

Superseding Middle Power Theory with the Keystone Concept: The Persuasive Case of Azerbaijan and the Silk Road Region

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The 'keystone state' concept better explains geopolitical and geoeconomic developments in the 'Silk Road region' than any extant alternatives, including, most relevantly, anything associated with the term 'middle power', whether remaining tethered to 'middle power theory' or resulting from (in some cases laudable) contemporary attempts to break away from its theoretical or normative limitations. The article's coda outlines five characteristics of 'Silk Road values' as a way to explain one important aspect of the region's strategic trajectory and its nascent institutional arrangements.

Keywords: Keystone States, Middle Powers, Middle Power Theory, Silk Road Region, Silk Road Values, South Caucasus, Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan.



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Introduction

The first recorded definition of ‘middle powers’ appears in a 1589 work by Giovanni Botero titled *The Reason of State*. Therein, he defined these as states that have “sufficient force [or strength, *forze*] and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help [or rescue, *soccorso*] from others.”¹ In Botero’s telling, leaders of middle powers tend to be acutely aware of the dexterity required to maintain security and project influence in a prudential manner beyond their immediate borders; and, *because* of that, middle powers are apt to have a facility in promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbours and their neighbours’ neighbours.

Botero’s definition, to my mind, illustrates an approach to the study of international relations that is best described as one of political phenomenology: a reasoning (*logos*) about the appearance or manifestation of the human situation (*phainomena*), as accomplished from the point of view of the appearance itself. Thus, in my reckoning, political phenomenology is a reasoned investigation into a particular manifestation of the human situation from the point of view of the phenomena of politics itself: of man and his world as it is, not as it could or ought to be. In one of his writings, Leo Strauss referred to such an approach as a contribution to a “coherent and comprehensive understanding of what is frequently called the common-sense view of political things” – that is to say, a “fully conscious” understanding of “the political things as they are experienced by the citizen or statesman.”²

This stands in stark contrast to the preferences of many present-day social scientists specializing in international relations, who have made all sorts of distinctions regarding middle powers that basically consist of one of two approaches: (1) a positional one that examines material power capabilities (involving the measurement of hierarchical positioning) and (2) a behavioural one³ – with the latter itself being

1 G.Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* I:2 (my translation). Cf. Carlsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), pp.10-44; see also Abbondanza, G. “Middle Powers and Great Powers through History: The Concept from Ancient Times to the Present Day,” *History of Political Thought*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2020), pp. 397-418.

2 L.Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 12, 11.

3 The positional approach is sometimes termed “middlepowerhood” and the behavioral one correspondingly termed “middlepowermanship”. See Nossal, K.R., ““Middlepowerhood’ and ‘Middlepowermanship’ in Canadian Foreign Policy,” in N.Hynek and D.Bosold

distinguishable between (a) those who assign middle power status to states with a capacity to support a preferred normative outcome (e.g., alignment with a U.S.-led ‘rules-based liberal international order’ or something similar) and (b) those who associate middle powers with distinct and considerable subjectivity or agency, and that have a choice of pursuable policies.⁴ This last approach (i.e., 2(b)) is, in my view, more useful than the other approaches favoured by social scientists, in part because it is closer to (but not synonymous with) the commonsensical approach of political phenomenology.

Expiration Date

Displaying admirable intellectual honesty, Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr – two prominent “researchers who have widely published on the concept of middle power” – recently wrote an article that convincingly calls into question the “real-world application” and “analytical utility”

(eds.), *Canada’s Foreign and Security Policy: Soft and Hard Strategies of a Middle Power* (Toronto: Oxford University, 2010), pp. 20-34.

4 This last is sometimes described as a functionalist approach or the “functional principle.” It was first articulated by Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong in a 20 January 1942 letter to his colleague Norman Robertson: “Each member of the grand alliance should have a voice in the conduct of war proportionate to its contribution to the general war effort. A subsidiary principle is that the influence of the various countries should be greatest in connection with those matters with which they are most directly concerned.” The text of the letter – and its interpretation (“a state’s influence in international affairs should be commensurate with its interests and capacity to contribute to the issue in question”) – is found in A. Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), p.23. Cf. Gelber, L., “Canada’s New Stature,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 2 (January 1946), pp. 277-289. In an earlier article, Chapnik argues for the existence of three approaches or models: functional, behavioral, and hierarchical. The first two are “politically motivated,” with the first attempting to “normalize the status of states when their power is temporarily exaggerated” whilst the reasoning behind the second is “circular” in that it “characterizes middle power behaviour as the actions of states it already considers middle powers.” The third “seeks to organize states according to their [recognized] international standing,” that is, “non-superpowers [...] recognized in the international community as tangibly different from the rest of the small states [that] must be consulted on, and ha[ve] the right to be involved in, all international issues, regardless of its relative capacity to contribute.” This third model is distinguished from “states that are capable of exercising influence in the international community based on their relative capabilities, interests, and involvement in specific issues at specific times. In actuality, they are no more than sometimes strong small powers.” See Chapnick, A., “The Middle Power,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 7, no 2 (1999), pp. 73-82.

of academically mainstream “middle power theory”.⁵ Their bottom-line argument is that “the middle power concept does not capture anything substantive about the behaviour of mid-sized states. It should therefore not be used by scholars any further.”⁶

Effectually, Robertson and Carr’s argument comes down to this: at the end of the Cold War, our fellow middle-power theorists at least implicitly bought into the ‘end of history’ hypothesis and proceeded to argue that middle powers needed to be, by definition, in the service of bringing it into being (the core theoretical proposition of the middle power concept was that, aside from being liberal-democratic in outlook, these states were “international in focus, multilateral in method, and good citizens [of the world] in conduct”⁷); they then grew disillusioned when the hypothesis fell apart.⁸ Since the concept is inextricably bound up with discredited normative presuppositions, they argue, it should be retired or, in Trotsky’s memorable phrase, put into the “dustbin of history” (‘historicized’ is the term Robertson and Carr employ).

The argument that ‘middle power theory’ has reached its expiration date is persuasive. Its adherents may even be right that the term ‘middle power’ itself should be shelved. Perhaps this explains why alternative

5 Robertson J. and Carr, A., “Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization,” *International Theory* 2023, pp. 1-25. Contributions to “middle power theory” have been made by scores of social scientists. Some of the most famous include (in alphabetical order): Gabriele Abbondanza, Douglas Anglin, Mark Beeson, Ronald M. Behringer, Louis Bélanger, Barry Buzan, Andrew Carr, Adam Chapnick, Stephen Clarkson, Andrew Fenton Cooper, David A. Cooper, Robert T. Cox, Ralf Emmers, Enrico Fels, Lionel Gelber, Bruce Gilley, George P. Glazebrook, Walter Goldstein, Richard A. Higgot, Carlsten Holbraad, John W. Holmes, Eduard Jordaan, Moch Faisal Karim, Robert O. Keohane, Peter K. Lee, R.A. MacKay, James Manicom, David R. Mares, Michael J. Mazarr, Rory Medcalf, Nelson Michaud, Raja Mohan, Laura Neack, Georga Nonnenmacher, Kim Richard Nossal, Andrew O’Neil, Allan Patience, Lester B. Pearson, Jonathan H. Ping, Cranford Pratt, John Ravenhill, Jeffrey Reeves, Jeffrey Robertson, Jai Dev Sethi, Dong-min Shin, Yoshihide Soeya, Frederic Soward, Denis Stairs, Tanguy Struye de Swielande, Tim Sweijts, Sarah Teo, Ole Waever, David Walton, Janis van der Westhuizen, Martin Wight, Thomas S. Wilkins, Bernard Wood, and Ali Wyne. Since this article is not meant to be a literature review, their respective contributions will not be examined here except as noted.

6 Robertson and Carr, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

7 Robertson and Carr, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

8 Mišković, D.K., “Atticism and the Summit for Democracy: A Little Thought Experiment”, *Baku Dialogues* 5:2 (Winter 2021-2022), Available at: https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2022/01/26/bd_w21_krnjevic.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2024). Cf. Mounk, Y., “The End of History Revisited”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2020), pp.22-35.

approaches – both in terms of content and terminology – have risen in prominence in the past decade. For instance, Ian Bremmer brought back the term ‘pivot states’ in 2012; the same year, Daniel M. Kliman and Richard Fontaine wrote about ‘global swing states’.⁹ And in 2015, Nikolai K. Gvosdev produced the term ‘keystone states’.¹⁰ More recently, a new wave of scholars – led by a research quartet working under the auspices of the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy: Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky (hereafter, IPD quartet) – have made the argument that the term itself is not only salvageable but that a substantive redefinition of the concept, which they provide, can contribute to a serious understanding of contemporary world politics.¹¹

Indeed, some of the thinkers mentioned in the preceding paragraph have adopted an approach compatible with that of political phenomenology. They each understand that the “rough and tumble of geopolitics” is sempiternally coeval with political life,¹² as is the Thucydidean

9 I. Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012), pp. 115-117, 178; D. M. Kliman and R. Fontaine, *Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and the Future of International Order* (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund and Center for a New American Security, 2012). See also T. Sweijts, W. T. Oosterveld, E. Knowles, and M. Schellekens, *Why Are Pivot States So Pivotal? The Role of Pivot States in Regional and Global Security* (Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014), pp. 7-9. The latter also enumerate similar contemporaneous terms, including “shatterbelts,” “belts of political change,” “crush zones,” “lynchpin states,” “asymmetrical states,” “gateway states,” “cleft countries,” “hinge states,” “middle tier states,” and “second-order states.” There is also the term “buffer states.” On this last, see T. M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 229.

