

HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?

Esmira Jafarova



CAUCASUS

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Special Issue No.1 • February 2024

Azerbaijan as a Middle Power

ARTICLES

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

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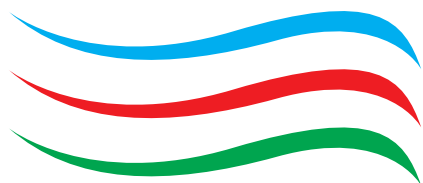
Between Giants:
The HAIKU Nations'
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ARTICLES

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post-Soviet space in the
context of the necessity for
regionalization of
international relations
**Stanislav Alexandrovich
Pritchinn**

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To bother or not to bother
with the middle power concept?
The case of Türkiye
Daria Isachenko



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Publisher: Center of Analysis of International Relations

Type of Publication: Periodical (biannual)

Caucasus Strategic Perspectives is a Baku-based academic foreign policy journal that discusses policymaking in and on the Caucasus as well as the region's role in the global context. Each issue of the journal will focus on a global or regional theme and includes perspectives from authors from different countries and backgrounds. The journal focuses largely on the Caucasus neighborhood, but does so with a global outlook. The journal of **Caucasus Strategic Perspectives** is issued by the Center of Analysis of International Relations in Baku.



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Editorial Office

Baku Office:

Center of Analysis of International Relations
Mirza Ibrahimov street 8, Baku, AZ1005, Azerbaijan
Tel: (+994 12) 596-82-39
E-mail: editorcspjournal@gmail.com

Artpoint Reklam MMC
ISSN (print): 2788-5178
ISSN (online): 2788-5186
Baku - 2024

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Editor's Note

The current special issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled “*Azerbaijan as a Middle Power*” is dedicated to the topic of middle powers, their increasing roles in international politics, and the newly found image of Azerbaijan as an assertive and rising middle power. The journal also covers various topics related to middle powers and Azerbaijan’s role as a middle power.

The CSP’s special issue includes 5 articles. The authors of the special issue analysed the Azerbaijan’s rising role as a middle power, analysed the applicability of the keystone concept in the case of Silk Road region, explored the new geopolitical grouping of rising middle-power countries, conducted a comparative analysis of the potential of the rising middle powers, etc.

The special issue’s **Highlight** is the article of **Esmira Jafarova** titled “*Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?*”. This article presents a fresh academic perspective on Azerbaijan’s growing international standing and activism via the prism of scholarly debate on middle powers. It argues that Azerbaijan, by virtue of its international initiatives and growing prestige, and having assumed the role of a norm entrepreneur, should no longer be characterized as a small state – despite its small geographic size – but as a middle power that demonstrates a high sense of global responsibility and supports international organizations, international development cooperation, sustainable development, global partnerships, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, etc.

The special issue’s **Articles Section** follows with **Damjan Krnjević Mišković’s** article of “*Superseding Middle Power Theory with the Keystone Concept: The Persuasive Case of Azerbaijan and the Silk Road Region*” explores the ‘keystone

state' concept, which according to the author, better explains geopolitical and geoeconomic developments in the 'Silk Road region'. 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.

Carlos Roa's article of "*Between Giants: The HAIKU Nations' Dance on the Geopolitical Stage*" proposes a new geopolitical grouping of rising middle-power countries labelled "HAIKU" (Hungary, Azerbaijan, Israel, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates). 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.

Stanislav Alexandrovich Pritchkin's article of "*'Middle powers' in the post-Soviet space in the context of the necessity for regionalization of international relations*" argues that in the post-Soviet space, and in particular in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, several countries can be classified as middle power (among them are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan). The author reveals that, according to the totality of the analysis of various factors and characteristics among the three potential players that could be considered middle powers, in many respects only Azerbaijan meets the requirements for this status.

Daria Isachenko's article of "*To bother or not to bother with the middle power concept? The case of Türkiye*" argues that, in order to understand the foreign policy choices of states that matter, it is helpful to look at how they themselves perceive their place and role in the international arena. The article thus seeks to contrast the concept of a middle power with the concept of a central country, as developed in official Ankara's foreign policy discourse.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this special issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issue.

Sincerely
Farid Shafiyev
Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal

Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?

Esmira Jafarova*

This article** seeks to present a fresh academic perspective on Azerbaijan's growing international standing and activism via the prism of scholarly debate on middle powers. It is argued that Azerbaijan, by virtue of its international initiatives and growing prestige, and having assumed the role of a norm entrepreneur, should no longer be characterized as a small state – despite its small geographic size – but as a middle power that demonstrates a high sense of global responsibility and supports international organizations, international development cooperation, sustainable development, global partnerships, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, etc. – principles that scholars in academia ascribe as the characteristics of middle powers. By acting as a norm entrepreneur on a global stage, Azerbaijan has the status of a middle power that also stands for collective gains and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Keywords: Middle Power, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus



* **Dr. Esmira Jafarova** is a Board Member of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (Baku, Azerbaijan)
** This is an updated version of the original article that was published by Modern Diplomacy on 16 May, 2020, available at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/16/is-azerbaijan-a-middle-power/>

Introduction

This article argues that, despite its relatively small geographic size, Azerbaijan can no longer be considered a small state, but should be classified as a rising middle power. In doing so, the article seeks to engage with existing concepts and academic debate over what it means to be a middle power. Although it appears that there is no clear consensus definition in the academic literature of a middle power, some common features and behavioural patterns of states nevertheless enable one to argue that certain countries could qualify to be named as middle powers by virtue of their international initiatives, sense of responsibility, and assumption of the role of norm entrepreneur in an anarchic world that needs guidance and foresight.

In making this assertion about Azerbaijan, this article delves into an analysis of Azerbaijan's rising international profile; initiatives and collaborative projects undertaken by the country with its international partners that foster cooperation and partnership across different regions and continents; as well as its promotion of certain values and principles that stand for a better, more equitable world, sustainable development, diversity, multiculturalism, multilateralism, etc. Azerbaijan's adherence to these values and principles denotes its dedication to acting as a norm entrepreneur, which is one of the key characteristics of a middle power as identified in the relevant academic literature.

Having looked through the factors that elevate Azerbaijan's status from that of a mere small state to that of a middle power via the prisms of the relevant concepts in the academic literature, the paper concludes that Azerbaijan's ambition to be counted as a middle power should henceforth be treated as a legitimate aspiration that serves the greater good at the systemic level.

The Concept of a Middle Power

Middle powers have been at the forefront of many international initiatives that demand the coordination of resources and the promotion of values. Traditionally, middle powers are so named simply because they are neither great nor small. Scholars in the field, however, see beyond the mere geographic meaning of middle powers and rightly portray their importance in terms of more than just physical criteria. In

an attempt at classification, scholars such as Marijke Breuning divide states into great/superpowers, middle powers, regional powers, and small powers, with middle powers defined as “states that can wield a measure of influence, albeit not through the projection of military might.”¹

Breuning stated that “middle powers are usually affluent states that employ their resources to foster peace and lessen global economic inequality” and are norm entrepreneurs that “advocate for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms.”²

In a seminal work, Carsten Holbrad defined middle powers as “... moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organizations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility.”³

Such countries play important roles in the area of international development cooperation, and the decision-makers of such countries typically advocate for more development aid and sustainable development. Examples of such states are Canada, a G8 member that has self-proclaimed itself a middle power to promote its role in the international environment; Norway, which, for example, facilitated negotiations between the representatives of Israel and Palestine in the run-up to the Oslo Accords in 1993; and the Netherlands and Sweden – which also claim to be norm entrepreneurs – whose work in the field of mediation, good offices, and environmental issues falls into the middle-power category. For instance, it is also argued that the decision-makers of Sweden and some other countries have used their middle power status and assumed a leadership role as norm entrepreneurs in countering global inequality.⁴ There is no consensus on the eligibility criteria; however, it is often advanced countries with purposeful activism on international affairs whose names make it onto the list.⁵

1 M.Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.150

2 Ibid.

3 C.Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, (The Macmillan Press, 1984) p. 205

4 Breuning, *op.cit.*, p.155

5 *Ibid.*, 150

Another interesting element in this categorization is the distinction that some authors make between the concepts of middle powers and small states. It is underscored that the latter is not so easily defined, covers a diverse group of states, and is not solely confined to geographic size, as it is a relative concept. In this context, small states are described as “those that have a rather limited capacity to exert influence on other states” and rarely resort to force in international relations.⁶ Breuning also argues that the concept of a middle power should not be coeval with the notion of a regional power, which is portrayed “as a state that has the resources to exert influence in its own region of the world”.⁷

