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Geopolitical Keystone

Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Historian Peter Frankopan concludes his magisterial sweep of world history, entitled *The Silk Roads* (2015), by noting that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, “networks and connections are quietly being knitted together across the spine of Asia; or rather, they are being restored. The Silk Roads are rising again.” The Caspian-Black Sea mega-region, to use the formulation of Amur Hajiyev, director of the Modern Turkey Study Center at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, serves as the buckle connecting these various belts together—linking the northern Middle East with Central Asia and Southeastern Europe. Former U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan Matthew Bryza prefers the term “greater Caspian region,”

which he defines as “the area stretching from India to the Black and Mediterranean Seas with the Caspian Sea at the center.”

A recent revival of the term “Silk Road region” is perhaps to be preferred. It is defined much in the same way as Bryza in terms of east-west boundaries, but adds, with purposeful imprecision, the Siberian steppe as a northern boundary, then sweeps down in a southerly direction towards the Persian Gulf and up and back westward across the Fertile Crescent and the Levant to the Mediterranean.

Whichever term is used, 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.

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The Silk Road region is emerging as the central east-west interchange between the European Union (population of 500 million with a \$19.6 trillion gross domestic product) and China (1.4 billion people and a GDP of \$22.5 trillion), with a north-south corridor connecting India (1.3 billion people with a \$2.7 trillion GDP) with Russia (144 million people and a \$1.7 trillion GDP) and Turkey (83 million and \$770 billion GDP).

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 Eu-

ropean neighborhood and the European Union itself. Arguably, the Silk Road region is emerging 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.

Moreover, in conditions of “great power competition”—where the possibility exists that competition

between major powers like China and the United States could tip over into confrontation—other interconnectors, such as the Arctic northern route or the “maritime roads” running through the Indo-Pacific basin—face the possibility of interruption or even interdiction. The challenge, therefore, is to keep the Silk Road region stable but also to keep open its interconnecting

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channels linking the most critical regions of the world. The countries of this region, if they embrace their position as a central keystone of international relations, can guarantee that their interchanges will remain open, even in the event that other east-west and north-south

routes go down due to environmental issues or political and economic challenges.

The Silk Road region—with Azerbaijan at its geopolitical center—is located at the seams of the global system and is positioned to serve as a critical mediator between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings. In turn, the

security and prosperity of almost all countries is now dependent on a series of transnational economic, security, and political networks that transfer capital, information, goods, and services across borders.

As deputy prime minister of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev has noted, this region “has a unique geographical location, and many transportation corridors span our country. In addition to the East-West Trans-Caspian Corridor, North-South, South-West and North-West international transportation corridors pass through Azerbaijan.” Safeguarding these interconnections ought to be the top priority for Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. By acting as the keystone state of a keystone region of the world, Azerbaijan secures its position as one of the world’s influential “middle powers” (in the words of Esmira Jafarova of the Baku-based AIR Center)—and can act as the gatekeeper and guarantor of one of the world economic system’s principal passageways.

Keystone Region

While the Silk Roads running across Eurasia were a defining feature of antiquity, for much of the twentieth century the focus was on disconnection and disassociation. Following the collapse of the Tsarist empire, the

newly-independent states of the Caucasus only had a brief period to try and secure their position as intermediaries between east and west until their sovereignty was snuffed out by the Soviet Union. Soviet power was used to forcibly sever the cultural and economic ties of the Silk Road region with its western, southern, and eastern neighbors. Because of the geographic determinism of Winston Churchill’s famous 1946 address at Westminster College, we have grown accustomed to conceiving of the “Iron Curtain” as stretching across the continent of Europe. But there was no less an iron curtain running from the Bulgarian-Greek-Turkish frontier, across the Black and Caspian Seas, and dividing Transcaucasia and Central Asia from Turkey, Iran, and South Asia. After the Sino-Soviet split, there was a similar barrier isolating China from Central Asia.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the artificial corralling of the region’s trade and transport networks to run through the Russian center ended. Azerbaijan and other states in the region looked to re-establish their pre-Soviet contacts and connections. The driving imperative, however, was that the United States, in the formulation of *Die Zeit* publisher-editor Josef Joffe, would serve as the “hub” of the new global order.

