human conduct consumes sizeable volumes of fossil fuel and thus leaves a huge carbon footprint.

In addition, each military unit in its permanent station produces persistent pollutant precipitants and contaminating wastes (e.g., diesel, gasoline, oil lubricants, acid, unexploded ordnance, empty casings, depleted batteries), which also have negative environmental and ecological impacts.

Imagine a tank battalion of 40 or more vehicles that spends one day on a firing range. Beyond the amounts of CO₂ returned from fires, explosions, and combusted jet or diesel fuel, the unit training also yielded toxic oxides and blast agents that go into the air. Training flights of military aircraft, especially jets, emit CO₂ into the atmosphere’s layers. The pinging of sonars used by naval warships affects marine mammals and often causes their beaching. In addition, military training, involving large numbers of forces, weapons, and equipment, often causes physical damage to geographic locations, lands, and

ecosystems. The land used by the military worldwide occupies an estimated [1 to 6 percent of the Earth’s surface](#).

The disposal of aging or surplus weapons, equipment, ammunition, and other military supplies represents a particular challenge. In the past, when climate change was not at the top of a nation’s policy priority list, military leftover items were dealt with recklessly.

After the end of World War II, for example, over 1 million tons of conventional ammunition were dumped in the Atlantic Ocean between Scotland and Ireland, together with more than 110 former German submarines scuttled in the same area (Operation Deadlight, 1945-1946). Substantial quantities of chemical shells were discarded in the Baltic Sea in the same manner.

During the Cold War, the USSR manufactured over 50,000 main battle tanks (more than all the other countries in the world combined); many hundreds of them are still rusting away in open storage facilities in some post-Soviet states (e.g., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), waiting for disposal—something that requires an expensive and energy-consuming technological

process. Dozens of decommissioned Soviet / Russian submarines in the Arctic and the Pacific await the deactivation of their nuclear reactors for decades. According to the [Bellona Environmental Foundation](#) headquartered in Norway, the pending recovery of five scuttled submarines' nuclear reactors from the seafloor of the Kara Sea will cost €278 million.

The infamous [saga](#) of the *Sao Paulo* aircraft carrier offers a glimpse of the challenge related to the management of the disposal of military hardware. This particular ship was written off by the French navy and sold to Brazil. The Brazilian navy decided to decommission her after a quarter of a century, due to its poor technical condition and associated hazards: the ship's interior contained kilometers of cables covered by asbestos as well as mercury, lead, and other carcinogenic materials. The ship's hull was towed to Türkiye for scrapping and recycling; however, she was barred entry into Turkish territorial waters after local environmentalist groups protested. Then the ship

had to return to Brazil, where she was also banned from port entry. Eventually, the navy scuttled this ship of misfortune—with all its toxic filling in the Atlantic Ocean at a depth of five kilometers—despite vocal protests from the country's public prosecutor's office, Greenpeace, and other environmentalist groups, which accused the Brazilian military of violating international conventions on the trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes and prevention of marine pollution.

“Green Warriors”

In discussing the highly politicized subject matter of climate change, some politicians, scientists, and environmental activists have put the utmost responsibility for carbon emissions on the [Global North](#). Indeed, from the perspective of the Global South, it was the countries of the Global North that had launched and then benefited from the Industrial Revolution and are responsible for [92 percent](#) of surplus GHG output, to which military-related activities also contribute.

Western states were the first to initiate and implement measures, procedures, and reforms aimed at controlling and limiting the environmental impact of military activity in war and peace.

That said, it is also necessary to admit that Western states were the first to initiate and implement measures, procedures, and reforms aimed at controlling and limiting the environmental impact of military activity in war and peace. Those actions are developing along five pathways. Each will be examined in turn.

The first such pathway is the *adaptation of institutional culture and architecture to environmental agendas*. Environmental imperatives have led to changes in militaries' institutional domains. For instance, the United States established the [Environmental Management Directorate](#) under the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense. Its area of responsibility is to incorporate environmental concerns into the American military's activities, reduce environmental costs and impacts of military operations, and execute other related tasks. All U.S. uniformed services have specialized departments, such as the [U.S. Army Environmental Command](#).

The majority of defense forces around the world, from France to South Africa, now have tons of manuals, guidebooks, and various types of “green codes of conduct” to regulate environmental and ecological aspects of military

activities. A particular instance is the [Environmental Guidebook for Military Operations](#), developed by a multinational working group and approved by the armed forces of the United States, Finland, and Sweden.

To increase environmental awareness among uniformed personnel, defense establishments conduct specialized training courses and embed designated officers (ombudspersons) to oversee environmental norms. Some armies (e.g., the [Indian Army](#)) have even established specialized ecological units or task forces.

The second pathway is the *projection of a responsible attitude*. Defense forces around the world now have to adopt policies and operational performance that minimize the environmental impact caused by military missions, notwithstanding their types.

One particular example of that track is the serial NATO exercise “Nordic Response,” which is conducted biannually in Norway. In 2024, the Norwegian Armed Forces, implementing measures to reduce the risk of accidents or damage to property and the environment during that exercise, established a special [Joint Daily Safety Signal](#) publication to increase forces' and

public awareness on the subject matter.

Moreover, the breeding areas of sea mammals (e.g., whales, orcas, dolphins) are exempted as zones of naval exercises; the militaries of the U.S., [Canada](#), Australia, New Zealand, and some European states have adopted codified procedures and caveats for the use of active sonars in order to ensure the protection of the marine mammals from acoustic disturbance. A striking example of the responsible modus operandi is provided by the case of the *USS Guardian*, a U.S. Navy minesweeper that accidentally ran aground on a reef off the coast of the Philippines—an area that had been previously designated as a national natural park. In order to avoid damage to that fragile ecosystem, the U.S. Navy was ordered to [disassemble the ship](#) on the spot of the accident instead of undertaking a salvaging operation. Formal apologies and compensation were provided as well. Thus, a valuable asset became stricken from the naval order of battle to preserve the environmental balance.

The third pathway aimed at controlling and limiting the physical impact of military activity in war and peace is the *application of environment protection missions and disaster relief operations*. Many

national military forces around the world, as the most organized state agents, now train for consequence-management and resilience duties related to natural and man-made disasters producing environmental and ecological impact (e.g., floods, storms, bushfires, industrial and transportation catastrophes and incidents).

Often, such missions are transformed into complex multinational [humanitarian relief operations](#) that involve dozens of countries, as they did in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Another example is how during the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK in 2001, the British Army provided assistance to civilian powers to manage the consequences.

Moreover, military engineering units around the world are often engaged in water management and construction works aimed at minimizing damage to the environment. The naval forces of many countries conduct fisheries control patrols and environmental monitoring, including in ecologically sensitive areas such as Greenland. The protection of nuclear power stations and other critical infrastructure installations from terrorist attacks that could produce consequential damage to the environment is also

among the responsibilities now given to militaries.

The fourth pathway consists of the *use of innovative technological solutions* that increase energy efficiency. This represents a promising yet costly pathway to reducing the military carbon footprint.

The reliance on alternative sources of power, such as biofuel, hydrogen, low-energy nuclear reactions (LENR), or lithium-ion batteries, would substantially lower GHG emissions. Two examples can help illustrate this trend. One, the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force are [actively experimenting](#) with propulsion systems and engines powered with biofuel blends. Two, in 2020, the Japanese Self-Defense Maritime Force commissioned an attack submarine powered by lithium-ion batteries, the first in its class in the world. Furthermore, military units around the world are integrating renewable sources of energy (wind, solar, and tidal) to reduce their daily fossil fuel consumption in their permanent locations.

Defense industries are following suit by elaborating their environment-friendly policies. For instance, the Saab Group—the leading Swedish aerospace and defense company—targets reducing carbon

emissions by [25 to 42 percent](#) by 2030, in compliance with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the COP process. The group also established a Climate Fund and aims to reduce the use of hazardous instances in its technological chain. Artificial intelligence tools play a growing role as enablers in attaining those ends.

Yet, there is still not too much clarity about how the mass transition to new technologies, including alternative fuels and propellants, would alter the operational and tactical performance of defense forces, especially in wartime. Furthermore, new technologies are a double blessing: for instance, 1 ton of pure lithium used for the manufacturing of lithium-ion batteries for submarines requires the mining of approximately 100 tons of ore, which produces polluting waste. Another example is the renewables-based “smart solutions,” which are weather condition-dependent.

Nonetheless, the relatively fast shift of military forces to using new energy sources is not an impossible mission, as history demonstrates. The navies’ changeover from coal to oil, prompted by World War I, took years, not decades. Likewise, the first nuclear naval propulsion was introduced less than a decade after the end of World War

II. Nowadays, we are witnessing a similar transfer. According to the [U.S. Defense Logistics Agency](#), in 2022 it purchased 84 million barrels of oil, compared to 99 million barrels in 2018. The same source indicates that the GHG emissions generated by the U.S. military in 2022 dropped to 48 million tons from 51 million tons in 2021. There are various causal factors behind that trend, such as a reduction of the American military's posture overseas; however, the increased use of new technologies (e.g., the increased use of drones together with manned aircraft, fuel-efficient solutions) also contribute to this reduced figure.

It appears that the ice is breaking up and the era of military transition to new energy is unfolding steadily.

The fifth pathway aimed at controlling and limiting the environmental impact of military activity in war and peace is *expanded international cooperation*. Multilateral engagement and collaboration are key elements in reducing GHG emissions and other environmental aftermaths produced by military activities.

In this regard, NATO represents an illustrative example of a supranational politico-security body that firmly integrates the environment

and climate into its strategic agenda. The [2022 NATO Strategic Concept](#) outlined climate change as a “defining challenge of our times.” That issue was on the agenda of all recent high-level NATO meetings; the last summit in Vilnius (2023) produced three reports in this regard.

Moreover, the Atlantic Alliance has developed a set of structures that deal with scientific research, analysis, and practical implementation of environmental solutions. Among them are the Science for Peace and Security Program, the Science and Technology Organization, the Environmental Protection Working Group, the Smart Energy Initiative, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, the Specialized Team on Energy Efficiency and Environmental Protection, and the [Center of Excellence for Climate Change and Security](#) in Montreal, Canada.

In addition, NATO has elaborated a range of directive documents in this regard, including the [Green Defence Framework](#) (2014), the [Climate Change and Security Action Plan](#) (2021), the [Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment](#) (2022), allied joint environment protection publications, and NATO standardization agreements (STANAG). These documents outline the Alliance's

vision of climate and environmental challenges and its own politico-security roles and priorities in this regard. Furthermore, they formulate standards and technical requirements aimed at reducing carbon emissions and address other practical aspects, such as commanders' environmental awareness and responsibilities during the preparation and execution of operations.

Although the described architecture appears cumbersome and over-bureaucratized, NATO seems to be demonstrating its determination to implement practical measures to adapt to climate change and mitigate its harmful effects.

International conventions and treaties (such as the aforementioned Geneva Conventions) represent an essential legal track in limiting the environmental impact of wars and military activities. In this regard, there are special frameworks that restrict the proliferation of certain classes of land-contaminating weapons (e.g., landmines, cluster munitions) and regulate the military use of global commons.

The military-induced factors of climate change and environmental degradation, and the climate-conflict-security nexus, should become an integral part of an overall calculus and addressed appropriately.

The incorporation of scientific and public tracks could provide an essential supplement to multilateral and bilateral interstate cooperation and partnerships. Academia and think tanks

significantly contribute to research related to climate change. For that particular reason, NATO's [Science for Peace and Security Program](#) finances scientific environmental projects in allied and partner nations (including the field of renewable energy technologies). International and national environmental non-governmental and non-profit organizations (e.g., the [Conflict and Environment Observatory](#)), grassroots movements, and other segments of civil society also play a role.

Green Takeaways

It took quite a long time for nations and governments to recognize the necessity of incorporating the military domain into the global green agenda. For instance, objections from some countries led to the omission of the reference to military activity in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which operationalized the UN

Framework Convention on Climate Change. The military-induced factors of climate change and environmental degradation, and the climate-conflict-security nexus, should become an integral part of an overall calculus and addressed appropriately.

Defense establishments, inherently conservative by nature, considered the commitments and requirements related to climate and environmental agendas as a liability that diverts their armed forces from their core warfighting missions while deleteriously affecting training, combat readiness, and operational performance. However, Western military culture and institutionalized civil-military relations based on subordination to civilian oversight eventually led to an acceptance of green codes of conduct as a conscious need. The presence of the NATO Secretary General and high-level [U.S. Department of Defense delegations](#) at all the recent UN Climate Change Conferences (including COP27 in Cairo and COP28 in Abu Dhabi) is a clear indicator of the ingraining of the environmental agenda into the military mind as one of their top strategic and operational imperatives.

However, a major problem still exists: not all state actors and none of the violent non-state actors recognize and accept

the pressing need to address climate change concerns. The logic of *Realpolitik* and “pragmatic” revisionist strategies enables those actors to behave selfishly and irresponsibly, especially during times of war and armed conflicts. The enforcement and accountability related to the implementation of climate change-related international frameworks will remain a weak link from an observable perspective.

Additionally, the issue of climate change remains a highly politicized and debated matter, generating biases and controversies that affect the adaptation and implementation of practical measures, including in the defense domain. Adding more intricacy, certain environmental and ecological activist groups preach “militant anti-militarism” and even commit violent acts for their cause.

In the era of global competition and rising geopolitical tensions, the subject matter of climate change and the environment becomes even more important. Moreover, the inherent link between international security, climate, and the environment will grow stronger over time for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that climate change and environmental degradation increase the risk of wars and violent conflicts.

All collective multinational and individual national de-carbonization strategies and environmental policies should take seriously the military dimension in their ongoing deliberation, for the simple reason that military and paramilitary forces (in both times of peace and war) leave a significant carbon and environmental footprint, due to the nature of their professional activities and material capabilities. The willingness of some major military actors to take seriously their commitments to the climate and the environment—and the unwillingness of others to do so—could impede achieving consensus at forthcoming Climate Change Conferences.

Former U.S. Vice President and celebrated environmental activist Al Gore wrote in his 2013 book *Earth in the Balance: Forging a New Common Purpose* that, “We are the enemy,

just as we have ourselves as allies.” In many ways, the life of human beings looks like a war with themselves, and the Earth is indeed a war theater.

The full overcoming of the anthropogenic impact on the environment is a far-fetched undertaking; however, its mitigation and adaptation to reasonable limits is still conceivable. This process is extremely complex and costly, yet a deficiency or insufficiency of action will precipitate even more cost. The military-induced factors of climate change and environmental degradation, and the climate-conflict-security nexus, should become an integral part of an overall calculus and addressed appropriately. It would therefore be prudent for Azerbaijan’s COP29 Presidency to incorporate that logic into its agenda and contribute to the development of consistent strategies and policies. **BD**

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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

The alternative to viewing interregional connectivity through the prism of great power competition could be the concept of “free and open spaces.”

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

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.

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

The potential for reengineering the Three Seas Initiative and linking the project to the Middle Corridor is geopolitically and geoeconomically game-changing.

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 Chaousovsky 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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Pivotal States, Not Swing States

Mohammed Soliman

The United States, in particular, is grappling with the challenges posed by the emerging multipolar order and the need to secure a favorable position in this evolving global landscape. As part of this contemplation, there is a growing recognition of the significance of “swing states” like India, Türkiye, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia in shaping the outcome of the post-Cold War order and the broader global system. However, framing these consequential states as “swing states” in and of itself carries significant risk, as it implies that the only choice they have is a binary one: pick the U.S.-led West or the China and Russia axis. In reality, their strategic posture is far away from choosing one side over the other; at the same time, they are not behaving similarly to the Cold War-era non-aligned movement that was inherently anti-Western

and leaned towards the Soviet-led block under the guise of anti-colonialism solidarity.

