

# Geopolitics and the Second Karabakh War

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The question of how geopolitics bore upon the Second Karabakh War is examined with reference to Aristotle's presentation of tragedy (entanglement, unravelling). The strategic consequences of the return of geopolitics to international relations owing to the onset of a G-Zero world were prudentially understood by Azerbaijan and tragically misunderstood by Armenia. As a result, Yerevan committed geopolitical malpractice by mistakenly believing that entrenching its posture of clientelism would enable the perpetuation of its occupation of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region and the seven surrounding districts. In contrast, Baku harnessed the consequences of the ongoing transformation of the international system to entrench its position as a keystone state in the Silk Road region. This goes a long way towards explaining how Azerbaijan was ultimately able to ensure it alone would determine the time and manner of the restoration of its territorial integrity. Thus, geopolitical considerations and misunderstandings contributed greatly to the outcome of the Second Karabakh War. This will have enduring consequences for the emerging regional order of the Silk Road region.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Second Karabakh War, Silk Road region, keystone state, Azerbaijan, Armenia



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### *Introduction*

What caused the Second Karabakh War to start and end as it did? In other words, what were the proximate affronts and provocations, as well as the immediate grounds, that led to the effective cessation of a negotiation process, and how did this bear upon Azerbaijan's victory and Armenia's defeat? This question naturally raises another, namely, why is it that in the Second Karabakh War the West stayed away, the Minsk Group stayed irrelevant, the United Nations stayed unseen, Russia stayed put, Iran stayed out, China stayed silent, Israel stayed alert, and Turkey stayed at the ready? The above questions can be reformulated in the following generalized manner: why did the flow of the particular political events at issue, as experienced by both belligerents and onlookers, happen as it did and not otherwise? What judgments and miscalculations informed the thoughts and actions of decision makers?<sup>1</sup>

To delve fruitfully into such and similar questions requires that we begin with a brief, preliminary examination of the nature of geopolitics. From this will emerge a consideration of the present and novel state of international relations, which in turn will enable us to uncover both the contours of an emerging order in the Silk Road region<sup>2</sup> and the leverage held by those states most responsible for its advent. Thus equipped, we shall be in a better position to examine more directly what sorts of considerations animated the speeches and deeds of the Second Karabakh War's protagonists, how these led to the terms of the armistice, and what boons and dangers lie ahead now that the guns have fallen silent.

### *A Middle Power emerges in a G-Zero world*

Geopolitics consists of more or less prudential exercises in acceptable exceptions by major powers conducive to the continued operation of an international system. If a given international system precludes or

1 Parts of this essay draw on four recent works of mine: "Great Power Populism" (co-written with Gvosdev, N.K.), *The National Interest*, No. 167, May/June 2020, pp. 39-48; "Leveraging the Present: Geopolitical Takeaways for the Silk Road Region," AIRCenter Analysis Paper, September 2020, available at: [www.aircenter.az/uploads/files/Damjan%20new.pdf](http://www.aircenter.az/uploads/files/Damjan%20new.pdf); "Armenia Needs to Sue for Peace Now: The Alternative is Even Worse," *The National Interest*, October 5, 2020, available at: [www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/armenia-needs-sue-peace-now-alternative-even-worse-170160](http://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/armenia-needs-sue-peace-now-alternative-even-worse-170160); and "Back with a Vengeance: The Return of Rough and Tumble Geopolitics," *Orbis*, Vol. 65, No. 1, Winter 2021, pp. 118-135.

2 The Silk Road region is defined "loosely" in "Editorial Statement," *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fall 2020), p. 7 in the following manner: "the geographic space looking west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Plain and the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping down around in the direction of the Persian Gulf and across the Fertile Crescent." The term 'Silk Road region' is more historically accurate and inclusive than neologistic monikers such as 'Eurasia,' 'Great Caspian basin,' 'South Caucasus and Central Asia,' or whatever else scholars and bureaucrats have devised.

disallows such exercises of acceptable exception—defined as a succession of power manoeuvres understood in the context of the need to maintain equilibrium and legitimacy, operating according to a logic of restraint and proportioned reciprocity—it is either too rigid and hence ripe for renovation, or too amorphous and thus not really a system.

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Our current global condition is such that, paradoxically, aspects of both are present. In a past age, Thomas M. Franck wrote that “in the international system, rules are not enforced and yet they are mostly obeyed.”<sup>3</sup> Today, it would be more accurate to say that rules are not enforced and increasingly disobeyed—or, to put it in terms more familiar to international legal scholars: the applicable scope of *jus cogens*, out of which follow the *obligato erga omnes*, is narrowing in practice.

The gravity of the present condition is further compounded by the ironic fact that connectivity is becoming a catalyst for further dividing our world: the spectre of technological bifurcation hangs over a transforming international system, which, in turn, helps to explain the onset of de-globalization due to the rapid escalation of Sino-American tensions. All this has become a recipe for skyrocketing unpredictability and increased instability in a world characterized, in part, by the absence of acknowledged leadership.

In a recent *Baku Dialogues* essay, S. Enders Wimbush provided the following snapshot picture of the “churning” geopolitical situation:

*Russia is failing. Europe is breaking. America is withdrawing. China is stretching assertively. India is rising. Japan is arming. Iran is pre-revolutionary (again). Turkey is in therapy. The Middle East is, well, the Middle East.*<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, such a description of our present global predicament confirms the observation made by Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini that “we are now living in a G-Zero world,” which they defined as “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.”<sup>5</sup>

Two strategic trade deals signed in December 2020 illustrate the

3 T.M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

4 Wimbush, S.E., “Eurasia 2040,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2020-2021, p. 112.

5 Bremmer, I. and Roubini, R., “A G-Zero World,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2, March/April 2011, p. 2.

veracity of the G-Zero paradigm, particularly the ongoing dearth of united Western leadership: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between China and 14 other Asian states (the ten ASEAN countries plus four treaty allies of the United States: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between China and the European Union. These represent the two largest trade deals in history and are natural companions to the China-led Belt and Road Initiative, which Andrew Michta of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies predicts will “effect a ‘grand inversion’”<sup>6</sup> such that the contemporary Silk Road region will regain its place as a critical seam of international relations.