During the 1990s, the focus for countries like Azerbaijan was to rebalance the northern vector (towards a post-Soviet Russia) with a western vector that would connect the Silk Road region to the United States via the trans-Atlantic corridor. Based on the geostrategic logic as outlined in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s famous 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article (“A Geostrategy for Eurasia”), the Silk Road region would become the easternmost annex of the Euro-Atlantic world, while the rest of Asia would connect eastward across the Pacific into the American hub. The geographic concept of the “continental divide”—the point at which rivers on one side flow towards a different ocean than on the other—applied here: the Caspian Sea would serve as the geoeconomic continental divide between the Atlantic and Pacific basins.

The “hub and spokes” approach was grounded in an assumption that the United States would, for the foreseeable future, remain in what *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer had termed the “unipolar moment”—where no significant alternative centers of power would emerge in the international system—and that the United States would be able to redraw the political and economic geography of the region. This vision of the United States sitting at the center

of a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific network has not quite come to pass, both because the United States itself has turned away from this approach, especially under the Trump administration, but also because of the rise and resurgence of other major powers, starting with Russia and China.

For the countries of the Silk Road region, the new post-Soviet lines of communication westward are being augmented not only by a refurbished northern route but also the enhancing of eastward and southern connectivities to Southern and Eastern Asia and the Middle East. Competing and complementary projects—especially those sponsored by the United States, the European Union, and China—mean that the “geoeconomics of Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe are becoming spatially reconfigured by connectivity,” as Leiden University’s Mohammadbagher Forough has concluded. But it also requires a deft approach to balance and coordinate competing interests, especially to ensure that the region does not become a zone of geopolitical confrontation.

In general, the United States remains the principal hub of the global political and economic order, but there are other centers of power and influence emerging which

will make it very difficult for Washington to coordinate under a single agenda. This has created conditions that Ian Bremmer terms the GZero world—where the United States, on its own, can no longer set the global agenda but where no other power or group of stakeholders are prepared to take up those burdens, either. Each of the major powers also finds it more difficult to project and sustain power the further it extends from their core areas.

The Silk Road region is a particularly good example of a geography in which all major players have a presence, but no one player can dominate. And despite talk that in a GZero world globalization will continue to fracture, economic interconnectedness remains intact. In such conditions, it is incumbent on the states of the Silk Road region to guarantee that at least this major interlocking corridor between the world's principal political and economic centers remains open and functioning. In many respects, the Silk Road region reflects a state of affairs that Council of Foreign Relations president Richard Haass defines as “nonpolarity” in which regional security is determined “not

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by one or two even several states but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power.”

As Richard Sokolsky and Eugene Rumer of the

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace conclude in a recent paper:

The United States and China will remain superpowers in the major dimensions of power (that is, military, economic, technological, and diplomatic), but there will be multiple power centers—at both the international (like the United Nations) and regional levels, such as the European Union, India, Japan, and Russia in its self-proclaimed sphere of privileged interests—that are capable of exercising influence in specific areas. Nonstate actors like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple—as well as transnational forces, such as pandemic diseases; jihadist terrorism; and populist, nationalist, and nativist movements—will affect global security and prosperity.

This creates conditions that Turkish political scientist Tarık Oğuzlu describes as “contested multipolarity” as the United States loses its ability to unilaterally set the global agenda. This development is even more pronounced when one considers the balances of power

in the greater Silk Road region. As Sokolsky and Rumer note, these factors “pose major obstacles to the emergence of a hegemonic power in the critical geopolitical regions of Eurasia.”

Given this reality, the challenge for the countries of the Silk Road region is to ensure that the negative form of multipolarity—what the U.S. National Security Strategy describes as “great power competition”—does not produce contestation that will be destructive. The tragedies of Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (in 2014) are stark warnings of what happens when a country's preferred partner is unable or unwilling to offer effective security guarantees and other great powers are prepared to intervene—to the point of using force—to defend their interests. In short, governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv both hoped that a major superpower patron (namely, the United States) would be prepared to reshape the realities of both physical and political geography on their behalves—a task that Washington was neither able nor willing to fulfill.

If a great power patron that can protect its client from the vicissitudes of great power competition is unavailable, then an embrace of nonpolarity may make greater strategic sense. As a foreign policy strategy, the pursuit of nonpolarity

within conditions of “contested multipolarity” expands on the concept of neutrality as the latter concept has traditionally been understood. Neutrality implies equidistance from all contenders, but often has conveyed a passive and even disengaged approach to world affairs, as reflected in Switzerland's decision for many decades not even to sign the Charter of the United Nations and join the organization. Nonpolarity, in contrast, is an active approach in which constant engagement with all the major stakeholders is a *sine qua non*. Nonpolarity recognizes that in conditions of a GZero 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.