The appropriate strategic name for this growing list of countries in the present-day is “pivotal states,” and includes Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, chosen for their strategic geography, demography, and overall strength. Alongside these, there are other pivotal states with unique roles, such as Vietnam due to its position in the global supply chain and Egypt as a maritime bottleneck between the East and West.

It is now widely acknowledged that international stability and the outcome of the U.S.-China neo-Cold War are influenced by factors beyond the behavior of Russia and China. But one crucial factor that remains underappreciated is that

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the behavior of pivotal states—which are determined to chart an independent course—will play vital roles in shaping the future of the international system. It is essential to recognize that these pivotal states inherently reject the bipolarity and “Cold War 2.0” framing that dominates the perspectives of, for example, Washington, Brussels, and Tokyo.

Criteria

Jared Cohen, the President of Global Affairs and Co-Head of the Office of Applied Innovation at Goldman Sachs, has defined these pivotal states as having several advantageous characteristics: a strong position in global supply chains; suitability for nearshoring, offshoring, or friendshoring; substantial capital resources and the willingness to deploy this capital worldwide; and leaders who nurture global visions while operating within certain constraints.

Cohen should be applauded for putting pen to paper and coming up with a framework that could include more countries in the future as their position strengthens in any of these four categories. According to Cohen, “geopolitical swing states” (his chosen term of use)—akin to the role of swing states in shaping U.S. domestic politics—possess the ability to impact the global balance of power. The “geopolitical swing states” have their independent global agendas and strategically utilize their stability and economic advantages to bolster their influence. They demonstrate heightened dynamism and strategic thinking

At the present moment, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye are considered to be among the most prominent and notable pivotal states on the geopolitical stage. A whole crop of others (among them Egypt, Nigeria, Taiwan, and Vietnam) hold the potential to acquire the level of international importance and characteristics of pivotal states.

and often opt for multi-alignment, positioning themselves as crucial and unpredictable actors in the future of globalization and the ongoing U.S.-China strategic competition.

Similarly, the Chairman of Eurasia Group, Cliff Kupchan, highlights the significance of the six prominent middle powers in the global south: Brazil, India,

Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye. According to Kupchan, these “swing states” (the term used by the author) in the Global South are not completely aligned with any particular superpower, granting them the freedom to shape new power dynamics.

Similar to Cohen, Kupchan provides criteria that explain why the growing importance of these six states can be attributed to long-term historical developments and recent global trends. Since the end of the Cold War, he argues, these states have gained more influence in international relations as the strict division into opposing blocs drew them in. The current Sino-U.S. bipolarity is weaker, allowing middle powers greater freedom of movement. Additionally, the process of deglobalization over the past two decades has led to the emergence of new regional relationships. These swing states, as regional leaders, are becoming increasingly significant as power devolves to their respective regions, which enables them to have more agency today than ever before. Near-shoring and friend-shoring are gradually redirecting firms and trade away from China to other regions, particularly the Global South. Consequently, certain swing states in the global south will evolve into busier trade hubs.

Terminology Matters

Cohen and Kupchan have devoted significant efforts to developing concrete criteria that could assist scholars, investors, and policymakers in identifying the significant states that will become even more significant as the world becomes increasingly multipolar and oriented towards the East. However, the term “swing states” itself creates a sense of detachment from these states, as it portrays Western engagement with them through the lens of great power competition, which is already being rejected. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar exemplified this perspective during remarks he delivered at the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum in June 2022. When asked about India’s position in the current U.S.-China Cold War, he stated, “Europe has to move away from the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, while the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” He further emphasized, “Although a connection is being made between China, India, and the events in Ukraine, it is important to recognize that the circumstances involving China and India existed long before the situation in Ukraine unfolded.”

The terminology used to categorize or discuss countries is crucial as it sets the tone for diplomatic discourse and political engagement. Many of these terms in the international relations lexicon are rooted in twentieth-century (and even nineteenth-century) Western-centric visions of the world and are being interpreted as a lack of interest in understanding the political realities of the Global South.

Hence the potential advantage of the “keystone states” concept that Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College first put forward in 2015. Summarizing this concept in a previous edition of *Baku Dialogues*, Damjan Krnjević Mišković has written that

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.)

Bearing in mind the potential advantage of the “keystone states” concept, Western and non-Western academics and policymakers can also open up an intellectual space that is more reflective of the textured and manifold histories and geopolitical aims of these countries by referring to the countries highlighted previously as “pivotal states” instead of “swing states.” Nurturing this intellectual space will help put the West on the right track toward developing long-term foreign policy frameworks appropriate for this dynamic age.

Technology Matters

A major component of the ongoing great power competition between the U.S. and the Russia-China Axis—a competition that pivotal states seek to evade—is

the increasing role of technology. As the world enters the second half of the 2020s, it is impossible to deny the enormous influence of technology—not only over economies and societies, but on geopolitics more broadly. Once concentrated in the hands of a few states (mostly those in the West, such as America), technological prowess is becoming more dispersed across the world as emerging powers harness the transformational power of technology to boost economic and geopolitical might.

As I have argued in a recent Foreign Policy Research Institute article, the world has entered “the technological pivot of history,” which means that global dynamics now hinge on a country’s ability to harness disruptive technological innovation, not just geographical control. This fundamentally reshapes the criteria for geopolitical influence. The U.S.-China tech Cold War exemplifies this, with states locked in an all-out race for technological supremacy. This competition draws new geopolitical lines around the control of artificial intelligence and data flows. Pivotal states (unlike some

keystone states) are scrambling to develop their own technology doctrines, further disrupting the global technology landscape.

Many pivotal states, such as India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, are pouring billions of dollars into initiatives aimed at advancing capabilities in areas such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, unmanned systems, and high-tech manufacturing. As China and the United States remain locked in fierce competition fueled by technology interests, these pivotal states are offering the world alternative avenues that do not involve alignment with one side of the rivalry or the other.

With the rise of the pivotal states in prominence in the global technology landscape, they are enjoying an associated increase in geopolitical clout that is inextricably linked to their attractively non-aligned position in the world, high economic growth potential, and the immense amount of worldwide interest in the products and capabilities that they are developing.

In short, this race for technological supremacy

Pivotal states (unlike some keystone states) are scrambling to develop their own technology doctrines, further disrupting the global technology landscape.

will define the new hierarchies of power, forcing countries—chief among them, pivotal states—to adapt to the transformative forces of technology.

Constrained Maneuverability

As valuable as these new discussions surrounding “pivotal states” are, it is imperative to refrain from incorporating countries that act as U.S. force multipliers—e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, Canada, Mexico—into the pantheon of “pivotal states.” These states, deeply embedded within the U.S.-led system of Western alliances, find their maneuverability on the international stage constrained, as their positioning within the global political and economic order is inextricably intertwined with the centrality of U.S. security guarantees. These states serve as force multipliers—with varying degrees—for the maintenance of America’s global position vis-a-vis China and Russia.

The United States, however, displays a notable blind spot when it comes to engaging with the

mentioned “pivotal states.” By reducing them to the label of mere swing states, the United States fails to grasp the true significance and agency these countries possess. Thus, the distinction between swing states and pivotal states is far from inconsequential. Pivotal states, using their degree of autonomy and assertiveness, chart their own discourse and exhibit a resolute refusal to succumb to the coercive dictates of the U.S.-China Cold War 2.0 imperative thrust upon them.

At the present moment, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye are considered to be among the most prominent and notable pivotal states on the geopolitical stage. As will be described in greater detail below, each of these pivotal states share similar characteristics in terms of their relative importance to global commerce and supply chains, power projection and military capabilities, and commitment to balancing relations between the U.S. and the West, on the one hand, and the China-Russia axis, on the other hand. Moreover, their growing contributions to technological progress and innovation are cementing their role as states of critical importance well into the future.

India

Among the emerging powers, India stands out due to its position in the broader Silk Road region (the preferred editorial term of this journal, in contradistinction to “Eurasia,” which is a term preferred by both Russian and Western sources for reasons not unrelated to my argument) as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South. This is based on its demographics, economic size and growth, geographical location between the Indo-Pacific and West Asia, membership in the elite nuclear club, and, most importantly, its political transformation from non-alignment to multi-alignment. Delhi maintains robust ties with Moscow while also advancing and, indeed, strengthening strategic partnerships with Washington, Paris, Rome, London, and Brussels—India even maintains an amicable relationship with Kiev. In West Asia, Indian foreign policy has pivoted towards gradually building mutual interest-based alignment with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE while also maintaining communication and cooperation with Iran.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2007 address to the Indian Parliament, titled “Confluence of

the Two Seas,” proved a prescient articulation of a nascent Asian dynamic. Inspired by the historical resonances of Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh’s work, Abe envisioned a strategic convergence—a “dynamic coupling”—between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This, he argued, would forge a broader Asian order, one transcending historical divisions. Although he did not refer to the “Asian values” concept that had been developed in the 1990s by the likes of Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad (in part responding to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis), one could certainly not ignore that it was “in the air,” so to speak.

Speculation aside, what is clear is that India—by virtue of its unique geopolitical position and enduring historical ties—now occupies a pivotal role in this emerging architecture. It serves as a linchpin, a point of convergence, between the burgeoning Indo-Pacific and the countries of West Asia, bound by their shared geoeconomic interests and historical heritage. This nascent alignment suggests the potential for the establishment of a broader Asian order—a subject about which I have written in detail elsewhere—where India serves as the main strategic cornerstone of the “Eurasian rimland” (to borrow the term coined by America’s “godfather of

containment,” Nicholas Spykman). This unique Indian position has brought geoeconomic dividends for Delhi, as major powers are seeking partnerships with India that span security, energy, trade, and digital infrastructure.

While there is a focus on India’s rising role in the Indo-Pacific amid the intensifying great power competition between the United States and China (see, for example, Ashley Tellis’s recent *Foreign Affairs* essay), Delhi’s engagement in West Asia has been transformed, with India now a member of the I2U2 alongside Israel, the U.S., and the UAE—a concrete manifestation of what I had advocated in the summer of 2021, namely the establishment of an “Indo-Abrahamic alliance.” At the September 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi, India, alongside the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the EU and its member states Germany, France, and Italy, introduced the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). This initiative aims to reshape power dynamics across much of the world by connecting the Indo-Pacific to Europe and West Asia through strategic connectivity projects. IMEC comprises two main routes: an eastern route linking India to the Gulf via sea lanes and a northern route connecting Saudi Arabia to Europe

through Jordan and Israel, primarily using railways. IMEC puts Delhi at the forefront of a major geoeconomic alignment across the “Eurasian rimland.” India’s rising geopolitical significance, coupled with its status as the world’s most populous country, its increasingly influential (and growing) diaspora, and a strong domestic push for industrialization, alongside remarkable economic growth, has positioned Delhi as an emerging industrial global economy. Major companies like Apple and Google are eyeing the region for their production facilities.

Türkiye

Another pivotal state is Türkiye, which occupies an unmatched geostrategic position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. This unique location endows Türkiye with a multifaceted identity, as it straddles the boundaries of both European and Asian spheres. One of Türkiye’s most significant roles lies in its stewardship of critical waterways, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which connect the Aegean and Mediterranean seas to the Black Sea and the broader geoeconomic space of the Silk Road region. By safeguarding these strategic passages, Türkiye plays a crucial role

in ensuring both the flow of commerce to the heart of Eurasia and energy to Europe.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent power vacuum in that country opened opportunities for Türkiye in northern Iraq, while the Assad regime's suppression of protests in Syria in 2011 triggered a prolonged conflict that is still ongoing. Türkiye capitalized on these dynamics by expanding its influence into Syria, establishing a buffer zone against Kurdish groups to hinder the possibility of a future Kurdish state. With its position secured in Syria and Iraq, Türkiye extended its reach to Libya, Somalia, and Sahel states, elevating its status to a trans-regional power. In the meantime, Ankara built a formidable indigenous defense industry, enabling Türkiye to act independently from NATO consensus. As a drone superpower, Türkiye leveraged drones to alter battlefield dynamics in Libya, Ethiopia, and the conflict over Karabakh between its ally Azerbaijan and Armenia.

As a NATO member state and despite condemning the Russian invasion and supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, Ankara has also sought to maintain a balanced relationship with Moscow. This balancing act is evident in the ways

Türkiye has supported Ukraine with armed drones, which had proven effective against Russian forces previously in Syria. However, Türkiye has also avoided actions that could severely antagonize Russia, such as implementing the Western sanctions regime. This approach allows Türkiye to maintain its economic ties with Russia and potentially act as a mediator in the future. Türkiye's détente with Russia, despite NATO criticism, underscores Ankara's strategic foresight. As Russia's influence weakens in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, Türkiye sees an opportunity, along with China, to expand its influence in the Silk Road region. Evidence of this shift includes Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan and the envisioned "Zangezur Corridor" extending to Azerbaijan, laying the groundwork for pan-Turkic geoeconomic integration via the Middle Corridor connectivity mega-project. In 2009, Türkiye, alongside Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, founded the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan. Hungary and Turkmenistan participate as fully-fledged observer states.

Furthermore, Türkiye's hybrid political regime, which combines democracy and elements of a civilization state, adds another layer

of uniqueness to its standing in a global system. Türkiye emerges as a pivotal state able to straddle the divide between Western liberal democracies and Eastern civilization states, positioning itself as a key player in shaping the trajectory of the multipolar world order.

Brazil

Home to over 200 million people, Brazil stands as the most populous country in South America, representing over half of the continent's total population. With a GDP exceeding \$1.9 trillion, Brazil ranks as the world's ninth-largest economy, serving as a crucial commercial link between South America and Atlantic states. Since it transitioned from military to civilian rule in 1985, Brazil has assumed a regional leadership role and gained influence as a global power. Regionally, Brazil has expanded the Mercosur customs union beyond its original members, supported the establishment of the Union of South American Nations, led UN peacekeeping efforts in Haiti, and bolstered integration with neighboring countries through infrastructure investments. On the global stage, Brazil has pursued a more prominent role by advocating for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, demonstrating leadership within the

G20 (with Rio de Janeiro slated to host the summit in November 2024), and actively engaging in WTO activities. Additionally, Brazil has participated in nuclear talks with Iran and promoted annual meetings for emerging powers, including BRICS and the IBSA Forum (comprising India, Brazil, and South Africa).

Home to the Amazon rainforest that is often dubbed the "lungs of the planet," Brazil plays an indisputable role in environmental conservation and biodiversity, contributing significantly to global environmental discussions. Brazil is a leading voice among Global South countries and has opted not to fully align with the United States in its broader Eurasian competition with China and Russia. Indeed, Brazil, alongside India, demonstrated notable independence by eschewing alignment with the West against Russia in the context of the conflict over Ukraine. This stance reflects a strategic effort to sidestep costly entanglements beyond their immediate geopolitical sphere with major powers.

By maintaining this position, Brazil aims to preserve its strategic flexibility and autonomy, positioning itself as a significant bridge between the Global South and Global North in terms of geopolitics, climate issues, and economic interests, setting a pathway forward for a new multipolar world order.