Holbraad notes that, to assess the role of middle powers, one has to see their typical contributions to the “international political process” towards the “basic goals of the society of nations”.⁸ He specifically mentioned international order and international justice in this regard, arguing that most of the descriptions that in the past were made about middle powers were based on their behaviour towards the international order.⁹ In this context, Holbraad asserts that:

“Such powers were presented as guardians of the balance of power, protecting the security of other states and the peace of the whole system; as moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organizations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility The contributions actually made by middle powers to the maintenance of order and the pursuit of justice may be considered first at the systemic level.”¹⁰

Holbraad also argues that, if middle powers seem “to behave differently from great powers and small states, it is essentially because they are placed in a different position in the hierarchy of powers and exposed to other pressures”.¹¹ He further points out that middle powers possess neither the exceptional strength nor the overarching interests and responsibilities of great powers, and therefore they often do not face

6 *Ibid.*, p.151

7 *Ibid.*, 150

8 Holbraad, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Holbraad, *op.cit.*, p.212.

the big temptations of great powers. Therefore, “commanding greater resources than lesser powers and carrying more weight in international relations, they are often led to attempt parts that would be beyond the capabilities of most small states”.¹²

Moreover, Holbraad refers to the role of military capabilities in middle-power politics in his above-mentioned work – without, however, making the military a defining factor in a state’s middle-power role. For example, he argues that “middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than great powers and more responsible than small states.”¹³

In the paragraphs below, the present article argues that Azerbaijan, despite its relatively small geographic size, has already established itself as a middle power by being able to effectively fit into the above-mentioned descriptions of middle powers in international relations.

Azerbaijan as a Middle Power and Norm Entrepreneur

In taking a close look at Azerbaijan’s rising international profile and its successful foreign policy, this article argues that the country’s role as a norm entrepreneur has earned it the title of middle power through the global initiatives that the country promotes and the emphasis it puts on values that unite societies, alongside serving as a bridge between often-competing geopolitical spaces.

Energy, Connectivity, Sustainable Development

The country has come a long way to becoming a regional leader through the many energy and infrastructure projects that it is implementing together with its international partners, for example, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines, and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) megaproject, which became operational in 2020. With the commissioning of the SGC, which spans seven

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.212-213

¹³ Holbaard, *op.cit.*, p.59.

Amid the Russia–Ukraine war and limitations on the use of the North–South Corridor, the significance of, and throughput via, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor, has further increased, thereby placing Azerbaijan at the heart of Eurasian connectivity.

countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy – Azerbaijan laid the foundation not only for mutually beneficial energy partnerships across the continent but also contributed to building trust and international cooperation, which deliver multiple benefits to these nations while also having contributed to greater energy security.

It has taken considerable work, cooperation, and coordination of efforts by Azerbaijan and its international partners to build this format of trustful cooperation. The SGC was built to be an expandable diversification infrastructure, with the existing capacity in the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline (TAP) capable of being increased as required. Work is under way for TANAP to be expanded to 31 bcm/yr transmission capacity, while TAP’s throughput could be doubled to 20 bcm/yr.¹⁴ Azerbaijani gas is also reaching new markets, such as the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. In the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war and the ensuing energy crisis in Europe, Azerbaijan stepped in to play a greater role in assuring Europe’s energy security with the signing of a memorandum of understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy with the EU in July 2022 for doubling gas exports to 20 bcm/yr by 2027.¹⁵

Moreover, the increasing importance of global connectivity projects has further solidified Azerbaijan’s central place therein. Amid the Russia–Ukraine war and limitations on the use of the North–South Corridor, the significance of, and throughput via, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor, has further increased, thereby placing Azerbaijan at the heart of Eurasian connectivity. The restoration and rebuilding work in the Garabagh region in the aftermath of the Second Garabagh War (2020),¹⁶ which includes new transportation projects, could further enhance the capacity of the Middle Corridor, and this could be further enhanced with the possible opening of the Zangezur Corridor through Armenia’s southern region to connect with

¹⁴ See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Second Garabagh War will be described later in the article.

Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.¹⁷ Azerbaijan's role as a crossroads between two continents and in fostering cooperation and connectivity between two geographic spaces has thus increased exponentially.

However, these projects are not merely profit-oriented; they also aim to contribute to the energy security, greater interdependence, infrastructure development, and stability of the region and wider neighbourhood, including Europe. Security means stability; stability and profit facilitate sustainable development, common benefits that Azerbaijan is fostering together with its international partners.

Renewable Energy: COP29

Azerbaijan, in addition to remaining an oil-rich country where the first oil well was drilled, using an industrial technique, in 1846, is assertively diversifying its energy mix and contributing to the decarbonization efforts of the European continent by exporting clean energy and increasing the share of its green energy. Supporting clean and green energy and contributing to global climate objectives has thus become a very significant element of Azerbaijan's energy strategy.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has also made great strides in terms of increasing the share of renewable energy in its energy mix, thereby contributing to climate action and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This reflects Azerbaijan's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2050, demonstrating the country's strong alignment with global climate objectives.¹⁸ Despite having oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan has embarked on the process of going

17 Article 9 of the Trilateral Statement clearly states that: “*All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia*” in President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: January 25, 2024). This new connectivity line, quickly dubbed the ‘Zangezur Corridor’, aims to facilitate ‘unimpeded’ movement in both directions and finally end Armenia’s decades-long isolation from all regional infrastructure and connectivity projects.

18 *Ibid.*

clean, which is accompanied by a process of going green. The country's offshore wind potential is estimated at about 157 GW, onshore wind and solar at 27 GW, and up to 10 GW of wind and solar in the territories liberated following the Second Garabagh War.¹⁹

The government aims to hit a target of 30% renewable energy in Azerbaijan's energy mix by 2030.²⁰ However, recent developments in Azerbaijan's renewable energy sector promise to boost this through the utilization of wind and solar energy. Agreements have been reached with Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power and the United Arab Emirates' Masdar on the construction of a 240-MW wind and a 230-MW solar power plant in Khizi-Absheron and Absheron-Baku respectively, a total of 470 MW. Another project set to be implemented in the liberated Jabrayil district will supply 240 MW. This makes a total of 710 MW of renewable energy in wind and solar. These facilities are expected to help free up millions of cubic meters of natural gas for export.²¹

The ground-breaking ceremony for the wind power plant to be built by ACWA Power took place in January 2022. Similarly, on 26 October 2023, the official inauguration of the 230-MW Garadagh Solar Power Plant, built by Masdar, also took place. Three investment agreements were also signed on this day, and Azerbaijan is working in phases towards producing up to 10 GW of renewables.²²

Moreover, Azerbaijan and its partners have already taken active steps towards building new partnerships based on renewable energy export. The initiation of the Caspian–EU energy corridor through building new interconnectivity projects, such as the “Green Energy Corridor” that includes, among other projects, integrated transmission production and consumption facilities, and the Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable,

19 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 9th Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting and 1st Green Energy Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting*, February 3, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58967> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

20 See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

21 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 9th Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting and 1st Green Energy Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting*, February 3, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58967> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

22 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Official Opening Ceremony of the 230 Garadagh Solar Power Plant*, October 26, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62005> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

is remarkable. Initially, the feasibility study for this project, which unites Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania, is preparing for about 4 GW of renewables.²³ However, there is a lot of potential for this project to reach a larger geography in Europe as well as transporting greater volumes, thereby making an even greater contribution to the energy security of and energy transition in Europe, and also its climate objectives.

Azerbaijan's plans for green energy were also approved through an Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan of 2 February 2021, titled "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development," which lists "clean environment and green growth" among five national priorities for the coming decade.²⁴ This, in turn, is expected to facilitate the application of environmentally friendly 'green' technologies and increase the share of renewable energy in the energy mix of the country. In addition, on 31 May 2021, a law "On the Use of Renewable Energy Sources in Electricity Production" was adopted.²⁵

Azerbaijan's success towards the energy transition and renewable energy, as well as efforts directed at meeting climate objectives, were recently globally acclaimed when, during the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) that took place in early December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan was granted the privilege of hosting COP29, which will take place on 11–24 November 2024 in Baku.²⁶ Moreover, by decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the year 2024 has been declared the "Year of Solidarity for [a] Green World" in Azerbaijan, with the objective "to enhance international solidarity in the global effort against climate change".²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ President.az, *Order of the President of Azerbaijan on Approval of "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development"*, February 2, 2021, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

²⁵ See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

²⁶ United Nations Climate Change, "COP28 Agreement Signals "Beginning of the End" of the Fossil Fuel Era", December 13, 2023, Available at: <https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era> (Accessed: January 7, 2024)

²⁷ Interfax, *President Aliyev declares 2024 as Green World Solidarity Year in Azerbaijan*, December 25, 2023, Available at: <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/97957/> (Accessed: January 7, 2024)

As the paragraphs above have demonstrated, the commitment to green energy, climate goals, and taking strong actions to this end fit well with Azerbaijan's role as a norm entrepreneur and middle power.

