

Between Giants: The HAIKU Nations' Dance on the Geopolitical Stage

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This article proposes a new geopolitical grouping of rising middle-power countries labelled "HAIKU" (Hungary, Azerbaijan, Israel, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates). Though distinct in many aspects, these nations find common ground in their geostrategic positioning, as they are located at key points in the international system between regional and great powers, and in their adoption of multivectoral foreign policy approaches. The focus of this article is to examine these commonalities, the dynamics that have led these countries to adopt their foreign policy approaches, and the potential for alignment among these states.

Keyword: Azerbaijan, Israel, Hungary, Kazakhstan, United Arab Emirates, Middle Power



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Introduction

In recent years, the global geopolitical landscape has witnessed tectonic shifts, characterized primarily by the relative waning of the United States' post-Cold War hegemony, the ascendance of China as a major strategic and economic power, and Russia's efforts to reassert its influence, especially in its near abroad. All of these pose a significant challenge to the Western-led, rules-based liberal international order. The resulting dynamics have led to heightened strategic competition, reshaping alliances and power balances across the world. The result is, depending on who is asked, either a return to great-power competition or a more multipolar world order with heightened geopolitical tensions.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has been one of, if not the most, consequential development in this geopolitical environment. Aside from putting the strategic competition between great powers into sharper relief, it has prompted leaders and policymakers (particularly Western ones) to push other, uninvolved states to “pick sides”. These attempts, however, have been met with stiff resistance.

An example is the April 2022 vote at the United Nations General Assembly on whether to expel Russia from the Human Rights Council.¹ Though the motion passed, 58 countries abstained and 24 voted against. Notable abstentions came from the likes of India, Egypt, Indonesia, and Ghana. Not merely coincidental, many of these were standard-bearers of the Non-Aligned Movement – a transnational grouping from the Cold War era that sought to chart its own course amidst the superpower tug-of-war. Nations such as Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa also chose to abstain from the vote.

Similarly, there is the matter of sanctions against Russia. According to Castellum.ai, a global sanctions-tracking database, 46 countries have imposed sanctions against Russia, while the vast majority of the world's nations have not.² This dynamic also applies to other great powers. China, for example, is pushing for the BRICS grouping of nations

1 UN Affairs, “UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council”, UN News, April 7, 2022, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

2 Castellum.AI, *Russia Sanctions Dashboard*, July 14, 2023, Available at: <https://www.castellum.ai/russia-sanctions-dashboard> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

to transform from “a non-aligned club for the economic interests of developing countries” into “a political force that openly challenges [the West]”. It is encountering wide opposition, including from fellow leading BRICS members Brazil and India.^{3,4,5} Russia, for its part, is encountering difficulty in holding its own strategic security alliances together.⁶

The ultimate result is, as the *Financial Times*' foreign editor Alec Russell put it, an “à la carte world” in contrast to “the old era when countries had to choose from a *prix fixe* menu of alliances.” Many nations wish to avoid “taking sides” for a whole variety of reasons, from economic to ideological; yet *whether they can continue to do* so is another question entirely. The political, financial, and military pressure that great powers can bring to bear is sizable and can impose significant costs on smaller states.

It must be asked, then: are there states that can maintain pragmatic neutrality despite the geopolitical pressures of a multipolar world with ongoing strategic competition between great powers?

For one particular set of countries, the answer is “yes”. The present article has dubbed this grouping – Hungary, Azerbaijan, Israel, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the HAIKU nations. Just as the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) offered a fresh perspective on emerging economies and their collective geopolitical weight, the HAIKU nations provide a unique blend of middle powers that balance between larger regional and global powers to effectively pursue their own national interests, maintain neutrality, and secure regional orders.

3 Cotterill, J., et. al. “China urges Brics to become geopolitical rival to G7”, *Financial Times*, August 20, 2023. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/40f7cd4d-66f2-4e4d-876d-a0c7aa7097e1> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

4 Pagliarini, A., “Here’s why Brazil is a major holdout against BRICS expansion”, *Responsible Statecraft*, August 7, 2023, Available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/08/07/heres-why-brazil-is-a-major-holdout-against-brics-expansion/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

5 Russell, A., “The à la carte world: our new geopolitical order”, *Financial Times*, August 21, 2023, Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/7997f72d-f772-4b70-9613-9823f233d18a> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

6 Mikovic, N., “How Russia loses allies amid the war in Ukraine”, *The Interpreter*, January 27, 2023, Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-russia-loses-allies-amid-war-ukraine> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

Characteristics of HAIKU Countries

At first glance, the HAIKU nations appear to be a disparate lot, as they differ widely in terms of geographic location, form of government, religious composition, and so forth. Yet a closer look reveals some shared geopolitical characteristics: their role as rising middle powers on the global stage, their possession of integrative power, and a consistent pursuit of a multivectoral foreign policy. Together, these characteristics not only underscore their unique geopolitical significance but also illuminate the dynamics shaping their interactions with the larger international community.

It is necessary then to examine each of these more closely in turn.

Rising Middle Powers

There is no clear definition for precisely what constitutes a “middle power”, leading to much debate among political scientists. Marijke Breuning calls them “affluent states that employ their resources to foster peace and lessen global economic inequality”, whereas Carsten

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Holbraad argues they are “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organisations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility.”^{7,8}

These are likely charitable definitions, depicting middle powers as overly selfless and failing to fully capture states’ pursuit of their own national interests.

The *Financial Times*’ Alec Russell, channelling Ivan Krastev, is by contrast too simplistic in explaining that the “middle” part of the term “refers to their position – in between the US and China – rather than their weighting.”⁹

Arta Moeini, Zachary Paikin, Christopher Mott, and David Polansky provide a more solid foundation via a set of criteria rather than a strict

7 Jafarova, E., “Is Azerbaijan a “middle power”?”, *Modern Diplomacy*, May 16, 2020, Available at: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/05/16/is-azerbaijan-a-middle-power/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

8 *Ibid.*

9 Russell, *op.cit.*

definition.¹⁰ Middle powers, they contend, are characterized by four elements:

1. They have an enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness.
2. They possess considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbours.
3. They have a historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, “firmly rooted to a particular land, tradition, and culture and possessing a powerful historical memory.”
4. They are regionally focused and have a limited extent of ambitions – they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near-abroad matching their historical range and scope.