Saudi Arabia

In the past decade, Saudi Arabia has undergone a remarkable transformation. Through its ambitious “Vision 2030” initiative, the kingdom has embarked on extensive economic diversification efforts and far-reaching social reforms. These initiatives have attracted significant investments in tourism, entertainment, foreign investment, technology, and manufacturing, positioning Saudi Arabia as a leading global destination in these sectors. With a population of approximately 32 million, including a large number of young and well-educated individuals alongside foreign workers, and boasting a GDP of \$833.5 billion, this country is poised for substantial growth and a notable global ascent.

Geopolitically, Saudi Arabia’s economic growth, strategic location at the crossroads of the West and the East, and role as host of Islam’s holiest cities (Mecca and Medina) have afforded it a large degree of diplomatic clout both within the Middle East and beyond among majority-Muslim countries in Africa and Asia. This explains Washington’s strong push for a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as the United States sees Saudi Arabia’s

immense cultural and religious influence in the Islamic world.

Riyadh’s position as the world’s largest oil exporter within OPEC+—characterized by vast reserves and low production costs—makes it a critical player in shaping global energy policy and its impact on economic growth. The conflict over Ukraine disrupted oil export routes from Russia, another significant global producer, prompting a worldwide search for alternative sources and emphasizing the importance of Saudi Arabia’s extensive oil reserves. Western powers pressed Saudi Arabia to increase production and stabilize surging oil prices resulting from the conflict. However, Riyadh resisted these efforts and continued to collaborate with Moscow within OPEC+ to pursue its independent energy policy. The Ukraine war highlighted Saudi Arabia’s influence as a major oil producer, with its production decisions having significant implications for the global economy and the energy security of other countries.

Saudi Arabia, unlike the other countries on the list of pivotal states, still relies on U.S. security guarantees, and a potential normalization agreement with Israel could entail additional alliance-like commitments.

Nonetheless, this dependency is evolving as Riyadh develops its own domestic military capabilities and enhances its defense capabilities, with a budget of \$69 billion in 2023. The war in Yemen served as a precursor to a more assertive Saudi stance regionally.

Indonesia

With a population exceeding 279 million and a GDP of \$1.3 trillion, Indonesia ranks as Asia’s third-largest economy. Moreover, its strategic positioning as a bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans further enhances its economic importance, wielding considerable geopolitical influence within Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Bolstered by a sizable military force comprising 400,000 active-duty troops and backed by a budget of roughly \$25 billion, Indonesia increasingly projects power regionally in a somewhat under-the-radar manner. Over the past few decades, Indonesia has enjoyed steady economic expansion propelled by factors such as escalating domestic consumption, infrastructural advancements, and the exportation of natural resources. Endowed with abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, coal, minerals, and agricultural products, Indonesia

lays a sturdy foundation for economic development and international trade relations.

Geopolitically, Indonesia holds substantial significance within Southeast Asia due to its extensive archipelago connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This geographical advantage establishes Indonesia as a pivotal player in regional geopolitics and maritime trade routes. Actively engaging with regional and global partners, Indonesia participates in fora like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the G20 and fosters partnerships with both China and America. These collaborations augment Indonesia’s balancing role in both regional and global affairs. Despite encountering challenges such as political transitions and regional tensions, Indonesia has maintained relative stability in recent years. Its commitment to democratic governance and peaceful transitions of power fosters investor confidence and ensures long-term stability. Moreover, Indonesia’s burgeoning tech sector and increasing internet penetration are catalyzing innovation and economic opportunities, positioning the country as a burgeoning hub for technology and digital entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia and perhaps beyond.

South Africa

Despite the large-scale political turmoil that has taken place in South Africa over the past decade, the country remains a very important player on the continent and the broader global stage. With a GDP of over \$400 billion and a population of nearly 60 million people, the country is Africa's most industrialized economy and is endowed with abundant natural resources, including some of the world's largest reported reserves of gold, platinum group metals, titanium, chrome ore, and manganese ore. South Africa's military of approximately 75,000 active-duty personnel, backed by a \$2.8 billion defense budget, is regarded as a well-equipped and moderately capable force that has largely succeeded in preventing any instability in neighboring countries from seeping into its borders.

Although considered a strategic partner of the United States, South Africa maintains very close ties to the Russia-China geopolitical camp and is a member of BRICS, regarded as the most significant non-Western challenger to the U.S.-led "rules-based international liberal order." Additionally, South Africa is a member of the

G20, another multilateral format aiming to foster consensus among non-Western powers alongside Western ones. This initiative is particularly relevant as the UN system faces increasing dysfunctionality, and the gap between the West and the Rest widens.

In short, South Africa and its fellow pivotal states seem to be successfully navigating our present era of disorder, in which, as I have written, the "Davos Man" who dominated the flat-world, unipolar moment is being replaced by a new breed—the "Geopolitical Man," who stands tall in the debris of fractured consensus, where free markets are becoming secondary to nationalism, populism, state conflict, industrial policy, national security concerns, ideological divides, pragmatism, and Realpolitik.

Future Pivotal States

The rise of pivotal states is not limited to just the countries described above—Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye. In fact, there is a whole crop of others—among them Egypt, Nigeria, Taiwan, and Vietnam—that are on the cusp of or hold the potential to acquire the level of international importance and characteristics of pivotal

states. Their economies are either high-functioning or possess the ingredients necessary to develop globally competitive industries, and their ambitions for prosperity and international prominence also lead them to take a balanced approach with respect to the ongoing great power competition.

With a population of 110 million, *Egypt* stands as the most populous state in the Arab world and the third most populous in Africa. However, despite its significant population, the Egyptian economy has faced challenges, including high unemployment, widespread poverty, and strains from population growth. Efforts are underway by the government to address these issues and improve the country's GDP, which currently stands at approximately \$476.7 billion—making the country the biggest economy in Africa.

In addition to its internal struggles, Egypt remains a crucial geopolitical player in the Middle East. It boasts a sizable military force of 450,000 active-duty personnel capable of exerting influence across the region. Despite the emergence of Gulf powers, Cairo maintains an active role in areas such as Libya, Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and the East Mediterranean. With a

two-sea navy and control over the strategic Suez Canal, Egypt holds a significant position in maritime geopolitics. The country is a central point in the emerging geoeconomic system across the Eurasian rimland from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pacific.

Looking ahead, if Egypt undergoes political and economic reforms that stimulate growth, it is likely to pursue a foreign policy agenda akin to Türkiye's approach. This could further elevate Egypt's stature on the global stage. As I have argued elsewhere, "there is no Indo-Pacific without Egypt." Indeed, the country stands as an almost indispensable keystone state in this trans-continental geostrategic project.

With a population of more than 218 million people, *Nigeria* is the largest in Africa. Its population growth rate is expected to remain high, with a predicted population of 392 million by 2050, making it the world's fourth most populous country. Supported by vast oil reserves and thriving telecommunications, financial services, and industrial sectors, Nigeria's economy boasts a GDP of \$390 billion. As the largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria holds significant sway over economic and

political dynamics in West Africa. The Nigerian government is committed to diversifying the economy and reducing dependence on fossil fuels by investing in other high-growth industries, such as those mentioned above.

However, Nigeria also faces challenges, including widespread corruption, human rights abuses, and armed conflicts with insurgent groups like Boko Haram. Economic downturns in Nigeria often lead to stagnation in other regional economies. Additionally, Nigeria's security situation is closely tied to that of West Africa and the Sahel. The Nigerian military, tasked with combating such insurgencies and establishing stability, consists of 135,000 active-duty troops with a budget of \$3.11 billion. The military is undergoing a modernization program, with most newly purchased arms and equipment sourced from China and Russia.

Like many pivotal states, Nigeria seeks balanced relations with the United States and the Russia-China axis. While maintaining strong economic partnerships with Russia and China, particularly as an OPEC member, Nigeria also values its security partnership with the United States.

Another future pivotal state is *Taiwan*, a political entity that, notwithstanding the fact that it is not a UN member state, transcends being just a geopolitical flashpoint. With a population exceeding 23 million and a highly educated workforce, Taiwan hosts a globally significant economy. Boasting an impressive GDP nearing \$791 billion, Taiwan's economic backbone lies in its thriving information and communications technology (ICT) industry, which ranks among the world's leading sectors. Notably, Taiwan is a major player in semiconductor manufacturing, exporting chips crucial for powering cutting-edge technologies like data storage, critical infrastructure, military systems, and artificial intelligence. The global significance of Taiwan's semiconductor industry elevates its influence in the geopolitical landscape, particularly amidst the intense tech rivalry between the United States and China. However, it is the broader great-power competition between the U.S. and China that poses the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

With staunch support from the United States, its main external security guarantor, Taiwan has developed a formidable military comprising 180,000 active-duty troops and 120,000 reservists dedicated to defending the island

from potential Chinese aggression. Backed by a \$19 billion budget, approximately 2.6 percent of its GDP, Taiwan's military is well-equipped, extensively trained, and possesses modern weaponry. The combination of a robust military and a highly productive, advanced economy solidifies Taiwan's emergence as a pivotal player in geopolitics.

In the decades since the end of its war with the United States in the 1970s, *Vietnam* has transformed from a U.S. adversary to a close partner, and from a faltering economy to a \$408.8 billion GDP powerhouse. Its highly educated population of 98 million is the backbone of its economic growth, which has been buoyed by a very strong manufacturing sector. In recent years, manufacturing in Vietnam has received a boost from large corporations (including many from the U.S.) seeking to "de-risk" U.S.-China competition by diversifying their supply chains with countries like Vietnam. The People's Army of Vietnam considered one of the strongest militaries in Southeast Asia, is backed by a \$6.65 billion budget and comprises

450,000 active-duty troops. Since the early 2000s, Hanoi has clearly prioritized improving the country's defense capabilities, as evidenced by the 700 percent increase in military spending from 2003 to 2018.

Despite expanding security ties with the U.S. and heightened tensions with China regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam remains committed to fostering balanced relations with all camps in international politics. It has refused to downgrade its relationship with Russia (from which it has purchased the vast majority of its military equipment) notwithstanding the West's entreaties to join its sanctions regime against Moscow, and continues to seek stronger political and security ties with China.

The Big Picture

The evolving global landscape in the face of an emerging multipolar order demands a more nuanced understanding of the role and significance of certain countries in shaping international

In this ever-changing landscape, acknowledging the true significance and autonomy of pivotal states is key to fostering constructive engagement and promoting a more balanced and inclusive approach to global affairs.

stability and power dynamics. The term “swing states,” though initially used to recognize the importance of countries like India, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia, falls short in accurately depicting their strategic posture and agency in the current geopolitical landscape. The “keystone states” concept—its advantages notwithstanding—does not devote sufficient weight to the homegrown technological innovation variable in determining the new global hierarchy of power.

But the concept of “pivotal states” does—one reason why it is more appropriate. It, too, acknowledges the strong position and autonomous decisionmaking of countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye, among others. These pivotal states possess advantageous characteristics and hold the potential to impact the global balance of power.

However, it is essential to avoid the temptation of incorporating deeply embedded U.S. alliance system countries into this category, as their maneuverability is constrained by their close association with the United States.

To navigate these complexities successfully, policymakers and academics should embrace more inclusive and representative terminology, recognizing the nuanced histories and geopolitical aims of these pivotal states. By doing so, Washington can develop long-term foreign policy frameworks that align better with the dynamic age we are in, ultimately promoting a more stable and cooperative global order. In this ever-changing landscape, acknowledging the true significance and autonomy of pivotal states is key to fostering constructive engagement and promoting a more balanced and inclusive approach to global affairs. **BD**

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The Russia Factor in China's Relations with the West

Klaus W. Larres and Lea Thome

Tension between China and the Western world has been a characteristic of global affairs for the better part of the last decade. Notwithstanding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States continues to view China as its greatest global rival and competitor. In fact, many policy-makers in Washington (though by no means all of them) view China as an existential threat to America's global influence and predominance.

As the European Union and its 27 member states are not among

the world's superpowers, the Europeans have a somewhat more relaxed attitude toward China. Still, according to an important policy statement issued by the EU Commission in 2019, Brussels has come to see Beijing not only as a "partner and competitor" but also as a serious "systemic rival." This refers less to geopolitical concerns but very much to global governance issues and geoeconomic, trade, and investment relations with China. The EU is deeply concerned about the continuing lack of reciprocity of market access, intellectual property theft, and China's

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frequently state-subsidized competition regarding cutting-edge technology products, including solar panels, EV vehicles, and many other products, which may soon swamp the EU market. The EU Commission has launched an investigation into China's production of EV vehicles and also Beijing's ship-building industry, which it suspects may well work on the basis of rather unfair and highly subsidized support from the Chinese state.

Still, both the EU and China continue to depend on each other regarding flourishing trade and investment relations. And China's recent economic difficulties and declining domestic consumption have encouraged Beijing to become more conciliatory and to strive to achieve a thaw in relations with both the EU and the United States.

Part of this thaw was the widely publicized meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping in San Francisco in late November 2023 on the margins of the APEC Summit. The two men's "candid and constructive discussion" by phone on 2 April 2024 regarding

"a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including areas of cooperation and areas of difference," as the White House described it, has contributed to the continuation of the thaw in U.S.-China relations. In addition, the visits of U.S. cabinet members to Beijing, including Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who visited Beijing twice during the past 12 months, and the visit of senior Chinese politicians to the U.S. has eased the tension somewhat.

The two-hour phone call between Xi and Biden on 2 April 2024 was wide-ranging, covering positive developments, such as military-to-military communication channels, which have opened up again, as well as many other areas of concern. According to the White House read-out, Biden referred to "the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and the rule of law and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea." He also "raised continued concerns about the PRC's unfair trade policies and non-market economic practices, which harm American workers and families. The President emphasized

Tension between China and the Western world has been a characteristic of global affairs for the better part of the last decade.

that the United States would continue to take necessary actions to prevent advanced U.S. technologies from being used to undermine our national security, without unduly limiting trade and investment.”

Not least Biden expressed his great dissatisfaction with “the PRC’s support for Russia’s defense industrial base and its impact on European and transatlantic security.” While all of the above concerns that Biden expressed to Xi are shared by the EU, the Europeans have become particularly worried about China’s support for Russia in the ongoing war in Ukraine. In fact, it seems China’s direct and indirect “material support” for Russia has helped Russia to continue fighting the war in Ukraine while keeping the Russian economy afloat.

In early April 2024, Blinken informed America’s allies in Europe that China was deepening its support for Russia’s military-industrial complex and that it had reached a “concerning scale.” There had been a great shift in China’s attitude and support of Russia, he explained. In particular, Beijing has been helping Russia with the production of optical equipment, propellants, and the space sector.

According to Blinken, it was mostly due to the expanded trade

with China that Russia had been able to keep its economy running, increase the output of its military industries, and produce an increasing amount of artillery shells, missiles, and drones. The same worries were expressed by Yellen when she talked to China’s Vice Premier He Lifeng on 6 April 2024 during her second recent visit to Beijing in the last nine months. Yellen referred to “significant consequences” if Chinese support for Russia’s war machine continued or even increased. She was assured by her Chinese interlocutors, however, that this was not Beijing’s intention.

In fact, at present China’s indirect and direct support of Russia is a major hurdle that stands in the way of a significant improvement of both China-U.S. and in particular China-EU relations. Beijing knows this and it has reached out to the Europeans (and also to the Global South) to overcome its credibility and image problem. In this context, China has recently pursued two major initiatives. Beijing has embarked on a charm offensive toward Europe, and it has attempted to set itself up as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war.