10 Gvosdev, N.K., “Keystone States: A New Category of Power,” *Horizons* 5 (Autumn 2015), pp. 104-120. See also Gvosdev, N.K., “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region”, *Baku Dialogues* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2020), pp. 26-39, <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2020/08/27/bd-1-gvosdev.pdf>. The keystone concept will be discussed at length in the second half of this essay, first in the context of “keystone states” and then in the context of “keystone region.”

11 A. Moeini, C. Mott, Z. Paikin, and D. Polansky, *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World* (Toronto: The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy, 2022).

12 Both the formulation and deriving argument is provided in Mišković, D.K., “Back with a Vengeance: The Return of Rough and Tumble Geopolitics,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 1, (Winter 2021), pp. 118-135. The rest of this paragraph and the one that follows draw heavily on formulations and arguments I have developed elsewhere. Aside from essays of mine cited in earlier footnotes, see Mišković D.K. and Ismailzade, F. “Preface,” in F. Ismailzade and D.K. Mišković (eds.), *Liberated Karabakh: Policy Perspectives by the ADA University Community* (Baku: ADA University Press, 2021),

antithesis between any nation's dreams and the reality of its power (Thuc. VI:31.5-6; VII:75.6-7; VII:87). This has been the case for as long as human beings have lived together in political communities advancing claims to justice, set down laws in accordance with these claims, and witnessed the perversion of these same claims by those who advanced their particular or private interests to the detriment of the common good of their political community in the name of advancing those same claims.

Here, it is useful to bring to the surface another Thucydidean antithesis: that of the burdens and responsibilities of statecraft and the necessary acknowledgement of even an accomplished statesman's inefficacy in the face of grave disadvantage (Thuc. V:85-116). This is, of course, even more applicable in cases involving political communities led by run-of-the-mill politicians, for statecraft is far more than the mere sum of one's intentions and aspirations. What statecraft requires most – everywhere and always – is a clinical examination of what *cannot* be achieved. Only then may the achievable be fruitfully contemplated and prudentially executed.

Quite right, as war is not like a Hollywood movie where the good guy always wins in the end. Civilization is coeval with conflict, not its Manichean opposite. In world politics, there is no apodictic solution to the problem of justice or the sempiternity of upheaval. Disorder cannot be transcended because human nature is not pliable like Play-Doh: too many social scientists specializing in international relations have deceived themselves into confusing humanity's indisputable technological progress with the illusion of moral progression culminating in what amounts to a chiliastic international system. This includes many of those associated with academically mainstream 'middle power theory' (as noted above). In contrast, approaches compatible with political phenomenology adhere to a more traditional worldview – one that goes back at least to Thucydides – which can be summarized in the following way: history never ends, geography matters, the future is uncertain, one's friends are always imperfect, power politics never go away, and no political cause is ever truly just. One derivation of this way of thinking is that consistently guarding against the temptation to

pp. 8-9 and Mišković, D.K., "Henry Kissinger and Ending the Conflict Over Ukraine," *The National Interest*, June 3, 2023, Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/henry-kissinger-and-ending-conflict-over-ukraine-202774> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

push aside the moderating insubordination of the ways of the world is neither cynicism nor appeasement; it is, rather, a commonsensical and healthy caution against championing for a world as it never could be and advocating the use of all means to get there. The “universal, all-pervasive interplay of motion and rest” – as well as that of necessity and fortune – remains the basis of all serious political science, as it has since its inception.¹³ From the foregoing, one may commonsensically derive the proposition that no regime type or political form can be “expect[ed] to last forever”.¹⁴ Statecraft is neither a morality play nor an exercise in telling others how to avoid perdition.

This is the starting point from which we may commence an inquiry into the possibility of resuscitating the middle power concept, if not the term itself.

Resuscitation?

To my mind, its successful resuscitation is predicated on a return to Botero’s original definition whilst building on its strong foundation in political phenomenology. This would, in turn, lead to an inquiry into whether a salutary attempt to move beyond the stifling debate on ‘middle

13 Strauss, *The City and Man*, *op.cit.*, p. 159. Cf. pp. 226-241.

14 Przeworski A. and Limongi, F., “Modernization: Theories and Facts”, *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 2 (January 1997), p. 165. The concept of regime (*politeia*) type goes back to Plato and Aristotle and is foundational to classical political science. It refers to the entirety of the laws, customs, and traditions that characterize a political community’s way of life in public and ultimately speaks to the question of rulership. Traditionally, a sixfold scheme of regimes is presented: one, few, or many – each of which has a good and a deviant variation (kingship, aristocracy, polity; tyranny, oligarchy, democracy). The concept of political form was laid out in P. Manent, *Cours familier de philosophie politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2001) and earlier writings; see also his *La raison des nations: Réflexions sur la démocratie en Europe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). Regarding the former book, see Mišković, D.K., “Pierre Manent and the New First Philosophy of Politics,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 157-164; regarding the latter, see Mahoney, D.J., “Pierre Manent on the Fate of Democracy in Europe,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 377-387; regarding the concept of a political form more broadly, see J. R. Wood, “Political Form in the Work of Pierre Manent,” PhD diss. (Catholic University of America, 2019). In brief, a political form is the embodiment of the visible shape within which the activity in a regime takes place. Manent identifies six principal political forms: city, empire, Church, national monarchy, nation-state, and the “modern State.” Together, the concepts of regime and form (should) constitute the two fundamental modes of analysis for contemporary political science, which includes the subfield of international relations. It is always useful (although evidently not strictly necessary) to recall that Aristotle refers to political science as the architectonic or master science (Arist., *Eth, Nic.*, 1094a26-ff).

power theory’ is possible, and, if so, whether the traditional term should be replaced with another one on the basis of what is, effectually, a ‘fruit of the poisonous tree’ argument.

What, then, is a middle power in the contemporary context?

In the present, the most promising mode of inquiry into the concept has been initiated by the IPD quartet, as noted above. Summarizing the findings of the IPD quartet’s report, which he co-authored, Christopher Mott wrote the following in the pages of *Baku Dialogues*:

“By our definition, a middle power is a regionally potent state that lacks the global heft of a great power. In a specific localized context, however, it can behave as a great power. This strong regional focus leads to massive differentials in calculating its geopolitical weight based on proximity alone. Such states do not simply project power, however, but are long-term regional anchors that outlast any one particular government or foreign policy stance. Their geographic base is thus also one of historical rootedness, with some version of political power stretching back generations and even across different successor governments. Thus, geography and history intertwine to create favorable security opportunities for local actors with the capacity to increase their influence in their respective neighborhoods. [...] A middle power, in short, is a state with long-term regional power projection which cannot be dominated in its own immediate neighborhood – what the report termed its “near abroad.”¹⁵

As the original IPD quartet’s report makes clear, understanding the “particular dynamics” of “regional security complexes” – a concept introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in 2003 – is “key to a proper conceptualization of middle powers.”¹⁶ To make their point, the IPD quartet quote the following passage from Buzan and Waever in their report:

“Processes of securitisation and thus the degree of security interdependence are more intense between the actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and those outside it. Security complexes may well be extensively

15 Mott, C., “Inshore Balancers and Reborn Opportunities: Middle Powers and the Silk Road Region”, *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Summer 2022), p. 7, 8, Available at: https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2022/07/24/bd-v5-n4-summer-2022_mott.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

16 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, p. 4.

penetrated by the global powers, but their regional dynamics nonetheless have a substantial degree of autonomy from the patterns set by the global powers. To paint a proper portrait of global security, one needs to understand both of these levels independently, as well as the interaction between them.”¹⁷

One could not speak of ‘middle powers’, the IPD quartet argues, “without taking into account their symbiotic relationship with the geographical regions wherein they are located and recognizing that ‘security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes.”¹⁸ This means that middle powers “occupy an inherently dynamic position in the emerging geopolitical mandala,” with the “single most important [distinguishing] quality” of a middle power being its “relative power advantage when compared to its immediate neighbors.”¹⁹ In turn, this means that middle powers are “confined – both in intent and their activities – to their designated regional security environments due, for the most part, to their relative resource constraints.”²⁰

In short, the IPD quartet holds that:

“factors such as a favorable geography, demographics, relative internal stability, economic development, military capacity, and a sense of thymotic will reflecting historical and cultural solidarity (inherited by the state) all combine to produce countries that can fully defend their independence of action and exert influence on the smaller powers in their vicinity – without, however, rising to the level of a world power capable of extra-regional (or global) power projection.”²¹

The IPD quartet identifies four elements that “taken together are both necessary and sufficient to allow entry in the dynamic-but-still-exclusive club of ‘middle powers’”, namely what they call – with unfortunate descent into academic jargon – geo-regionality, relative material advantage, status as a cultural state, and limited, non-global aims.²²

17 B. Buzan and O. Waeber, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4.

18 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, p. 2.