Multiculturalism and Multilateralism

Azerbaijan has long made the promotion of tolerance and multiculturalism one of its central platforms in international affairs. Specifically, there is an established International Center on Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan that implements the state's initiatives and vision in this area, and Azerbaijan declared 2016 the Year of Multiculturalism. It is a multiethnic and multi-confessional state where national minorities and freedom of religious belief are respected. Tolerance is therefore endemic to Azerbaijani society.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's emphasis on multilateralism is important. Its belief in the power of international institutions and increasing weight in international affairs elevated it to the status of non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2012–2013. One hallmark initiative promoted by Azerbaijan was the conduct of a high-level, open debate on “Strengthening partnership synergy between the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)” during the second term of its presidency of the Security Council in October 2013, which was the first ever high-level debate in the Council on this topic.

Azerbaijan has long made the promotion of tolerance and multiculturalism one of its central platforms in international affairs.

Further, it was Azerbaijan that initiated the creation of what has now become the driving force behind international efforts to stabilize the global oil market: OPEC+. The establishment of this united format of OPEC and non-OPEC countries amid fluctuating oil prices to tackle the challenges in the global oil market stems from the idea that Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev proposed during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2016.²⁸ He stated that “it would be nice if the main OPEC and non-OPEC countries could come together and agree with

28 Mammadov, V. “Escape Window: How Does Azerbaijani President's OPEC+ Model Justify Itself?”, *AzTV*, January 30, 2024, Available at: <http://www.aztv.az/en/news/4819/escape-window-how-does-azerbaijani-presidents-opec-model-justify-itself-markcommentmark> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

each other.”²⁹ Azerbaijan’s appeal to the concerned oil-producing countries found widespread support among them, so OPEC+ came into being and has since been acting at the forefront of all developments associated with the global oil market.

Azerbaijan’s emphasis on international cooperation, and the importance it attaches to the role of international organizations, in this case, paid off well for the common objectives of the oil-producing states and achieved balance in the global oil market. This fact also testifies to the fact that the country has acted as a middle power and norm entrepreneur that both “advocated for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms”³⁰ and worked to provide “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states”³¹ and as a notable supporter of international organizations, thereby showcasing a particularly high sense of responsibility.

Azerbaijan’s emphasis on international cooperation, and the importance it attaches to the role of international organizations, in this case, paid off well for the common objectives of the oil-producing states and achieved balance in the global oil market.

Chairmanship in the Non-Aligned Movement and other global initiatives

Commitment by Azerbaijan to multilateralism is further manifested in the most recent initiatives taken to bring together countries of diverse as well as similar faiths, identities, and interests. The country also acquired a valuable chance to assert itself as a middle power and a norm entrepreneur through its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the second-largest global entity after the UN with 120 members, from 2019 to 2022, as well as of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS),³² GUAM, and TRACECA in 2020. Due to the success of its NAM Chairmanship, Azerbaijan’s tenure was extended to cover the year 2023. The 7th Summit of the Turkic-speaking States and

29 APA News Agency, *President Ilham Aliyev attended Energy Security round table as part of Munich Security Conference*, February 15, 2020, Available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-news/President-Ilham-Aliyev-attended-Energy-Security-round-table-as-part-of-Munich-Security-Conference-coloredUPDATEDcolor-312830> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

30 Breuning, *op.cit.*, p.150

31 *Ibid.*

32 Turkic Council at a time.

the 18th Summit of the heads of state and governments of the member countries of the NAM were held under Azerbaijani chairmanship in October 2019, and the 2nd Summit of World Religious Leaders was held in Baku in November 2019. Later, on March 2, 2023, the summit-level Meeting of the NAM Contact Group in response to COVID-19 on post-pandemic global recovery was also held in Baku.³³

Among many achievements of the NAM, its institutionalization through various mechanisms also stands out. The establishment of the NAM Parliamentary Network and Youth Organization in 2021 and 2022 respectively, as well as an initiative on the establishment of the NAM Women Platform and NAM Contact Group on humanitarian demining, are important milestones in this regard.³⁴

Azerbaijan's initiatives with the OTS and NAM were also remarkable during the new reality induced by COVID-19.

By possessing the central role in these organizations, making its voice heard through such versatile institutions, and once again focusing on issues of global importance such as those related to religious tolerance, multiculturalism, tolerance, interfaith dialogue, interstate cooperation, youth movement, women's empowerment, and sustainable development, Azerbaijan has further explored opportunities to act as a norm entrepreneur and middle power.

Azerbaijan's initiatives with the OTS and NAM were also remarkable during the new reality induced by COVID-19. Online special meetings of the two organizations were convened in April³⁵ and May³⁶ 2020 respectively that focused specifically on global efforts to deal with the consequences of the pandemic and sought to agree more specific, united

33 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Attends NAM Contact Group on Fight Against COVID-19*, March 2, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/59074> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

34 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Participated in Ministerial Meeting of NAM Coordinating Bureau*, July 5, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60366> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

35 Huseynov, V. "Azerbaijan Hopes to Minimize Ramifications of Coronavirus Crisis", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; The Jamestown Foundation, Volume: 17 Issue: 52, April 16, 2020, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-hopes-to-minimize-ramifications-of-coronavirus-crisis/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

36 Jafarova, E. "Non-Aligned Movement is United Against COVID-19", *EURACTIV*, May 5, 2020, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/non-aligned-movement-is-united-against-covid-19/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

actions to alleviate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the member states of the two organizations. A focus on unity, multilateralism, international cooperation, and commitment to common objectives was the crux of those meetings. It was repeatedly underscored that only through effective multilateralism and consistent adherence to the common values that unite all the affected states would they be able to overcome these challenges.

Azerbaijan also acted as a norm entrepreneur and middle power as it repeatedly stood for sustainable development, having allocated about US\$10 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support its efforts concerning COVID-19, especially to help needy populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Azerbaijan also extended humanitarian and financial assistance to over 80 countries bilaterally and through the WHO.³⁷

In line with its broader foreign policy objectives, Azerbaijan also vowed to promote multilateralism, international cooperation, and solidarity within the NAM during its 2019–2023 chairmanship. Among the important outcomes of the above-mentioned online NAM summit on May 4, 2020, one gained particular traction: the idea proposed by President Ilham Aliyev that NAM countries could initiate convening a special online session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19 at the level of Heads of States and Governments.³⁸ This initiative voiced the innate belief of many that more should be done by international organizations to stave off the repercussions of COVID-19 and unite global efforts through fostering greater cooperation and multilateralism, as opposed to pursuing isolationist and national agendas in the face of the calamity.

In line with its broader foreign policy objectives, Azerbaijan also vowed to promote multilateralism, international cooperation, and solidarity within the NAM during its 2019–2023 chairmanship.

Owing to this confidence and trust in Azerbaijan's initiative by the NAM countries and the greater UN community, the proposal for convening the special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19 was supported by more than two-thirds of UN Member

37 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Participated in Ministerial Meeting of NAM Coordinating Bureau*, July 5, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60366> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

38 Jafarova, *op.cit.*

States, 130 in total.³⁹ Only 30 UN General Assembly special sessions had taken place before that, as these are different from regular plenary sessions. However, while COVID-19 continued to pose an unseen challenge to our existence in the habitual system of international relations, discussions about the modalities of this special session started in July 2020 and it took place on December 3, 2020. Once again, Azerbaijan, as an ardent believer in the power of international institutions, cooperation, and solidarity, stood up to its role as a *norm entrepreneur* by initiating and summoning this special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19. Every effort matters, but one country is insufficient to cope with such a crisis if its efforts are not multiplied by the like-minded. Azerbaijan's efforts to achieve global solidarity were supported first within the NAM and later by the rest of the UN community, and the message delivered through this special UN General Assembly session related, first and foremost, to the message of solace – that we are not alone in times of trial.

Among other initiatives proposed by Azerbaijan, particular emphasis should be given to the work done on the topic of decolonization that was rightfully put forth by the country. Azerbaijan, as a norm entrepreneur, also assumed the role of a defender of those nations that are still under modern colonial domination. To defend the rights of suppressed people against the manifestations of colonialism and neocolonialism across the world, Azerbaijan announced the establishment of the Baku Initiative Group on July 6, 2023, within the framework of the ministerial meeting of the Coordination Bureau of the NAM.⁴⁰ Oppression of populations under colonial domination is at cross purposes with the existing norms and principles of international and human rights law, and Azerbaijan stands ready to flag the issue for the protection of human rights and the fight against injustice.