This essay will consider the Chinese charm offensive and China’s likely participation in the proposed Swiss peace conference.

China Charm Offensive

Amid multiple sources of conflict around the world, there seems to be one bright spot. Since the November 2023 meeting on the margins of the APEC Summit between Biden and Xi Jinping, the downward spiral in U.S.-China relations has been somewhat halted. Even so, Beijing seems convinced that constructive relations with the U.S. can no longer be maintained beyond a superficial level of engagement. As outlined in its April 2022 Global Security Initiative, Beijing now sees itself as a force for stability and security in a world that has moved beyond the need for the United States.

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This makes relations with the European Union and its 27 member states crucial for China in its search for global partners in an increasingly polarized world. It also goes some way to explaining why the world is witnessing a Chinese charm offensive for the soul of Europe. In addition to meeting European leaders or foreign ministers at the Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi made visits to France and Spain. While the Conference launched its annual

report in the context of “lose-lose” dynamics, Wang was determined to turn his attendance at the conference into a “win-win” situation.

Despite China’s support for Russia within the framework of a “friendship that has no limits” (the formulation used in a 4 February 2022 Joint Statement on International Relations), the effective failure of its 12-point peace proposal of 2023, and Beijing’s passivity in the Red Sea crisis, Wang highlighted China’s desire to act as a “staunch force for stability” in the world. More importantly, he focused on the future of EU-China cooperation, saying that “China and Europe are the world’s two major forces, markets, and civilizations.”

With an eye on the U.S. and the re-establishment of close transatlantic relations under the Biden Administration, Wang said it was “imperative that China and Europe stay clear of geopolitical and ideological distractions, see each other as partners rather than rivals, and join hands to inject positive energy into a volatile world and point the way for overcoming difficulties together.”

The elephant in the room was the potential return of Donald Trump to the American presidency after the U.S. election takes place in November 2024. A drastic change in Washington's foreign policy could make the EU and its member states forge ahead with a more independent global policy, which would benefit China. Beijing appears to be preparing for the eventual realization of European "strategic autonomy," as long advocated by France's lingering Gaullist foreign policy tendencies.

Wang subsequently met several European policymakers, including the EU's High Representative for External Affairs Josep Borrell, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski. China's message for all these meetings highlighted the need for each side to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation and bilateral development.

Wang's carefully orchestrated meeting agenda at the Munich Security Conference was indicative of China's re-prioritization of Europe in its foreign policy agenda. Although the G20 foreign

ministers meeting took place at the same time, Wang chose to attend the meetings in Europe and sent Vice-Minister Ma Zhaoxu to Brazil instead. After China's harsh "zero-Covid" pandemic policy, it has reinforced its efforts to appear at important international venues and symbolize to the world that China is open again for business.

Next on Wang's schedule was a short trip to Madrid to meet Spain's King Felipe VI, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, and Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares. The two sides agreed to "fair, just, and non-discriminatory business relations" and Beijing lifted its 24-year ban on beef imports from Spain.

The last stop of Wang's European tour was in Paris, where he met French President Emmanuel Macron and other officials. Not surprisingly, among the topics discussed were the promotion of free and fair trade as well as deepening strategic coordination. Wang advocated that Paris and the EU need to play an independent and "constructive role" in world affairs, while Macron told him that China needed to put pressure on Russia to "return to the negotiating table" with a credible offer to end the Ukraine war.

The states Wang visited are among the most diplomatically active countries within the EU. Most recently, they have taken a similar route through establishing new strategies toward China and committing to 'de-risking.' Beijing might hope Berlin and Paris will turn towards China in the wake of a potentially isolationist second Trump Administration, but Germany and France abandoning their long-standing ally in favor of China is unlikely.

While the Chinese foreign minister was busy in western Europe, Public Security Minister Wang Xiaohong traveled to Budapest to meet Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. While there, he also met Hungarian Interior Minister Sándor Pintér to finalize agreements on law enforcement and security cooperation. Beijing might view this as a successful first step in efforts to forge closer ties with the EU and its member states, though Hungary is something of an outlier among EU countries and has aligned itself more closely with non-Western actors in recent years.

Following the Chinese foreign minister's European tour, Chinese and European officials met in late February 2024 in Brussels to discuss cooperating on matters such as automobiles and critical raw minerals.

Whether China's charm offensive has been effective in reversing the growing push in Europe to "de-risk" relations and turning the tide in China's favor remains uncertain.

Nothing has yet been set in stone for Sino-European relations, though, especially with the EU's decision

to blacklist some Chinese firms for aiding Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Regardless of whether the U.S. remains a dependable ally, the EU must decide how to forge its own path in the coming months.

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China as Mediator?

Over the past few weeks, Chinese Special Envoy for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui traveled through Europe in a second attempt at Chinese shuttle diplomacy. This follows Beijing's announcement of its support for and

participation in a peace conference that neutral Switzerland plans to convene soon, perhaps in the summer of 2024.

After more than two years of fighting, China hopes that both Moscow and Kiev will participate in such a conference to terminate the war. Despite China's attempt at the creation of a peace plan as well as its recent efforts to conduct shuttle diplomacy, Beijing has been unable to position itself as a credible mediator in the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war. As the Chinese government has continuously supported Russia—both directly and indirectly—in its war efforts, Beijing's advocacy for a peace conference hosted by a neutral state, Switzerland, can be understood as strategic posturing rather than a credible commitment to resolving the war.

As the participation of Russia in the conference is highly unlikely, Beijing's efforts may have ulterior motives: China clearly wishes to develop a benign and constructive image as a peacemaker and global mediator. This initiative appears to resonate particularly well in major non-Western powers like India, South Africa, and Brazil, which have preferred not to join in the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime

against Russia—the centerpiece of the West's wartime support for Ukraine.

Most Western countries, however, fail to see how China's 'pro-Russian neutrality' and its strong support of Moscow could possibly enable it to mediate in the war. As noted above, in early February 2022, Xi Jinping and Putin declared a "no-limits" friendship between the two countries characterized by "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation," to which they have stuck ever since. Although Beijing seems not to have delivered lethal weapons to Moscow, China has purchased significant and increasing amounts of oil and gas and delivered urgently required dual-use products to Russia, including drones, semiconductors, and spare parts. As noted above, the U.S. has characterized China's support for Russia's military-industrial complex as being at a "concerning scale."

Despite increasing its share of economic power in the world over the last several decades, traditionally China has been slow to get involved in global security issues. Yet, since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Beijing has begun to participate actively in multilateral dialogues. During the past decade, China has, in fact, attempted

to act as a mediator in conflict areas on several occasions, such as in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, but with only very limited success so far. On the other hand, it did achieve success in August 2023 when it helped to broker a renormalization deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

A few months before that diplomatic achievement—around the first anniversary of the outbreak of the war—Chinese officials revealed Beijing's vision for how the Russia-Ukraine war could be ended by means of a "12-point-peace plan." While quickly dismissed by the U.S. and most NATO member states as largely siding with Russia, Beijing took its initiative seriously.

As part of this plan, Beijing envisioned not only the cessation of hostilities, but also the large-scale lifting of Western-led sanctions against Russia. China's plan also focused on resolving the devastating humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Ukraine and launching post-conflict reconstruction efforts. While Putin formally welcomed China's 2023 peace plan, Moscow did not engage with the proposal in any practical way, despite its close ties with Beijing. This, however, did not stop Beijing from trying again in February 2024.

Over time, China has become greatly concerned that the war could further escalate or potentially get "out of control," as Wang Shiting, the Chinese ambassador to Switzerland, expressed it. Particularly, Putin's increasingly frequent threat to deploy nuclear weapons against Ukraine has raised global concerns, with Xi already admonishing Putin to be much more restrained in his use of nuclear threats last year.

On 28 February 2024, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced that Special Representative Li Hui would visit Europe "for the second round of shuttle diplomacy on seeking a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis." Over the course of March 2024, Li Hui visited Russia, Ukraine, France, Germany, and the EU's headquarters in Brussels. In a press conference held in Beijing on 22 March 2024, Li Hui briefed both diplomats and journalists about his European tour.

Li Hui stated that "as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a common friend of Russia and Ukraine," China was best suited to embark on "shuttle mediation and convey information between the two countries and all parties." Beijing has urged "all parties to seek common ground

while resolving differences and build consensus, so as to accumulate more favorable conditions for holding peace talks.” While Li Hui’s announcement expressed peaceful sentiments—although these were rather general ones—it does not appear that either of the warring parties and their supporters were impressed with this noncommittal rhetoric.

As far as can be discerned, Li Hui’s shuttle diplomacy in Europe has not led to any direct outcomes as of this writing (early April 2024). China must realize the lack of confidence the Swiss effort enjoys. The Kremlin has remained unconvinced too, it seems: Russia has rejected its own participation in the peace conference proposed by Switzerland. Aware of this sentiment, Beijing’s efforts may well be more concerned with the building of its global image than with an actual commitment to ending the war in Ukraine.

Participating in the envisaged Swiss peace conference would be China’s third attempt to put itself forward as a mediator in the Ukraine war. If China wants to make a credible effort to end the war, Western analysts suggest that Beijing ought to exert pressure on Russia to offer concessions regarding the eastern Ukrainian territories now under Moscow’s control,

including a proposal on Crimea. Be that as it may, Moscow seems to have recently warmed to Beijing’s 12-point peace proposal, nearly a year after its initial announcement, as it has been announced that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov is preparing to visit China soon.

Beyond Russia, China also needs to work closely with both the United States and NATO’s European members in establishing the necessary conditions for an end to the military action in Ukraine. But most importantly, Beijing will need to reflect on its own assumed ‘neutrality’ in direct contradiction to its partnership and support of Russia—if, that is, it seeks to demonstrate convincingly to the Europeans that its somewhat more relaxed attitude toward China (as compared to that of the United States) is worth pursuing in the time ahead.

However, the Europeans are not convinced that China has gone beyond its non-committal rhetoric of peace to become involved in a more concrete and practical way to help end the devastating war in Ukraine. Li Hui’s shuttle diplomacy in Europe does not yet seem to have persuaded European leaders of China’s ability to act as a mediator to end the Ukraine war.

Outlook

Although a mild thaw has developed in relations between China and the Western world, the underlying tension that has characterized this relationship since the middle of the last decade has not gone away. Undoubtedly, economic and technological issues as well as geopolitical concerns regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea are the main reasons for this tension. But China’s support for Russia and the Ukraine War has increased this tension significantly and has given it an even sharper security-focused edge. Unless the conflict over Ukraine comes to a sudden end, China’s sympathy and support for Russia will continue to sour Beijing’s relations with the Western world.

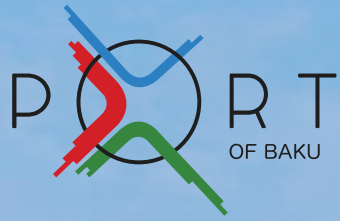
In particular, the EU and its 27 member states, which are generally still more optimistic about their future relationship with China, will turn away from Beijing. China may well “lose” the EU Commission and most EU member states (with some exceptions such as Hungary and Slovakia) if it does not reassess its policy toward Russia. China’s

support for Russia finds very little support in Brussels and most EU member states, and it threatens to drive them away further from their hitherto mostly constructive economic and political relations with China. From the perspective of Brussels (and many of the EU member states), the future of China-Europe relations is in Beijing’s hands.

Unless the conflict over Ukraine comes to a sudden end, China’s sympathy and support for Russia will continue to sour Beijing’s relations with the Western world.

Chinese policy-makers should ask themselves whether or not their continued support of the Russians is worth their while,

if it leads to the loss of good and constructive relations with the Europeans. When exploring the potential impacts of the foregoing on the Silk Road region and its core states, including Azerbaijan—particularly in the context of the connectivity ambitions of the major outside powers—there is more than a minimal chance that these will not be negligible. There is also a possibility that the impact of China’s policy of ‘pro-Russian neutrality’—in the event that it retains its present contours—could spill over into various multilateral negotiation processes and fora, including COP29 over which Azerbaijan will be presiding. **BD**



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The South Caucasus and Great Power Confrontation

Is There a Silver Lining on the Horizon?

Gulshan Pashayeva

Nearly 15 years ago, I evaluated several aspects of the geopolitical context in which the South Caucasus has found itself after the August 2008 events in Georgia in an article entitled “The Southern Caucasus: In Search of a Balance between Russia and the West.” At that time, the expert community analyzed the developments in the South Caucasus and Balkans through the prism of the emerging Russia-West confrontation, taken to the next stage in part by the West’s choice to violate Serbia’s territorial integrity through its recognition of the independence of “Kosovo.”

It was apparent, even back then, that the failure of the

aforementioned geopolitical actors to overcome their opposite positions on practical interpretations of the basic principles of international law—namely the principle of territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination transformed, somehow, into an avowed right of secession—would be of strategic consequence. According to an article published in August 2009 by Alexander Rahr of the German Council on Foreign Relations, the West did not want Russia to become a hegemon and to have a special influence in its “near abroad” (e.g., on Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia). Therefore, in his opinion, the central conflict between the West and Russia had not

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yet been resolved, creating a danger of more conflicts.

His view turned out to be prophetic, as confirmed by subsequent events in intermediate Europe, a region that, from a geopolitical standpoint, lies between the West (EU and NATO) and Russia, encompassing six sovereign post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its continued destabilization of eastern Ukraine since 2014 has clearly demonstrated a renewal of great-power rivalry due to the failure to create a pan-European security system involving all the countries of Greater Europe, including Russia.

These developments once more demonstrated the vulnerability of states located at or near the beginning of the Eurasian landmass’ western peninsula. It was also crystal clear that the West and Russia were unable to adopt inclusive policies to transform this region (“intermediate Europe”) from a “contested” area into one of effective cooperation, as I put it in

a 2015 publication co-produced by the European Policy Centre.

The onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022 further heightened an already tense geopolitical standoff. Although this war has now entered into its third year, there is no clear sign that a peaceful settlement could be within reach. Rather, each passing day makes the situation more complicated and drags both sides towards a dead end in which neither one nor the other of the two direct belligerents is likely to emerge better off than each was before the full-scale fighting began again in earnest.

Today, this war in which two major geopolitical actors—the West and Russia—have become trapped is also having an impact on other regions around the globe. The European Union is one, obviously:

its ambitions to achieve geopolitical autonomy (at least within the West, as a distinct pole), for instance, have been set back, and Brussels has had to scramble mightily to reconfigure the terms of its energy security. Another is the Silk

This essay will examine the latest developments in the South Caucasus through an inquiry into whether (and how) the evolving geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia affects that part of the world.

Road region in general, and the South Caucasus in particular.

This essay will examine the latest developments in this latter area through an inquiry into whether (and how) the evolving geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia affects that part of the world. It will culminate with a consideration of whether there is any silver lining that could result from this situation, whereby the South Caucasus could become a politically and economically united region in the time ahead.

A Fragmented Region

Historically, the South Caucasus has experienced various invasions and wars due to its location at the crossroads of three powerful empires—Persian, Ottoman, and Russian. The Russian Empire was the last to govern this region, and with its decay in the early twentieth century, particularly following the February 1917 revolution in Russia, the necessary conditions arose for the three South Caucasian states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—to declare independence in May 1918. Although they were independent for only a short period before losing their freedom (Azerbaijan in April 1920, Armenia

in December 1920, and Georgia in February 1921) to what shortly became the Soviet Union, this was a valuable experience in the history of all three nations.