19 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 2, 4.

20 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, p. 4.

21 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, p. 5.

22 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 5-6.

There is much more to their argument, but the foregoing captures the gist of its core contribution to the topic at hand, namely that a resuscitation of the middle power concept is predicated on adherence to a political phenomenology approach and, indeed, a return to Botero's original definition as a starting point. Ironically, it turns out that this apparently promising mode of inquiry further strengthens Robertson and Carr's conclusion that "middle power theory" should be "historicized", as will be demonstrated below.

It is necessary here to underline that the IPD quartet's report exhibits at least one thread of continuity with this social science construct, namely the ascription of importance to the distinction between middle powers that are 'status quo' and those that are 'revisionist' – or, as one of its advocates (for a time) put it, those that are 'traditional' and those that are 'emerging'.²³ Status quo or traditional middle powers are those that belong to, benefit from, and thus have an interest in defending the U.S.-led 'rules-based liberal international order'; revisionist or emerging middle powers are those that see an opportunity to increase their influence over their neighbours and "actively resist the prevailing world order [...], which it blames for its diminished position or status and believes unjust." Moreover, in the IPD quartet's telling, although revisionist middle powers do not have the ability to "directly challenge a great power", they do have the "capacity and willingness to assert their interest in a way that credibly threatens to alter the material situation in a major geopolitical theater [...] and undermine the status quo great power it perceives as hegemonic and threatening to its form of life."²⁴

This suggests that, for all their innovation, the IPD quartet remains tethered to a variant of the behavioural or positional approach. Thus, however close the IPD quartet may be to the commonsensical approach of political phenomenology – and thus to Botero's – their approach fails to take seriously the fact that 'status quo' or 'traditional' middle powers consciously choose to renounce, if not surrender, the exercise of *autonomous* or even *independent agency*. This is a fundamental flaw

23 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 12-13. Cf. Jordaan, E., "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers", *Politikon: South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2003), pp. 165-181 with his later article "The Emerging Middle Power Concept: Time to Say Goodbye?", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2017), pp. 395-412.

24 Moeini et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 12-13.

in their argument, because it speaks directly to the underlying point of this entire debate: the categorization of power.

The decision to strategically align one's foreign policy with a great or major power may have been prudent in the unipolar era (1989–2008),²⁵ but it makes no sense for states that otherwise might be considered middle powers to maintain such a posture in anything resembling a 'G-Zero world' context – i.e., “one in which no single country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage – or the will – to drive a truly international agenda.”²⁶ In fact, the choice (or the constraint) to remain more or less fully aligned with a major power or bloc in a G-Zero world disqualifies any state that otherwise would be considered a middle power from being so distinguished. The reason is that, in a G-Zero world, “to align exclusively with one major power increases, rather than reduces, insecurity by incentivizing other powers to then take action detrimental to [the] national interests” of a country that would otherwise qualify as a middle power.²⁷

Put simply: no state can be considered a middle power if it forgoes the possibility of being treated as a *subject* of international order – if, in other words, it does not see the pursuit of this possibility as being in its national interest. On this fundamental point, Botero is in clear agreement: middle powers – to quote him again – are states that have “sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others.”²⁸ A short next step from this possibility of autonomous geopolitical and geo-economic development is the will or

²⁵ An explanation for setting 2008 as the terminal year of the unipolar era is found in Krnjević, “Atticism”, *op.cit.*, pp. 128-129.

²⁶ Bremmer I. and Roubini, N., “A G-Zero World”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011), p. 2. Note that, more or less contemporaneously, Nader Mousavizadeh popularized his “archipelago world” concept in various publications, which is effectually synonymous with the G-Zero world one. His first attempt was made in 2008, however: “a world of parts is emerging – of states drifting farther away from each other into a global archipelago of interests and values; and that in an archipelago world, appeals to freedom, democracy and human rights must compete with aims of stability, resource security and the projection of national power.” See Mousavizadeh, N., “How to Navigate the New Global Archipelago,” *The Times*, August 29, 2008. Also of note is that the Foreign Editor of the *Financial Times* has coined the term the “à la carte world” and has contrasted it to its predecessor, the “*prix fixe* world.” This, too, is a variant on the G-Zero world concept. See Russell, A., “The À La Carte World: Our New Geopolitical Order,” *Financial Times*, August 21, 2023.

²⁷ Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone,” p. 31.

²⁸ Botero, *op. cit.*

desire (as well as the capability, obviously) to acquire and maintain autonomous or (ideally) independent agency. My point is that giving it up is tantamount to disqualification from, to paraphrase the IPD quartet, being allowed entry into the dynamic-but-still-exclusive club of middle powers.

By downplaying the importance of agency in defining true middle powers, the IPD quartet's report ironically reinforces Robertson and Carr's conclusion that "middle power theory" should be "historicized" on the grounds that they, too, fail to distance themselves sufficiently from that moribund academic debate. And because even the IPD quartet's original approach cannot fully escape from the constricting tethers of this sort of social science, I would argue that this constitutes another argument that the term middle power itself needs to be cancelled.

Another attempt to break free from the normative and methodological constraints of middle power theory seems to have been made by a group of authors affiliated with the European Council on Foreign Relations. In a policy brief published in October 2023, co-authors Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Susi Dennison, Marie Dumoulin, Frédéric Grare, Mark Leonard, Theodore Murphy, and José Ignacio Torreblanca (hereafter ECFR group²⁹) argue that "today's superpowers" – i.e., China and the United States – "lack [both] the level of dominance [and] the type of inspiring ideology that in the Cold War helped move elites and publics throughout the world into strict alignment."³⁰ This, they argue, opens the door for a "new class of middle powers" to "more easily operate without aligning themselves to one of these patrons" – a situation attributable to the fact that this "new class of middle powers has much more agency than they had during the Cold War."³¹

The ECFR group's paper can thus be said to point to the veracity of the G-Zero world paradigm, which can be folded into what Bilahari Kausikan has more recently described in *Baku Dialogues* as a world of heightened geopolitical and geoeconomic complexity that "broadens both our ability to exercise agency and to find new options (provided

29 Aydıntaşbaş, A., Barnes-Dacey, J., Dennison, S., Dumoulin, M., Grare, F., Leonard, M., Murphy, T., and Torreblanca, J.I., "Strategic Interdependence: Europe's New Approach In a World of Middle Powers", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Policy Brief no. 513, October 2023.

30 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 2.

31 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 3.

we have the will to recognize the opportunities). Complexity,” he adds, “also broadens both the agility and courage to seize these same opportunities on offer.” Lastly, complexity manifests itself through greater fluidity or ambiguity of relationships between states: the unprecedented level of “interdependence creates deep ties while, ironically, the very extent of those ties exposes those vulnerabilities.” Kausikan, like the ECFR group, anticipates the emergence of an “order of dynamic multipolarity”, which “could be characterized by shifting combinations of regional middle powers and smaller countries continually arranging and rearranging themselves in variegated and overlapping patterns along the central axis of Sino-American relations, sometimes tilting in one direction, sometimes tilting the other way, and sometimes going their own way.”³² Unlike the ECFR group, however, Kausikan acknowledges that the category of middle powers must retain an aura of numerical exclusivity – i.e., that there exists at least one category below it.³³ The lack of the foregoing in the ECFR group’s paper will become apparent in what follows, as will its significance for my argument.

The ECFR group argues that the countries belonging to this “new class of middle powers” are:

“engaged in acquiring their own influence in international affairs and are willing to leverage US-China competition to their advantage or, in many cases, challenge it. Their decisions on their relationships with the superpowers, and with each other, will largely determine where the new world order lands on the spectrum from bipolarity to fragmentation. If collectively these powers choose to align with one or the other superpower, then we may indeed have a new bipolar confrontation. If they opt instead for more promiscuous strategies that seek to avoid strict alignment, we will get a much more disordered landscape.”³⁴

The purpose of the paper produced by the ECFR group is thus, by its own admission, to put forward an analytical warning of sorts, followed by a specific call to action. It is, in other words, a document

32 Kausikan, B., “The Future of Global Uncertainties”, *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring 2023), pp. 53, 63, 64, Available at: https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2023/04/18/bd-v6-n3_kausikan.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

33 Here it seems useful to remind readers of Botero’s definition of this below category, as it were, that of a small state: one that “cannot be maintained by itself, but needs the protection and support of others.”