However, these criteria, though seemingly broad enough to include a variety of states, are applied in an exclusionary manner by Moeini and company. The emphasis placed on “*considerable* economic and military capacity” and a particular understanding of how much “historical and cultural pedigree” qualifies a “civilizational state” limits middle powers to a handful of states just one step below great powers; think of the likes of Germany, Türkiye, Iran, and Japan. Smaller and less powerful countries that nonetheless still play important, even critical, roles in the international arena – whether it be in security, diplomacy, or development cooperation – would not be counted as middle powers. Christopher Mott, one of the co-authors of the IPD analysis, notes in a separate article that this is more a matter of “disagreement on specific definitions and present economic dispositions rather than the overall concepts.”¹¹

Given this, what is necessary is a broader and more inclusive understanding of what constitutes a middle power (compared with that defined by the IPD analysis) that includes *rising middle powers*, as it were. We can define these as regionally focused, geographically rooted states with limited yet considerable assets (diplomatic, military, and/or economic) that can pursue their own national interests and, sometimes,

10 Moeini, A., et al. “*Middle Powers in a Multipolar World*”, White paper, *The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022, Available at: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

11 Mott, C., “Inshore Balancers and Reborn Opportunities: Middle Powers and the Silk Road Region”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 5 No. 4. (Summer 2022), pp.6–20, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/inshore-balancers-and-reborn-opportunities-08-07-2022> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

play a determinant role in broader geopolitics by leveraging their position and relative importance to regional and great powers.

Integrative Power

Building on the work of Amitai Etzioni, U.S. Naval War College professor Nikolas K. Gvosdev defines integrative power as “the ability to generate positive relationships,” which can come from a variety of sources.^{12,13} These include:

“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.”¹⁴

Moreover, states with the right mix of geography, integrative power, and a particular foreign policy can be described as “keystone states” that provide “coherence to a regional order – or, if it is itself destabilized, contributes to the insecurity of its neighbors.”¹⁵

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, two of the HAIKU states, are described by Gvosdev as keystone states.¹⁶ Similarly, Hungary has been strongly argued to be the keystone state for the East-Central Europe region through “inheriting” the position from Ukraine due to the latter’s inability to maintain neutrality between the major geopolitical forces, the American–European axis and Russia.¹⁷

12 A. Etzioni, *Political Reunification Revisited: On Building Supranational Communities*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2001)

13 Gvosdev, N.K. “Keystone States - A New Category of Power”, *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, No.5, United States: The Giant Challenged (Autumn 2015), pp.104–123, Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/48573591 (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 Gvosdev, Nikolas K. “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4 No. 1. (Fall 2020), pp.26–39, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/geopolitical-keystone> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

17 Roa, C., “Between East and West: The Prospect of Hungary as a Keystone State”, *The Hungarian Conservative*, Vol. 2. No. 5 (2022), pp.60–67, Available at: <https://www.>

Israel and the UAE face somewhat different circumstances. Gvosdev cogently argues that the Kingdom of Jordan is best suited for the role of keystone state in the Levant/Gulf region. However, both Israel and the UAE are nonetheless strategically positioned and possess noteworthy integrative power. More recently, they have taken to playing important roles in shaping regional order given various trends, such as the relative decline of the United States' security involvement in the Middle East and the G20's proposed India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) – a U.S.-led trade corridor alternative to the China-led Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁸

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Multivectoral Foreign Policy

As with “middle power”, there is no one clear definition for the term “multivectoral foreign policy”. Admittedly a relatively novel concept, used to describe the foreign policy approaches of Central Asian states, it has recently found purchase in Azerbaijan, Hungary, Belarus, and other countries.^{19, 20, 21, 22} Multivectoralism's chief exponent is arguably

hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/between-east-and-west-the-prospect-of-hungary-as-a-keystone-state/ (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

18 The White House, “Memorandum of Understanding on the Principles of an India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor”, September 9, 2023, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-principles-of-an-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

19 Lemon, E. and Bradley J., “Central Asia's Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy”, *Kennan Cable*, No. 68 (June 2021), Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-68-central-asias-multi-vector-defense-diplomacy> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

20 Hajiyev, H., “Strategic Equilibrium: Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (Fall 2020), pp.186–206, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/strategic-equilibrium> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

21 Orbán, B., “A Model for Connectivity: Hungary's Strong Bond with the Turkic World”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 6 No. 4 (Summer 2023), pp.6–17, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/a-model-for-connectivity-12-07-2023> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

22 Mikovic, N., “Can Belarus Revive its ‘Multi-Vector’ Foreign Policy?”, *Diplomatic Courier*, January 9, 2023, Available at: <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/can-belarus-revive-its-multi-vector-foreign-policy> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

Kazakhstan's former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who described the approach as “the development of friendly and predictable relations with all states that play a significant role in world affairs and are of practical interest to the country.”²³ A more neutral and effective definition has been put forward by Reuel R. Hanks, who defines it as “a policy that develops foreign relations through a framework based on a pragmatic, non-ideological foundation.”²⁴

Yet this definition is lacking, failing to capture the precise breadth of actions that can occur under a multivectoral foreign policy. Because of this, like middle powers, providing a set of criteria rather than a strict definition would be more useful. Given what can be observed at present, a multivectoral foreign policy is usually characterized by four elements:

1. Pragmatism over ideology: countries with a multivectoral foreign policy prioritize practicality over ideological rigidity.
2. Sovereignty and security: countries with a multivectoral foreign policy aim to ensure their national sovereignty, especially in geostrategically challenging neighbourhoods.
3. Leveraging between Great Powers: Positioned between major powers, countries with a multivectoral foreign policy often play a balancing act, leveraging relationships to ensure their unique national interests are protected.
4. Economic development and cooperation: Countries with a multivectoral foreign policy seek new opportunities to diversify their economies, often looking for partners outside their traditional alliances.