The three countries each regained their independence only in 1991, after the dissolution of the USSR. These countries differ from each other in markedly evident ways: they have different political elites and civil society institutions, different ambitions towards membership in the EU and NATO and their Russia-led equivalents, and different levels of economic development based on the distribution of natural resources.

Georgia is traditionally seen as the most eager to join the West's two flagship institutions; more recently, it seems to have taken pragmatic steps to reduce its level of confrontation with Russia. Armenia, for its part, has traditionally associated its security with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) whilst also forging a strategic alliance with Iran; more recently, it seems to have begun to flirt with France and India in an attempt to geopolitically and geoeconomically diversify its strategic dependence on Russia.

Azerbaijan, for its part, has consistently pursued a more balanced

approach, using its abundant oil and gas resources to build a national security system through diplomatic means predicated on a multiplication of strategic partners, near and far. It became a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011 as part of the pursuit of what Hikmet Hajiyev called in the Fall 2020 edition of *Baku Dialogues* an “independent and pragmatic foreign policy based on the national interest” pursued on the basis of what he had called the “Four Ms”: multi-vectoralism, multi-regionalism, multilateralism, and multiculturalism. More recently, it forged a strategic alliance with NATO member Türkiye and placed greater emphasis on reaching out to the Central Asian states and the Turkic world through the OTS, but also deepening engagement with some of the GCC states without sacrificing its commercial bonds with European countries and relations with neighboring Georgia, Iran, and Russia—not to mention traditional friends like Israel.

What is observable is the fact that none of the three South Caucasus states are politically or economically integrated with each other. In other words, the South Caucasus is characterized by fragmentation—this has been the case since 1991. The South Caucasus remains fragmented due

to three unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts. This legacy, which traces its origins back to the end of the Soviet period (i.e., the second half of the Gorbachev era, starting in late 1987 or early 1988), has colored the entire post-independence period of the region.

Having emerged in the late 1980s as a result of irredentist and secessionist movements in Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Georgia, these conflicts were not adequately resolved by the Soviet leadership. After Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent in 1991, these conflicts culminated in the First Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan and two wars involving Georgia and separatist South Ossetia (1991-1992) and Abkhazia (1992-1993), respectively. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and its recognition of the independence of the separatist forces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused an open confrontation between Russia and Georgia under the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili. Thus, these wars led not only to the occupation of around one-fifth of the internationally recognized territories of both Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the death and displacement of over one million people, but also to closed borders, mistrust, and hatred between the

populations, along with other humanitarian problems, as direct consequences of these conflicts.

However, it seems safe to say that, on balance, the Armenia-Azerbaijan confrontation was the main stumbling block to ending the fragmentation of the South Caucasus. In some ways, this has come to an end—or, at least, it seems to be coming to an end. Nevertheless, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet established inter-state relations, and the prospects of a peace treaty being signed are uncertain. Perhaps it can be put this way: the finish line is within sight, perhaps even within reach, but there is still some road left to travel. Hence the fact that the very basis of regional development and trans-regional cooperation among the three South Caucasian states remains only a possibility—not an actuality.

The Liberation of Karabakh

The outcome of the Second Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's establishment of complete control over Karabakh

The very basis of regional development and trans-regional cooperation among the three South Caucasian states remains only a possibility—not an actuality.

following its localized counter-terrorism measures in September 2023 significantly changed the facts on the ground. Thus, the almost 30-year-long Armenian occupation ended with the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity through military and political means (still under Armenian occupation, however, are eight Azerbaijani exclave and border villages).

Furthermore, the balance of power in the region has drastically changed since November 2020, resulting in a new geopolitical reality. According to the terms that ended the Second Karabakh War, a Russian peacekeeping contingent is present in a certain part of the Karabakh economic region (this presence will remain until at least November 2025). And—as I wrote in my contribution to the edited volume *Liberated Karabakh* (2021)—one outcome of the war was that “Türkiye and Russia, two regional powers representing two different intergovernmental military alliances—namely, NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—not only strengthened their respective

positions in the South Caucasus, but also, for the first time anywhere in the post-Soviet space, formalized their cooperation through the establishment near Aghdam of a Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh, in accordance with a memorandum signed by the defense chiefs of the two countries on 11 November 2020.” Moreover, as observed by Damjan Krnjević Mišković in his *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* article that appeared only weeks after the end of the war, the arrival of Turkish soldiers “in Azerbaijan at the very end of 2020 represents the first time in a century that Turkish troops are durably deployed in the South Caucasus. [Moreover,] this represents the first time *tout court* that non-Russian troops are deployed in the South Caucasus with the perspicuous consent of Russia, which had for two centuries held a monopoly on this matter in this part of what Moscow used to call its ‘near-abroad.’”

The subsequent establishment and double expansion (in terms of numbers, duration, and scope) in Armenia of what is now called the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), coupled with various initiatives by France (and Greece) and India to provide arms (and other forms of military cooperation) to Yerevan, alongside

plans for the EU to provide military assistance of Armenia under the European Peace Facility, has also contributed to this new geopolitical reality, albeit less than the foregoing factors (more on this last below).

Since 2021, the Azerbaijani Government has also begun the realization of a comprehensive reconstruction and recovery program in the Karabakh and East Zangazur economic regions to enable hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani IDPs expelled from their homes in the early 1990s to return to their lands in safety and dignity. To date, numerous new highways, airports, residential settlements, hospitals, schools, etc. have been built in the liberated territories. Moreover, one of the priorities in the process of reconstruction is the restoration of the ecosystem and environmental protection. Due to the fact that these territories include almost all types of renewable energy sources, including hydro, solar, wind, and geothermal, it is envisaged to turn them into a net zero emission zone by 2050.

At the same time, significant mine clearance work has been conducted by the Azerbaijan Mine Action Agency (ANAMA)—an important part of the recovery of the liberated territories. The Azerbaijani government estimates at least one million

mines were laid by Armenia during the years of occupation. Armenia's unwillingness to provide accurate minefield locations creates not only tremendous problems for post-conflict reconstruction, but also brings death and injuries. So far, the accuracy of previously provided information on minefields laid by Armenia in the Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan districts has been estimated to be only 25 percent. As a result, 350 Azerbaijanis, both servicemen and civilians, have been killed or injured in mine explosions in the liberated territories since the end of the Second Karabakh War.

Another terrible legacy of the Armenian occupation has come to light: the existence of mass graves. To date, 16 such burial sites have been discovered in various villages and cities freed from occupation, including those located in or near Asgaran, Saricali, Dashalti, Edilli, Farrukh, Yukhari Seyidahmedli, Khojaly, Shusha, and Kalbajar. These mass graves have provided more evidence that local Armenian separatists from Karabakh as well as armed detachments from Armenia committed war crimes during the First Karabakh War. Perhaps that is why Armenia is reluctant to provide information about the location of other mass graves. At the

same time, the discovery of mass graves prompted work on identifying the fates of missing persons. As a result of the First Karabakh War, 3,890 Azerbaijani citizens (including 71 children, 267 women, and 326 elderly people) were registered as missing. Today Azerbaijan is working with the ICRC to collect DNA samples from the relatives of missing persons who are still waiting for news on their whereabouts. These samples will be used for the identification of persons buried in mass and nameless graves.

Thus, the fundamental rights of around one million forcibly expelled Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and internally displaced persons from mountainous and lowland Karabakh—the direct victims of the Armenian aggression—have been violated for almost three decades. The culmination of these horrendous atrocities was the Khojaly massacre committed against innocent civilians of this town, located just down the road from Khankendi in the early hours of 26 February 1992 as a result of which 613 civilians were brutally murdered, including 106 women, 63 children, and 70 elderly citizens.

On 31 March 2024, the remains of seven victims of the Khojaly massacre who were recently found in mass graves and identified

through DNA analysis were buried in the Alley of Martyrs of Khojaly. It seems likely that the remains of other victims of mass atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis will emerge from beneath the ground in liberated Azerbaijani territories in the time ahead. At the same time, holding the perpetrators of these mass atrocities accountable is of utmost importance, because doing so serves as a deterrent for the future.

Against this backdrop, it is necessary to underline that the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime that was based in Khankendi during the occupation—together with successive Armenian governments and the Armenian diaspora—had allocated untold billions of dollars and devoted significant political resources to illegally settle thousands of Armenians in the occupied Azerbaijani territories and implement illegal infrastructure and commercial projects there. The deliberate destruction and pillage of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, as well as religious and historical monuments, has also been a part of their battle over perceptions. As Nasimi Aghayev wrote in July 2020, “Almost all once Azerbaijani-populated towns, villages, and even streets, have been renamed after the occupation, and Armenianized, in a vicious attempt to erase any traces

of Azerbaijanis' age-old presence in Karabakh.”

Only after the liberation of Karabakh did it finally become possible for former Azerbaijani IDPs to begin the return journey to their homes. The First State Program on the Great Return was endorsed by presidential decree and foresees that by the end of a five-year period, a total of 34,500 families (150,000 persons) will return to their lands. In fact, the first Azerbaijani IDPs returned to the village of Aghali, located in the Zangilan district, which was rebuilt based on the concept of a “smart village” in July 2022.

The existence of the so-called “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh” and the fate of its Armenian population have always been considered the main sticking points in the normalization of Armenian-Azerbaijani bilateral relations since the peace process began after the Second Karabakh War, with Armenia demanding an international presence in this region to secure the rights and security of this population. In contrast, Azerbaijan opposed any possible international presence (except the Russian peacekeeping force, which had been deployed there as a result of the terms that ended the Second Karabakh War), indicating that Baku sought direct negotiations

with the local Karabakh Armenians without any third-party mediation. Baku's stated purpose was to reintegrate Karabakh Armenians into the constitutional fabric of Azerbaijan as equal citizens.

In fact, the first meeting between representatives of Azerbaijan and representatives of the Karabakh Armenians was held on 1 March 2023 at the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping force in Khojaly. However, despite the invitations issued by the Presidential Administration on March 13 and March 27 to "representatives of the Armenian public in Karabakh" to come to Baku for talks on "reintegration" and the "implementation of infrastructure projects," the Karabakh Armenians refused. They indicated a readiness to meet with Azerbaijani representatives only in Khojaly through the Russian peacekeeping mediation.

At the same time, the continuing presence of a more than 10,000-strong illegal Armenian armed detachment in Karabakh created serious impediments to the launch of direct interaction between Baku and Khankendi. Azerbaijan demanded the withdrawal or disarmament of the former, alongside the dissolution of the structures of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh." Regretfully,

this took place only as a result of the Azerbaijani military's local counter-terrorism measures.

Very soon thereafter, Azerbaijani state representatives and those of the local Karabakh Armenian community met in the town of Yevlakh to discuss the reintegration of Armenians under the Azerbaijan Constitution. Two further meetings took place in short order in Khojaly and Yevlakh. A few days later, on 28 September 2023, a "decree" was signed by the head of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" to dissolve this illegal entity.

During this period, around 100,000 Karabakh Armenians left Azerbaijan. Today there are two opposing narratives regarding this departure. Some circles in Armenia (including the country's prime minister) and the West (including those serving as paid lobbyists like Luis Moreno Ocampo and Anders Fogh Rasmussen) have claimed that the Azerbaijani operation represented the culmination of an orchestrated "aggression" or "ethnic cleansing" campaign of forced displacement because this population suffered food and supply shortages over a period of several months and did not have unobstructed (i.e., free of Azerbaijani customs and border controls) passage from the

Russian peacekeeping zone in parts of Karabakh to Armenia via the Lachin corridor.

The Azerbaijani narrative, on the other hand, revolved around President Ilham Aliyev's statement, made hours after the operation came to an end, that "before the operation, I once again gave a strict order to all our military units that the Armenian population living in the Karabakh region should not be affected by the anti-terrorist measures and that the civilian population be protected. We have achieved this by using high-precision weapons." Moreover, Azerbaijani officials emphasized the country's commitment to the rights and safety of all residents, calling on Armenians to remain in their places of residence and be part of a multiethnic Azerbaijan, governed by the rule of law and mutual respect. At the same time, Azerbaijan facilitated the departure of ethnic-Armenians by providing safe and secure passage from Karabakh to Armenia. As Elin Suleymanov, Azerbaijan's ambassador to the UK put it in an interview with Reuters on 28 September 2023, "What should Azerbaijan do? We [...] don't want to keep anyone by force, [but] we don't encourage anyone to leave," he said, adding that Azerbaijani authorities had delivered requested medical,

fuel and other supplies. "We would prefer for people at least to be in a position to make a more informed decision on whether they want to stay." Thus, Baku argued that their departure amounted to a voluntary evacuation—a voluntary decision on the part of ethnic-Armenians unwilling to live in Karabakh under restored Azerbaijani sovereignty. One of the reasons for this decision, the thinking went, was the fact that the Karabakh Armenians had not forgotten the atrocities they committed against the Azerbaijanis in the early 1990s, and thus feared their retribution or revenge.

It is against this background that a UN mission, led by its Resident Coordinator in Azerbaijan, Vladanka Andreeva, visited Karabakh on 1 October 2023. Alongside technical staff, the senior UN official was accompanied by Ramesh Rajasingham, the Director of the Coordination Division of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as representatives from the Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Refugee Agency, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization.

The result of this on-the-ground mission was a press release that stated it had "visited the city of

Khankendi, where the team met with the local population and interlocutors and saw first-hand the situation regarding health and education facilities. In parts of the city that the team visited, they saw no damage to civilian public infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and housing, or to cultural and religious structures. The mission saw that the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan was preparing for the resumption of health services and some utilities in the city.” The press release also stated that “the team heard from interlocutors that between 50 and 1,000 ethnic Armenians remain in the Karabakh region” and “did not come across any reports—neither from the local population interviewed nor from the interlocutors—of incidences of violence against civilians following the latest ceasefire.”

Western media and European institutions such as the European Parliament have focused adamantly on faulting Azerbaijan for the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians at the expense of ignoring the big picture by deliberately avoiding any mention of the fate of Karabakh Azerbaijanis. However, the human rights of all inhabitants of both mountainous and lowland Karabakh must be fully respected

regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, or language.

Meanwhile, the initial registration of Armenian residents of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan has started, and a special internet portal has been created by the State Migration Service for this specific purpose. Those ethnic-Armenian citizens of Azerbaijan who want to return can do so. Those who regrettably choose to reject the constitutional and political reality that Karabakh is Azerbaijan are, effectually, saying that this refusal is more important to them than continuing to live in Karabakh. There is no way around that conclusion except through claims that at the end of the day amount to sophistry.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Armenian-Russian relations started worsening after Nikol Pashinyan came to power in Armenia in 2018. However, after its defeat in the Second Karabakh War, Yerevan began to think about whether the exclusive reliance on Moscow for security guarantees (and economic development) was a mistake and began showing its readiness to get closer to the

West by diversifying its security arrangements.

Thus, in September 2023 Armenia and the United States conducted a ten-day joint military training exercise titled “Eagle Partner,” which was designed to prepare the Armenian Armed Forces to take part in Western-led peacekeeping missions. Armenia is also currently trying to seek new security partners in the West, specifically France, in order to develop its security capabilities and enhance its military build-up. India is also among the new sources of support for its rearmament.

On the other hand, Armenia took some steps to reduce meaningful cooperation with Russian-dominated structures. For example, in February 2024, Pashinyan declared that his country was suspending cooperation with the CSTO because it had not fulfilled its commitment to defend Armenia. At the same time, Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan said that Armenia expects the “CSTO to recognize the border of its responsibility; that is, the recognized 29,800-square-kilometer territory of Armenia, as well as the borders that exist with Georgia, Türkiye, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Unless the CSTO recognizes [them], this issue remains up in the air.”