34 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 3.

that advocates the adoption of a new “strategy that stresses Europe’s connections with countries beyond the US in order to protect their interests with the range of other countries that are shaping power dynamics.”³⁵ Their chosen prescription or advice – the need to adopt a posture of ‘strategic interdependence’ – is designed to “allow the EU to preserve its agency by building relationships with key players in which it preserves the power to stand up to them when they challenge its interests and values.”³⁶

Within this context, the ECFR group asserts that a “new class of middle powers” is “shaping a more fragmented world, characterised by an increasingly transactional approach to foreign policy.”³⁷ It argues that this ‘new class of middle powers’ has “no single common feature that defines them as a group” save one: “an approach to foreign policy aimed at maximising their sovereignty as opposed to subscribing to any specific ideology” – in other words, what binds them together is the “goal of increased independence” that, due to various factors, produces “quite distinct strategies” for the pursuit of the foregoing.³⁸ Building on their general definition (reproduced above), the ECFR group’s paper proposes a taxonomy of four basic sub-groups that together make up this ‘new class of middle powers’.

The first is ‘peace preservationists’. Middle powers belonging to this subgroup are “focused on managing the rise of China as a hegemonic power [in the Indo-Pacific] and avoiding war” while “adapting their policies to support [the status quo] order on both the regional and global level, lest disorder come to them.”³⁹

The second sub-category of the ‘new class of middle powers’ is the ‘America hedgers’. Located in traditional spheres of U.S. influence such as Latin America and the Middle East (particularly the leading GCC states), such states are “now trying to hedge against overdependence on the U.S. by engaging with new partners.” They practise ‘active non-alignment’ so as to optimize “their strategic independence and avoid choosing sides. Their vision of the international order is

35 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 5.

36 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 13.

37 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 3.

38 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 3.

39 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 5, 6.

dominated by a desire to exercise political and economic sovereignty and to avoid external interference, especially from Washington and Brussels.” They share a vision of the international system in which no major power may any longer “impose decisions on them,” enabling them to both prioritize and advance “their own political, security, and economic interests.”⁴⁰

The third is ‘post-colonial dreamers’, which “includes former colonies in Africa and central Asia.” The authors unfavourably compare the states belonging to this sub-category of middle powers with the previous one, noting that many of these “lack the wherewithal to challenge their former patrons outright”, notwithstanding attempts at “building up relations with almost everyone else.”⁴¹ I will return to a discussion of this sub-category below.

States belonging to the fourth and final sub-category of the ‘new class of middle powers’ are rather post-modernistically termed ‘polyamorous powers’. The ECFR group identifies only two by name: Türkiye and India, “powers with a clear upward trajectory [that] are confident enough about their role in the next global order that they are happy to enter into relationships with all manner of partners.” They have “open relationships” with the major powers and “play the field” to gain a “role and status commensurate with [their] actual economic, political, and military weight.”⁴²

Irrespective of whether this is done intentionally or not, what amounts to the ECFR group’s attempt to break free from the normative and methodological constraints of ‘middle power theory’ is laudable. In some sense, the group comes closer than does the IPD quartet to the approach of political phenomenology, whose starting point is the experience of citizens and statesmen. The main flaw in the ECFR group’s approach, however, is that their examination of what they call “a new class of middle powers” is much too broad: what binds them together is, as noted above, a “single common feature” – i.e., “an approach to foreign policy aimed at maximising their sovereignty as opposed to subscribing to any specific ideology.” It should go without saying that this feature (i.e., the maximalization of state sovereignty) is

40 Aydıntaşbaşı et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 6, 7, 9.

41 Aydıntaşbaşı et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 9, 10.

42 Aydıntaşbaşı et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 11, 12.

a goal shared by pretty much every country – or at least by pretty much every UN member state that has not made a conscious choice to limit its sovereignty through membership in the hybrid political form that is the European Union, which is evidently more than an intergovernmental bureaucracy but, equally evidently, is less than a sovereign state. The ECFR group admits as much when it writes that “Europeans stand apart in this analysis. [...] But the EU is not a nation state and cannot fully realise th[e] potential [to ‘compete more or less on par with China and the U.S.’] in its current institutional configuration.”⁴³ Basically, the ECFR group’s understanding of “a new class of middle powers,” even when broken down into a taxonomy of four sub-groups, can be said to encompass more or less all geopolitically and geoeconomically relevant political actors in international relations save for the United States, China, and the European Union itself. This is, of course, a slight exaggeration, but only a slight one. By attempting to provide an all-encompassing conceptual roadmap for the EU to “preserve its agency”, the ECFR group casts its discursive net much too widely to be of much analytical use to this inquiry.

At this point, therefore, it seems that to rescue Botero’s core concept requires the effectual abandonment of both the term and its underlying theory. Let us then begin anew (or again) – *palin eks archēs* (Plat., *Stat.*, 264b6) – as it were.

Keystone States

In classical Roman architecture, a keystone is the stone that is placed at the apex of a masonry arch and is, by necessity, angled or wedge-shaped, so as to be able to bear the weight of the opposing stresses – otherwise, the arch would collapse on itself. The verb ‘to key’, here, means to keep in place.⁴⁴

⁴³ Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Note that a keystone is neither a capstone nor a cornerstone. The former is a finishing stone atop an exterior architectural feature like an exterior wall or roof whose purpose is to protect the masonry by causing water to flow in a certain way and thus mitigate erosion; the latter is the first stone laid when constructing a masonry foundation; in Greece and Rome, offerings were made to the gods and interred under this stone – more recently, some public buildings engrave their cornerstones with the name of prominent individuals associated with their construction or bury time capsules underneath these.

The keystone is, therefore, the most important piece in an arch. It holds together the entire construction while at the same time bearing the most weight – this does not increase the danger to the structure, however, so long as the keystone remains where it is. It is only its structural enfeeblement and, ultimately, its removal that results in collapse: a keystone’s purpose is thus to lock in an arch’s gravity compression and weight transference. Put in terms of Newtonian Third Law physics, the keystone block – properly secured and maintained – results in an equilibrium in forces due to its central position, exerting the forces evenly down the sides of the arch.

From this is derived the figurative sense of the term. In the United States, for example, Pennsylvania is called the ‘keystone state’ because of its geographical, economic, and political position in the first American confederation – it was the crucial seventh or middle of the original Thirteen Colonies. The keystone state of Pennsylvania held the nascent country together during the founding period.

Conceptually, then, keystone states operating in a G-Zero world can be understood as being (or having the potential to become) trusted interlocutors, reliable intermediaries, and go-betweens or conciliators between major powers. Their potential roles also include “shaping the outcome of diplomatic interactions.”⁴⁵

The principal author of the ‘keystone state’ concept is Nikolas Gvosdev, who introduced it in print in 2015, refining it in 2020. In his original formulation, a keystone state

*“gives coherence to a regional order – or, if it is itself destabilized, contributes to the insecurity of its neighbors. Such countries are important because they are located at the seams of the global system and serve as critical mediators between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings. A keystone state, even if it is ‘small,’ [...] may nevertheless be important to regional or global security beyond what its own domestic capabilities may merit.”*⁴⁶

45 Gleason, G., “Grand Strategy Along the Silk Road: The Pivotal Role of Keystone States,” *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 2020-2021), pp. 156, 146, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2020/12/12/bd-2-gleason.pdf> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

46 Gvosdev, “Keystone States,...”, *op.cit.*, pp. 104-105.

Gvosdev identifies ‘integrative power’ as a chief characteristic of a keystone state. This term is derived from Amitai Etzioni’s definition: the “ability to generate positive relationships”, which can be:

“derived from a number of sources: the existence of important transit and communications lines that are vital for trade traversing its territory; the position of the state to promote regional integration and collective security among its neighbors; its role as a point of passage between different blocs, or its position overlapping the spheres of influence of several different major actors, thus serving as a mediator between them; or its willingness to take up the role as a guaranteed barrier securing neighbors from attack.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, in his original essay Gvosdev emphasizes that “one particularly important role that a keystone state may play is to ensure that if one of its neighbors collapses or falls into chaos, it will act as a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent the further spread of the impending contagion. In short,” he argues, “a keystone state connects and protects its neighbors.”⁴⁸

Lastly, a keystone state’s integrative power is supplemented by the fact that “an effective keystone state can [also] serve as a pressure-release valve in the international system, particularly as the transition to conditions of [G-Zero] nonpolarity continues, by acting as a buffer and reducing the potential for conflict between major power centers.”⁴⁹

All this would be familiar to Botero, as would the definition of a keystone state provided by Balász Orbán: “a nation with extensive relationships, active participation in complex alliance systems, integration into the global economy, and significant political, military, economic, and cultural influence.”⁵⁰ However, Orbán goes on to add another characteristic to the definition: a keystone state needs to be in the right geographical location, and its leadership needs to prudently leverage this fact such that it can come to serve as a connectivity focal point. An argument made by Gleason echoes this point: “in the logic of

47 Gvosdev, “Keystone States,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

48 Gvosdev, “Keystone States,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

49 Gvosdev, “Keystone States,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

50 Orbán, B., “3rd Danube Geopolitical Summit Keynote Speech”, Budapest, September 22, 2023, Available at: <https://orbanbalazsandras.hu/en/3rd-danube-geopolitical-summit-keynote-speech> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

the situation of today's world, the states and regions that are situated territorially or conceptually between the competing visions of world order are of pivotal significance. Keystone states are significant for this reason."⁵¹