In essence, a multivectoral foreign policy is not a rigid doctrine but rather a fluid and adaptable approach to international relations. It reflects the complex interplay of realism, pragmatism, and strategic

²³ Nursultan Nazarbayev, “*Era nezavisimosti* [Era of independence]” (Astana: B. I., 2017), pp.168–75, Available at: <https://elbasy.kz/sites/default/files/pagefiles/2019-06/423d7253d66cad2c6f68758bcaf33782.pdf>; See also “*Mnogovektornaya diplomatiya na praktike*—Kazakhstan [Multivector diplomacy in practice – Kazakhstan]”, Central Asian Analytical Network, April 20, 2018, Available at: <http://caa-network.org/archives/12956> (All accessed: January 5, 2024)

²⁴ Hanks, R.R. “‘Multi-vector politics’ and Kazakhstan’s emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11. No 3, September 2009, pp.257–267, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903152110> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

interests. As the global environment continues to change, with shifting alliances and emerging powers, such an approach provides nations with the flexibility to navigate these complexities while also prioritizing their national interests and ensuring their sovereignty.

Individual Country Analysis

All HAIKU countries share the aforementioned characteristics (role as rising middle powers, possession of integrative power, and consistent pursuit of a multivectoral foreign policy). However, it is worth analysing each of the five HAIKU nations individually, alongside the trends that led them to their present state.

Hungary

Nestled in Central Europe, Hungary is in a distinct position, both within the context of its own neighbourhood and the broader international arena. In a previous article for the *Hungarian Conservative*, I examined how the country's geographical position grants it significant integrative power and affects elements of its foreign policy:

*“Geographically, [Hungary] occupies a key position between the overlapping spheres of influence of the West, Russia, and Türkiye, making it a potential mediator and transit point between all three. Hungary’s location also makes it a natural gateway for broader Eurasian trade, as well as a key European distribution hub. In recent years, a number of projects have been undertaken to capitalize on this potential, including the East–West Gate Terminal, Europe’s largest intermodal railway terminal with 5G facilities; the Budapest–Belgrade–Piraeus cargo railway line; a dedicated cargo terminal at Budapest’s international airport; and so on. Similarly, Hungary is also an energy connector via numerous existing projects: the Slovak–Hungarian gas interconnector, the Arad–Szeged gas pipeline with Romania, the TurkStream gas pipeline via Serbia, the Druzhba (Friendship) oil pipeline via Ukraine, and so on.”*²⁵

These existing arrangements mean that, although Hungary may be a member state of both the EU and NATO, its own national survival and well-being are greatly affected by its independent foreign relations with

²⁵ Roa, *op.cit.*

other great powers and actors. For example, somewhere between 80 and 85 per cent of the country's gas comes from Russia, along with 80 per cent of its crude oil imports.²⁶ Though Budapest is actively seeking to wean itself off this dependence, in the short and medium term it cannot afford to do as other Western states have and impose energy sanctions on Moscow. Similarly, the growing importance of Asia – including significant foreign direct investment from China, India, Japan, South Korea, and others – means that Hungary cannot neglect its various eastern ties.²⁷

Finally, Hungary has demonstrated an earnest interest in upholding its own cultural values and sovereignty, making it something of a gadfly in the Western world. Most notably, Budapest has been a staunch advocate of strengthening borders – in contrast to the Western norm of an open-borders approach – and a champion of family policy as a means of tackling demographic issues.²⁸ As a result, Hungary is now widely regarded as a redoubt of Western right-wing politics, drawing in conservative politicians, intellectuals, political activists, and others from not just the Western world (including the United States in particular), but also further afield.^{29,30}

These various dynamics have driven Budapest to embrace a particular brand of pragmatic diplomacy, manoeuvring between the West, Russia, the Turkish world, China, and others while seeking new avenues for growth and safeguarding national interests.

26 Reuters, *Hungary agrees on option for more Russian gas shipments, oil transit fees*, April 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-agrees-option-more-russian-gas-shipments-oil-transit-fees-2023-04-11/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

27 U.S. State Department, *2022 Investment Climate Statements: Hungary*, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-investment-climate-statements/hungary/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

28 Pappin, G., “Is Family Policy the New Foreign Policy?”, *The National Interest*, September 28, 2023, Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/family-policy-new-foreign-policy-206838> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

29 Kim, A.B. and Rios, R., “Hungary Leads Way in Defense of Conservative Values, Culture”, *The Heritage Foundation*, November 1, 2022, Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/hungary-leads-way-defense-conservative-values-culture> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

30 Heilbrunn, J., “I Was Banned From Entering CPAC Hungary’s ‘Woke Free Zone’”, *Politico*, May 6, 2023, Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/05/06/cpac-hungary-woke-free-zone-00095576> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

Azerbaijan

Of all the HAIKU countries, Azerbaijan perhaps most easily exemplifies the complexities that these states face. It is positioned right between Russia, Iran, the West, and Central Asia, making it a crossroads of key transport, trade, and energy corridors. Damjan Krnjević Mišković explains that – given the Russo-Ukrainian War (and the resulting sanctions imposed on Russia by the West), along with various political and security difficulties transporting goods through Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to the south – the “Middle Corridor” trade route that passes through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus is “the only game in town for achieving Asian, Turkish, and European transport and connectivity ambitions.”³¹ In this context, Azerbaijan is “the indispensable state, the geographically unavoidable hub.”³² This geographic and logistical reality, along with Azerbaijan’s own substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, means that the country is a highly-desired prize for any one of the world’s, or even the region’s, powers.

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Yet, through careful, pragmatic diplomacy and domestic political management, Baku has skilfully leveraged its natural resources to ensure its own independence and sovereignty; friendly to all, but not part of any one bloc. As Gvosdev notes:

“This requires careful management of the country’s international relations to avoid zero-sum situations where a gain made by one country in its relations with Azerbaijan must automatically come at the expense of another. In turn, by avoiding making any of its partners believe that its interests are continually being ignored or even actively disregarded, the government in Baku creates incentives for all the major actors in the Caspian basin—even those actively at odds with each other—to maintain the status quo.”³³

Azerbaijan has only strengthened its position over time. Its recent success in restoring sovereignty over the (now previously) occupied

31 Mišković, D.K., “The Rise of the Silk Road Region”, *Orbis*, Vol. 67 No. 3 (Summer 2023), pp.332–337, Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438723000273> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

32 *Ibid.*

33 Gvosdev, N.K. “Keystone States..”, *op.cit.*

territories, including the Karabakh region, amounting to 20 per cent of the country's internationally recognized territory, is a testament to its patient approach to international relations. By further strengthening ties with countries along the Middle Corridor trade route and acting as an alternative energy provider for the West (in light of the energy sanctions applied on Russia over the Russo–Ukrainian War), Azerbaijan has made itself an indispensable actor for all major powers.