Armenia has also joined the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its statute officially entered into force for Armenia on 1 February 2024. One practical consequence of this policy choice is that the country is now obligated to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin should he find himself on Armenian soil, because the ICC has issued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader. Understandably, the Russian Foreign Ministry has called this decision of the Armenian government an “unfriendly step.”

Furthermore, in March 2024, Pashinyan announced that, effective 1 August 2024, Armenia is terminating a protection arrangement under which Russian border guards are deployed at its main airport. The Russian side has confirmed this information.

At the same time, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan stated in an interview on TRT World that was taped on the sidelines of the March 2024 Antalya Diplomatic Forum that the people of Armenia have European aspirations, and the idea of joining the EU is on the list of issues that are being actively discussed in Armenia nowadays. According to some Armenian media sources, Pashinyan made it clear at a closed meeting of his Civil Contract party on 8 March 2024 that the West

demands from Armenia practical steps to distance itself from Russia and oust it from the region, because “Russia has long ago turned away from us.” In this situation, “Armenia should apply to join the EU no later than the fall of this year.”

In contrast, Armenia does not appear to have immediate ambitions to become a NATO member state. In a 1 April 2024 interview with Argentine TV channel *Todo Noticias*, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said that “joining NATO is not on Armenia’s agenda.” At the same time, Mirzoyan stated that “the problems that exist in relations with Russia cannot be hidden.” He pointed out that “the security mechanisms that we had for several decades did not work. It is for this reason that we were forced to ask the European Union to send a mission and observe the situation on our border with Azerbaijan.”

This EU mission (the EUMA), which marked its first anniversary on 20 February 2024, aims to contribute “to human security in conflict-affected areas in Armenia and through its presence on the ground aims to build confidence among the local population in border areas,” as a recent press release affirms. However, the Azerbaijani side has another view on this issue. According to Aykhan

Hajizada, the Foreign Ministry’s Spokesperson, EUMA has been actively exploited as “an anti-Azerbaijani propaganda tool” and has issued “statements calling the EUMA a deterrence force, and creating an illusion of a possible intervention by Azerbaijan, which has no grounds whatsoever.” Hajizada added that “the EU was urged to take all necessary measures with a view to ensuring that the EUMA acts strictly as a neutral, civilian and unarmed mission, in line with its declared mandate, and refrains from any activity targeting Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, or affects its legitimate security interests in any other manner.”

At the same time, Hajizada expressed serious concerns about the 5 April 2024 trilateral meeting scheduled to take place in Brussels between the Prime Minister of Armenia, the U.S. Secretary of State, and the President of the EU Commission (it had been announced, in principle, during the European Political Community summit in Grenada in October 2023). In particular, Hajizada said that this meeting “is not conducted in a fully transparent manner, lacks regional inclusivity, and runs contrary to promoted and much needed confidence-building, and integrity in the region. It creates new dividing lines and so-called spheres

of influence in the region, instead of encouraging the Armenian side to negotiate in good faith.” At the same time, he made it clear that the EU and the U.S. “share responsibility for any destabilizing action of Armenia” that may take place subsequent to the meeting, “given the revanchist mood in Armenia,” explaining further that “such an open pro-Armenian public manifestation by Washington and Brussels might create a dangerous illusion in Armenia that EU and U.S. are going to support Armenia in its possible renewed provocations against Azerbaijan.”

However, U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller pointed out that the Brussels meeting will focus “on Armenia’s economic resilience,” stressing that Armenia is working to diversify trade ties and address humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, he also did not rule out that Armenian-Azerbaijani issues will be discussed at this meeting, but added that this will not be the main agenda item of the meeting.

The Azerbaijani readout of the phone call that the U.S. Secretary of State made to President Aliyev on 3 April 2024 indicated that, “based on the information he received, discussions preceding the trilateral meeting included topics such

as military support for Armenia, joint military exercises, the establishment of military infrastructure along border areas with Azerbaijan, and Armenia’s arming through the EU’s European Peace Facility funded through the U.S. budget.” He also reiterated Azerbaijan’s view that the trilateral meeting “would ultimately escalate tensions and create new dividing lines instead of fostering peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus.”

The Azerbaijani readout of the phone call that the President of the EU Commission made to President Aliyev on 4 April 2024 also referred to the aforementioned trilateral meeting. It indicated that the country’s head of state had “reiterated Azerbaijan’s standpoint on this meeting, similar to the discussions with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and emphasized the need for regional inclusivity.”

The trilateral meeting took place on 5 April 2024, just as this edition of *Baku Dialogues* was being finalized. On Twitter, Pashinyan indicated that the “consultations” had been about “expanding economic cooperation to strengthen Armenia’s economic, humanitarian, democratic resilience.” At a joint press conference preceding the meeting, the President of the EU Commission

announced 270€ million in grants to Armenia over the next four years, while the U.S. Secretary of State said that his country has “plans to provide over \$65 million in assistance from our FY23 budget funds.” Both Washington and Brussels also indicated a willingness to invest in various infrastructure projects in Armenia, but refrained from making binding promises to do so.

All in all, in their public remarks, both of the Western representatives spoke equitably, although some of their formulations could be construed as leaning in Armenia’s direction. For instance, the President of the EU Commission began her remarks by saying, “I’m glad to host a meeting in support of Armenia. We’re delivering on a promise we made last October, the promise to stand shoulder to shoulder by Armenia.” Her only reference to the EU’s vision regarding the future of the entire region was contained in her final sentence: “We will continue to work all together for the future of Armenia in a stable and prosperous South Caucasus region.”

This is to be contrasted to the U.S. Secretary of State’s more articulated vision: “We are here to reaffirm transatlantic support for a democratic, prosperous future for the Armenian people—and a more integrated and a more peaceful South

Caucasus region,” adding that “we want Armenia to take its place as a strong, independent nation at peace with its neighbors, connected to the region and the world.” His final assessment struck an evenhanded tone:

For Armenia, regional integration is a key to security and to prosperity. [...] We see a more integrated South Caucasus with new transportation routes, energy cooperation, [and] telecommunications. This will promote diversified economies, expanded opportunity, and it will bolster peace and reconciliation efforts. There is a powerful future with a region that is increasingly integrated, that will benefit people in every connected country.

Encouragingly, both Ursula von der Leyen and Tony Blinken spoke of “displaced” ethnic-Armenians from Karabakh, thus (at least implicitly) refusing to follow Pashinyan’s preferred formulation (“forcibly displaced”), which he repeated—likely with an eye to his domestic audience—during the joint press conference.

One could thus conclude that what President Aliyev said to von der Leyen and Blinken during the aforementioned phone calls had a positive impact on the language that was used during the press conference. It may have even indirectly

contributed to the manner in which Pashinyan formulated the Armenian position regarding the peace process:

I want to stress that we remain committed to the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan based on mutual recognition of each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in accordance with the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991. Armenia is also fully committed to the delimitation of borders based on the Alma-Ata Declaration and unblocking all the regional communications based on full respect for countries’ sovereignty and jurisdiction, and the principles of equality and reciprocity.

Lastly, it should be noted that none of the speakers at the press conference mentioned Russia explicitly. However, it seems clear enough that the transatlantic expressions of support for not only Armenia, but Pashinyan personally were implicitly yet unmistakably directed at least in part against Moscow. The attempted turn toward the West seems to be accelerating—or, as von der Leyen put it, “the EU and Armenia are increasingly aligned in values and interests.”

This could lead to geopolitical complications, for Armenia depends on Russia in many ways that are, at present, irreplaceable. Russia maintains a major military

base in Gyumri, controls two of Armenia’s four borders, supplies most of its energy, and remains its top trading partner.

Armenia is also part of the Russia-run Eurasian Economic Union. Official economic statistics state that according to last year’s data, about 36 percent of Armenia’s trade turnover is with EAEU countries, mainly Russia. The conflict over Ukraine has also led directly to a dramatic increase in trade turnover with Russia. According to statistics, exports to the Russian market increased by 40 percent, while exports decreased to the United States by 38 percent and the EU 8.2 percent. Thus, the EAEU is the main export market for Armenian products, and it is difficult to assume that Armenia can reconsider its membership in this Union at the moment.

Thus, Armenia today faces a hard choice of whether to abandon Russia without any serious plan to transform the still largely symbolic commitments made by the West into a geopolitically viable and economically sustainable strategy.

However, given the strategic importance of the South Caucasus region, it is somewhat unsettling that Moscow has not, at least for the time being, replied to these

latest developments in Armenia. There is no guarantee that the Kremlin will refrain from using one or more elements of its quite varied points of leverage—not all of which can be categorized as soft power tools—against Armenia in response to the policies of the Pashinyan government.

Western Bias

Azerbaijan's September 2024 counter-terrorism measures have been exploited by external actors, who have promoted a one-sided narrative that seriously hinders the peace process—or, at the very least, seriously hinders the ability of those external actors that have embraced this one-sided narrative from playing constructive roles in the peace process.

France's increasingly overt support of Armenia is one example of such a narrative that raises concerns in Azerbaijan. On the one hand, immediately after the end of the Second Karabakh War, the Senate and the National Assembly of France adopted harsh anti-Azerbaijani resolutions that called on the government to recognize the separatist regime in Karabakh. On the other hand, French President Emmanuel Macron's statements regarding this part of the world—one

would be hard-pressed not to notice their constant anti-Azerbaijani character—are further stirring tensions. In a joint press briefing after a meeting held at the Élysée Palace with Pashinyan on 21 February 2024, Macron vowed that his country would continue to develop and expand military cooperation with Armenia. He also stated that the exchange of gunfire along the Armenia-Azerbaijan undelimited border on 13 September 2024 proved “that the danger of escalation remains real”—which is fair enough—but could not help describing Azerbaijan's response as “disproportionate,” as it killed four Armenian soldiers.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry did not take kindly to his characterization: “It is unacceptable to blame Azerbaijan for taking a disproportionate response, while refraining from criticizing Armenia, who took unprovoked actions disrupting the stable situation that lasted for almost five months,” the statement read.

The same document accused Macron of disregarding the historical context, i.e., the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by Armenia against Azerbaijanis. “As a country, which has never mentioned the

rights of Azerbaijanis violated for nearly 30 years, displaced from their territories, and subjected to mass massacres, the French side's statement about the rights and security of Armenians that left the territories of Azerbaijan at their own will and without any violence, is completely inappropriate.”

Two days later, on 23 February 2024, Pashinyan received a delegation led by French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu. They discussed defense cooperation and Armenia-France collaboration in military education, combat training, and modernizing the Armenian Armed Forces. The French minister stressed his country's commitment to supplying air defense systems and armored vehicles to Armenia and emphasized France's self-sufficiency in arms production.

It seems, therefore, that a Paris-led campaign to militarize Armenia is currently underway.

The Russian side has not taken kindly to French ambitions directed at its centuries-old ally. Hence the statement made on 10 March 2024 by Maria Zakharova, the Spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, in which she criticized France's attempts to portray itself as a peacekeeper in Karabakh

“despite Russia's prominent role in peacekeeping efforts” there. She further suggested that France's increased activity in the South Caucasus may be seen as compensation for “its failed policies in Africa.”

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has also demonstrated an anti-Azerbaijan stance in various statements. For example, on 22 January 2022, he expressed his particular solidarity with France and French diplomats who have been expelled from Azerbaijan. However, such an open expression of solidarity and justifying the actions of expelled French diplomats in Azerbaijan (they were accused of being spies) can be considered an intervention in the ongoing legal investigation process and thus an open neglect of diplomatic conduct rules and guidelines relating to the investigation of this case.

Aliyev touched upon this issue while receiving a delegation led by Managing Director of the German Eastern Business Association Michael Harms in Baku in early February 2024. He noted in particular that after restoring sovereignty and territorial integrity by dismantling the separatist stronghold in Karabakh, Azerbaijan came under

attack and was blamed by individuals such as Macron, Borrell, and others. At the same time, he added that “we are witnessing attempts to establish divisive lines in the South Caucasus. Many people in Azerbaijan think that our Muslim religion is the only way out given Georgia and Armenia are taken very close to the hearts of the European institutions and Azerbaijan is now being demonized.” The potential strategic implications for the possible trajectory of domestic developments in Azerbaijan contained in this passage have not been sufficiently appreciated and should be taken much more seriously.

Furthermore, the president mentioned that Ukraine seeks to restore its territorial integrity, and that Germany and other countries are sending weapons to Ukraine. They all declare that Ukraine must ensure its territorial integrity, but seem to have a different standard when it comes to Azerbaijan. “Is our issue less important than the issue of Ukraine?” he said.

Normalization of Relations?

The geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus is going through a period of transformation. Some states are trying to change their foreign and security aspirations by moving away from traditional to new allies, while others are trying to ensure their own strategic posture remains unchangeable. According to Emil Avdaliani’s February 2024 analysis, “the South Caucasus is undergoing a geopolitical transformation. The war in Ukraine and the effective resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan mean that the region is entering a new age.”

Today, Armenia and Azerbaijan are at a very important stage of their bilateral discussions. They want to normalize ties and establish inter-state relations. Azerbaijan, though, demands certain quite logical changes in Armenia’s current constitution as

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an antidote against future territorial revanchism. Pashinyan has also emphasized the necessity for Armenia to adopt a new constitution, reflecting geopolitical changes.

While discussing the issue of a new constitution and its connection with Armenia’s Declaration of Independence, political scientist Areg Kochinyan noted that the Declaration of Independence of Armenia addresses the recognition of the Armenian genocide, the fulfillment of the people’s aspirations, and the reunification of Armenia and the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (and other foreign territories), yet none of these points applies to the Republic of Armenia. In his opinion, if the Declaration of Independence does not pertain to the foundations of statehood and state goals, then the connection between it and the Constitution should be severed. He therefore suggested the separation of the Declaration of Independence from the Constitution. He has also suggested that the only viable option for the establishment of peace is coexistence with Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

Speaking at a joint press conference with his Azerbaijani counterpart in mid-February 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said:

There is no doubt that the signing of a lasting peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia will be a new source of hope for peace, tranquility, and stability in our region and the world. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Azerbaijan in this process. With the end of the occupation in Karabakh, a historic window of opportunity for lasting peace in our region has opened. It is critical that this window of opportunity is not closed. I believe that Armenia should think long-term and evaluate this process with a strategic perspective. We invite third parties to make constructive contributions instead of poisoning the process.

Consolidated Vision?

Irrespective of whether the West and Russia are locked into a new Cold War or something like it, it is clear that great power confrontation is part of the new global reality. Azerbaijan and Armenia (and Georgia) should work together now to ensure that outside players’ geopolitical rivalry is not reflected in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. As Azerbaijan’s presidential adviser Hikmat Hajiyev put it on 1 March 2024:

There are forces in our region that implement militarization policy, promote arms race, try to create new separating and dividing lines in the region,

and at the same time, they want to bring their geopolitical intrigues outside the South Caucasus region to the region. There are certain forces that try to develop the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan not as a border, but as a kind of confrontation line, which is unfortunate. We expect that Armenia will not repeat the mistakes of previous years and will pursue a policy that will serve lasting peace in the region. This is the intention of Azerbaijan.

In this context, Pashinyan's recent statement on 28 March 2024 is quite exceptional. He noted that Armenia does not recognize any government in exile and there is only one legitimate government in Armenia, which is located within the boundaries of the Cabinet room. Pashinyan expressed concern about the potential threat to Armenia's national security posed by the actions and statements of certain groups, and stressed the need for clarity and decisive action to prevent external forces from exploiting such situations.