39 Hajiyev, H., "More than 130 countries of the world supported President Ilham Aliyev's initiative to hold a special session of the UN General Assembly" (translation from Azerbaijani), AZƏRTAC, June 27, 2020, Available at: https://azertag.az/xeber/Hikmet_Haciyev_Dunyanin_130_dan_chox_dovleti_Prezident_Ilham_Aliyevin_BMT_Bas_Assambleyasinin_xususi_sessiyasinin_kechirilmesi_tesebbusunu_destekledi-1523401 (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

40 See the official website of the Baku Initiative Group, <https://www.bakuinitiative.com/#about-us>

Restoration of Azerbaijan's Territorial Integrity and its Rising Middle Power Status

A state's middle-power status is often defined not by its military might alone, however, a critical review of the concept of a middle power underscores the role of many sources of power, including military, in middle-power politics, revealing that a middle power is a state actor that has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it.⁴¹

Moreover, other sources also argue that, besides a state's leadership capabilities and rising influence in international politics, its military strength may also be a factor in defining a particular state as a middle power.⁴² Although being a middle power means a lot more than being in mere possession of strong military assets, some authors claim that the latter plays a role in consolidating a state's middle-power status.

Building on Holbraad's work, other scholars concur that one can define middle powers by a quantitative assessment of their GDP, population, military expenditure, trade, and similar material factors. It is argued in this regard that "although not as powerful as major powers, middle powers can be treated as secondary states whose possession of material capabilities can, to some degree, influence the international system through their active engagement in global governance."⁴³

As argued above, Holbraad also speaks of the role of military capabilities in middle-power politics, albeit he does not prioritize the role of the military in deciding a state's middle-power status. To repeat the previous assumption from his work: "middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of

41 Min-Shin, D. "A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power", *E-International Relations*, December 4, 2015, Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/60016> (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

42 Muftuler Bac, M. "Middle Power Politics", Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/middle-power> (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

43 Faisal Karim, M. "Middle power, status-seeking and role conceptions: The cases of Indonesia and South Korea," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2018.1443428, p.3.

The Second Garabagh War (or 44-day war) that unfolded in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict between September 27 and November 10, 2020, demonstrated Azerbaijan’s military prowess.

international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than great powers and more responsible than small states.”⁴⁴

In this sense, and building on the above assertions, Azerbaijan indeed boasts strong military capabilities, and its armed forces score high in the leading military indices.⁴⁵ The Second Garabagh War (or 44-day war) that unfolded in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict⁴⁶

between September 27 and November 10, 2020, demonstrated Azerbaijan’s military prowess. Azerbaijan substantiated the legitimacy of its counteroffensive according to its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter – fighting a foreign threat within its internationally recognized territories. From the outset of the 44-day-long war, Azerbaijan’s military superiority was clear. International military experts often refer to this as a “fifth-generation war” owing to the widespread use of military drones by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani armed forces managed to liberate over 300 population centres, cities, villages, and strategic heights.

As a result of Azerbaijan’s military gains, Armenia capitulated. On November 10, a trilateral statement was signed by the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The statement, which reflected

⁴⁴ Holbaard, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Global Firepower, “Azerbaijan Military Strength, 2020”, Available at: https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=azerbaijan (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

⁴⁶ The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out with armed military aggression by the Republic of Armenia against Azerbaijan and the latter lost twenty per cent of its internationally recognized territories to the former in the course of the first Garabagh War (1988–1994). It should be remembered that Armenia continued to occupy the [former] Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan for about three decades in blatant disregard to the norms and principles of international law, including the four UN Security Council Resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) that, in 1993, demanded an immediate, unconditional, and full withdrawal of all occupying forces from the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. The negotiations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that started in the early 1990s under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group were unsuccessful, owing to the maximalist and unconstructive position of Armenia, which refused to liberate Azerbaijan’s occupied territories and feigned engagement in the peace talks. During these years, Armenia many times violated the ceasefire that was in place since 1994 and, on September 27, 2020, launched a massive attack against Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan responded by undertaking a counteroffensive that lasted for 44 days from September 27 to November 10.

Armenia's practically complete capitulation, obliged Armenia to return to Azerbaijan all remaining occupied territories. Furthermore, on September 19–20, 2023, Azerbaijan embarked on local counterterrorism measures in the parts of its Garabagh region where tens of thousands of illegal armed formations of Armenia remained, thus finally dismantling the illegal separatist entity in this region.⁴⁷

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Garabagh War in 2020 and the restoration of its territorial integrity following the September 2023 counter-terrorism measures also showed that, in line with the above critical review on middle powers, the country is capable of defending its "own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it".⁴⁸

Azerbaijan's Middle Power Role in Reducing Tensions among Great Powers

Another distinctive feature of a middle power, as defined in Holbaard's work, cited above, is "reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers". Azerbaijan has hosted several consecutive meetings between Russia and its Western partners. The first⁴⁹ took place in April 2018 between Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation General, and then NATO Supreme Allied Commander Curtis Scaparrotti, who met in Azerbaijan to discuss the situation in Syria, while the second⁵⁰ occurred in December of the same year

This practice continued in 2019 with a meeting in July in Baku between Russia's Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, and then NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Tod Wolters. The

47 Daily Sabah, *Separatists in Azerbaijan's Karabakh dismantle their illegal regime*, September 28, 2023, Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/separatists-in-azerbajians-karabakh-dismantle-their-illegal-regime/news> (Accessed: December 29, 2023)

48 Min-Shin, *op.cit.*

49 Gotev, G. "Top Russian, NATO generals choose Baku for talks on preventing military incidents", *EURACTIV*, April 19, 2018, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/top-russian-nato-generals-choose-baku-for-talks-on-preventing-military-incidents/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

50 Gotev, G., "NATO: Baku is 'perfect venue' for talking to Russia", *Euractiv*, December 16, 2018, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-baku-is-perfect-venue-for-talking-to-russia/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

parties discussed issues including “European and global security, ways to prevent incidents between Russia and NATO and the prospects for resuming dialogue between military experts.” They also deliberated topics relating to the fight against terrorism and maritime piracy, alongside focusing on the situations in Afghanistan and Syria.⁵¹ In November 2019, a meeting was held in Baku between Valery Gerasimov and then Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach. In February 2020, another meeting of Valery Gerasimov and Tod Wolters took place in Baku.⁵²

The choice of Baku for such meetings between Russia and NATO officials is not coincidental, as Baku is increasingly proving itself as a geographic venue capable of accommodating diverse and often competing interests between different geopolitical spaces, thus once again hewing to the definitions attested above of the concept of a middle power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are different perspectives in the scholarly literature on what actually constitutes a middle power. The ones chosen for this work have given some description of the concept, sufficient to be utilized as an analytical framework. In an attempt to argue whether Azerbaijan fits into the concept of a middle power, the article has highlighted many initiatives and policies implemented by the country in recent years that have encapsulated the values of cooperation, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, sustainable development, and other norms and principles that attest to Azerbaijan’s high sense of global responsibility and have provided a bridge for dialogue.

As was also argued in the article, all the Azerbaijani initiatives described – certainly not an exhaustive list – demonstrate a strong dedication by the country to continue acting as a norm entrepreneur with a particularly high sense of responsibility. They testify to the fact that the country is a middle power that, as Breuning argues, has both

51 Caucasus Watch, *Meeting between NATO and Russia commanders in Baku*, July 12, 2019, Available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/1816.html> (Accessed: May 15, 2020).

52 Mehdiyev, E. “MP: Russia-NATO meeting in Baku confirms that Azerbaijan perceived as reliable partner”, *Trend News Agency*, November 27, 2019, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3154952.html> (Accessed: May 15, 2020).

“advocated for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states also to adopt these norms” and delivered “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states”. As underscored above, Azerbaijan is a notable supporter of international organizations, international development cooperation, global partnerships, multilateralism, multiculturalism, and other principles that many authors in the field define as among the characteristics of middle powers. By choosing to act as a norm entrepreneur on the global stage, Azerbaijan also stands for the greater good and collective gains.

Objectively, our world would have been a better place had all the above values and initiatives been instilled into the fabric of our societies and foreign policy choices. Widespread acceptance of these values and norms could bring more dialogue, understanding, and peace to the anarchic nature of the international system. Norm entrepreneurs and middle powers are therefore valuable for the premium they place on these and other types of value systems that build, unite, improve, and consolidate our collective home. It seems that Azerbaijan is on the right track, and its ambition to qualify for norm entrepreneur and middle power status should be taken at face value.