Overall, Azerbaijan is a strong example of a rising middle power that can utilize its integrative power and multivectoral policy to its own advantage. What remains to be seen is whether Baku can continue to build upon this success and, more notably, leverage it to further develop its own economy, moving away from its previous reliance on natural resources.

Israel

At first glance, Israel seems like an odd inclusion in the HAIKU grouping. It is a particularly strong ally of the United States and the West, seemingly possesses less integrative power compared to its peers and stands out in terms of religious composition and form of government.

Yet first appearances can be deceiving. Israel is, in fact, far more in play in the great game than conventional logic would suggest, and recent developments only serve to highlight this reality.

First, Israel's geographical position between the West, the Middle East, and Africa has historically made it a natural point of interaction between these regions and their respective empires and powers. This characteristic will increase in importance in the coming years, given Africa's increasing importance in global trade, economics, and geopolitics, and the announcement of the IMEC initiative.

Second, Israel's economic strategy underwent a notable shift in the early 2000s, driven by a desire to decrease the country's dependence on Western economies.³⁴ The shift toward an export-led growth model

34 Krampf, A., "Export-Led Growth and the Geopolitical Hypothesis: Israel's Regime Change after the Second Intifada", Berlin *School of Economics and Law, Institute for International Political Economy Berlin*, Working Paper, 2023, p.222, Available at: www.ipe-berlin.org/fileadmin/institut-ipe/Dokumente/Working_Papers/ipe_working_paper_222.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

that relies less on Western capital has had two principal effects: 1) it has reduced the West's *political* leverage on Israel, and 2) it has pushed Israel toward seeking increased diplomatic engagement with its neighbours and further afield as a way to secure new markets for its products.

The latter is evident given a variety of infrastructure and diplomatic initiatives in recent years. Israel Katz, the country's foreign minister (formerly the minister of energy), has long been a proponent of, in his own words, "a regional vision that would link all of the Middle East through railways."³⁵ Several projects have, in the past decade, been undertaken or proposed with that exact goal in mind, including the Red-Med rail link between the port cities of Eilat and Tel Aviv, constructed with the intention of creating "an Asian-European cargo link as an alternative to the Suez Canal", and a 2017 proposal dubbed "Tracks for Regional Peace", which would link "Haifa's seaport to Jordan's rail network, which in turn will be linked with that of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states."^{36,37} IMEC, if advanced, has the potential to supercharge this effort, turning Israel into a lucrative logistics and trade hub, further strengthening its integrative power.

Third, as the world's only Jewish state, Israeli domestic and foreign policy is particularly fixated on protecting its sovereignty, along with its unique religious and cultural character. Its increasingly multivectoral foreign policy, emerging in response to changing geopolitical circumstances, is partially in service of this end. The "Abraham Accords", normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (and later Morocco and Sudan), occurred in the context of the United States' gradual disengagement from the Middle East and broader relative geopolitical decline, along with Iran's rising influence and strength. Similarly, Israel has normalized relations with Türkiye and

35 Keinon, H., "Israel as a regional transport hub: Could this pipe dream come true? - analysis", *The Israel Post*, September 10, 2023, Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-758409> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

36 *Ibid.*

37 TOI Staff, "Israel to begin promoting railway linking Haifa seaport with Saudi Arabia", *The Times of Israel*, June 24, 2018, Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-begin-promoting-railway-linking-haifa-seaport-with-saudi-arabia/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

is deepening ties with Azerbaijan.^{38,39} In terms of great power relations, Israel and China have deepened diplomatic and trade ties in recent years (though these have arguably plateaued in light of various concerns and U.S. pressure).⁴⁰ Similarly, Israel has long cooperated extensively in the economic, military, and intelligence spheres with Russia – even in light of the Russo-Ukrainian War – for a wide variety of reasons, not least of which is that a large percentage of Israelis are Russian-speaking (or Russian) Jews.⁴¹ More broadly, Israeli capabilities – particularly in the military and technological realms – are well-regarded and highly sought after internationally, meaning that Israel must cultivate a wide variety of diplomatic and strategic partnerships.

Despite its small size and distinct politics, Israel’s political, military, economic, and technological prowess, strategic relationships, and complex dynamics with neighbouring Middle Eastern states make it a noteworthy example of a state that can constantly balance between different interests and powers.

Kazakhstan

The largest and arguably the most prosperous of the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is a historical meeting point of worlds – European and Christian to its north and west, Turkish and Islamic to its south and southwest, and East Asian to its east and southeast. Lodged between these, Astana acts as a bridge between Europe and Asia, balancing ties with Russia, China, the West, and its Central Asian neighbours.

38 Cook, S. A., “How Israel and Turkey Benefit From Restoring Relations”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 23, 2022, Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-israel-and-turkey-benefit-restoring-relations> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

39 Lenk, A., “The Iceberg Melted: The Enhanced Visibility of Strategic Ties Between Israel and Azerbaijan”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 6 No. 2 (Winter 2022), pp.28–39, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/azerbaijan-israel-01-02-2023> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

40 Eilam, E., “Israel and China: The Bloom Is Off the Rose”, *Middle East Institute*, December 1, 2022. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-and-china-bloom-rose> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

41 Katz, M.M. “Russia and Israel: an improbable friendship” in N.Popescu and S.Secieru (eds), *Russia’s Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, July 2018. pp.103–108, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21138.15.pdf> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

Having two great powers as neighbours, however, means that Kazakhstan must play a careful diplomatic game. The trick, Gvosdev points out, is in “develop[ing] effective engagement beyond Russia and China without tripping red lines in both Moscow and Beijing.”⁴² The country’s multivectoral foreign policy has achieved this; Kazakhstan is either a member of or maintains favourable relations with all the major security organizations (NATO, SCO, and CSTO), and is a consistent participant in other international organizations.