This seemed to be a direct response to the remarks published

earlier in the same day by the former "president" of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. When asked whether there was a government in exile, he stated, "Yes, the office of the president and the offices of the judicial and legislative bodies of Artsakh are located in the building where I am hosting you. Parliamentarians can gather here to vote. A decree was signed in October [2023], which stipulates that all government ministers remain in their positions on a voluntary basis."

Pashinyan now faces a difficult dilemma, since he seems to be interpreting this interview as part of a pattern of ongoing political behavior that is contrary to that of his government—with no end in sight. Taking legal action, including the arrest and detention of Karabakh separatists operating in Armenia, could lead to even greater tension within Armenian society.

It is clear that, despite almost three and a half years that have passed since Armenia was defeated in the Second Karabakh War, there is no consolidated vision of the

Azerbaijan and Armenia (and Georgia) should work together now to ensure that outside players' geopolitical rivalry is not reflected in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process in Armenia. However, it is time for Armenians to move away from myths and accept the new reality on the ground, reject the tragically romantic paradigms of the past, and work towards the establishment of pragmatic relations with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Indeed, signing what may be titled the "Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations" will not only formally end the state of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and thus

contribute to the establishment of inter-state relations, but it will also provide an enabling environment for future generations to lay a foundation for trust, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the time ahead. It can also eventually contribute to the transformation of the South Caucasus into an area of regional stability and cooperation. Finally, it can contribute to the aspiration, shared by the Silk Road region's most serious leaders, for this part of the world to transform itself from an object of great power rivalry to a subject of international order. ^{BD}

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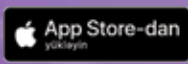

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Open-Door Country

The Place and Role of Georgia

Maxime Gauin

The formal award of official EU candidate country status to Georgia in December 2023, the Armenia-Georgia agreement of January 2024, and the warm Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani meeting in March 2024 confirm and even reinforce the singular position of Georgia in the South Caucasus. This essay examines the origins and current aspects of the place and role occupied by Tbilisi in the region, and how this has come to be seen as an advantage by the most relevant external players. Georgia is the ‘open-door country’ of the Silk Road region.

Background

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the territory inhabited by ethnic-Georgians was an integral part of a broader

struggle involving three empires: the Ottoman, the Persian, and the Russian. The first two were rival Muslim (Sunni and Shia, respectively) polities that had each seen better days; the third was a dynamic, rising Orthodox power making strategic inroads throughout the South Caucasus (and elsewhere). Some Georgian leaders still ruled over their territories more or less independently in various fragmented kingdoms and principalities, including Kartli-Kakheti, whose capital was Tbilisi. After its sacking by the Persians in 1795, a power vacuum ensued, coupled with various internecine revolts and succession struggles. This enabled Russia to justify its violation of the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), which had guaranteed this small kingdom’s territorial integrity and the continued reign of the ruling dynasty under the status of an imperial protectorate.

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Between 1800 and 1803, Russia consolidated its hold on that part of the Georgian lands. Then, in 1810, it annexed another Georgian kingdom, Imereti, in 1810. This was followed by the Treaty of Gulistan (1813),

which saw Persia formally ceding much of its Georgian territories to Russia—a de jure acknowledgment of the reality on the ground. The remaining parts of modern-day Georgia were gradually absorbed into the Russian Empire thanks in large part to a series of victories over the Ottoman Empire—e.g., the port city of Poti in 1829, the Principality of Guria in 1829, Svaneti in 1858, Mingrelia in 1867—culminating in the ceding of Adjara in 1878 at the Congress of Berlin.

Whatever else drove the policy of Russia in the South Caucasus, it did see itself as defending Georgians, which in turn necessitated the incorporation of their lands into the empire: any strategic alternative, given geopolitical realities, would have resulted in those same lands falling into the hands of either the Ottomans or Persians. Russian strategic thinking neither left open

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the possibility of independent Georgian polities nor the restoration of a consolidated Georgian state governed independently by a native sovereign. By the time the Russians had completed

their expansion into the South Caucasus, all Georgians came to live under one sovereign for the first time in centuries.

The incorporation of the Georgian nobility into the Russian aristocracy speaks to the ‘defending Georgians’ point, particularly when contrasted with the fate of Armenian and Azerbaijani elites during the same period. Perhaps this contrast had something to do with the fact that Georgians, unlike their Armenian and Azerbaijani neighbors, were Orthodox Christians, as were the overwhelming majority of Russian imperial elites. The fact that Stalin remains the only uncontested non-Slavic ruler of Russia in history since the Mongol occupation came to an end should also be taken as a piece of evidence in a later historical context, notwithstanding the obvious ironies.

It should also be noted that Russian rule over Georgia sometimes yielded to local sensitivities. For example, the abolishment of serfdom in the Russian heartland took place in 1861 but waited until 1865 to decree the same in the Georgian lands, with the implementation process lasting into the 1870s. This made Georgia the last place in Europe to end slavery, except for the Ottoman Empire.

The continuity of Russian rule was broken for a short period during the civil war that began after the Bolshevik Revolution. Georgian representatives to the parliament of the newly-established Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (it lasted little over a month in the spring of 1918) met alone and declared Georgian independence.

Unlike Armenia, Georgia settled its territorial disagreements with Azerbaijan peacefully and then, in 1919, signed a military alliance with Baku against both the (White) Volunteer Army of Anton Denikin and the Bolsheviks. Despite the Armenian-Georgian war of December 1918 (provoked by Armenia and won by Georgia), Tbilisi proposed to Yerevan (in vain, as it turned out) to join a regional alliance. Instead, Armenia sought one with Denikin and, later, an

understanding with the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, much better settled in France than the Armenian nationalists, Georgian representatives lobbied in the West—including against Armenian nationalist claims toward Türkiye and Azerbaijan—with the hope of forcing a South Caucasian rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Georgia's independence was recognized by the Bolshevik regime in the Treaty of Moscow (1920) that it signed with Georgia. This treaty was violated by Lenin at the urging of Stalin and other Georgian Bolsheviks the very next year when the Red Army took Tbilisi and declared the establishment of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in February 1921. This did not stop anti-communist Georgians from revolting in May-December 1921 and then again in August-September 1924 (similar to how anti-communist Azerbaijanis revolted in Ganja in May 1920, in Lankaran in July-December of the same year, and in Shusha in the spring of 1921, or to the uprising that took place in Yerevan in February-April 1921). All such and similar revolts were crushed. Then, the religious persecution during the Stalinist period was particularly harsh, not unlike the purge of Georgian writers in 1937 (both the national church and the artists being particularly

important in the preservation of the national feeling).

Meanwhile, together with Bolshevik-occupied Armenia and Azerbaijan, the three new Soviet Socialist Republics were united into what was called the Federative Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia in March 1922, which became one of the four founding republics of the Soviet Union in December 1922. In December 1936, Transcaucasia was dissolved, and Georgia (together with Armenia and Azerbaijan) regained republic status within the Soviet Union. And so it remained until the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Georgian strivings for independence gained ground in 1987, with one focal point of resistance to Soviet rule being the Ilia Tshavtchavadze Society (named in tribute to a prince who played a key role in the revival of the Georgian national idea in the nineteenth century). The Soviet repression of 8-9 April 1989 resulted in 20 official deaths (the killing largely took place with shovels and toxic gas) and 200 wounded. Although this pales in comparison to the Red Army's massacre in Baku on 20 January 1990 (officially 147 killed, 4 disappeared, and 744 wounded), it was still a considerable figure. It can be called a shared fate.

Not unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia too suffered from Moscow-backed separatism in the early 1990s with the war in Abkhazia, an autonomous republic located in the north of the country. The separatist movement was materially helped by Boris Yeltsin's Russia (this is especially visible by the presence of T-72 tanks and Grad rocket launchers) and included Armenian volunteers, especially those of the Bagramyan Battalion (named in tribute to Marshal Ivan Bagramyan, deceased in 1982, who justified Stalin's purges as late as 1970). The Bagramyan Battalion fought irregular Georgian forces as late as 1998. The 1992-1993 war cost the lives of about 30,000 persons and resulted in the expulsion of 250,000 ethnic-Georgians (about 45 percent of the population in 1991). The Yeltsin's support was particularly ironical, as 60 percent of Abkhazians had been deported by the Tsar's government during the 1860s, and as the Abkhazian language regressed from 1945 to 1978, the softening of Soviet policy in the late 1970s was due to a divide-and-rule policy more than anything else.

Today, Georgia is inhabited by sizeable ethnic-Armenian and ethnic-Azerbaijani minorities, respectively making up 4.5 and 6.3 percent of the population. Indeed, Georgia never tried

to ethnically cleanse its minorities, unlike Armenia (it is presently the most ethnically homogeneous country on the European continent). There were massacres of Muslims in Georgia in 1915, but they were committed by the Russian army, and a deportation of Meskhetian Turks did take place in Georgia in 1944, but this was Stalin's decision.

Georgia co-founded the GUAM in 1997, together with Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Moldova—three countries that, at the time, each faced problems of Russian-backed separatism, with the fourth fearing to face a similar situation one day. On 10 October 1997, the joint communiqué of the meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, held in Strasbourg, announced the following:

[The] leaders of the four nations were unanimous in assessing threats and risk for the European, as well as for the regional securities. They agreed that the process of integration into Trans-Atlantic and European structures could to a considerable extent reduce these threats and risks. In this connection, they underlined the prospects of the four nations' cooperation within the framework of the OSCE, [and] other European and Atlantic structures, including the recently established

Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace NATO Program. [...] The President unanimously upheld the need for combating aggressive nationalism, separatism, and international terrorism.

The GUAM platform of cooperation has contributed to the rapprochement of its members to each other, but also (crucially) to the West. In the case of Georgia, this opening was reinforced by the 2003 Rose Revolution. However, President Mikheil Saakashvili overestimated the tangible results of this opening in 2008, when he tried to recover control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian troops took reprisal action in South Ossetia (and other parts of Georgia, withdrawing only in 2010). Georgia severed its diplomatic relations with Russia and left the Commonwealth of Independent States, arguing that Moscow had violated—for the second time—Article 5 of the Alma-Ata Declaration (“The High Contracting Parties acknowledge and respect each other’s territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders within the Commonwealth”).

As the war progressed and Saakashvili appealed to the West for assistance, some in Europe and America wanted to answer

the call forcefully. In her memoir, then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote about a National Security Council meeting on 12 August 2008 chaired by U.S. National Security Adviser Steve Hadley:

The session was a bit unruly, with a fair amount of chest beating about the Russians. At one point Steve Hadley intervened, something he rarely did. There was all kind of loose talk about what threats the United States might make. “I want to ask a question,” he said in his low-key way. “Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?” That quieted the room, and we settled into a more productive conversation of what we could do. [...] We sent humanitarian supplies by military transport—a visible statement of support that might at least back Moscow off. And we decided that I’d go to Georgia.

She does not add that neither the United States nor the European Union chose, at the time, to sanction Russia.

Saakashvili was far from an ideal president—in her memoirs, titled *No Higher Honor* (2011), Rice characterizes him as a “capricious, emotional [...] American-educated firebrand.” But the absence of a dissuasive reaction to Russia’s actions explains, at least

in part, the Georgian electorate’s decision to abandon him and his party in favor of their main rival, Georgian Dream, in 2012 (55 percent against 40.3 percent) and its campaign promise of “de-escalation.”

Georgia’s Importance for Azerbaijan

The most obvious aspect of the Georgia-Azerbaijan relationship is energy. Across the decades, the Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa oil pipeline (1999), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2005), the South Caucasus gas pipeline (2006), and the TANAP gas pipeline (2018) have been built and unveiled. Practically all the hydrocarbons exported by Azerbaijan to Türkiye, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere pass through Georgia, and Tbilisi depends on Baku for most of Georgia’s oil and gas supplies. Around 90 percent of the gas consumed in the country originates in Azerbaijan, which comes out to about 17 percent of Azerbaijan’s total gas exports.

Another key aspect is connectivity. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway (826 km, including 500 km in Azerbaijan), which took a decade to build, was inaugurated in

2017. The unveiling of the BTK and TANAP are among the main reasons why the outcome of the Second Karabakh War was completely different from the April 2016 Four-Day War. Indeed, these works reinforced the Azerbaijani economy, while the decrease in oil prices and the imposition of successive waves of sanctions by the West against Moscow starting in 2014 weakened the Russian one.

The Georgian economy has incontrovertibly profited from the opening of this strategic railway line. For example, the value of products exported by Georgia to Azerbaijan increased by 28.2 percent from 2022 to 2023, amounting to \$862.07 million (14.2 percent of its total exports). BTK is a strategic economic lifeline for Georgia.

Baku and Tbilisi want to make this increase in trade sustainable and flourishing, and thus it is not surprising that Azerbaijan has made sure it regularly informs Georgia about developments in the talks concerning the Zangezur Corridor (but also the alternative Aras Corridor, which will loop below Armenian territory through Iran). The point is that these southern routes are understood by both countries as being complementary to the northern one, which passes through Georgia.

Politically speaking, Georgia has always been consistent in supporting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. In April 2023, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated the following:

The Georgian side does not recognize the so-called independence of Nagorno Karabakh and therefore does not recognize the second round of the so-called presidential elections held in this region of Azerbaijan. Georgia supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders and supports the peaceful settlement of conflict based on the principles and norms of international law.

The most decisive moment in this context was, of course, the Second Karabakh War, for at least two reasons. First, Georgia's political support (not unlike that of Ukraine and Israel) was a strong reply to Armenian nationalist propagandists, who tried to describe the conflict as one based primarily on religion. Secondly, and more concretely, as President Ilham Aliyev explained at ADA University on 29 April 2022:

We asked our Georgian friends to close the airspace, and they did. Also, we asked our Georgian friends to block the land route from Russia to Georgia to transport weapons to Armenia, and they did it also. And we are grateful.

During the Second Karabakh War, Georgian customs officials seized Russian armored vehicles, as there was at least one attempt to send such equipment despite the ban on the transfer of military material to Armenia. This was only logical, given the fact that Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani military cooperation was raised to a higher level as early as 2014 (i.e., the year Russian troops re-entered Crimea and the Donbass), with a consequential meeting of the defense ministers of the three countries taking place in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave. They decided, among other things, to organize at least one joint military exercise every year, and agreed on joint product developments for their respective defense industries. For obvious reasons, the first exercises focused on the protection of oil and gas pipelines, but, since 2017, their scope has been expanded.

The liberation of Karabakh in 2020 and the extinguishment of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist entity in September 2023 changed nothing to this military cooperation. Quite the contrary, in October 2023, the annual joint exercise took place in Baku—more precisely at the Center for War Games of the Military Administration Institute of the National Defense University

of Azerbaijan. It focused on the protection of the BTC pipeline and the BTK railway. Yet, considering the reinforcement of the links between Georgia and NATO since 2008 (see below), Georgia's participation has a special importance for Azerbaijan.

For various reasons—the details of which are beyond the scope of this essay—the likelihood of Georgia serving as a facilitator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process increased in the wake of the liberation of Khankendi and its neighborhood in September 2023. Thus, on 8 October 2023, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated the following in a joint conference with his “dear friend, Mr. Ilham Aliyev”:

I once again informed Mr. President that we support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We are grateful to Azerbaijan, which, in turn, always supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. We have also confirmed that we have great hopes that Azerbaijan and Armenia sign a peace agreement. From this point of view, our views on the peace agenda in the South Caucasus fully coincide. We do hope that peace in this region will be sustainable and serve the prosperity of our countries, as well as the people of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.