The foregoing speaks to a point made more explicitly by Gvosdev in his more recent essay (the one from 2020), which moves beyond the parameters one could reasonably derive from Botero's approach, namely being "located at the seams of the global system." This is what makes the keystone concept into a fully-fledged, new category of power. This line of reasoning brings Gvosdev to reaffirm his conclusion, drawn in his original essay, that Azerbaijan is one of the world's relatively small number of keystone states.⁵² In this, he builds on a formulation first made by then-U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Stanley Escudero in 1998.⁵³ Gvosdev goes on to argue that "Azerbaijan must embrace its position as a keystone state for a keystone region."⁵⁴

51 Gleason, G., "Grand Strategy,..." , *op.cit.*, p. 151.

52 In his original essay, Gvosdev lists Jordan ("guardian keystone"), Indonesia ("keystone integrator"), and Kazakhstan ("bridge-builder") as keystone states in addition to Azerbaijan ("Caspian balancer"). He also identifies South Korea and Afghanistan as potential "emerging keystones" and Ukraine as a "failed keystone." Cf. Robertson and Carr, who note that "over thirty states identified as middle powers" before singling out "two archetypal middle power states" – Canada and Australia – and "four additional countries which scholars treat as middle powers and whose policymakers have, in the 21st century, explicitly embraced the concept," namely Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey. In their attempt at resuscitation, Moeini et al. propose Japan, Turkey, Iran, Brazil, Indonesia, India, Germany, France, the Anglosphere (the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand "when & where they work in tandem"), Nigeria, and South Africa. Another obvious candidate is Saudi Arabia, which is not usually seen as a middle power in the scholarship.

53 Escudero called Azerbaijan the "keystone country" in his 1998 U.S. Independence Day address at the U.S. Embassy in Baku and reportedly used the term frequently during his time in the country (December 1997 to October 2000). This later evolved into the term "Caspian keystone." See Suleymanov, E., "Azerbaijan: The Wider Black Sea's Caspian Keystone," in Ronald D. Asmus (ed), *Next Steps in Forging a Euroatlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea* (Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006), pp. 175-183. The reference to Escudero's speech is on p. 179. Two years later, it was appropriated, seemingly without attribution, by Elkhan Nuriyev, the founding director of the now-defunct Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), who used it on several occasions. See E. Nuriyev, "Azerbaijan and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia: Foreign Policy Strategies, Caspian Energy Security, and Great Power Politics," lecture delivered to the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 14, 2008, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/azerbaijan-and-the-new-geopolitics-eurasia-foreign-policy-strategies-caspian-energy-security>.

54 Gvosdev, "Geopolitical Keystone,..." , *op.cit.*, p. 34.

The Keystone Silk Road Region

The optimal term for this ‘keystone region’ or ‘keystone zone’ is the ‘Silk Road region’.⁵⁵ I have made my case regarding the advantages of adopting this term elsewhere – an argument that also involved examining the deficiencies of alternative terms including ‘Greater Central Asia’, ‘Inner Asia’, ‘Middle Asia’, ‘Caspian Basin’, ‘Caspian Sea Region’, ‘South Caucasus and Central Asia’, and, of course, ‘Central’ or ‘Core Eurasia’ (or, simply, Eurasia).⁵⁶ This is much more than a terminological matter, the details of which go beyond the topic at hand. Suffice it to say, for present purposes, that a principal advantage of the shorthand ‘Silk Road region’ is its adherence to the approach of political phenomenology, namely that “it does not define [this] region in terms of any external power or national ideology. Instead, it focuses discussion where it should be focused: namely on the character of the region itself; on its distinctive geographical, cultural, political, economic, and historical features; and on the question of whether those features may be the keys to its future.”⁵⁷

In terms of geography, my definition is purposefully and constructively ambiguous: the Silk Road region comprises that part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the

55 The term “Silk Road” or “Silk Road” is a Western neologism. Its genesis is often mistakenly attributed to Ferdinand von Richthofen, “Über die zentralasiatischen Seidenstrassen bis zum 2. Jahrhundert. N. Chr.,” *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 4 (1877), pp. 96-122. For an overview of Richthofen’s contribution and its later popularization, see Chin, T., “The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 1 (Autumn 2013), pp. 194-219. It turns out, however, that this term was coined in 1838 by Carl Ritter and that others (Robert Mack, Hermann Guthe, and Johann Kaeuffer) made use of its before Richthofen and those who followed. On this, see Mertens, M., “Did Richthofen Really Coin ‘the Silk Road’?”, *The Silk Road: The Journal of the Silk Road House* no. 17 (2019), pp. 1-9.

56 Mišković, D.K., “On Some Conceptual Advantages of the Term ‘Silk Road Region’: Heraldic Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Emancipation”, *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer 2023), pp. 20-27, Available at: https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2023/07/12/bd-v6-n4_miskovic.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2024). The two paragraphs that follow draw heavily on formulations and arguments developed in the essay cited in this footnote.

57 The quote is from Starr, S.F., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” Policy Paper, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*, September 2008, p. 6. Starr does not adopt or consider the term “Silk Road region” but does reject the term “Central Eurasia” in favor of the term “Greater Central Asia.” The quoted text is part of his defense of this term. The quoted passage seems to me to be even more persuasive when put in the service of defending the use of the term “Silk Road region.”

Caspian towards the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley; and then looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.⁵⁸

Of course, in terms of the political map, the *core* of the Silk Road region comprises the countries we call the South Caucasus and Central Asia – eight former Soviet republics that are now sovereign states. Some add Afghanistan to the latter category. And there are various other countries that are bound, in whole or in part, to this region. Those ties are genuine, which is why, in some real sense, such states also belong to the Silk Road region; but they certainly do not belong to it in the same way as do its core states.

The Silk Road region thus has finite yet somewhat elastic geopolitical boundaries, and these correspond, very roughly, to the frontiers of the Mongol empire in the second and third quarters of the 1200s – not that this matters much except as a historical sidenote. Be that as it may, today:

*“this strategic area interlinks not only the world’s two most critically important regions (the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific basins), but also directly interconnects South Asia, the Middle East, and the Eurasian space with each other. [...] In geostrategic terms, this region is the geopolitical hinge where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization meets the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and where the Belt and Road Initiative connects with the wider European neighborhood and the European Union itself.”*⁵⁹

As such, the Silk Road region should be understood as a single geopolitical theatre with multiple stages, the exits from which are very purposefully not defined with precision.⁶⁰

58 This definition was first presented in “Editorial Statement,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fall 2020), p. 7, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/editorial-statement> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

59 Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone,...”, *op.cit.*, pp. 26, 27.

60 This term thus also has the advantage of being imbued with a Pascalian *esprit de finesse* conforming to the approach of political phenomenology, in contradistinction to what he called an *esprit de géométrie* so characteristic of contemporary social science. See <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/editorial-statement>. For the Pascalian distinction, see his *Pensées* L512 (B1).

The Silk Road region is emerging, according to Gvosdev, “as the most critical keystone zone for international relations in the twenty-first century; and Azerbaijan, as the central axis of the area, is poised to assume a more important role in world affairs as a result.”⁶¹ Gleason argues similarly when he identifies Azerbaijan as a “strategic hub by virtue of being situated at a critical geographical fulcrum point of rapidly expanding transport and communication infrastructure.”⁶²

Elsewhere in the same essay, Gvosdev makes the point explicitly: “for the Silk Road region to serve as a keystone, it requires its own keystone state to utilize its integrative power.”⁶³ One such keystone state, as noted above, is Azerbaijan: “by acting as the keystone state of a keystone region of the world, Azerbaijan [...] can act as the gatekeeper and guarantor of one of the world economic system’s principal passageways.”⁶⁴ This echoes Zbigniew Brzezinski’s 1997 description of Azerbaijan as the “cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia.”⁶⁵

After its victory in the Second Karabakh War and the onset of the current phase in the conflict over Ukraine, the veracity of such assessments is becoming incontestable. In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to recognize Azerbaijan as the indispensable country for the advancement

61 Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 27. This is all the more impressive given that just thirty years ago the country was widely considered to be a failing or even failed state. There are several excellent book-length accounts of Azerbaijan’s time as a failing state, which corresponds roughly to the period that immediately followed the forced retirement of Heydar Aliyev from the posts of Full Member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Union in October 1987 and his return to power in Azerbaijan in June 1993. These include T. Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); T. Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); S. E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011); and T. Swietochowski, *Azerbaijan: Legacies of the Past and the Trials of Independence* (London: Routledge, 2015). Thus, one could justifiably say that Azerbaijan is a rare contemporary example of successful national statecraft: of leadership and success, foresight and perseverance, modernization and the consolidation of power.