Facilitating trade is another dimension by which Kazakhstan fosters friendly ties with myriad actors. For instance, the country’s economic development strategy, “Kazakstahn-2050,” is aimed at maximizing the country’s integrative power by facilitating transcontinental trade through taking advantage of its attractiveness as an overland freight transit hub linking China and Europe via the Middle Corridor.⁴³ The country’s president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has emphasized that “the transportation and logistics industry should become a cornerstone of the country’s economic development.”⁴⁴ To that end, Astana has invested significant resources towards development; the country’s *Nurly Zhol* (“Bright Path”) initiative has seen billions of dollars spent on road modernization, rail and port development, electrification, housing construction, and more.⁴⁵ These investments in connectivity, helped by the country’s ample energy (oil and gas) resources, have yielded impressive results: record-breaking foreign direct investment (\$28 billion in 2022), foreign trade turnover (\$136 billion), and exports of \$84 billion.⁴⁶

Kazakhstan is intent on staying the course, cooperating with its Central Asian and South Caucasus partners to ensure its neighbourhood –

42 Gvosdev, N.K. “Keystone States...”, *op.cit.*

43 See the official website of the office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy”, Available at: https://www.akorda.kz/en/official_documents/strategies_and_programs (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

44 See the official website of the office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s State of the Nation Address “Economic course of a Just Kazakhstan”, Available at: <https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-economic-course-of-a-just-kazakhstan-283243> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

45 Yergaliyeva, A., “Kazakh government estimates Nurly Zhol programme will cost \$16.91 billion over next five years”, *The Astana Times*, October 24, 2019, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2019/10/kazakh-government-estimates-nurly-zhol-programme-will-cost-16-91-billion-over-next-five-years/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

46 “President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s State of the Nation Address”, *op.cit.*

broadly described by Damjan Krnjević as “the Silk Road region” – can maintain stability, strategic autonomy, and strategic restraint while pursuing mutually beneficial economic arrangements with a wide variety of partners.^{47,48}

United Arab Emirates

Located at the very centre of the Middle East, the UAE occupies a central location along not just key international trade routes, but also broader geopolitics; it sits between Europe and the Mediterranean, Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia. In other words, the UAE sits between practically all great and rising powers save for Russia far to the north. This, combined with the fact that it is the smallest of the HAIKU countries in terms of population – if one does not count expatriates and non-citizens – means that the UAE’s entire strategic approach by necessity involves leveraging its significant oil wealth to achieve economic and diplomatic advantages.

Recognizing the implications of the United States’ gradual security pullback from the region, Abu Dhabi has traded in its mid-2000s, Arab Spring-era interventionist foreign policy. In its place, it has pursued a diplomatic-oriented, multivectoral one with the express intention of ensuring its own economic future and security.⁴⁹ The new approach, dubbed the “zero problem” policy, “entails building bridges of communication, expanding diplomatic and mediation efforts, and avoiding all confrontations that may deter Abu Dhabi’s endeavor to boost the country’s national economy in the post Covid era.”⁵⁰ This often involves some very delicate tightrope diplomacy; look no further than the drive toward the normalization of relations with Israel via the Abraham Accords while simultaneously improving ties with rival Iran. However, if Emirati diplomats can succeed in these efforts, then the

47 Mišković, “The Rise of the Silk Road Region...”, *op.cit.*

48 Mišković, D.K., “On Some Conceptual Advantages of the Term ‘Silk Road Region’: Heralding Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Emancipation”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol 6. No 4. (Summer 2023), pp.20–33, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/on-some-conceptual-advantages-of-the-term-silk-road-region-12-07-2023> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

49 Barhouma, M., “The Reshaping of UAE Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Strategy”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 4, 2022, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86130> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

50 *Ibid.*

UAE can solidify its position as a vital diplomatic partner for not just its neighbours, but the more distant great powers.

The UAE's future, however, will primarily be determined by economics and the integrative power that it grants. Emirati policymakers have correctly determined that their country's central location makes it an ideal regional hub for business, finance, and innovation, and have invested accordingly. Dubai is already widely regarded as “the business capital of Africa” and a key launch platform for any business venture in the continent.⁵¹ The country's ports, particularly Dubai's Jebel Ali port, handle a significant volume of global trade, and will likely see increased traffic given the expected economic growth (and trade) from India and East/Southeast Asia – especially if the IMEC initiative unfolds. Similarly, Dubai is very much set to become a major global financial hub, taking advantage of a light regulatory regime and significant investments into financial technology to act as a clearing house for global finance.⁵² This trend will only accelerate due to evolving great power competition, as the global economy is likely to split into competing economic blocs.⁵³

The UAE's future, in short, depends on it being able to deftly navigate relationships with Western powers, neighbouring Gulf states, and Asia. This will be the key to leveraging its economic strength to ensure its own security and independence while positioning itself as an essential regional and global hub for logistics, transport, trade, business, and finance.

The Potential for HAIKU Alignment

Though all five HAIKU countries share the same characteristics – rising middle powers in strategically important geographical positions, possession of noteworthy integrative power, and the adoption of a

51 Cochrane, P., “Dubai, the business capital of Africa”, *Middle East Eye*, March 28, 2021, Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-dubai-africa-business-capital> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

52 Wintermeyer, L., “Dubai: On The Road To Becoming A Top Global Financial Services Hub”, *Forbes*, June 16, 2023. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lawrencewintermeyer/2023/06/16/dubai-on-the-road-to-becoming-a-top-global-financial-services-hub/?sh=5466cf6a5a9c> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

53 Shearing, N., “World economy is fracturing, not deglobalizing”, *Chatham House*, February 8, 2023, Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/world-economy-fracturing-not-deglobalizing> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

Though all five HAIKU countries share the same characteristics – rising middle powers in strategically important geographical positions, possession of noteworthy integrative power, and the adoption of a multivectoral foreign policy – these dynamics are seemingly more conducive towards non-alignment and independence rather than pursuing any form of deeper commitment.

multivectoral foreign policy – these dynamics are seemingly more conducive towards non-alignment and independence rather than pursuing any form of deeper commitment. Yet, at the same time, leaders and policymakers within the HAIKU nations are independently and increasingly recognizing the potential benefits of pursuing mutual diplomatic and economic collaboration and development. In a sense, HAIKU states are behaving akin to a modern-day Hanseatic League – a loose confederation of actors advancing mutual commercial and strategic regional interests.