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

Damjan Krnjević Mišković*

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.



* **Damjan Krnjević Mišković**, a former senior Serbian and UN policymaker, is Professor of Practice at ADA University; Director for Policy Research, Analysis, and Publications at its Institute for Development and Diplomacy; and Co-Editor of the quarterly journal *Baku Dialogues* (www.bakudialogues.ada.edu.az).

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. Waever, *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 Aydıntaşbaş et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 6, 7, 9.

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

42 Aydıntaşbaş 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’: Heralding 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 Geostrategic 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., Asiryay, 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://digitallibrary.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.sectsco.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 Ilexander 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.

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

Carlos Roa*

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



* **Carlos Roa** is a Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute and an Associate Washington Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. He is also a Contributing Editor at The National Interest, and was formerly the Executive Editor of the publication.

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

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.

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.

'Middle powers' in the post-Soviet space in the context of the necessity for regionalization of international relations

Stanislav Alexandrovich Pritchinn^{*}

In the context of the global transformation of international relations, regional powers, which can be considered as middle power, are gaining increasing influence and importance. In the post-Soviet space, and in particular in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, several countries can be classified in this category. Among them are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. A comparative analysis of these three players shows that Kazakhstan has the largest natural reserves and the largest territory, while Uzbekistan's strengths are its industrial potential and population size. Compared with its neighbors, Azerbaijan, with its smaller geographical size and scale of the economy, has managed to solve a number of important tasks as an independent player, in particular, to implement a number of large infrastructure projects that will realize the country's energy and transit potential, restore its territorial integrity after losing part of its territories in 1994.

Keywords: Middle powers, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, South Caucasus



^{*} **Dr. Stanislav Pritchinn (Ph. D)** is a Senior Research Fellow at the IMEMO (The Institute of World Economy and International Relations) named after E. M. Primakov (Russian Federation)

Introduction

In the conditions of the crisis in international relations caused by the erosion and decline of the influence of international organizations, primarily the UN; the escalation of a complex array of conflicts, including the Russia–West and China–West confrontations; as well as a noticeable crisis of globalization and the demand for an alternative to the dominant Western global financial world system, there is a requirement for a serious attempt at the regionalization of international and economic relations. Such a transformation requires significant political and economic strengthening of regional players that, by promoting their regional agenda, can ensure the diversification of the existing order of international relations away from the traditional centers of power – the United States, China, the EU, and the Russian Federation – and lead to a real transition to multipolarity. The main role in this transformation will be assigned to actors that have been termed ‘middle powers’. At the same time, such a transformation may be associated with the risk of turbulence and conflict at the global and regional levels.

Researchers have identified several possible scenarios for such a change in the system of international relations. The first is the formation of a new hegemon; the second the restoration of the rule of the collective West, as in the period of the late 1990s to early 2000s; and the third is the rise of the middle powers, and their growing role in global governance.¹

An analysis of the current political and economic situation in the world suggests that the implementation of the first scenario is complicated by the fact that China, as the main contender for the role of the new hegemon, does not yet have the full, necessary range of capabilities and power to become an unambiguously dominant player in the world, capable of forming its own rules of the game in the international arena and imposing them on its partners and opponents. The United States and Western countries still retain control over the global financial market and represent a powerful consolidated force in the economy. Militarily, China ranks below the United States and Russia, despite the growing power of its armed forces.

The second scenario is also unrealizable. The United States and its allies, the European Union, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and Japan, with all their economic power, are unable to form an international system

¹ R.Keohane, *After Hegemony*, (Princeton University Press, 1984).

in which they, by relying on their economic and military levers, could regain the status of a truly dominant player in the world.

Thus, we see that, in the conditions of the impossibility of implementing the first two scenarios in a pure form, there is a gradual diversification of international relations with the formation of regional orders. Researchers also classify different variants of the formation of such orders: the establishment of regional hegemony by a great or middle power, or the strengthening of regional institutions, that is, collective rule.² The regional order is characterized by a common set of rules and practices that the states of the region agree with and that help them achieve common interests. Such an order can be either hierarchical or equal. At the same time, in the regional order, important roles are played both by large players, which seek to dominate, and medium-sized players, which also identify their interests and, by virtue of their capabilities and tools, participate in the formation of interaction conditions and rules of the game within the regional order.³

Turning to the assessment of the characteristics of countries that can be considered as middle powers, it is worth noting that physical criteria are important: geographical size, scale of economy, military power, etc. But we must also consider a number of other parameters that cannot always be unambiguously calculated numerically. There is, for example, the question of political will, the effectiveness of political management, and the strategy of building relations with large and regional players, as well as the ability to achieve their goals in the international arena, where they may be in conflict with other players, even large ones. The assessment can also include as a parameter the ability to initiate and implement large inter-state projects that can change the economic and political regional configuration.

‘Middle powers’ in the post-Soviet space

In the post-Soviet space, three players can be simultaneously considered as potential middle powers. These are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and

2 Lake, D., “Regional Hierarchy: Authority and Local International Order”, *Review of International Studies*, 2009, 35(1), pp. 35-58.

3 Safranchuk, I., Zhornist, V., Nesmashnyi, A., Chernov, D., “The Dilemma of Middlepowermanship in Central Asia: Prospects for Hegemony”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol.20 №3 July-September, August 10, 2022, pp.116-133.

In the post-Soviet space, three players can be simultaneously considered as potential middle powers. These are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan. Each of these countries, according to a number of economic indicators – area and population, military power, and disposition in its subregion – can be designated as a middle power with its own set of characteristics. As part of this article, the current author will conduct a comparative analysis of these three regional players in order to identify, among them, the actor(s) that can really be considered regional middle powers.

All three countries differ from their neighbors in their advantage in population size. Uzbekistan is the largest country by population in Central Asia and, in the coming years, will become second to Russia in the entire post-Soviet space, with a population of 36 million, according to the latest estimate⁴. Kazakhstan, with a population of about 20 million people, ranks second in the region. Azerbaijan is a dominant player in the sub-region of the South Caucasus, its population of 10 million surpassing its combined neighbors – Armenia and Georgia – twice over. Geographically, Kazakhstan is among the 10 countries with the largest areas at 2.7 million square kilometers. In comparison, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have more modest territories of 86,600 and 446,000 square kilometers, respectively.

According to these indicators, then, all three states can be considered as middle powers in their regional context. In economic terms, they are also all leaders in their subregions. Kazakhstan is the leader in Central Asia in terms of nominal and per capita GDP. In 2022, Kazakhstan’s GDP was \$220.623 billion, and the country was ranked 55 in terms of GDP of the 196 economies for which the IMF publishes data⁵ and its GDP per capita was \$11,312. In contrast, the GDP of Uzbekistan was \$80,392 billion in 2022, ranked 73 by the IMF, with a per capita GDP of \$2,326. Uzbekistan is thus noticeably inferior to Kazakhstan in terms of economic indicators, especially per capita GDP, but it demonstrates high development dynamics and ambition for economic growth. Therefore, according to economists, the gap between these countries will fall.

Azerbaijan, with a GDP of \$78,721 billion in 2022, was number 74

4 See Worldometers on “Population of Uzbekistan”, Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uzbekistan-population/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

5 See Countryeconomy on “Kazakhstan GDP - Gross Domestic Product” Available at: <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/kazakhstan?year=2022> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

in the IMF ranking. With a GDP per capita of \$7,773 in that year, Azerbaijan is an unambiguous economic leader in the South Caucasus in this regard.⁶

In the matter of economic development, Uzbekistan is somewhat inferior to its neighbors. In order to consolidate the status of an economic middle power, official Tashkent needs to ensure progressive rates of economic development in the coming years, outstripping its neighbors in many ways.

Military capability is an important factor in positioning a state as a middle power. All three countries examined are at a fairly high position in Global Firepower's Military Strength Ranking. Azerbaijan took 57th place, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan 62nd and 63rd places respectively. At the same time, unlike the Central Asian republics, the Azerbaijani army has real, successful combat experience, having won the Second Karabakh War with Armenia in 2020 in difficult geographical terrain. Also, thanks to systematic work, including strengthening its military potential, Azerbaijan managed to fully restore its territorial integrity by establishing sovereignty over its Karabakh region in September 2023, an outcome that is strategically important for the development of the country. Neither Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan have faced such challenges to their security, nor have they had the opportunity to test their armed forces in real combat conditions, especially in conditions of modern, flank warfare with the use of modern models of military equipment. Therefore, the proximity of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Azerbaijan in this rating is significantly hypothetical, and, among the three countries we have chosen to examine, Baku best fits the definition of a middle power in the military context.⁷

Military capability is an important factor in positioning a state as a middle power. All three countries examined are at a fairly high position in Global Firepower's Military Strength Ranking.