But perhaps the best—and certainly the most relevant, given the present subject of inquiry—illustration of the veracity of the G-Zero paradigm is what Vasif Huseynov, writing in the inaugural issue of this journal, has called the “geopolitical heterogeneity”<sup>7</sup> of the contemporary Silk Road region. The predominant reality in this 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. Over the past decades, the Silk Road region has come to serve increasingly as a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies, an important intercessor between major powers, and a hard-to-avoid gateway between different blocks of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.

In other words, the Silk Road region is coming into its own as a fully-fledged subject of international relations that has kept moving cogently in the direction of establishing sturdier contours of a fledgling regional order by building upon classical balance-of-power principles. This has gone a long way to ensure that outside rivalries are kept at bay and in check.

Undoubtedly, an important prerequisite for the completion of such a regional order is the existence of a number of states of substantially equal strength, which can enable the Silk Road region to maintain and possibly deepen its own balance of power system, notwithstanding the G-Zero world paradigm. This is well on its way to being successfully executed, for at least five reasons. *First*, the unique complexities

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6 A.A. Michta, “U.S. Alliances: Crucial Enablers in Great-Power Competition,” in Dakota L. Wood (ed.), *2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength*. Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2020, p. 90.

7 Huseynov, V., “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-Regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity,” *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. I, No. 1, Summer 2020, p. 128.

involved in transporting hydrocarbons and other natural resources to market, as well as the infrastructure provisions necessary to facilitate trade, require a region-specific type of cooperation and compromise. *Second*, no state belonging to the region is strong enough to dominate the others, economically or otherwise, which encourages equilibrium. *Third*, virtually no state in the region is weak enough to succumb to crude attempts at domination without others aligning to significantly limit the depth and scope of said attempt. *Fourth*, no outside power truly behaves hegemonically, notwithstanding latent (or not so latent) desires or ambitions.

The *fifth* reason is perhaps the most interesting: the burgeoning set of arrangements characterizing the Silk Road region appear on their way to being anchored by what Giovanni Botero, a late 16<sup>th</sup> century political and economic thinker and diplomat, was the first to call “middle powers,” which he defined as states that have “sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others.”<sup>8</sup> 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 facility in properly managing their finances and promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbours and their neighbours’ neighbours.

Unquestionably, Azerbaijan is one such middle power: a “strategic hub by virtue of being situated at a critical geographical fulcrum point of rapidly expanding transport and communication infrastructure.”<sup>9</sup> Azerbaijan is in fact a rare contemporary example of successful national statecraft—rarer still when one bears in mind the fact that just thirty years ago the country was widely considered to be a failing or even failed state.<sup>10</sup> The Silk Road region boasts at least two other middle powers: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Scholars such as Nikolas Gvosdev and Gregory Gleason, among

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8 G. Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* I:2.

9 Gleason, G., “Grand Strategy Along the Silk Road: The Pivotal Role of Keystone States,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2020-2021, p. 160.

10 On Azerbaijan’s political development, see S.E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, (M.E. Sharp: Armonk, 2011) and “Reform Behind a Static Façade,” *The American Interest*, October 17, 2019, available at: [www.the-american-interest.com/2019/10/17/azerbaijan-reform-behind-a-static-facade](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/10/17/azerbaijan-reform-behind-a-static-facade). On Azerbaijan’s relations with Russia, see Valiyev, A., “Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy Towards Russia Since Independence: Compromise Achieved,” *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2019, pp. 269-291; on Azerbaijan’s relations with Turkey, see Ergun, A., “Special, Exceptional, and Privileged,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2020-2021, pp. 52-64.

others, have identified such middle powers—whose external relations embrace elements of both autonomy and restraint—as “keystone states” to denote the significant (and growing) strategic leverage they hold in giving coherence to, as well as orienting the direction of, a regional order.

### *Keystone states and the significance of 2008*

Thus, we must add the following codicil to the definition of geopolitics provided at the beginning of this article: regional orders that build upon classic geopolitical balance-of-power principles can be established in a G-Zero world in the event they can be held together by middle powers, better described, given present circumstances, as keystone states. Gleason suggests that keystone states are coming to serve as trusted interlocutors, reliable intermediaries, and “critical mediators” between what Western political scientists call “status quo powers and revisionists.”<sup>11</sup> This integrative power is supplemented by the fact that, in Gvosdev’s telling, “an effective keystone state can serve as a pressure-release valve in the international system, particularly as the transition to conditions of non-polarity continues, by acting as a buffer and reducing the potential for conflict between major power centers.”<sup>12</sup> Non-polarity, Gvosdev specifies, is an

*active approach in which constant engagement with all the major stakeholders is a sine qua non. Non-polarity recognizes that in conditions of a G-Zero world no one power can establish and guarantee absolute security or impose a uniform set of preferences—and that to align exclusively with one major power increases, rather than reduces, insecurity by incentivizing other powers to then take action detrimental to one’s national interests.*<sup>13</sup>

We must now say a few words about the moment at which the G-Zero world came about, for Bremmer and Roubini do not do so explicitly. Its onset is traceable back to events that took place in the third quarter of 2008, made manifest over a period of only forty days that began in August 2008 with the Russo-Georgian conflict and the Kremlin’s correct judgment that the West could not make a credible attempt to

11 Gleason, op. cit., pp. 148, 156.

12 Gvosdev, N.K., “Keystone States: A New Category of Power,” *Horizons*, No. 5, Autumn 2015, p. 120.

13 Gvosdev, N.K., “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2020, p. 31.

prevent or reverse it, as that would mean going to war with Russia.<sup>14</sup> The second and last stage of the onset of the G-Zero world came not even two months later, when Lehman Brothers went into bankruptcy. This last rapidly cascaded into a collapse of Western stock markets and the onset of a global financial recession.

The logic of a G-Zero world has effectively replaced the dominant unipolar conception of international relations, predicated on the embrace of the idea of the “end of history” championed on both sides of the Atlantic since the end of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> The cardinal point is that that forty-day period in 2008 represents the moment in which the credibility of the West cracked on two critical fronts: great power politics and international economics. This called into question, in a fundamental way, the West’s claim to primacy in global leadership, which rested not insignificantly on predictability, prosperity, and a “monopoly on patronage.”<sup>16</sup>

At least two facts serve to illustrate the weight of the 2008 moment. *First*, remedial efforts to overcome the effect of the economic crash could not have succeeded without significant non-Western participation—an unprecedented turn of events. *Second*, the criteria for membership in the new institutional arrangements that were hastily arranged at the time in response to the West’s financial collapse—most notably the establishment of the G20—did not involve having liberal democracy as a form of government. What mattered most was having cash in one’s state coffers, coupled with the willingness to spend it in the pursuit of geopolitical expeditions beyond one’s borders.