More recently, in February 2024, it was announced that Ameriabank, one of Armenia's main banks (its total assets are estimated to be \$3.4 billion) was to be sold to the Bank of Georgia, an Anglo-Georgian company, for the price of \$303.6 million. Yet, almost half of its shares are currently possessed by Russian-Armenian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan, a former "State Minister" of the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic." He is currently in jail in Baku, having been arrested after the liberation of Khankendi and its neighborhood. The Azerbaijani government is quite likely aware of this transaction and has made no negative comment on the sale. This shows the importance of Georgia for both sides, lending credence to my characterization of Georgia as the Silk Road region's open-door country.

Georgia's Importance for Armenia

In recent years, the relationship between Georgia and Armenia has improved, both politically and economically. There was a crisis between Yerevan and Tbilisi in 2008-2009 and then, to a lesser extent, another one in 2018 (i.e., during

the presidency of the Khankendi-born Serzh Sargsyan) and again in 2020 (in the context of the Second Karabakh War) concerning the Armenian minority in Georgia, but these tensions now belong to the past. Similarly, the "republics" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were the only ones to "recognize" the secessionist regime that used to be based in Khankendi, which reciprocally "recognized" them, but Azerbaijan's successful anti-terrorist measure in September 2023 precipitated the formal dissolution of that separatist entity. Notably, the Armenian army did not fire a single shot during this operation, in absolute contrast with its conduct in the Second Karabakh War.

Two months after this last victory and one month after Pashinyan affixed his signature on the Grenada declaration—this document represents the first written Armenian political commitment to the number of square kilometers Yerevan recognizes as constituting Azerbaijani sovereign territory (it includes the whole of Karabakh and the eight villages still under Armenian occupation)—a question was posed to him on Armenia's official position regarding Georgia's secessionist territories on 24

Georgia is the 'open-door country' of the Silk Road region.

November 2023. Pashinyan's answer was clear and unambiguous: "We fully and unequivocally defend the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and democracy of Georgia."

In this context, the word "defend" should be interpreted as being stronger than its usual alternative ("recognize"). It thus seems unlikely that Pashinyan chose it by chance; the same can be said for the words that followed, including "unity," "sovereignty," and "territorial integrity." In the context of Armenia-Georgia relations, this wording is unprecedented. For instance, Armenia had voted against all resolutions in the UN General Assembly in favor of the Georgian refugees prior to 2019—and since this date, Yerevan has abstained from participating in the vote on such and similar resolutions.

Pashinyan's statement is even more remarkable given the existence of a sizeable ethnic-Armenian minority in Abkhazia. Not surprisingly, it was badly perceived by the separatists of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The "president" of South Ossetia even said: "We are not interested in the opinion of the Armenian Prime Minister, who left Nagorno-Karabakh in the most difficult situation. He betrayed his own people."

However, such reactions left him unimpressed, and Pashinyan signed a strategic partnership agreement with Georgia in January 2024. The exact text does not seem to have been made public and, anyway (as always with such agreements), its worth will be determined by what the signatories make of it. The most relevant comment, perhaps, from the Armenian side is from an answer given by Nikol Pashinyan to a question in the Armenian Parliament: "We really worked very intensively in recent years to create that political content in our relations." The use of the word "years" shows that the agreement is the outcome of rather lengthy negotiations, perhaps since 2021.

The economic dimension of the Armenia-Georgia relationship is also clear. In 2023, Armenia was the second-largest destination for Georgian exports. Besides those, virtually all Turkish exports to Armenia pass through Georgia, as the land border between these two countries has been closed since 1993 (due to Turkish solidarity with Azerbaijan). Here we can mention also that although flights between Istanbul and Yerevan resumed in February 2022, they were suspended in April 2023 due to the unveiling in Yerevan of a monument glorifying Operation Nemesis—a terrorist program

that was active between 1920 and 1922, having been orchestrated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to assassinate Ottoman and Azerbaijani it held responsible for the events of 1915-1916 and 1918.

In the south, Iran remains under Western and UN Security Council sanctions. For as long as these have been in place, Armenia has helped Iran to bypass them, notwithstanding the fact that this illegal activity has proven to be mediocreatively effective for the Armenian economy. In other words, there is a non-economic incentive at play in Armenia's conduct.

Indeed, after a November 2018 visit of officials from the U.S. Departments of State and Treasury in Yerevan "to discuss Iran sanctions policies with counterparts in the Armenian government and business community," the Director of the CIA himself traveled to Armenia in July 2022 to issue an in-person warning to Yerevan to cease its ongoing support for the actions of the Iranian and Russian governments to evade sanctions.

It should also be noted that the land trade route between Armenia and Russia goes through Georgia. In September 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department

sanctioned an Armenian company, TAKO, for this reason. This was followed by the sanction of another one, Medisar, in May 2023. But as Orkhan Baghirov wrote in the Winter 2023-2024 edition of *Baku Dialogues*,

Armenia's substantial and strategic economic reliance on Russia, which is evident across trade, energy, food security, transport, and various other vital sectors, has intensified of late, particularly since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite Yerevan's recent political posturing against Russia, Armenia's economic ties to Russia have deepened, driven by the prospect of increased income amid the conflict. To put it bluntly, Armenia is an economic beneficiary of the conflict over Ukraine; indeed, the longer the conflict lasts and the Western sanctions against Russia are maintained, the better it will be for Armenia.

Still, both the bilateral trade with Georgia and the use of Georgia as an open door to Türkiye and the European Union are among the most promising perspectives for the Armenian economy. The strategic partnership between Armenia and Georgia can help in this regard.

Politically speaking, this strategic partnership also has clear advantages for Armenia. Georgia enjoys the trust of both Azerbaijan and

Türkiye. Either as a mediator or as a facilitator, Tbilisi can contribute to the peace process and could only gain an advantage in doing so—even more now given that Armenia "defends" the territorial integrity of its northern neighbor and has politically recognized, in a written form, that of Azerbaijan. The U.S. government openly favors the rapprochement between Georgia and Armenia, especially via the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA).

Coming back to Georgia's possible role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, we can note that on 8 October 2023 Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili welcomed President Ilham Aliyev to Tbilisi and stated, during the aforementioned joint press conference, that

We have always been impartial here in Georgia and are ready to contribute to this issue today. We want to be a mediator in this matter and are ready to offer any friendly format. Our future should be peaceful and stable, and all three countries of the South Caucasus should address regional issues themselves.

His Azerbaijani guest answered positively. The Armenian government did not explicitly respond, but the signature of the strategic partnership some months later allows one to think that Yerevan

is considering such a role for Tbilisi. Even more recently, on 15 March 2024, during the meeting of Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Turkish foreign ministers held in Baku, Minister Ilia Darchiashvili reiterated this proposal.

Earlier in the same month, the Rondeli Foundation, a Georgian think tank (established in 1998 with the support of the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), invited Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) and Areg Kochinyan, President of the Research Center on Security Policy (RCSP) and a former spokesman of the Security Council of Armenia (2018-2020), to speak at the same session of its annual security conference.

The session was eloquently titled: "The South Caucasus: Can the New Connectivity Opportunity Transform the Region?" Not surprisingly, Kochinyan had previously stated that, in order to end Russia's dominant political, security, and economic role in Armenia, peace agreements had to be forged with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

As noted by Tbilisi-based journalist Onnik James Krikorian put it on Twitter that day, "Thanks to

@RondeliSecConf for the panel. More of the same in Tbilisi, please. It still remains the only location where such events can happen on a semi-regular basis.”

Georgia in the Eyes of the EU and NATO

The usual pathway for post-communist European countries to anchor their relationship with Western institutions has been to join NATO first and the EU second. For instance, Poland, Czechia, and Hungary joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004; the three Baltic states became member states of NATO in March 2004 and the EU in May of the same year; Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. Georgia initially planned to follow this path, then inverted its priorities after its August 2008 war with Russia. The two aspirations converged around 2014, in a different context. To get at this, we need to go back to the historical record.

Georgia was an inaugural partner of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (this took place in March 1994). According to NATO,

Activities on offer under the PFP programme touch on virtually every field of NATO activity,

including defence-related work, defence reform, defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, military-to-military cooperation and exercises, civil emergency response, and cooperation on science and environmental issues.

Regardless of this ambitious formulation, Georgia-NATO cooperation through PfP remained at a relatively low level for years, partly because of the NATO candidacies of countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, partly because of Georgia’s limited military budget, and partly because the Western governments found wise, at that time, to search for compromises with Russia.

The most bitterly felt aspect—from the Georgian point of view—of this search for compromise was the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, when the Georgian candidacy was welcomed, but without a timeline and without starting the actual candidacy procedure (the exact formulation of the Summit’s declaration was as follows: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”).

Saakashvili grossly overestimated the value of this statement, which came several months before the renewal of hostilities between his country and Russia, which was triggered by his attempt to forcibly recover control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—notwithstanding the fact that this was in full conformity with international law (e.g., the Alma-Ata Declaration, the Helsinki Final Act, and the UN Charter). Clearly, his actions were used by the Kremlin as a pretext for invasion. Condoleezza Rice recalls a meeting with Saakashvili on 10 July 2004 in which she told him,

“Mr. President, whatever you do, don’t let the Russians provoke you. You remember when President [George W.] Bush said that Moscow would try to get you to do something stupid. And don’t engage Russian military forces. No one will come to your aid, and you will lose,” I said sternly.

The situation started changing after the August 2008 invasion. In September 2008, a NATO-Georgia Commission was established, and then a NATO Liaison Office was set up two years later. Not surprisingly, at the September 2014 NATO Wales Summit (which took place after Russian troops re-entered Crimea and the Donbass), something called the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) of measures was adopted in order

to improve the capacities of the Georgian military. A second SNGP was adopted in December 2020. These SNGPs cover strategic and operational planning, aviation, air defense, maritime security, strategic communications, special operations, cyber defense, etc.

Among the most tangible effects of the SNGPs, we can list joint exercises (this began in 2015), the establishment of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre the same year, and tailor-made seminars to teach NATO military doctrines and operational planning processes.

Moreover, the sale of radars and anti-aircraft missiles by France beginning in 2015, of anti-tank missiles and guided bombs (JDAMs) by the U.S. (since 2018) and of anti-aircraft missiles by Israel, particularly in 2021 (as well as the local production of Israeli-designed drones and assault rifles since the same year), provided Georgia with the start of a NATO-standard arsenal.

It is probably not a coincidence that the trilateral joint exercises between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye also started in 2014.

Then, in June 2022, at the end of the Madrid Summit, NATO announced:

In light of the changed security environment in Europe, we have decided on new measures to step up tailored political and practical support to partners, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova. We will work with them to build their integrity and resilience, develop capabilities, and uphold their political independence.

The organization later explained that this “tailored political and practical support” represents both an intensification of political dialogue with Tbilisi and an acceleration of the project to replace Georgia’s Soviet- and Russian-made military equipment with NATO-made materials.

A certain parallel can be made concerning Georgia’s relationship with the EU. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Tbilisi took active measures to make itself more attractive to Brussels in preparation (it was hoped) for a formal offer to commence accession negotiations. For example, between 2004 and 2007, 1,200 Georgian high civil servants were sentenced for corruption; during the same period, the government implemented a radical renewal of the police force and practices. In 2002, the World Bank had rated Georgia below Nigeria for the climate of business; in 2007, Georgia was considered better in this regard than ten EU member states.

Yet, Georgia also faced challenges, starting with its crisis with Russia in 2006. Moscow had decided on an aerial blockade of the country and pushed for a “referendum of self-determination” in South Ossetia. This took place against the backdrop of discussions between Georgia and the EU on signing an Association Agreement. These talks began in late 2004 but ended up being signed only a full decade later. The clashes in Tbilisi with those accused of preparing a coup that would have benefitted Moscow at the end of 2007 and the controversial result of the January 2008 election that saw Saakashvili retain power are insufficient grounds for justifying such a long delay.

Be that as it may, the year 2023 was a turning point in relations between Georgia and the EU, as the country’s candidacy for membership in the EU, which had been formally presented in March 2022 was officially accepted in December 2023. The EU Commission’s report marked full satisfaction with the improvements made by Tbilisi in the justice (“this priority is completed”) and gender equality categories (same assessment); Brussels also assessed positively the transparency of public finances—to cite only three key examples.

Unless something changes radically, however, the accession process could take quite a long time to reach its endpoint. In fact, there is no guarantee of a positive outcome (i.e., accession to the EU), as the example of both Türkiye and the Western Balkans makes clear. The more technical questions about the rapidity of the reform process in Georgia are unlikely to be the sole criteria to measure progress on the road that could end with an accession offer. There is also the political issue of the evolution of the EU itself.

Moreover, Georgia has acted ambiguously in the context of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia. “We do not impose sanctions against Russia, but we will do everything so that our territory is not used for circumventing sanctions,” Georgia’s Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stressed in early March 2024. But as early as March 2022, the Georgian government announced that it was “in full compliance with the financial sanctions imposed by the international community” against Russia. And in August 2023 Tbilisi banned the re-export to Russia and Belarus of Western-imported cars. At the same time, the numbers just don’t lie: Georgia’s trade turnover with Russia has

increased markedly since the start of the Ukraine war.

However, one cannot downplay the symbolism of the fact that the first visit of the country’s new prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, was to Brussels, where both the EU and NATO are headquartered. This took place in February 2024. During this visit, he expressed Georgia’s support for Ukraine: “Once again, I express my solidarity with our friendly Ukrainian people, who fell victim to Russian military aggression.”

Even before this visit, he had placed “the integration to the European Union” at the top of his priorities. Georgia has also welcomed more than 24,000 Ukrainian refugees, securing for them the provision of various economic and social services. Moreover, 25 units of high-power generators were provided to Ukraine by the Georgian government in December 2022, and 338 smaller units arrived the same month, by private initiatives. This is not inconsiderable. The Western wish to see Georgia doing more to support Ukraine is understandable, but it seems obvious that, for instance, the way to obtain the end of Tbilisi-Moscow flights lies in the West providing adequate economic compensation.

Still, the overall trend seems clear: both the EU and NATO have intensified their presence in Georgia since 2022. Concerning the EU, the acceptance of Georgia's candidacy in December 2023

has been characterized by Victor Kipiani, chair of the Georgian think-tank Geocase, as proof of the "intention of the European Union to abandon the so-called 'deaf defense' and move to a 'strategic counterattack' in our complex Caucasus region."

Conclusion

Despite considerable external constraints, internal troubles, secessionist movements, and a lack of natural resources, Georgia has been remarkably successful in transforming itself into

When it comes to this part of the world, what could be more important than lending support for a sustainable pathway to safety, security, and prosperity for all its inhabitants?

a viable state (notwithstanding the occupation of 22 percent of its territory) that delivers concrete results to its citizens whilst serving as a trusted regional connectivity partner. As noted above, Georgia is now incontrovertibly the Silk Road region's open-door country.

Moreover, its strategic importance is now understood by the West and across the Silk Road region, particularly by its two South Caucasus neighbors. After all, being courted by the West and Russia at the same time is not a negative characteristic for a possible host of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. When it comes to this part of the world, what could be more important than lending support for a sustainable pathway to safety, security, and prosperity for all its inhabitants? **BD**

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