An important element of state capacity is the ability to implement large infrastructure projects that are designed to fundamentally change the weight and status of an actor and enable it to realize its geopolitical and export ambitions. In this regard, Azerbaijan is a leader in the post-Soviet space, as a player that fully uses its strengths, that is, an

6 See Countryeconomy on "Azerbaijan GDP - Gross Domestic Product", Available at: <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/azerbaijan> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

7 See Global Firepower Index's 2023 Military Strength Ranking, Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

An important element of state capacity is the ability to implement large infrastructure projects that are designed to fundamentally change the weight and status of an actor and enable it to realize its geopolitical and export ambitions.

advantageous geopolitical position and the availability of natural resources, to maximize its strength in the international arena. Thus, having no independent outlet for its main export product, oil, Baku, with the involvement of interested countries and investors, built the strategically important Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines, and implemented the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), thereby securing Azerbaijan’s status as an important energy partner of the European Union.

At the same time, Baku is systematically increasing its transit potential through the development of its own transport infrastructure and the construction of transport corridors with its neighbors. Thus, in recent years, land and marine (Caspian Sea) transport capacities have been radically updated. The maritime infrastructure allows Azerbaijan to be an important element of the extant North–South Transport Corridor. Moreover, Azerbaijan has completed work on another important transport mode: the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, which makes it possible to provide the shortest access route through the territory of Azerbaijan from the Caspian basin to the markets of Türkiye, Georgia, and on to the EU. With the implementation of projects passing through Armenia that are currently under discussion within the framework of the normalization of bilateral relations, Baku could, in coming years, become a key transport hub for a number of major Eurasian infrastructure projects: the Russian–Iranian North–South route; the Chinese One Belt, One Road initiative; and the Turkish regional Middle Corridor.

In contrast, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan’s historical record of independent implementation of strategically important megaprojects is not comparable to that of Azerbaijan. Thus, Kazakhstan has been unable to implement the strategically important Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, which would reduce its dependence on Russia for the export of oil and other goods, and at least partially realize the huge transit potential of Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan has not yet been able to implement any of the major infrastructure projects, with the participation of its neighbors, that have been announced. As a result, the prospects for Tashkent’s main project, the construction of a transport corridor that would link Central and South Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan, remain vague.

Serious progress has not yet been observed in other major transport projects in which Uzbekistan is vitally interested, in particular the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. Although the preparation of a feasibility study for this project has already begun, the main question remains, who will finance the longest part of the 280-km long railway through Kyrgyzstan, and on what terms? Bishkek is not ready to take out new loans in conditions of high external debt, and China and Uzbekistan are also not yet ready to take on the costs of building an expensive infrastructure project.

In terms of energy, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, unlike Azerbaijan, are in an energy crisis. Thus, according to the estimates of the Ministry of Energy of Kazakhstan, the republic will have a shortage of electricity, with a peak deficit of 5.5 billion kWh/y, until at least 2029. According to a report of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, of 37 combined heat and power plants operating in the country, only 7 stations were registered as being in the so-called ‘green zone’, which means that the level of equipment wear is acceptable and does not carry risks for electricity and heat generation. Of the rest, 11 thermal power plants were registered as ‘yellow zone,’ with moderate wear, and 19 as high-risk ‘red.’ So, in general, the average wear of equipment in Kazakhstan is 66%, and wear at a number of thermal power plants in the country, in particular in Uralsk, Stepnogorsk, Taraz, Kyzylorda, and Kentau, exceeds the critical level of 80%.⁸

In Uzbekistan, over the six years from 2016 to 2022, electricity consumption by the population increased by 40%. The domestic share in the total structure of electricity consumption increased from 26.4% in 2016 to 28.9% in 2022. Demand for electricity from the population is expected to grow by 5–5.3% annually until 2035. According to the same study, taking into account only growing domestic demand for electricity, Uzbekistan needs to increase its power generation capacity by 70–80% of the existing level by 2035, and this does not take into account the country’s ambitious plans for economic development.

According to the head of state, at the time of the most acute energy crisis in Uzbekistan in January 2023, there was an electricity shortage

8 Kun.uz, *Until 2035, the demand of Uzbek citizens for electricity will grow annually by 5-5.3%*, January 31, 2023, Available at: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/01/31/do-2035-goda-spros-uzbekistansev-na-elektroenergiyu-budet-rasti-yejyegodno-na-5-53> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

of 3.1 billion kWh, including 1.1 billion kWh in the regions of the Fergana Valley (Andijan region: 384 MWh; Namangan: 288 MWh; Ferghana: 441 MWh).⁹

Against this background, Azerbaijan has not only fully provided itself with electricity through the modernization of existing gas-fired power plants, but is also implementing a large-scale project to organize the export of electricity to the EU.

Conclusions

Summing up, our research reveals that, according to the totality of the analysis of various factors and characteristics among the three potential players that could be considered middle powers, in many respects only Azerbaijan meets the requirements for this status. Although having a smaller land area and population compared to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan nevertheless managed to build a more effective foreign policy that, by the 32nd anniversary of its independence, allowed the country to restore its territorial integrity, build a system of balanced relations with major regional and extra-regional players, and develop a system of large inter-state infrastructure projects that are key to the country's long-term influence and economic growth.

⁹ Kun.uz, *By 2030, electricity consumption in Uzbekistan will amount to 120.8 billion kWh*, Available at: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/01/28/k-2030-godu-potrebleniye-elektroenergii-v-uzbekistane-sostavit-1208-mlrd-kvtch> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

To bother or not to bother with the middle power concept? The case of Türkiye

Daria Isachenko*

The current transformation of the world order has led to a renewed interest in the role of states that do not fall into the category of great powers, but whose foreign policy choices nevertheless matter. These are discussed under the heading of ‘middle powers’, and also referred to as ‘global swing states’. The role of such states appears to be crucial, but in what way precisely remains unclear. A review of the middle power debate suggests that much of the ambiguity of the concept has to do with the desire to offer a solution without agreeing on what the problem is. Using the case of Türkiye, this article argues that, in order to understand the foreign policy choices of states that matter, it is helpful to look at how they themselves perceive their place and role in the international arena. The article thus seeks to contrast the concept of a middle power with the concept of a central country, as developed in official Ankara’s foreign policy discourse. The analysis shows that one of the key limits of the middle power concept lies in its statism, whereas a focus on the self-understanding of actors would provide a dynamic view of their foreign policy preferences, highlighting the impact of regional developments and systemic transformation.

Keywords: Türkiye, Middle Power, Global Swing States, International Order



* **Dr. Daria Isachenko** is an Associate at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International Security Affairs (Berlin, Germany).

Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine has polarised the world, with the escalating confrontation between Russia and the West framed along the lines of “you are either with us or against us”. However, the global response to the war has not lived up to this expectation. The reluctance of many states to take sides has already led to a rethinking of the usual division between “the West and the rest”.¹ In addition, the systemic rivalry between the United States and China adds another layer to the need to understand likely and unlikely changes in alignments. In particular, the role of middle powers has received increasing attention, especially in regions that are no longer seen as just ‘the rest’, but as the Global South, and ‘fence sitters’ are now suddenly treated as ‘global swing states’ whose foreign policy choices can influence the ongoing transformation of the world order.²

It is questionable, however, to what extent the middle power concept can advance our understanding of those states that matter more than small states, but still less than great powers. A review of the middle power debate suggests that much of the ambiguity surrounding the concept has to do with the desire to offer a solution without agreeing on what the problem is. Using the case of Türkiye, this article argues that, in order to understand the foreign policy choices of middle powers, it is helpful to look at how they themselves perceive their place and

1 Fry, R., “The West and the Rest: Where Did It All Go Wrong?”, *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, August 22, 2022, Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/west-and-rest-where-did-it-all-go-wrong>; Karaganov, S., “Ot Ne-Zapada K Mirovomu Bol’shinstvu (From Non-West to World Majority)”, *Russia in Global Affairs* 20, no. 5 (2022): 6–18, September 1, 2022, Available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>; Öniş, Z., “The West Versus the Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis of the “Post-Western” Order”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, no. 4 (2023): 33–52, March 1, 2023, Available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1179/the-west-versus-the-rest-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-crisis-of-the-post-western-order> (All the sources accessed: September 30, 2023)

2 Kupchan, C., “6 Swing States Will Decide the Future of Geopolitics: These Middle Powers of the Global South Should Be the Focus of the U.S. Policy”, *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2023, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/06/geopolitics-global-south-middle-powers-swing-states-india-brazil-turkey-indonesia-saudi-arabia-south-africa/>; Conley, H., et al. “Alliances in a Shifting Global Order: Rethinking Transatlantic Engagement with Global Swing States”, *German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/alliances-shifting-global-order-rethinking-transatlantic-engagement-global-swing-states> (All the sources accessed: September 30, 2023)

role in the international arena. As a conceptual framework, such a perspective draws on the Weberian idea of ‘subjectively intended meaning’ (*subjektiv gemeinter Sinn*), whereby a social action needs to be contextualised in reference to “that meaning in terms of which a real, ‘concrete’ individual understands his or her own action.”³ The current article thus seeks to contrast the concept of a middle power with the concept of a central country, as developed in official Ankara’s foreign policy discourse. It shows that one of the key limits of the middle power concept lies in its statism, whereas the focus on the self-understanding of actors accounts for a dynamic view of their foreign policy preferences, highlighting the impact of regional developments and systemic transformation.