It so happens that there is a not insignificant correlation—one that goes back at least to the time of Thucydides—between a state having cash in its pocket and the ambitions of its leaders to play an active and influential geopolitical role in world politics. After the events of 2008, the field became wide open owing to the lessening of the

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14 For a detailed account of the Russo-Georgian conflict from an American perspective, see P. Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), pp. 602-605. The situation in which Georgia found itself in 2008 is strongly reminiscent of the one in which Hungary found itself in 1956. On this, see P. Lendvai, *One Day That Shook the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and H.W. Brands, *Cold Warriors: Eisenhower’s Generation and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Both Lendvai and Brands contrast the American liberation rhetoric of anticommunist ideology with a policymaking process characterized by realist geopolitical considerations that left no space for the provision of any sort of tangible assistance to Moscow’s Hungarian opponents.

15 See Fukuyama, F., “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, No. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 1-18; R. Cooper, *The postmodern state and world order* (London: Demos, 2000); R. Cooper, “The post-modern state,” in Mark Leonard (ed.), *Re-Ordering the World* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002), pp. 11-20; and Cooper, R., “Imperial Liberalism,” *The National Interest*, No. 79, Spring 2005, pp. 25-34. Cf. Krauthammer, C., “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990-1991, pp. 23-33.

16 Cooley, A. and Nexon, D.H., “How Hegemony Ends,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4, July/August 2020, p. 147.

aforementioned constraints. From this came to be derived the following strategic takeaway for much of the rest of the world: the West could not solve international problems by itself anymore—even problems primarily of its own making.

At the time, most Western decision makers did not grasp the scope of the paradigm shift this triggered, although most everyone else did (including Azerbaijan, Turkey, and of course Russia, but tragically, as it turns out, not Armenia)—namely, the return of geopolitics.

### *Geopolitical snapshot*

From all this, we see the following: present geopolitical circumstances are such that this is the first time in centuries that an evident vacuum of power is not being filled, in part because no state or alliance of states believes it could see a reasonable rate of return on its investment even in making a successful play for the mantle of global leadership, much less actually assuming it. This last calculus has only grown in the wake of extremely costly measures, hopefully successful, that have been taken by states to reduce the likelihood of the onset of a full-scale economic depression due to the myriad restrictions put in place to mitigate against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Six other observable geopolitical trends have now risen to the surface, which, taken together, provide the remaining elements of the geopolitical background conducive to properly assess and understand both the beginning and end of the Second Karabakh War. *First*, options are progressively narrowing for the West, yet this has not resulted in what the Germans call *Torschlusspanik*. *Second*, many of the major players are becoming increasingly detached from ‘Western liberal democracy’ without much remorse or embarrassment. *Third*, a lack of respect, even disdain, characterizes the perceptions of virtually all the major players towards one another. *Fourth*, few of the major players, irrespective of their regime type and political form, are ready to commit to working in concert to establish agreed terms framing a workable international system predicated on a realistic, common assessment of a new global balance of power. *Fifth*, the major players will have fewer resources at their disposal to fund their ever-deepening rivalries. *Sixth*, a whole set of issues requiring a broad and robust multilateral approach (most obviously sustainable development, including climate change, as well as cyber

security, nuclear proliferation, and so on) is already receiving a suboptimal amount of attention.

Under such circumstances, those who still insist on an ‘international community’<sup>17</sup> predicated on a set of normative convictions held in common, the existence of a shared approach to policy questions, and an acceptance of burden-sharing in the name of solidarity—on assigning substantial weight to an ‘international community’ greater than that offered by, say, Hans Kelsen<sup>18</sup>—are in reality speaking of “mere wind and void.”<sup>19</sup> This becomes rather obvious once Amitai Etzioni’s definition of ‘community’ is brought forth: “a shared moral culture and bonds of affection.”<sup>20</sup> At best, the ‘international community’ can be understood as “the arena for minimizing conflict and maximizing common interests in deference to the minimum common denominator.”<sup>21</sup> Cynics, of course, would add that

*the idea of international community, though it presents itself as the general interest of all its constituent parts, is in fact the preoccupation of a subset of international actors whose claim to speak for all is highly dubious. [...] The international community is [...] the voice of classically liberal normative aspiration: what the world should be like. [...] This comes in many guises, from various forms of cosmopolitanism and universalism on one side to various particular iterations such as American exceptionalism or Western civilization on the other.<sup>22</sup>*

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17 The promotion of the concept of an ‘international community’ in both theory and practice is vast. Consider Kofi Annan’s vision of an ‘international community’ as described in a 15 September 1999 speech to a conference of NGOs organized by the UN Department of Public Information entitled “Meaning of International Community” (SG/SM/7133, PI/1176). Annan drew on this speech in composing his March 2000 manifesto, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: UN Department of Public Information, 2000), which should be understood as the precipitating cause that led to the September 2005 endorsement of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine as part of the World Summit Outcome document adopted by the UN General Assembly (A/RES/60/1), and which represents the pinnacle of a norm-based understanding of the ‘international community.’ See also Ellis, D.C., “On the Possibility of ‘International Community,’” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2009, pp. 1-26; Kritsiotis, D., “Imagining the International Community,” *European Journal of International Law*, Vol 13, No. 4, 2002, pp. 961-992; and H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society, Second Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

18 H. Kelsen, *Principles of International Law* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1952), pp. 110-111: “All the states are members of the international community constituted by general international law, and hence are subject to that law; and a state may, without losing its character as a state, be a member of an international community constituted by particular international law, i.e., by a treaty to which the state is a contracting party.”

19 Isaiah 41:29.

20 A. Etzioni, *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 49.

21 Haas, E.B., “International Integration,” *International Organization*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 1961, p. 392.