Consider Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan: both share numerous cultural and economic similarities, seeking to safeguard their own independence – particularly from neighbouring Russia – and recognize the importance of developing infrastructure and promoting trade along the Middle Corridor.⁵⁴ Bilateral trade increased by 40 per cent between 2021 and 2022, reaching a high of \$460 million.⁵⁵ The volume of oil transported between the two increased *twelvefold*, from 69,000 to 838,000 tons, in 2023.⁵⁶ Both countries increasingly realize, as Damjan Krnjević notes, that closer cooperation is essential to turn their immediate geopolitical neighbourhood from “an object of major power competition – a geography to be won and lost by others” into “a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated subject of international order.”⁵⁷

Hungary, near the endpoint of the Middle Corridor (and, notably, IMEC), wishes to be involved in this. The country is an observer in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), of which both Azerbaijan

54 Soltes, A., “Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan Relations Take a Step Forward”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, June 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/kazakhstan-azerbaijan-relations-take-a-step-forward/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

55 The Astana Times, *Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan Set to Boost Trade Relations to \$1 Billion*, June 22, 2023, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2023/06/kazakhstan-azerbaijan-set-to-boost-trade-relations-to-1-billion/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

56 Caspian Policy Center, *Headlines from the Caspian September 12, 2023*, September 12, 2023, Available at: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/weekly-media-highlights/headlines-from-the-caspian-september-12-2023> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

57 Krnjević, “On Some Conceptual Advantages...”, *op.cit.*

and Kazakhstan are members. Balázs Orbán, a prominent Hungarian parliamentarian and political director for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (no relation), argues that the “OTS and its member states provide great opportunities for cooperation” for Hungary. While “Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia were not at the forefront of attention for the main Western countries in the early 2010s, Hungary’s historical and cultural connections to those nations, along with the knowledge it had acquired over the past decades, led it to recognize the potential benefits and competitive advantages of engaging with the Turkic states.”⁵⁸ Orbán also notes how economic cooperation, trade, and investment between Hungary and OTS members have doubled over the past decade, along with increased cultural engagement via education, scholarships, joint research endeavours, and more.⁵⁹ More recently, Hungary announced its intention to participate in reconstruction work in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, making it one of the first Western nations to do so.⁶⁰

The UAE will not be left out either. In fact, over recent years, Abu Dhabi has spearheaded the Gulf states’ efforts to engage with and invest in Central Asia, seeing not only geopolitical opportunities but also commercial ones via the development of the Middle Corridor.^{61,62} The UAE has invested significantly in Kazakhstan in particular, with over 200 Emirati companies operating in the latter, and multiple bilateral investments in infrastructure, logistics, agriculture, mining, and energy.⁶³ These deals are in the billions of dollars, and include the construction of a variety of endeavours, from a chemical complex in Kazakhstan’s Atyrau region to the creation of new grain shipping routes

58 Orbán, B., “A Model for Connectivity: Hungary’s Strong Bond with the Turkic World”, *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 6 No. 4. (Summer 2023), pp.6–17, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/a-model-for-connectivity-12-07-2023> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Headlines from the Caspian: September 12, 2023, op.cit.*

61 Mammadov, R., “The UAE leads Gulf outreach to Central Asia”, *Middle East Institute*, April 3, 2019, Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-leads-gulf-outreach-central-asia> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

62 Karasik, T., “The UAE’s northern strategy in Central Asia”, *Gulf State Analytics*, Available at: <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/the-uaes-northern-strategy-in-central-asia/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

63 *Ibid.*

to the Gulf.^{64, 65, 66} The UAE has likewise taken an interest in Azerbaijan, making significant investments such as a 30 per cent equity stake in the latter's Absheron gas field.^{67, 68} Trade between the two countries is up 270 per cent over the past five years.⁶⁹ Hungary has not escaped notice either; the UAE is the former's largest Arab trading partner, and trade between the two states has continuously grown in recent years.⁷⁰ Both sides agreed last year to a nine-pronged economic collaboration programme in the "areas of trade, investment, talent attraction, small and medium-sized enterprises, water resource management, energy and renewable energy, tourism and culture, logistics and supply, research and technology, space and education."⁷¹

Then there is Israel. The recent normalization of ties with the UAE has thrown open the door to economic opportunity and investment between the two countries. It is estimated that a recent free-trade pact will reduce or remove around 96 per cent of tariffs on goods traded between the two countries.⁷² Policymakers in Abu Dhabi have expressed a commitment

64 Erubaeva, G., "Kazakhstan, UAE Sign Deals Worth Over \$6 Billion", *Caspian News*, October 19, 2020. Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-uae-sign-deals-worth-over-6-billion-2020-10-15-56/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

65 Abbasova, V., "UAE Steps Up Investments in Central Asia's Largest Economy", *Caspian News*, September 23, 2022. Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/uae-steps-up-investments-in-central-asias-largest-economy-2022-9-23-0/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

66 Abbasova, V., "Kazakhstan, UAE in Talks to Create New Shipping Route for Grain Exports", *Caspian News*, August 8, 2023. Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-uae-in-talks-to-create-new-shipping-route-for-grain-exports-2023-8-7-50/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

67 Lmahamad, A., "Azerbaijan, UAE discuss expanding cooperation in trade, investment, logistics", *AzerNews*, July 22, 2022, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/business/197191.html> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

68 Caspian News, *Leading UAE Energy Company Acquires Stake in Azerbaijani Gas Field*, August 6, 2023, Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/leading-uae-energy-company-acquires-stake-in-azerbaijani-gas-field-2023-8-4-0/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

69 AlGhoul, R., and Esmail, E., "UAE's trade with Azerbaijan increases 3-fold in 5 years, up 270%: minister", *Zawya*, February 23, 2023, Available at: <https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/gcc/uaes-trade-with-azerbaijan-increases-3-fold-in-5-years-up-270-minister-taeiuckx> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