What is at stake in the middle power debate?

The debate on middle powers revolves around the key issues of international relations, such as power, hierarchy, status, and agency. However, the concept itself is notorious for its lack of clarity and definition.⁴ A loose understanding has emerged that views middle powers as having “a certain degree of heft – in economic, geographic, demographic or military terms,” whereby “some relatively small states can vault into the category as a function of their international activism and influence.”⁵ It is precisely their activism that seems to give rise to the challenge that the middle powers, by virtue of their ambitions and perceived willingness to take risks, may eventually pose. Such states are, thus, equally likely to either “contribute to stability by providing additional sources of balance and diplomacy” or “exacerbate other

3 Rosenberg, M., “Generally Intended Meaning, the ‘Average’ Actor, and Max Weber’s Interpretive Sociology”, *Max Weber Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 39–63.

4 Robertson, J. “Middle-Power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355–70; Chapnick, A., “The Middle Power”, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (1999): 73–82; Jordaan, E., “The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing Between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers”, *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–81; Cooper, D. “Somewhere Between Great and Small: Disentangling the Conceptual Jumble of Middle, Regional, and Niche Powers”, *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2013): 23–35.

5 Sweijts, T. and Mazarr, M., “Mind the Middle Powers”, *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2023, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2023/04/mind-the-middle-powers/> (Accessed: September 30, 2023)

The concept of a middle power, in its current usage, has its origins in the post-1945 world order.

rising instabilities of the international system.”⁶ At issue is thus the question of how predictable, and how reliable, middle powers are.

The concept of a middle power, in its current usage, has its origins in the post-1945 world order. It is therefore important to look at its underlying assumptions, and more specifically at the context, and the problems it was used to address at the time. The driving forces behind the promotion of the middle power idea at that time were the policymakers of Canada and Australia, as they were seeking a fitting place and striving to “contribute to international, multilateral forums to address common problems.”⁷ The concept was eventually captured by a normatively functional idea, with Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr pointing out “that middle powers are *International* in focus, *Multilateral* in method, and *Good Citizens* in conduct.”⁸ The authors argue that such a view does not reflect the fundamental changes in today’s international environment, and the concept itself is therefore no longer relevant.⁹

In an attempt to rescue the middle power concept and adapt it to contemporary realities, other scholars have focused on the importance of the regional dimension. In their recent study “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World”, Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky suggest that middle powers are characterised by “1) enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness, 2) considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors, 3) historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, 4) the regionally-focused, limited extent of their ambitions – they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near-abroad matching their historical range and scope.”¹⁰ Given the diversity of states that fall into the category of middle powers, the authors suggest distinguishing between “status quo middle powers”, such as Japan and Germany, and “revisionist middle powers”, such as Türkiye and Iran. The regional focus is indeed useful

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Robertson, J. and Carr, A. “Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization”, *International Theory* (2023): 1–25.

⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Moeini, A., Mott, C., Paikin, Z., and Polansky, D., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World”, White Paper, *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

for understanding the foreign policy choices of states such as Türkiye. But the suggested framework is not without its shortcomings.

First, as encompassing as it aspires to be, this conception is not dynamic enough and lacks explanatory power to account for changes. As the authors themselves point out, “Ankara’s geopolitical moves in recent years show how easy it can be for a middle power to pivot from status quo to revisionist as well as to change the direction of its strategic focus.”¹¹ However, it remains unclear how to explain this shift and, more importantly, how strategic it actually is. Second, although Ankara’s foreign policy is indeed based on regionalised thinking, the idea of a regional security complex, which is the basis of the adjusted concept, does not fully take into account Türkiye’s geographical position, as it straddles several regions.¹² By implication, this leaves out the question of how developments in one region are likely to affect Türkiye’s policies in other regional neighbourhoods.¹³ In short, the proposed concept provides a descriptive and a static account of Turkish foreign policy, but does not fully explain Türkiye’s foreign policy choices and whether these choices are situational or structural in nature. A similar tendency can be observed in academic research on Türkiye as a middle power, where Türkiye’s seeming incompatibility with the concept is adjusted with appropriate adjectives such as, to name a few, modified, emerging, or second-generation middle power.¹⁴

11 *Ibid*, p. 22.

12 Kardaş, Ş., “Turkey: A Regional Power Facing a Changing International System”, *Turkish Studies* 14, no. 4 (2013): 637–60.

13 How Turkey’s policy in the Black Sea region has been affected by the developments in the Middle East see, among others, Kınıklıoğlu, S., “Turkey’s Black Sea Policy: Strategic Interplay at a Critical Junction”, in R.D. Asmus (ed), *Next Steps in Forging a Euroatlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea*, 55–64 (Washington, DC, The German Marshall Fund, 2006); On the connections between the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean see, among others, Dalay, G., “Turkey’s Middle East Reset: A Precursor for Re-Escalation?”, Policy Paper, *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, August 9, 2022, Available at: <https://mecouncil.org/publication/turkeys-middle-east-reset-a-precursor-for-re-escalation/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

14 Sandal, N., “Middle Powerhood as a Legitimation Strategy in the Developing World: The Cases of Brazil and Turkey”, *International Politics* 51, no. 6 (2014): 693–708; Öniş, Z., and Kutlay, M. “The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2017): 164–83; Altunışık, M. “The Trajectory of a Modified Middle Power: An Attempt to Make Sense of Turkey’s Foreign Policy in Its Centennial”, *Turkish Studies*, 2022, 1–15; Sucu, A.E., Safranchuk, I., Nesmashnyi, A., and Iskandarov, Q., “Transformation of Middle Powers with the Decline of World Hegemony: The Case

Changes and continuities in Ankara's quest for agency

If the debate on middle powers is about how to understand their foreign policy choices and whether middle powers are likely to change their strategic orientation, this paper argues it is necessary to look at how a particular state itself perceives its role, be it in its regional neighbourhood or in the international arena. In the case of Türkiye, it is helpful to examine the idea of a 'central country' (*merkez ülke*), as elaborated by Turkish academic and politician, Ahmet Davutoğlu. The concept of a central country provides important insights into the question of how the quest for agency manifests itself in the case of Türkiye, as well as the contextual interplay of regional dynamics and systemic transformation that informs Ankara's aspiration for autonomous action.

From Davutoğlu's doctrine of strategic depth, the idea of zero problems with zero neighbours has gained the most prominence. In contrast, his concept of a central country has received far less attention, but, as this paper suggests, has considerable explanatory potential for understanding Türkiye's foreign-policy moves and agency manifestation. What makes Türkiye a central country is, in the words of Davutoğlu, its multi-regional geographic location: "As a major country in the midst of the Afro-Eurasia landmass, Türkiye is a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one, unified category. In terms of its sphere of influence, Türkiye is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country all at the same time."¹⁵ What Davutoğlu was addressing with this assertively ambitious definition of Türkiye was a reassessment of Ankara's self-perception of its role, in particular in relation to the West. In other words, it expressed dissatisfaction with the perception of Türkiye's role as a 'bridge' between East and West, which was too narrow, because it limited Ankara's agency.¹⁶

Indeed, Türkiye has played many roles in its relations with the West.

of Turkey", *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 4 (2021): 307–20; Oğuzlu, H.T., "Turkey as a Restrained Middle Power", *Turkish Studies*, 2023, 1–18.