22 Lindberg, T., “Making Sense of the ‘International Community,’” *Working Paper of the International Institutions and Global Governance Program of the Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2014, p. 11, 15-16.

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However that may be, in a G-Zero world, the ‘international community’ is giving way to a nascent international system in which states find ways to coexist and reach agreement on mutually-accepted regulations to facilitate transactions.

What does any of this have to do with the Second Karabakh War? Let us see if we can pull some of the strands together.

### ***Entanglement***

The Second Karabakh War that began on 27 September 2020 marked the start of what Aristotle famously called the tragic unravelling or dénouement (*lusis*)<sup>23</sup> of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that originated in February 1988.<sup>24</sup> In the intervening decades, the one constant has been the Armenian occupation of about 20 per cent of the internationally-recognized territory of Azerbaijan: the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the seven surrounding districts. Yerevan’s effective capitulation—enshrined in the November 10, 2020, armistice statement<sup>25</sup> signed by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, and President Vladimir Putin of Russia—for all intents and purposes ended the occupation: today, no contingent of Armenian troops is present anywhere in Azerbaijan.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Azerbaijan has become a nation whole, free, and at peace for the first time in its modern history. Through a prudent combination of limited warfare and active diplomacy, Aliyev accomplished a feat that no other leader anywhere in the world has been able to achieve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the restoration of a country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. And he did so, it must be added, against the diplomatic objections voiced by the ‘international community.’

We must underline that even Armenia did not legally admit its own occupation in the dual sense that it neither formally recognized the

23 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1455b25-ff and 1460b6-ff.

24 “The first bullet released by me in February 1988 was released for the security of the Armenian people” Balasanyan, V., “Dear Compatriots, The First Bullet...” Facebook post, December 1, 2020, 11:50 PM. Available at: [www.facebook.com/412749769529573/posts/874138043390741/?d=n](http://www.facebook.com/412749769529573/posts/874138043390741/?d=n).

25 Kremlin.ru, *Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (accessed January 3, 2021).

26 Neither the lingering presence of Armenian holdouts that for various reasons reject the tripartite statement, nor the possibility of guerrilla (or terrorist) cells operating in Armenia or the liberated territories, are likely to represent a serious, long-term threat.

ethnic Armenian secessionist regime installed in the Nagorno-Karabakh region nor did it formally annex the territory. Thus, it can be credibly said that no one seriously disputed that these lands were occupied illegally; and that virtually no one disputed that they needed to be returned: four UN Security Council resolutions and various OSCE documents<sup>27</sup> directly related to the conflict made this clear, as did the formal positions of all the major powers, not to mention the rest of the world. The fact that Armenia had totally cleansed the occupied lands (and not only the occupied lands) of its pre-war ethnic-Azerbaijani population had obviously not helped its claim of victimhood or remedial justice, either.<sup>28</sup> (It may also be relevant to note that Armenia is itself now the most ethnically homogeneous country in both the Silk Road region and the OSCE space.)<sup>29</sup> The bottom line was this:

*Armenia did not legally admit its own occupation in the dual sense that it neither formally recognized the ethnic Armenian secessionist regime installed in the Nagorno-Karabakh region nor did it formally annex the territory. Thus, it can be credibly said that no one seriously disputed that these lands were occupied illegally; and that virtually no one disputed that they needed to be returned.*

irrespective of ancient grievances, a convoluted historical record, and whatever other vagarious claims have been put forward, the situation was unambiguous: Yerevan's military occupation of these lands had to come to an end, and the hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani civilians ethnically cleansed from those same lands had to be allowed to return to their homes.

The Armenian irredentist claim to the Nagorno-Karabakh region (but not the seven surrounding districts, which were conquered outright out of a combination of desiring to establish a security buffer and precipitating an Armenian colonization effort) was based on falsely

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, "Documents of International Organizations on The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict", 202, available at: [www.mfa.gov.az/files/shares/Documents%20of%20international%20organizations.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.az/files/shares/Documents%20of%20international%20organizations.pdf); Aniarc.am, *Madrid Principles – Full Text*, 29 November 2007, April 11, 2016, available at: [www.aniarc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text](http://www.aniarc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text) (both sources accessed January 2, 2021).

28 With regard to the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenian forces between the two Karabakh Wars, the census data presented by the occupier in 2005 indicates that 6 individuals were identified as Azerbaijani (and 125 as "other") out of a total of 137,737; the census data presented by the occupier in 2015 indicates that 0 individuals were identified as Azerbaijani (and 50 as "other") out of a total of 145,053.

29 Evidence of the extreme ethnic homogeneity of Armenia is extrapolated from the "Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization (HIEF) version 2.0 dataset for the year 2013" (the latest year contained in the dataset) compiled by Lenka Dražanová and archived in the Harvard Dataverse (available at: [dataverse.harvard.edu](http://dataverse.harvard.edu)). The HIEF is an ethnic fractionalization index for 165 countries across all continents. The ethnic fractionalization index corresponds to the probability that two randomly drawn individuals within a country are not from the same ethnic group. Armenia's ethnic fractionalization score (EIndex) for 2013 is 0.045. Only six other countries ranked lower in 2013: Japan (0.019), North Korea (0.02), Bangladesh (0.025), Tunisia (0.03), Egypt (0.041), and Jordan (0.044). The HIEF dataset does not include the following OSCE participating States: Andorra, Holy See, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, and Montenegro. For an overview of the dataset, see Dražanová, L., "Introducing the Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization (HIEF) Dataset: Accounting for Longitudinal Changes in Ethnic Diversity," *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2020.

equating self-determination with the avowed right of secession: the former falls within the scope of international law whereas the latter does not. And the reason is simple: the avowed right of secession directly infringes on the right of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, by construction, self-determination is subordinate to sovereignty and its corollary, territorial integrity. In the rough-and-tumble of geopolitics, there are three basic ways to counter this subordination: by treaty (when the aggrieved state signs away its legal territory), by a decision of the UN Security Council (essentially imposing a transfer of lands from one country to another, a highly theoretical possibility), or by force and conquest (maintenance of occupation). Armenia knew full well that the first and second options were effectively impossible, and thus had opted, since 1988, for the third. Now this last, too, has run its course.