62 Gleason, “Grand Strategy,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 160.

63 Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

64 Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

65 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 46. His next sentence reinforces the point: “the independence of the Central Asian states can be rendered nearly meaningless if Azerbaijan becomes fully subordinated to Moscow’s control” – or that of any other great or major power, for that matter.

of the strategic energy and connectivity ambitions of all the major powers that surround the Silk Road region – Western and non-Western alike. A cursory examination of the map makes this point clearly. Land traffic between East and West has three basic routes: the northern route via Russia, the use of which is impeded due to the choice by the West to impose sanctions and export restrictions against that country; the southern route via Iran, which is fraught with risk due to the various sanctions regimes imposed on the country, and so on; and the middle route that traverses the core of the Silk Road region and must pass through Azerbaijan. Of the three, the middle one is the most reliable and safest – it is certainly the only unsanctioned route – and, once optimized, it will become the fastest and most cost-effective. This, after all, is the basis of the logic informing the findings of two recent reports issued by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank.⁶⁶ In short, the “rough and tumble of geopolitics” ensures Azerbaijan’s indispensability as a keystone state of a keystone region.⁶⁷ My indispensability argument becomes even more compelling when one takes into account Azerbaijan’s pivotal role in the International North–South Transportation Corridor (INSTC).

In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to recognize Azerbaijan as the indispensable country for the advancement of the strategic energy and connectivity ambitions of all the major powers that surround the Silk Road region – Western and non-Western alike.

Nevertheless, all of this is not sufficient: by itself, Azerbaijan cannot drive the Silk Road region to achieve its potential (namely, the establishment of sturdier contours of a fledgling regional order by building upon classical balance-of-power principles applied towards major outside powers, which, if successful, would go a long way towards ensuring it comes into its own as a fully-fledged subject of international relations rather than relapsing into again being viewed as

66 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia* (London: EBRD, 2023), Available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/news/publications/special-reports/sustainable-transport-connections-between-europe-and-central-asia.html>; and World Bank, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2023), Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/middle-trade-and-transport-corridor> (All accessed: January 5, 2024).

67 Neither the obvious infrastructure and regulatory challenges nor the political commitment to establish an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) takes away from this argument.

an object of major power rivalry).⁶⁸ And, in this sense, Mott’s assertion that Azerbaijan “still does not meet the criteria to a middle power as set out by IPD’s recent research” is correct.⁶⁹ In and of itself, however, this takes nothing away from the argument that the country is a keystone state of a keystone region. Although Mott notes that “this is a disagreement on specific definitions and present economic dispositions rather than the overall concepts”,⁷⁰ it seems to me to be slightly more than that.

Mott, and, by implication, the IPD quartet, downplay the importance of Azerbaijan’s growing integrative power and its manifest indispensability, but also the “character of the [Silk Road] region itself [and] its distinctive geographical, cultural, political, economic, and historical features”, to refer to an earlier cited passage. At bottom, he writes, this is a disagreement not about the past (“the region already has a rich history, going back many centuries, of leveraging its geography between other power poles to its own massive benefit”⁷¹) or the future (“one could say the growth potential of the region is immense”⁷²), but about the present (“we at IPD are skeptical that any middle powers currently exist in Central Asia and the Caucasus”⁷³).

Mott’s bottom line – he calls it a “long-term prognosis” – is this:

“The individual states in both the Caucasus and Central Asia must choose between bandwagoning with each other to form a proximate regional power; or act in some kind of less centralized but still coordinated neutral non-aligned league. There is certainly an opportunity in Central Asia for an insular security treaty/organization in the mode of the Abraham Accords to protect these states from future interference from outside powers. Doing so, however, requires prudent and sober leadership and strategic nuance.”⁷⁴

Mott acknowledges that “there is some evidence that more than embryonic steps are being taken in [the direction of greater regional

68 This is a point made earlier by Valiyev, A., “Can Azerbaijan Revive the Silk Road?,” *PONARS Policy Memo*, August 26, 2015, Available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/can-azerbaijan-revive-the-silk-road> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

69 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

70 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

71 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, 14.

72 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

73 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

74 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

integration and a dedicated forum to smooth over local disputes before they can be capitalized on by outside powers], under the framework of a process that began formally in 2018, called the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia,” but does not judge this to be of particular significance at present.⁷⁵ Still, Mott adds, “both Krnjević and Gvosdev, writing both together and separately, make the point that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan taken together constitute the anchors of a nascent regional order.”⁷⁶ This passage should be sufficient to establish its strategic potentiality, which presupposes its present analytical relevance and, indeed, its current existence in at least embryonic form.

Consider that the core Silk Road region is made up of a number of states of substantially equal strength, anchored by three keystone states that are genuinely committed to championing both formal documents and informal understandings, which is what can enable this geopolitical theatre to maintain and possibly deepen its own balance of power system, notwithstanding the G-Zero world paradigm. None by itself is indispensable, but, together, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan provide equilibrium while setting the tone, pace, and scope of the overall regional cooperation agenda.⁷⁷

Moreover, the unique complexities involved in realizing the potential of connectivity – of transporting hydrocarbons and other natural resources to market, as well as the infrastructure provisions necessary to facilitate trade – have incentivized a set of region-specific types of cooperation and compromise. This has gone a long way to ensure that no state belonging to the Silk Road region is strong enough to dominate the others, economically or otherwise, which encourages equilibrium. The corollary to this last is that no state in the region is weak enough to succumb to crude attempts at all-out domination without others aligning to significantly limit the depth and scope of said attempt. Thus, already today no major outside power truly behaves hegemonically in

75 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

76 Mott, “Inshore Balancers,...”, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-14.

77 For more on this, see Cornell, S.E., “Centripetal vs. Centrifugal Forces and the Emergence of Middle Powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus”, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, *Silk Road Paper*, June 2023, Available at: <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13484-centripetal-vs-centrifugal-forces-and-emergence-of-middle-powers-in-central-asia-and-the-caucasus.html> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

this geopolitical theatre, notwithstanding latent (or not so latent) desires or ambitions.⁷⁸ This is not to say that external powers do not still exert some, at times significant, influence (of course they do),⁷⁹ but the contemporaneous reality is that developments in the Silk Road region are no longer *decisively* determined or driven by the oftentimes clashing agendas, preferences, objectives, and priorities of outsiders. In short, already today, the Silk Road region is characterized by “geopolitical [and geoeconomic] heterogeneity.”⁸⁰

But this is hardly a new phenomenon. Over the past decade or two, the Silk Road region has increasingly positioned itself as a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies, an important intercessor between major powers, and a hard-to-avoid gateway to neighbouring parts of the world. This can be seen with reference to a recent book by Kent Calder, whose overall understanding of the Silk Road region is, in broad terms, compatible with the one presented in these pages:

“Particularly important in propelling deepening connectivity and interaction across Eurasia are several middle-power regionalist integrators, with special incentives to pursue continental integration, even in opposition to broader

78 Another way of putting this is to assess that not only is no major outside power strong enough to impose an “exclusive economic zone” or “sphere of influence” upon the Silk Road region, but none save one (arguably) see this as being in their national interest. The (arguable) exception is Russia, which may still see the region through the strategic lens of one aspect of what is sometimes called the Primakov Doctrine (i.e., Russia should insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region) whilst at the same time being unable to act in accordance with it for at least two strategic reasons: its preoccupation with the conflict with the West over Ukraine and its assessment not to oppose directly the ambitions of China, Turkey, and other major non-Western actors in that part of the world. For more on this, see “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” March 2023, particularly articles 49 and 54, Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

79 One way is through various C5+1 initiatives. At the heads of state level, Russia and China took an early lead in such endeavors, followed by the EU and some of its member states, and most recently the United States. No doubt, Turkey will soon follow. Another way was through a major international conference promoting “economic connectivity” between Central Asia and South Asia, which took place in Tashkent in July 2021. A third was through the EU-led Eastern Partnership. A fourth was through the 3+3 “consultative platform” initiative. None of the outside players have successfully engaged with all the core countries of the Silk Road region.