15 Davutoğlu, A., "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 77–96 (77).

16 Erşen, E., and Çelikpala, M., "Turkey and the Changing Energy Geopolitics of Eurasia", *Energy Policy* 128 (2019): 584–92; Yanık, L., "The Making of Turkish Exceptionalism: The West, the Rest and Unreconciled Issues from the Past", *Turkish Studies* 24, 3-4 (2023): 640–57.

During the Cold War, since Ankara joined NATO in 1952, it has been the “last patrol on the southern flank” of the Western alliance.¹⁷ In the 1980s, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, this role became less important and Ankara, as Washington’s ‘forgotten ally’ back then, was to become “a strategic link between Europe and the turbulent Middle East.”¹⁸

After the end of the Cold War, there was uncertainty in Ankara about the future of its relations with the West, especially against the background of its rejected application for membership of the European Economic Community.¹⁹ On the one hand, Türkiye seized the opportunity to create its own ‘unipolar moment’ in the early 1990s by taking the lead in the regional integration project that later became the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.²⁰ On the other hand, Ankara also played along with other roles conceived by its Western allies after the end of the Cold War.

In the early 1990s, the Western media extensively reported about and celebrated Türkiye as “the ‘epicenter’ of an emerging Turkic world”. Ankara was to serve as a secular and democratic model for Central Asia, as the West was worrying about potential instability and the spread of radical Islam in the region.²¹ In the period 2003–2005, the Turkish model was again useful for the West, this time “to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with democracy.”²² With the developments in the Middle East in 2010–2012, Türkiye was seen as a ‘model’ by both the West and the countries of the region. In its turn Ankara, in the words of

Indeed, Türkiye has played many roles in its relations with the West. During the Cold War, since Ankara joined NATO in 1952, it has been the “last patrol on the southern flank” of the Western alliance.

17 Erhan, Ç., and Sıvış, E., “Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future”, *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 89–116.

18 Rustow, D., *Turkey. America’s Forgotten Ally* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1989), p. 109.

19 Aydın, M., “Geographical Blessing versus Geopolitical Curse: Great Power Security Agendas for the Black Sea Region and a Turkish Alternative”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 271–85.

20 Isachenko, D., “Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Ankara’s Reactions to the War in Ukraine Against the Background of Regional Dynamics and Global Confrontation”, SWP Research Paper RP 12, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), October 17, 2023, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-in-the-black-sea-region> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

21 Dar, E.P., and Erşen, E., “Reassessing the “Turkish Model” in the Post-Cold War Era: A Role Theory Perspective”, *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 258–82, p. 264.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 267

Brief review of Türkiye's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era suggests is that there are several persistent themes in Ankara's self-perception that cannot be fully explained by a middle power concept.

Davutoğlu, the then foreign minister of Türkiye, saw itself as an “order instituting actor.”²³ In the context of the Arab Spring, Davutoğlu's aspiration was that “Turkey would be both the pioneer and speaker of this order of peace.”²⁴ In the post-Davutoğlu period, especially since 2016, Turkish foreign policy has become more security-driven.²⁵ Yet, Ankara's quest for agency remains a key feature in its foreign policy and finds its current expression in the idea that it is possible to “remain within the West and act autonomously”.²⁶

What this brief review of Türkiye's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era suggests is that there are several persistent themes in Ankara's self-perception that cannot be fully explained by a middle power concept. First, Ankara's foreign-policy choices can be seen as resulting from the interplay between regional dynamics and systemic geopolitical change, which may have a different impact on self-understanding and the manifestation of agency. Davutoğlu's definition of Türkiye as a central country is perhaps the most explicit conceptual attempt, but similar grand narratives can also be traced back to Turgut Özal's vision of the 21st century as “a Turkish century” and Süleyman Demirel's idea of a

23 Davutoğlu, A., “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring”, *Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı/Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey* (TEPAV), 2012, Available at: www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1336135395-4.Principles_of_Turkish_Foreign_Policy_and_Regional_Political_Structuring_by_Ahmet_Davutoglu.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2020)

24 Quoted in Özcan, G., “If the Crisis Is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria”, in F.Aksu and H.Sarı Ertem (eds), *Analyzing Foreign Policy Crises in Turkey: Conceptual Theoretical and Practical Discussions*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 178–98, p. 184.

25 Keyman, E.F., “A New Turkish Foreign Policy: Towards Proactive “Moral Realism””, *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 55–69; Altunışık, M., “The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities”, IAI Papers 20, *Instituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI), July 17, 2020, Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities> (Accessed: January 5, 2024); Gümüş, A., “Increasing Realism in Turkish Foreign Policy During Post-Davutoğlu Era”, *Insight Turkey* 24, no. 4 (2022): 167–85.

26 Ergin, S., “Turkish Foreign Policy in 2023 (6) Main Direction: Staying in the West while Acting Autonomously (translation from Turkish)”, *Hürriyet*, January 12, 2024, Available at: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/2023te-turk-dis-politikasi-6-ana-yonelis-bati-icinde-kalip-ozerk-hareket-etmek-42389530> (Accessed: January 12, 2024).

Turkic World “from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China”.²⁷ As far as Ankara’s grand narratives are concerned, while acknowledging regional embeddedness and historical legacy, the middle power concept does not explain the coexistence of paradoxical trends in Ankara’s foreign-policy thinking, such as greatness and encirclement, or Türkiye’s simultaneous post-imperial identity and post-colonial features.²⁸ Second, Türkiye’s quest for agency cannot be fully understood in isolation from Ankara’s ambivalent relationship with the West.²⁹ Ankara’s current balancing is often seen as pivoting away from the West. However, this ignores questions such as what role the West has historically played in Turkish foreign policy thinking, that is, why Türkiye sought a Western orientation in the first place, and the multiple meanings that the West currently holds for Türkiye.³⁰ In other words, such a pivoting framework with an inbuilt binary of either with or against the West is unable to accommodate Ankara’s perception of its role within the West while at the same time striving for autonomous action.

Implications

Two final observations on the concept of a middle power are worth highlighting. First, amid the current uncertainty about the emerging and declining poles in the transformation of the world order, there is a tendency to think about the positioning of states in terms of the bloc paradigm, as implied by references to ‘fence sitters’, or ‘global swing

27 Dalay, G., “Post-Imperial State Ego and Foreign Policy (translation from Turkish)”. *Perspektif*, January 11, 2021, Available at: <https://www.perspektif.online/post-emperyal-devlet-egosu-ve-dis-politika/> (Accessed: January 12, 2024)

28 *Ibid.*

29 Yanık, L. “The Making of Turkish Exceptionalism: The West, the Rest and Unreconciled Issues from the Past”, *Turkish Studies* 24, 3-4 (2023): 640–57.

30 Isachenko, D., “Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation”, SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 07, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), October 28, 2021, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-and-russia>; Dalay, G., “Turkey’s Recurring Quest for Security, Status, and Geopolitical Identity”, Insights on Turkey, *German Marshall Fund of the United States* (GMF), April 1, 2022, Available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-recurring-quest-security-status-and-geopolitical-identity>; Dalay, G., “Deciphering Turkey’s Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia.” SWP Comment 2022/C 35, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), May 20, 2022, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/deciphering-turkeys-geopolitical-balancing-and-anti-westernism-in-its-relations-with-russia> (Accessed: January 12, 2024)

states’, or even the ‘Global South’. The current growing interest in the concept of middle powers can be seen as an attempt to categorise important states into a group and thereby, while recognising their weight in the international arena, at the same time limiting their agency by expecting them to follow one of the blocs. Second, because the middle power concept as it is currently used was developed in a specific context and for specific purposes, it does not help to answer the question of what concerns middle power states today, namely what influences their foreign policy choices and whether they are likely to contribute to stability or instability. As a result, the case of Türkiye as a middle power does not seem to fit into the lines of inquiry on either basis.

However, if we look at how Türkiye’s self-perception has evolved historically, some light can be shed on Ankara’s foreign-policy choices. For example, one can examine how the idea of a central country is also linked to the concept of regional ownership that has been similarly present in Ankara’s foreign-policy thinking, as well as observing how Türkiye’s view of NATO transformed from following the NATO agenda into the desire to sit at the table and set its agenda.³¹ In short, the focus on self-perception allows for a dynamic understanding of foreign policy choices, so that the fact that Türkiye, as a NATO member, buys Russian anti-aircraft missile systems; does not consider the Ukraine war as Cold War 2.0; and supplies Ukraine with military equipment while Moscow accepts Ankara as a mediator, may no longer seem surprising.

31 Kardaş, Ş., “Turkey on NATO’s Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a “Central Country””, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2012, Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kardas_Brief.pdf (Accessed: January 3, 2024).

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ISSN 2788-5178