*The Armenian irredentist claim to the Nagorno-Karabakh region was based on falsely equating self-determination with the avowed right of secession*

There seem to be at least two immediate causes that resulted in the onset of the dénouement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. *First*, Yerevan’s increasingly agitated advocacy of the false equation of self-determination and secession, as discussed above. One saw this in terms of statements coming out of Armenia in the past few years that made it clear that Yerevan was no longer interested in participating in good-faith negotiations that would have as their strategic objective the end of the military occupation of the sovereign lands of Azerbaijan (this will be discussed below). *Second*, this was matched, increasingly, in terms of actions on the ground: incremental increases in the bellicosity of ceasefire violations and provocations. The attack at dawn on September 27, 2020, perpetrated by Armenian forces, that resulted in a number of Azerbaijani deaths in Azerbaijan proper was judged by Baku to have been a step too far: the strategic patience of Azerbaijan was brought to an end after decades of fruitless talks led by the ‘international community’ aimed at peacefully and multilaterally reversing a military occupation.

Obviously, Azerbaijan had been preparing for this eventuality: Baku’s counterstrike was not a spur-of-the-moment reaction. But there was nothing politically, legally, or morally wrong with its chosen course of action: the country acted well within its right of “inherent” self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter in a manner that brings to mind the words of the Athenian ambassadors at Melos, as reported by Thucydides so very long ago: “neither laying down the law, nor being the first to use it as laid down, but taking it as it is and will be forever

when we have left it behind, we use it, knowing that you and others, if you became as powerful as we are, would do [the] same.”<sup>30</sup> These words should be seen as particularly apt given that these same Athenians had travelled to Melos with the intention to find agreement and avoid war.<sup>31</sup> So, of course, Azerbaijan took pains to ensure the steady improvement of its military capabilities and worked diligently to lock in the strong, virtually unconditional support of Turkey that made it harder for other geopolitical actors to exert undue pressure on Azerbaijan to stick to fruitless negotiations, and so on. But again, the emphasis needs to be put on Yerevan’s evident and categorical unwillingness to bring the occupation to an end peacefully, through negotiations. This is the fundamental point.

Thus, Yerevan’s words and its resulting actions led directly to the Azerbaijani counterattack. Yerevan did not think Baku would respond decisively to what amounted to a war of attrition, in part because it overestimated the extent of its own external backing. This is obviously a failure of Armenian statecraft and, frankly, the leadership in Yerevan had it coming.

We can be justified in delivering such a harsh judgment on the basis of even a cursory examination of the July 2020 military flare up at the uncontested, *de jure* border between the two states, which took place near critical energy and transportation infrastructure nodes. During this intense period Armenia was very publicly told by Russia and others that it could not invoke the protections under Article IV of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).<sup>32</sup> Instead of understanding this to mean that it could not rely on the unconditional support of its main treaty ally and should therefore return in earnest to the negotiating table, Yerevan threatened to attack the network

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30 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* V:105.

31 For an authoritative interpretation of the Melian dialogue and much else besides, see L. Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 184-ff. Cf. Bruell, C., “Thucydides’ View of Athenian Imperialism,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, March 1974, pp. 11-17.

32 On 14 July 2020 Armenia’s permanent representative to the CSTO Permanent Council Viktor Biyagov stated, “The existing situation is a cause of attention and concern for the entire Organization and for each of its member states, since it’s an attempt of direct aggression against one of the members of the Organization in the zone of responsibility of the Organization. We call on our allies to demonstrate solidarity and support in line with the nature of the CSTO Charter. This unprecedented situation becomes a serious test for each of us and for the entire Organization.” The call went unheeded. This statement should be read in light of the refusal of the CSTO to even hold an emergency meeting to address the July 2020 clashes. The CSTO took the same position during the Second Karabakh War, as of course did Russia itself. On October 7, 2020, Putin stated on Rossiya24 that “we have certain obligations as part of the [CSTO] treaty. Russia has always honoured and will continue to honour its commitments. [...] It is deeply regrettable that the hostilities continue, but they are not taking place on Armenian territory.” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was even more explicit, saying Russia’s obligations under the CSTO “do not extend to Karabakh.” For the Putin and Peskov quotes, see “Russia’s Security Guarantees for Armenia Don’t Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says,” *Moscow Times*, October 7, 2020.

of oil and gas pipelines that run from Azerbaijan through Georgia into Turkey and from there into EU territory (Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy).<sup>33</sup> This was understandably interpreted by Azerbaijan—but also by Turkey and all the other strategic energy partners—as representing a clear and present danger to their respective core national interests and nascent regional energy security arrangements designed to ensure a diversification of supply from Russia.<sup>34</sup> It stands to reason that Moscow took unkindly to such threats for the simple reason that their execution would have set a dangerous precedent for Russia’s own pipeline network in places such as Ukraine.

But this is far from the whole story: it is not enough to point the finger at Armenia. The principal outside mediators—the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group (Russia, France, and the United States)—are also at fault: there was a formal negotiation process, launched in 1992, that had essentially produced no concrete results on the ground, in the sense that the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the seven surrounding districts had not come to an end, Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been prevented from exercising their right of return, and so on. In other words, for nearly three decades—including more than a decade since the onset of the G-Zero world—the Minsk Group led negotiations the objectives of which were clearly and unambiguously set down on paper. The ‘international community,’ in the form of the Co-Chairs, gave themselves the responsibility of leading a defined process to achieve a defined result, and yet the conflict remained frozen since the 1994 ceasefire was put into effect by Russia: none of the Minsk Group’s defined objectives had been achieved—not even close. Thus, their actions or inaction—whether by design or not—resulted in the perpetuation of a status quo that was the opposite of the agreed objectives. So, this is why it is not enough to just point the finger at Yerevan.

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33 During the Second Karabakh War, Armenia followed through on its threats to take aim at Azerbaijan’s infrastructure network. For a partial chronology of these attacks, see Hajiyev, H., “Attacks by Armenia against Azerbaijani civilians and critical infrastructure should not be overlooked,” *Euractiv*, October 16, 2020, available at: [www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/attacks-by-armenia-against-azerbaijani-civilians-and-critical-infrastructure-should-not-be-overlooked](http://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/attacks-by-armenia-against-azerbaijani-civilians-and-critical-infrastructure-should-not-be-overlooked) (accessed January 2, 2021).