70 GulfBusiness, *UAE and Hungary launch economic cooperation programme*, February 17, 2022, Available at: <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-and-hungary-launch-economic-cooperation-programme/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

71 *Ibid.*

72 Rabinovitch, A., "Israel, UAE sign free trade pact into effect", *Reuters*, March 26,

to long-term economic ties with Israel despite various political and geopolitical concerns, and the advent of IMEC will only increase the importance of relations between the two Middle Eastern states in the future.⁷³ Looking north, Israel enjoys warm relations with Hungary. It has been observed that “Budapest has in recent years been Israel’s staunchest supporter in the European Union, blocking several efforts to issue statements critical of Israeli policies.”⁷⁴ Israel has reciprocated by opting out of Western condemnation of some of Hungary’s cultural policies.⁷⁵ Commercially, the two countries cooperate in several ventures, such as a recent major agreement to manufacture combat drones in cooperation with German companies.⁷⁶

Relations between Israel and the Caspian states of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, meanwhile, are highly valued. Kevjn Lim, IHS Markit’s Middle East principal country analyst, argued in 2022 that “Kazakhstan and especially Azerbaijan remain the twin anchors of Israeli engagement within the former Soviet Union’s Muslim space.”⁷⁷ Baku, in particular, has benefited from this engagement; as Brenda Shaffer and Avinoam Idan observe, Israeli–Azerbaijani ties are long-standing, with Israel being one of the first countries to recognize

2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-free-trade-pact-into-effect-2023-03-26/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

73 Uppal, R., and Barrington, L., “Analysis: UAE plans long-term economic ties with Israel despite political strains”, *Reuters*, April 4, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-plans-long-term-economic-ties-with-israel-despite-political-strains-2023-04-03/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

74 Ahren, R., “Hungary FM, one of Israel’s staunchest allies in Europe, due in Israel Monday”, *The Times of Israel*, July 19, 2023, Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungary-fm-one-of-israels-staunchest-allies-in-europe-due-in-israel-monday/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

75 Tibon, A., “Israel Opts Out of Joining U.S. Condemnation of Hungary’s New anti-LGBTQ Legislation”, *Haaretz*, July 16, 2023, Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-07-16/ty-article/israel-opts-out-of-joining-u-s-condemnation-of-hungarys-new-anti-lgbtq-legislation/00000189-5eaa-de4e-adeb-ffaeb7630000> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

76 Szandelszky, B., “Hungary is to produce combat drones in cooperation with Israel and Germany, the prime minister says”, *Associated Press*, August 18, 2023, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-israel-manufacture-combat-drones-7be91bb6edded7a7274080b082c3d828> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

77 Rosenberg, D., “Oil, Cyber and Weapons: Inside Israel’s Relationship with Kazakhstan”, *Haaretz*, January 11, 2022, Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-01-11/ty-article/oil-cyber-weapons-relations-israel-kazakhstan-protests/0000017f-e5da-dc7e-adff-f5ffdeb0000> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

(December 25, 1991) Azerbaijani independence. It was also one of the first to establish diplomatic ties (April 7, 1992) and an embassy in Baku (August 29, 1993).⁷⁸ Baku was unable to reciprocate these relations at first, “out of concern of losing support from the Arab Muslim bloc in UN resolutions related to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.” The recent settlement of the conflict, along with the signing of the Abraham Accords, has, however, enabled Azerbaijan to publicly solidify its ties with Israel.⁷⁹ Relations have thus flourished in more recent times.⁸⁰ Azerbaijan was the second-largest recipient of Israeli weapons exports between 2018 and 2022, which played an instrumental role in the Second Karabakh War of 2020.⁸¹ Baku, in turn, supplies Israel with a great deal of energy – an estimated 40 per cent of the country’s energy demands since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War.⁸² Similarly, both countries have an interest in balancing against Iran, their mutual regional rival.⁸³ Finally, there are reasons for cultural affinity: “Azerbaijan is the home to the last remaining Jewish community in the Caucasus, known as *Krasnaya Sloboda* (“Red Town”), while a large community of European Jews has been living in Azerbaijan (mostly in Baku) since the late 19th century.”⁸⁴

Kazakhstan, for its part, is a key oil source for Israeli energy demand and an important market for Israeli arms.⁸⁵ The primary reason Israel has not significantly invested in Kazakhstan until recently is because of dashed expectations during the immediate post-Soviet era. Recent

78 Idan, A. and Shaffer, B., “Israel’s role in the Second Armenian-Azerbaijan War”, in T.Gafarli and M.Arnold (eds), *The Karabakh Gambit: Responsibility for the Future*, pp.190–208, Available at: https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Karabakh-Gambit_IsraelRole-1.pdf (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

79 *Ibid.*

80 Muradov, M. and Guliyev, I., “Azerbaijan-Israel Relations Shifting the Geopolitics of the Middle East”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, May 26, 2023, Available at: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/azerbaijan-israel-relations-reach-a-new-level/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

83 Kaleji, V., “The Israel Factor as a ‘Third Party’ in Growing Tensions Between Iran and Azerbaijan”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *The Jamestown Foundation*, Vol 20. Issue 74. May 8, 2023, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/tehran-worried-about-israel-factor-in-growing-tensions-between-iran-and-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

84 *Ibid.*

85 Rosenberg, D., *op.cit.*

political and economic reforms undertaken by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appear to be dispelling this notion, evoking newfound Israeli interest in the Central Asian republic.^{86,87}

Conclusion

In the unfolding geopolitical environment, with great powers vying for supremacy and prompting nations to align, the emergence of the HAIKU nations presents an intriguing potential paradigm. These nations stand testament to the fact that, despite the immense pressures in an increasingly multipolar world, strategic neutrality is not only plausible but, potentially, an effective approach for rising middle powers.