80 Huseynov, V., “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-Regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Summer 2020), p. 128.

globalization. They are playing similar regional roles to those of the Benelux nations in Europe six decades ago. Small and middle powers such as Erdoğan's Turkey, Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan, and Lukashenko's Belarus—maneuvering among larger nations like Xi Jinping's China and Vladimir Putin's Russia—have all for a variety of reasons actively sought to bring Eurasian neighbors together in subglobal Eurasian continentalist associations, with the smaller powers playing surprisingly important catalytic roles. Also prominent among these would-be continentalists is Iran, with the eleventh largest population and the second largest energy reserves on the continent. [...] The large nations of Eurasia, as many have argued, do have “big power” consciousness and divergent geopolitical aims. They exist, however, in a changing continental context, in which their relative influence is shifting, smaller powers are growing more active, and connectivity is sharply rising.”⁸¹

This can also be seen with reference to another passage from the ECFR group's essay. Aside from perpetuating the conventional mistake of failing to grasp the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of seeing the South Caucasus and Central Asia together (they are hardly the only ones), as well as conceiving the Central Asian states as ‘postcolonial’ and so lumping them unhelpfully together with African countries under the sub-category of ‘post-colonial dreamers’, nonetheless it does a decent job of describing their “attitude [...] towards world order.” The Central Asian states, the ECFR group indicates (this applies to the South Caucasus states as well, even though the authors do not do so), seek to “expand their array of partnerships beyond the West and putting additional pressure on the West to pursue reforms to other multilateral structures”; in addition, the ECFR group writes, their “leaders have a strong attachment to the independence and sovereignty that their countries achieved after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also difficulties in asserting it.” Their “fear of Russian dominance [...] is balanced by a strong aversion to any form of Western ‘interference’ in their internal affairs, especially regarding human rights, which could promote a democratic agenda that would undermine the grip of

81 K. E. Calder, *Super Continent: The Logic of Eurasian Integration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 16-17. Surprisingly, the author fails to list Azerbaijan as a ‘regionalist integrator’. This can perhaps be explained away by its publication date and perhaps also with reference to at least one aspect of the argument presented in the Expiration Date section of this paper.

governing elites on institutions and resources.” Hence, the interest of the states that make up the core of the Silk Road region to attract new players willing to diversify their economies, build new infrastructure, bolster their security needs, and generally diversify their foreign policy options, which includes to some extent a preference for ‘authoritarian allies’ (particularly China), but also Türkiye, South Korea, the Persian Gulf states, and, to some extent (as in the case of Kazakhstan), the European Union.⁸²

That being said, what is missing entirely from the writings of both the ECFR group and the IPD quartet, and is mentioned only in passing by Mott, is the fact that steps towards institutionalizing regional economic connectivity and cooperation have been taking place since at least the first regularized meeting of the heads of state of the five Central Asian states in March 2018 in Astana (a testing-of-the-water summit had been convened in November 2017 in Samarkand).

Indeed, the scale, scope, and ambition of the plans now being laid call to mind older arrangements in other geographies: ASEAN,⁸³ the Nordic Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the original European *Economic Community*,⁸⁴ and even the Hanseatic League. The basis of this argument is the treaty text of institutionalized cooperation, titled “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the Twenty-First Century”, which was finalized in 2022 but has (admittedly) not yet come into force. My overall argument is bolstered by the fact that Azerbaijan seems to be rapidly moving in the direction of associating itself with this process, as evidenced by the presence of its head of state at the latest summit of Central Asian leaders in Dushanbe in September 2023 and the holding of the first-ever top-level summit of a heretofore unimportant process called the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of

82 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 10, 11.

83 Lee, J., Asiryany, A., and Butler, M., “Integration of the Central Asian Republics: The ASEAN Example”, *E-international relations*, September 17, 2020, Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/17/integration-of-the-central-asian-republics-the-asean-example> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

84 It is useful to draw attention to the fact that the EEC’s founding charter – the Treaty of Rome (1957) – contains not a single reference to “democracy,” “human rights,” or “European values.” The original focus of the European construction was on fostering economic interdependence through a reduction of trade barriers, the establishment of an embryonic customs union, and the setting of terms for a single market characterized by common policies on agriculture, transport, and the like.

Central Asia (SPECA) in Baku in November 2023. It is in this context that Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev spoke of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states as constituting a “single political, economic, and geopolitical space”,⁸⁵ adding a day later that “Azerbaijan and the countries of Central Asia are bound by centuries-long historical and cultural ties. Azerbaijan and Central Asia represent a single historical, cultural, and geopolitical space, with increasing strategic significance.”⁸⁶

Coda: Silk Road Values

There is much more that can and should be said on this genuinely important topic; it may, indeed, require a book-length treatment. In lieu of summarizing the details of the argument contained in this essay – which seems largely redundant and even discourteous, as it would presuppose the reader’s incapacity to have read it with sufficient attention – telegraphing its overall conclusions seems to me to be of some use. The two paragraphs that follow should be understood in this light.

Taking seriously the commonsensical approach of political phenomenology – i.e., a reasoning (*logos*) about the appearance or manifestation of the human situation (*phainomena*), as accomplished from the point of view of the appearance itself – enables one to uncover that the keystone state concept, especially as applied to the Silk Road region (or, at the very least, to what we can call the ‘SPECA region’). This approach – it seems proper to call it a Thucydidean approach – captures something normatively and analytically more useful than anything associated with middle power theory or various attempts to revive the term and/or modify the concept.

The flow of my argument ultimately resulted in the provision of three overarching characteristics of the Silk Road region: one, it is anchored by three keystone states that share a commitment to building a region with more partners and fewer enemies; two, these keystone states embrace elements of both strategic autonomy and strategic restraint – a

85 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev received Executive Secretary of UN Economic Commission for Europe*, November 23, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62309> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

86 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev attended the Summit of UN Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia – SPECA*, November 24, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62327> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

related scholarly term for this characteristic is ‘soft-balancing’;⁸⁷ and three, the predominant reality in that part of the world consists of a combination of formal treaties and informal understandings in which no single power dominates, equilibrium (but not necessarily equidistance) is maintained, and a general balance is kept. There is a fourth one, which I judge to be essential for those who seek to understand the region as it understands itself: the Silk Road region is run by the leaders that make up its most important core countries, in accordance with a twenty-first-century version of what, in the 1990s, was called ‘Asian values’.⁸⁸

87 Pape, R., “Soft-Balancing Against the United States”, *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 7-45.

88 The “Asian values” concept was developed in practice by the likes of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad and propounded in documents like the Bangkok Declaration (1993), adopted at the Regional Meeting for Asia for the World Conference on Human Rights. The full text of the Bangkok Declaration is available in a UN document identified as A/CONF.157/ASRM/8 and A/CONF.157/PC/59, <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/167021?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>. Article 8 of this document reads, “we recognise that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds.” Primers, studies, and reflections on the original Asian values debate are great in number and include: L.K., Yew, “The East Asian Way: Interview with Lee Kuan Yew”, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1992), pp. 4-13; K. Mahubani, “The West and the Rest”, *The National Interest* no. 28 (1992), pp. 3-13; B. Kausikan, “Asia’s Different Standard”, *Foreign Policy* no. 92 (Autumn 1993), pp. 24-41; Zakaria, F., “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 109-126; Kausikan, B., “An East Asian Approach to Human Rights,” *Buffalo Journal of International Law*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1996), pp. 263-83; Kausikan, B., “Hong Kong, Singapore, and ‘Asian Values:’ Governance that Works”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1997), pp. 24-34; Glazer, N., “Two Cheers for ‘Asian Values’”, *The National Interest* no. 57 (Fall 1999), pp. 27-34; Barr, M.D., “Lee Kuan Yew and the ‘Asian Values’ Debate”, *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (September 2000), pp. 309-334; Barr, M.D., *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002); Bell, D.A., *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Hoon, Ch.Y., “Revisiting the Asian Values Argument Used by Asian Political Leaders and its Validity”, *Indonesian Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2004), pp. 154-174; Kausikan, B., “The Idea of Asia”, Address to the Singapore Writers Festival, November 1, 2014, excerpted as “1990s ‘Asian values’ Advocate Bilahari Explains the Real Reason Behind the ‘Asian Values’ Debate,” *Mothership*, November 4, 2014, Available at: <https://mothership.sg/2014/11/1990s-asian-values-advocate-bilahari-explains-the-real-reason-behind-the-asian-values-debate/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024); and Kausikan, B., “The ‘Asian Values’ Debate, 30 Years On”, *The Straits Times*, March 16, 2021. The original “Asian values” debate arose at least in part in thinking through the strategic implications of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, itself a response to the worldview contained in Francis Fukuyama’s writings on the “end of history.” For more on this, see Krnjević, “Back with a Vengeance”, *op.cit.*, pp. 118-135. Cf. X.Jinping, “Deepening

Although it makes no sense at this point to provide a full typology of contemporary Silk Road region values,⁸⁹ five characteristics can help illustrate this underappreciated phenomenon.

First, they are more compatible with strictly observing universally recognized international law – including the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, which are assumed to be in the service of “restrain[ing] the exercise of righteous power” and the “avoid[ance] of unbridgeable schisms,”⁹⁰ in Henry Kissinger’s memorable phrase – rather than with conducting affairs of state in accordance with a ‘rules-based liberal international order.’⁹¹ In other words, Silk Road values can be understood

Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations for an Asian Community with a Shared Future,” keynote address of the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, Beijing, May 15, 2019, Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1663857.shtml (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

89 One notable articulation of something similar to what I am arguing is provided under the moniker “Shanghai spirit” as defined in the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2001, Available at: <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents> (Accessed: January 5, 2024). For more on this, see Ambrosio, T., “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 8 (October 2008), pp. 1321-1344. More broadly, see Lewis, D., “Who’s Socialising Whom? Regional Organisations and Contested Norms in Central Asia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, no. 7 (2012), pp. 1219-1237 and Alexander Lukin, A., “Eurasian Integration and the Clash of Values”, *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2014), pp. 43-60.