34 During an interview with Turkish broadcaster Habertürk on October 14, 2020, Aliyev stated, “Armenia is trying to attack and take control of our pipelines. [...] If Armenia tries to take control of the pipelines there, I can say that the outcome will be severe for them.” Had Armenia’s attacks been successful, it seems a near certainty that Turkey would have intervened directly in the war. Although no evidence has emerged in public, it seems likely that what almost certainly amounted to a ‘red line’ was communicated by Ankara to Moscow at the highest level; if so, it is equally likely that the Kremlin would have communicated this to the Armenian leadership. The fact that Armenia ceased trying to target Azerbaijan’s energy and transport infrastructure around this time lends credence to this speculation.

## Unravelling

And so we come to the start of the dénouement of the war. Objectively, the solution to the conflict was predicated upon the return of the aforementioned occupied lands by Armenia to Azerbaijan: that is what the various documents of the ‘international community’ indicated, particularly those of the UN and OSCE. This result could have been achieved through diplomacy—through negotiations—or through war. It is a truism of contemporary political science to affirm that the former is preferable to the latter, of course. And this was indeed the option that had been pursued by Azerbaijan in good faith for decades. The problem was that this good faith was not only unreciprocated by Armenia, but it was instrumentalized and abused—most recently in the past few years. Yerevan simply believed that it could stall indefinitely, all the while entrenching its occupation. All appearances that a breakthrough was approaching turned out to be illusory or duplicitous. And instead of adhering to the lesson contained in the age-old maxim *quieta non movere*, Armenia continued to provoke and violate the ceasefire (of course, Azerbaijan did so too). This took place in parallel to various incendiary remarks by Armenia’s leadership that Azerbaijan rightly interpreted as constituting the abandonment of the pursuit of a peaceful, negotiated solution to the conflict within the previously agreed framework. Five examples will suffice for present purposes. *One*, in late October 2018, Pashinyan told then U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton, “those who determine whether to resolve the Karabakh conflict or not are the people of Armenia, the people of Artsakh,<sup>35</sup> and the diaspora because this is a pan-Armenian issue.”<sup>36</sup> *Two*, in late March 2019, Armenia’s then defence minister David Tonoyan called on the country to prepare for the pursuit of a “new war for new territories” hours after Pashinyan had held his first official meeting with Aliyev in Vienna.<sup>37</sup> *Three*, in mid-May 2019, Pashinyan repudiated the Madrid Principles, thereby rejecting the existence of a documentary

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35 The controversial term “Artsakh” is used by Armenians and their supporters to denote the secessionist, self-proclaimed entity that operated on the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan during the occupation, which effectively came to an end as a result of the Second Karabakh War.

36 Socor, V. “How Yerevan Walked Away From the ‘Basic Principles’ of Karabakh Conflict Settlement,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 17 Issue:168, November 25, 2020, available at: <http://jamestown.org/program/how-yerevan-walked-away-from-the-basic-principles-of-karabakh-conflict-settlement/> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

37 Aravot.am, David Tonoyan. ‘Territories for Security’ format will no longer exist (translated from Armenian), March 30, 2019, available at: <https://www.aravot.am/2019/03/30/1032523/> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

*Yerevan simply believed that it could stall indefinitely, all the while entrenching its occupation. All appearances that a breakthrough was approaching turned out to be illusory or duplicitous.*

basis for resolving the conflict.<sup>38</sup> *Four*, in early August 2019, Pashinyan declared, in occupied Khankendi no less, that the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the seven surrounding districts were a part of Armenia,<sup>39</sup> which Baku interpreted as being tantamount to a political declaration of Yerevan's intent to formally annex Azerbaijan's sovereign territories. And *five*, right after the July 2020 military flare up at the international border between the two states, Pashinyan stated that

the "Azerbaijani myth that their army can defeat the Armenian Army" in order to force Armenia to "make concessions has vanished. [...] Azerbaijan's position that the negotiations are the continuation of war and they should help to address military objectives at the negotiation table undermines the meaning of the whole peace process."<sup>40</sup> In short, the aggressor kept pushing the aggrieved party and the mediators did nothing in response. No wonder that Azerbaijan judged the situation to no longer be tenable. Frankly, by the start of the Second Karabakh War, Armenia had no leg to stand on—no just cause to complain.

Thus, both on the field of battle and at the negotiating table, Armenia overplayed its hand; Yerevan lost, in part, because the "Pashinyan government became a hostage of its own nationalist rhetoric"<sup>41</sup> while failing to adopt what a South Korean political scientist may have been the first to term a "porcupine defence."<sup>42</sup> One cannot help but be reminded of the pitiful lamentation of Prometheus as he helplessly contemplated his *moira*: "To my friends, I am a spectacle of pity. [...] I stopped mortals from foreseeing doom [...] I drugged them with blind hopes."<sup>43</sup> Azerbaijan won for two basic reasons. *First*, because it had patiently built up its military prowess (a topic that is beyond the scope

38 News.am, *Armenia's Pashinyan rejects Madrid Principles for resolving Karabakh conflict?*, May 10, 2019, available at: <https://news.am/eng/news/511864.html> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

39 Pashinyan's exact words were "Artsakh is Armenia, period." Asbarez, 'Artsakh is Armenia,' *Says Pashinyan during Stepanakert Rally*, August 5, 2019, available at: <http://asbarez.com/183673/artsakh-is-armenia-says-pashinyan-during-stepanakert-rally/> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

40 Lragir.am, *July victories took us to new level of resilience: PM Pashinyan*, July 23, 2020, available at <https://www.lragir.am/en/2020/07/23/75141> (accessed January 10, 2021).

41 Zeynalova, L., "Glen E. Howard: Fighting in Nagorno Karabakh going quite badly for Pashinyan", *Trend*, October 2, 2020.

42 Chae-Ha, P., "A Grand Strategy for Korea's Defense," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 1:2, 1989, pp. 192-193, defines the aforementioned defence posture thusly: "the basic concept must be that since we would obviously be the loser should they invade us (because of their enormous size and military might), we have to do everything within our power to deter such an invasion. While we could not overcome an invasion [...], we have to sharpen our military expertise and systems mainly in terms of accuracy, so that they are as effective as the poisonous quills of a porcupine. If we are perceived not to be such an easy pushover, they will be less likely to attack us, just like the little porcupine which most larger and better-equipped hunters usually avoid."