These states do, however, face some potential challenges and limitations. For one, they have diverse interests, so aligning national interests may prove challenging. Similarly, internal dynamics and domestic political shifts may affect the continuity and coherence of the grouping. Likewise, unexpected shocks may precipitate a reevaluation of ties amongst these states, depending on the nature of the particular shock and who it affects. Finally, great and regional powers may perceive growing ties and cooperation between HAIKU countries as a threat and exert pressure as a result. As an example, consider growing Iranian concern over Azerbaijani and Israeli cooperation: Tehran regards this as a component of an Israeli strategy of diplomatic encirclement.⁸⁸

Yet thus far, the HAIKU states' ability to balance between larger regional and global actors, champion their national interests, and ensure regional stability underscores the dynamic nature of the current international arena. HAIKU states challenge the age-old notion of rigid alignments and offer a glimpse into a future where nations navigate the global stage with calculated autonomy.

86 Uali, B., "A year of major political reforms in Kazakhstan", *EURACTIV*, March 31, 2023, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/opinion/a-year-of-major-political-reforms-in-kazakhstan/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

87 Kazakh Invest, *The Israeli Businesses will continue to Invest in Kazakhstan*, February 22, 2022, Available at: <https://invest.gov.kz/media-center/press-releases/delovye-krug-i-zrailiya-prodolzhat-investirovat-v-kazakhstan/> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

88 Vatanka, A., "Azerbaijan and Israel's encirclement of Iran", *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2023, Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijan-and-israels-encirclement-iran> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

As global order continues to evolve and alliances shift, the HAIKU nations serve as a reminder that independence and pragmatism can coexist, even in an age of heightened geopolitical tensions.

Afterword – February 2024

The original version of this article was written in August/September of 2023, a few weeks before the October 7 attacks by Hamas on the state of Israel and the resulting Israel–Hamas War, also known as the Simchat Torah War. Though this development confirms an earlier assertion made in this article – namely, that Israel is “far more in play in the great game than conventional logic would suggest” – it does raise the question whether the country still merits inclusion within the HAIKU framework.

Primarily, two issues stand out. First, the “Abraham Accords” signatories’ (including the UAE) and potential signatories (namely, Saudi Arabia) have “paused” their diplomatic normalization with Israel – and have given indications that these diplomatic gains could be reversed – given Israel’s punitive campaign on the Gaza Strip. Second, Israel’s heavy reliance on U.S. and Western military aid and diplomatic support amid the current conflict presents a strong case against the notion that Israel is increasingly pursuing a multivectoral foreign policy and de facto non-alignment.

A mere afterward does not permit one the space to elaborate on this matter. In short, the answer is “yes”, Israel should still be included within the HAIKU framework. As I argue – at greater and much more detailed length – in a forthcoming issue of *The Hungarian Conservative*, the current strength of U.S. and Western support is a temporary phenomenon, dependent on a changing set of conditions. Namely, the United States lacks the military, economic, and industrial strength to support Israel as it has in past decades, especially in the context of strategic competition with China and Russia.^{89 90} Compounding these circumstances is that

89 Lee, M., “US Military Is “Weak”, in Danger of Not Being Able to Defend National Interests”, *Yahoo News*, January 25, 2024, Available at: <https://news.yahoo.com/us-military-weak-danger-not-090055032.html> (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

90 Tirpak, J.A., “New Defense Industrial Base Strategy Warns of Long Recovery to Reverse Atrophy”, *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, January 12, 2024, Available at: www.afmagazine.com

political support for Israel *within* the West is in relative decline. As polling data, along with various kinds of political protests and demonstrations, suggest, younger generations – including individuals on track to assume positions of political, diplomatic, and economic power in the future – demonstrate far more support for the Palestinian cause than their predecessors did.^{91 92 93 94 95}

Moreover, it is worth noting that while the UAE and other regional states interested in pursuing diplomatic normalization with Israel have condemned the latter’s actions vis-à-vis Gaza, in practice they have not been as castigating as they could be. The implicit diplomatic message here is that the door toward diplomatic normalization is not yet shut; that option remains on the table if the Palestinian issue is properly addressed.

Additionally, the blocking of the Red Sea by Yemen-based Houthis – though inflicting grave economic damage and highlighting the wider consequences of supporting Israel’s current policy toward Gaza – has highlighted the need for trade and supply chain resilience in light of geopolitical challenges. In effect, the conflict is partially providing the case for IMEC, which includes an on-land alternative route for trade that crosses the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan to reach Israel, rather than going through the Red Sea and Egypt via the Suez Canal.

airandspaceforces.com/new-defense-industrial-base-strategy-long-recovery/ (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

91 Kampeas, R., “Polls Show Lower Support for Israel among Young Americans amid War against Hamas”, *Times of Israel*, November 3, 2023, Available at: www.timesofisrael.com/polls-show-lower-support-for-israel-among-young-americans-amid-war-against-hamas/ (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

92 Muchnick, J. and Kamarck, E., “The Generation Gap in Opinions toward Israel”, *Brookings Institution*, November 9, 2023, Available at: www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/ (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

93 Ward, A., Seligman, L., and Berg, M., “White House Holds Staff Meetings on Israel–Hamas War”, *Politico*, October 24, 2023, Available at: www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/10/24/white-house-holds-staff-meetings-on-israel-hamas-war-00123148 (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

94 Toosi, N., “U.S. diplomats Slam Israel Policy in Leaked Memo”, *Politico*, November 6, 2023, Available at: www.politico.com/news/2023/11/06/u-s-diplomats-slam-israel-policy-in-leaked-memo-00125538 (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

95 Salcedo A. and Hudson, J., “USAID Staffers Urge Biden to Push Israel toward “Immediate Cease-fire””, *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2023, Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/11/03/usaid-workers-ceasefire-israel-hamas/ (Accessed: January 25, 2024)

This leads me to conclude in the aforementioned forthcoming article that, “changing geopolitical circumstances are forcing, and will continue to force, Israel towards a multivectoral foreign policy. In the medium term, this change will also curb Israel’s freedom of action, which enabled (among other things) its decades-long occupation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza. Ultimately, the forced pursuit of a multivectoral foreign policy will likely result in both Israel’s integration with the region’s economy and the creation of a Palestinian state, all as a means to ensure continued national survival in a more demanding international environment.”

That being said, much will admittedly depend on the manner in which Israel concludes the current conflict and its precise plans for the future of Gaza and its inhabitants.