90 H. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957), pp. 206, 193.

91 For more on one view on this distinction, see Lavrov, S., “On Law, Rights, and Rules”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3 (September 2021), p. 229. Cf. my account of the intellectual genesis of the concept of a ‘rules-based liberal international order’ and discussed some of its geopolitical implications in Krnjević, “Atticism”, *op.cit.*, pp. 140-165. The ‘rules-based liberal international order’ has been defined as the combination of practices designed to advance a vision of “open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law.” The reference is to J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2. See also S. E. Goddard, “Embedded Revisionism: Networks, Institutions, and Challenges to World Order”, *International Organization*, vol. 72, no. 4 (May 2018), pp. 763-797; Jahn, B., “Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects”, *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1 (January 2018), pp. 43-61; Ikenberry, J. and Nexon, D.H., “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders”, *Security Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (June 2019), pp. 395-421; and Adler-Nissen, R. and Zarakol, A., “Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents”, *International Organization*, vol. 75, no. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 611-634. Perhaps the clearest articulation of the criticism of the rules-based liberal international order is that it “infuriates rivals, alienates potential friends, and pleases only Western progressives,” as tweeted by Elbridge Colby on 20 May 2023. It

as being much closer in spirit to recent Chinese formulations, which commits Beijing to “firmly uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law, and the basic norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.”⁹² Those who doubt the veracity or relevance of this point should consider that, of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, only China continues to recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all 193 UN member states.

Second, Silk Road values are broadly suspicious of outsiders placing soft-law-driven limitations on national sovereignty and domestic sources of legitimacy. One example is the narrowing of the scope of the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states.⁹³ Another example of soft-law-driven limitations on national sovereignty is the expanded conception of individual liberty that prioritizes the political dimension of the doctrine of human rights.⁹⁴ A third example is being

served as a comment to passages from Henry Kissinger’s interview with *The Economist* over a two-day period in late April 2023 in which he said, “my impression of talking to Chinese leaders is that what is grating on them is our assumption that we are on the right course, and that if they behave themselves, we will grant them certain privileges. And also when we speak of a world system, a rules-based system, we made all the rules. And they want to participate in whatever new rules emerge. There’s another part that thinks that the Americans will never grant us that, so it’s foolish to fall for it. [...] [To the Chinese,] world order means they are the final judges of their interests. What they want is participation in how the rules are made. Not agreeing on the rules does not mean war, but it is a greater possibility.” The transcript of the entire interview may be accessed here: <https://www.economist.com/kissinger-transcript>. See also Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar’s comments on this in his speech at the General Debate of the seventy-eighth session of the UN General Assembly, September 26, 2023, Available at: <https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/india> (Accessed: January 5, 2024), which should be read together with the final paragraph.

⁹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, “Outlook on China’s Foreign Policy on Its Neighborhood In the New Era, October 24, 2023, Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202310/t20231024_11167100.html (Accessed: January 5, 2024). Tellingly, the next sentence of this document reads, “China upholds open regionalism, practices true multilateralism, and works with neighboring countries to foster *Asian values* centered on peace, cooperation, inclusiveness and integration and promote the unity, development and revitalization of Asia” (emphasis added).

⁹³ A classic formulation is found in C.A. Macartney, *National States and National Minorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 296: “The doctrine of state sovereignty does not admit that the domestic policy of any state – the policy which it follows towards its own citizens – can be any concern of any other state.”

⁹⁴ A soft law example of the former is the Responsibility to Protect; of the latter, the

threatened with various penalties and conditionalities for not enforcing sanctions unilaterally adopted by a few states or an alliance of countries, i.e., sanctions that have not been ratified by the UN Security Council.

Third, Silk Road values prioritize an allegiance to a strong state with an economically interventionist government. The logic here is that – at least in that part of the world – a weak state more easily produces a failing state. And a weak state also allows foreign capital to leverage economic decision-making, which necessarily limits the scope of governmental power, which can affect state security – industrial policy is understood to be an integral part of national security policy. This also explains the increasing emphasis on *meritocratic governance* pioneered by Singapore over U.S.- or EU-style liberal democracy,⁹⁵ which brings to mind the concept of a ‘project state’.⁹⁶

Fourth, Silk Road values generally downplay ethnic and even civic nationalism in favour of what Anatol Lieven calls ‘state nationalism’ – that is, fidelity to the state as embodied by loyalty to its leadership.⁹⁷

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Regarding the latter, see Carchidi, V.J., “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at Seventy-Five,” *The National Interest*, 19 November 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/universal-declaration-human-rights-seventy-five-207363>. It should almost go without saying that the principal drafters of this document were Westerners or individuals disproportionately influenced by the Western tradition. These included John Humphrey, who drew on the British tradition and its Canadian variant; René Cassin, who drew on the philosophical tradition that produced the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen; and Eleanor Roosevelt, who drew on the philosophical tradition that produced the text of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

95 On the concept of political meritocracy – “the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue” – including the contrast between the Singaporean and Chinese experiences, see D. A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). The definition quoted in the foregoing sentence is found on p. 6.

96 Ch. S. Maier, *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023).

97 This argument has been made regarding Vladimir Putin in particular, but it holds generally for the leaders of the countries of the Silk Road region, including, critically, for the statesmen presiding over its three keystone states. See Lieven, A., “National Responsibility,” *The Point: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 22 (Summer 2020), Available at: <https://thepointmag.com/politics/national-responsibility> (Accessed: January 5, 2024): Putin is “a Russian *state* nationalist – a very important distinction that has escaped many Western commentators. The criterion for membership of the Russian power elites is not ethnic origin but loyalty to the Russian state, as presently embodied in Putin” (emphasis added). Lieven adds that “Putin seems to me to exemplify something John Maynard Keynes once said about George Clemenceau” and goes on to illustrate this with a passage from Keynes, a slightly different selection of which I reproduce here: “He felt about France

A preference for the exercise of strong executive power tends to be accompanied by a strong distaste for anarchy and chaos – that is to say, a heightened sensitivity for the need to maintain public support and stability.

Fifth, Silk Road values do not entail the sublimation of distinct state identities in the name of institutionalizing cooperation among themselves, much less with outsiders. Hence the rise in championing “norms privileging state security, civilizational diversity, and traditional [social and cultural] values,”⁹⁸ as well as understanding, rather commonsensically, that the conduct of diplomacy is most effective when backed by one’s own military strength and other instruments of hard power that demonstrate resolve without, of course, taking all the steps that would be required to turn one’s country into a fully-fledged garrison state.

Seriously coming to terms with the Silk Road values that frame the conception and conduct of the statesmen who preside over the region and the citizens who reside within it is essential, in my view, for understanding properly the geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of the keystone concept as applied to the Silk Road region itself.

what Pericles felt of Athens – unique value in her, nothing else mattering; but his theory of politics was Bismarck’s. [...] His philosophy had [...] no place for ‘sentimentality’ in international relations. Nations are real things, of whom you love one and feel for the rest indifference – or hatred. [...] The politics of power are inevitable, and there is nothing very new to learn about this war or the end it was fought for [...]. Prudence required some measure of lip service to the ‘ideals’ of foolish Americans and hypocritical Englishmen; but it would be stupid to believe that there is much room in the world, as it really is, for such affairs as the League of Nations [...] except as an ingenious formula for rearranging the balance of power in one’s own interests.” The quote is taken from A. Robinson and D. Moggridge (eds.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume II: The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 20-21. Also, I note that Ernest Renan first made explicit the distinction between civil nationalism and ethnic nationalism. He identified the former with the French conception of the nation as a free choice or an “everyday plebiscite” and the latter with the German conception of the nation as a community of language and race. The relevant texts by Ernest Renan on nationalism have been collected in R. Girardet, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Et autres écrits politiques* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, coll. Acteurs de l’Histoire, 1996). Hans Kohn’s principal works on nationalism make much of this distinction. See his *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946).

98 Cooley, A., “Countering Democratic Norms,” in C. Walker, M. F. Plattner, and L. Diamond (eds.), *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 118.

However, it should not be understood as a ‘model’ for understanding any other part of the world, for a model is, by definition, an example to be followed or imitated. It is neither. I believe that both scholars and practitioners would be much better served by taking seriously what Brzezinski was the first to raise as a geostrategic possibility: that the core Silk Road region can become an “assertive single entity”.⁹⁹ This would require, *inter alia*, genuine institutionalized cooperation anchored by its three keystone states, which is not yet a foregone conclusion – notwithstanding my assessment that its pursuit is in the national interest of all the states that should be granted membership in what would be a strategic endeavour. According to the commonsensical approach of political phenomenology, its success should be proclaimed on whether it forms the basis for a genuinely stable and lasting regional order – one that advances, first and foremost, the interests and values *of* the region, *by* the region, and *for* the region as a whole. Such a standard is compatible with what I take to be Thucydides’ definition of statecraft: “to know how to remain moderate in prosperity and take care that the state grows concurrently in security as in renown” (Thuc. VIII.24.4).

⁹⁹ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, *op.cit.* p.35.