43 Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 248-252.

of this article); and *second*, because its leadership fully understood the transformed geopolitical circumstances in play as a result of the onset of the G-Zero world in which no single country or durable alliance of states proffers a coherent set of ideas or policies that amount to a credible and confident claim to international leadership. The resulting global power vacuum, characterized by centrifugal geopolitics at the level of the great powers, was able to be supplemented by efforts to establish a centripetal regional order of the sort described above and held together by, *inter alia*, an Azerbaijan that increasingly conducted itself in accord with the precepts of a middle power or keystone state. And this gave Azerbaijan a strategic advantage the significance of which Armenia somehow did not fathom.

*Thus, both on the field of battle and at the negotiating table, Armenia overplayed its hand; Yerevan lost, in part, because the “Pashinyan government became a hostage of its own nationalist rhetoric”*

By war’s end, Aliyev had been able to secure recognition from those that matter most that Azerbaijan has been geopolitically lifted up, as it were, to the level of an independent power—one that is now indisputably a direct and level participant in regional affairs that is poised to take on the role of an autochthonous guarantor of peace, security, and prosperity in the Silk Road region. There is undoubtedly a certain irony that Azerbaijan achieved this by consenting to the presence of Russian and Turkish troops on Azerbaijani soil. To wit: the November 10, 2020, tripartite statement provides for a “peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation” composed of 1,960 regular Armed Forces personnel (and equipment), whose presence is guaranteed to last five years. In this context, we should note, however, that the Russian military has maintained a continuous presence in the South Caucasus from around the time of the French Revolution, with the exception of a few short years following the October Revolution. The weight of this fact should be measured against another clause of the tripartite statement and what came afterwards. The clause reads thusly: “In order to increase the effectiveness of control over the implementation of the agreements by the Parties to the conflict, a peacekeeping centre shall be deployed to exercise control over the ceasefire.” We note that there is no mention of Turkey. However, one day later (on November 11, 2020), Russia’s defence minister stated that a “a memorandum was signed [with Turkey] to establish a Joint [Monitoring] Centre to control the ceasefire and all hostilities in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.” Shortly thereafter (on November 17, 2020), the Turkish parliament authorized

the deployment of Turkish Armed Forces personnel as well as civilians to this centre for up to one year. We can make two observations on the basis of the above events. *First*, their arrival in Azerbaijan at the very end of 2020 represents the first time in a century that Turkish troops are durably deployed in the South Caucasus. *Second*, this represents the first time *tout court* that non-Russian troops are deployed in the South Caucasus with the perspicuous consent of Russia, which had for two centuries held a monopoly on this matter in this part of what Moscow used to call its ‘near-abroad.’

We are now in a better position to affirm that the November 10, 2020, armistice statement represents the emancipation of Azerbaijan. More broadly, it represents a paradigm shift in the Silk Road region: certainly, Putin achieved important tactical gains for his country; yet, ironically,

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he appears to have been unable to prevent a country whose name is most conspicuously absent from the document in question from emerging as the principal strategic beneficiary (alongside the victor, of course) of the region’s now evident geopolitical heterogeneity. One could say that, henceforth, plenipotentiary discourse in the South Caucasus will be conducted primarily in Slavonic and Turkic locutions. States in which English, French, and German (not to mention

Persian) are spoken as native languages can hardly be expected to play decisive roles in whatever peace process may follow.

In practice, this will almost certainly constrict dramatically the heretofore central role of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and all but guarantees the irrelevance of the Madrid Principles that the ‘international community’ long championed through ultimately ineffective diplomacy. This situation was set in motion primarily by Armenia, as discussed above, although obviously the result turned out to be the opposite of what Yerevan had in mind. Namely, for the first time in decades, the operative document accepted by the two belligerents to the conflict is silent on the self-determination question—what the Madrid document called the “final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh.” The November 10, 2020, document also stipulates the construction of “new transport links [...] to connect [Azerbaijan’s] Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and the western regions of Azerbaijan” so as to provide for the “unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo in both directions.” On this basis one would be hard-pressed to deny that the Madrid Principles or any other Minsk Group document no longer represent the framework for

the peaceful settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In writing about tragedy, Aristotle speaks of the moment of reversal: the inflection point (*eschaton*) of misfortune, as it were, that marks the onset of the tragic unravelling.<sup>44</sup> Armenia failed to see that its maximalist position was no longer tenable, certainly not in 2020—an inexcusable act of geopolitical malpractice on the part of the leadership in Yerevan that naturally produced the sort of response one would expect from the leadership of any serious, strategically conscious, and geopolitically literate keystone state such as Azerbaijan. Simply put, Armenia was outmatched, outgunned, and out-maneuvered. And it has only itself to blame for, in effect, having bluffed itself into a corner from which it could not extricate itself. We thus agree with two assessments offered recently by Princeton’s Michael Reynolds: “Armenian statecraft [...] revealed itself as a mix of delusional self-confidence and naïve sentimentality” and “Armenia’s example perhaps suggests that historical trauma coupled with limited experience of sovereignty can lead states voluntarily to pursue self-destructive policies.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Strategic takeaway*

At the end of the day, the consequences of the onset of the G-Zero world, which precipitated the return of geopolitics, were misunderstood by Armenia and understood by Azerbaijan.

For Yerevan, the strategic takeaway went something like this: as Karabakh is to Armenia, so South Ossetia (or Abkhazia, or the Donbass, or Crimea—take your pick) is to Russia. In other words, geopolitics in the South Caucasus will remain primarily within the referential purview of the traditional suzerain, who will remain on the side of Armenia. The national interest consists in entrenching a posture of clientelism and supplication towards the sole arbiter that truly matters,

44 See the previous reference to Aristotle’s *Poetics* in light of 1460b6, 1460b22, and 1461b24 in the same work, in which *lusis* and *luein* are given the meaning not of ‘unravelling’ but of ‘solution (or ‘solve’) or ‘resolution’ (or ‘resolve’). When all this is put together with 1454a37, where *lusis* connotes ‘interpretation’ (or ‘analysis’), it would imply that tragedies contain in themselves their own unmistakable interpretation: that the *eschaton* is foreshadowed by the *desis* that becomes the *lusis*. Such an understanding is wholly consistent with the events that produced Armenian *hubris* in the period 1988–1994, the resultant complacency with the status quo established by the 1994 ceasefire, the blindness to subsequent geopolitical change brought on by the events of 2008 (see the section of this essay entitled “Keystone states and the significance of 2008”), and the fantastic hope in the temporal sempiternity of the frozenness of the conflict. In this one finds what Aristotle calls the “lesson of tragedy” (*pathei mathos*): the mistaken demand men make that their particular understanding of justice must prevail in the world (see 1453a8-23).

45 Reynolds, M.A., “Confidence and Catastrophe: Armenia and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War,” *War on the Rocks*, January 11, 2021, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/confidence-and-catastrophe-armenia-and-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war/> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

which will engender it to demonstrate solidarity and support for a state dedicated to the expression of nearly unconditional loyalty. The country must continue to rely on this great power to maintain the status quo of occupation while feverishly encouraging its diaspora to convince rival great powers that genuine outreach on the part of Armenia to each of them will be forthcoming shortly.

For Baku, in contrast, the strategic takeaway from the onset of the G-Zero world went something like this: in continuing to reach out to the world, Azerbaijan will not allow itself to become dependent on any single line of access to the outside world. The country will strategically harness the fact that most of the world's great powers look at the Silk Road region—specifically, the South Caucasus—and conclude that they have intrinsic national security and economic interests. And it will take advantage of the fact that there is tension between those same great powers in terms of how they each define their respective interests in this part of the world by managing relations between them in such a way as to ensure that Azerbaijan becomes a subject of the international system instead of a mere object of great power rivalry. As Machiavelli put it, “one should never fall in the belief you can find someone to pick you up.”<sup>46</sup> This strategic takeaway has been aptly translated into contemporary scholarly terminology by Ilgar Gurbanov. Writing in the inaugural issue of this journal, he “conceptually classified” Azerbaijan’s foreign policy posture in the following manner: careful bandwagoning, pragmatic balancing, strategic hedging, finding a balance of interests, predictability, and strategic patience.<sup>47</sup> From such considerations emerged a bedrock principle of Azerbaijan’s national strategy: to ensure it becomes sovereign and strong enough so that it—and it alone—may determine the time and manner of the restoration of its territorial integrity.<sup>48</sup>

And thus came about the liberation of the Azerbaijan’s occupied territories, which took place against a global background of an international system characterized by the return of rough-and-tumble geopolitics in our G-Zero world and an emerging local reality in which keystone states such as Azerbaijan are working to establish an order in the Silk Road region strong enough to counter great power aspirations to

46 N. Machiavelli, *The Prince* XXIV.

47 Gurbanov, I., “Relevance of Non-Alignment for Azerbaijan’s Foreign and Security Policy,” *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. I, No. 1, Summer 2020, p. 16.

48 Such a strategy may be formulated in Machiavellian terms thusly: only by having recourse to “one’s own arms” (*Prince* VI, XIII) can *lo stato* become its own master in both peace and war thanks to the prudential execution of *virtù* and the opportunity provided by *fortuna*, whose vicissitudes may thereby be tamed (*The Prince* XXV) by its “most excellent” leader.

continue treating this part of the world as a mere object of international relations. Now the onus has been put by Baku on the domestic task of reconstruction and renewal, with revanchism contained and war crimes allegations being investigated; perhaps, one day soon, circumstances in Yerevan will be such that the difficult, yet necessary, undertaking of reconciliation may begin in earnest.<sup>49</sup>

This would, of course, require Yerevan to accept its battlefield and diplomatic losses while focusing its energies on securing the dividends of peace that it can enjoy by choosing to integrate into the Silk Road region's nascent order. Azerbaijan can encourage this by an increased demonstration of magnanimity and goodwill towards a defeated adversary and permanent neighbour, especially with regard to economic incentivization and greater sensitivity on questions having to do with identity. On the other hand, Armenia could opt to rebuff such entreaties by choosing to pursue a strategy aiming to overturn the definitive result of the Second Karabakh War. This article has sought to demonstrate the futility of that option, whose success would be predicated on the instauration of novel geopolitical circumstances that Yerevan simply does not have the capability to engender, much less set in motion. (One could add that such striving, indifferent to anything other than its object, namely revenge, is truly unbecoming of a nation “dedicated to the strengthening and prosperity of the fatherland”—to quote from the preamble of the Armenian constitution.)

Yet there are Armenians in positions of power or influence who nonetheless believe the opposite. By way of conclusion, here is what, at a minimum, this sort of thinking would need to entail in practice. *First*, the sudden discovery of massive hydrocarbon deposits in Armenia or the country's rapid transformation into the Singapore of the Silk Road region. *Second*, the aptitude to safely push Turkey back out of the South Caucasus. *Third*, the ability to incentivize the ‘international community’—or, more accurately, the West (e.g., the U.S., NATO, the EU, France, and Germany)—to engage in the region more seriously than it ever has. And *fourth*, the wherewithal to entice Russia to actively and exclusively support Armenia's maximalist position by any means

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49 One recent formulation, used in the context of Azerbaijan's nascent policy towards the liberated territories, is “the ‘three Rs’: re-construction, re-integration, re-population.” See Stevens, C., “For Azerbaijan, what comes after the military victory?,” *Eureporter*, January 8, 2021, available at: <https://www.eureporter.co/world/azerbaijan-world/2021/01/08/for-azerbaijan-what-comes-after-the-military-victory/> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

necessary—up to and including a readiness to engage in an offensive military campaign against Azerbaijan (and almost certainly Turkey) for the sake of land it has consistently recognized as being Azerbaijan’s sovereign territory. We cannot leave it unsaid that a necessary prerequisite to the successful instauration of these novel geopolitical circumstances on the part of Armenia would be the wholesale political isolation, economic constriction, and military disassembly of Azerbaijan. We can therefore only hope that sagacity and common sense prevail in Yerevan, for it would truly be foolhardy for Armenia to henceforth advocate, much less pursue, policies that would compound the effects of what amounts to a capitulation by burdening another generation of its citizens with the perpetuation of illusions and the reality of poverty.