Nonpolarity and Integrative Power

The Silk Road region is one of the few areas in the world where all the major global players have interests and influence. It is the point where the European Union's “eastern partnerships” and Western New Silk Road initiatives intersect with China's Belt and

Road Initiative and connect with the Indo-Iranian-Russian “north-south” route. When one looks at the major foreign investors in Azerbaijan, for instance, what is striking is that all five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the leading countries of the European Union are represented, as well as key Middle Eastern players. Indeed, Azerbaijan is one of the few countries in the world where American, French, German, Turkish, Chinese, Iranian, Russian, Emirati, Dutch, Indian, and Japanese companies might end up as *de facto*—or even *de jure*—partners. Lastly, the Silk Road region is a place where all of the major military-security players and blocs have the ability to project power and to operate.

This means that no major power center can pursue what can be termed a “denial/compellence” strategy in the region: denying access to other key players while attempting to compel the countries of the region to exclusively affiliate to their position. Moreover, because of the intermodal linkages that crisscross the region, the benefits for keeping these ways open—the China to Europe east-west link, the north-south connection between Russia and Iran, the American transport corridor to Central Asia—are more important than risking a complete closure by trying to deny anyone else access.

The Silk Road region, both by virtue of physical and political geography, is not well set up to serve as the first type of geopolitical region: the frontline or barrier region. Places like the Baltic Sea littoral or the East Asian “first island chain” in the western Pacific form cohesive, compact territories that, while they are points of interchange between major powers, have had the opportunity to affiliate to a great power or regional security bloc in order to serve as an effective barrier that limits the ability of others to project influence. However, for this to work there needs to be a set of geographic and political criteria in place. In the case of the Baltic littoral, this region, although it borders Russia, is fully integrated into the European economic order and can be integrated under the defensive umbrella of the North Atlantic alliance. The East Asian island and peninsular states—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines—all enjoy formal alliances with the United States that predate the rise of China.

The challenges of maintaining and expanding American alliances in the immediate post-Cold War period was relatively low, with costs quite manageable; but the further into the Silk Road region heartland the United States has attempted to expand, the higher have been the

associated costs. Moreover, in geographic terms, the United States, as a maritime power, finds it more difficult and costly to create bilateral security arrangements further inland where major continental powers enjoy a greater preponderance of influence and ability. The admission of the Baltic states, as well as the western Black Sea countries of Bulgaria and Romania, may have marked the high-water point for the expansion of NATO, while the United States has found limits in developing its “quartet” as a basis for South and East Asian regional security.

From the American perspective, the situation with regards to the Silk Road region, in contrast, is different: therein, it is far more expensive and dangerous for Washington to try to bar any major power’s exercise of power and projection. Over the past several years, a series of crises and war scares—in Syria, the Black Sea, and the Persian Gulf—involving, at times, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and members of the NATO alliance—all highlighted the risks that Azerbaijan and other countries of the region might face from choosing sides. And as China increases its footprint in the area and India expands its presence, this danger only increases. Moreover, the threat remains that the region

could become a proxy battlefield in any sustained great power competition.

In order to avoid being torn apart by clashes between the major power centers, a sounder geopolitical strategy for the region consists in adopting an approach based on two concepts: integrative power and nonpolarity. With regards to integrative power, Amitai Etzioni defines it as 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.

In policy terms, a strategy of nonpolarity is executed by the practice of what Azerbaijani political scientists Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova have described as “transactional neutrality.” Transactional neutrality is based both on the countries of the region but also every major power center accepting the reality that the states

of the Silk Road region will have economic, political, and even security relationships with every great power and bloc and that these relationships will be non-exclusive. Within the region, a country would forgo the opportunity to enter into an exclusive relationship with one bloc (the neutrality part) but would purchase guarantees that it retains the sovereign right to make choices which may not always align with every preference of the outside actor.

This would require the countries of the region to adopt the mindset of being “keystone states.” As already noted above, such states are critical 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. For the Silk Road region to serve as a keystone, it requires its own keystone state to utilize its integrative power.

Per the assessment undertaken by Jafarova, Azerbaijan is poised to function as a leading “middle power” with both regional and global influence precisely because of its ability to coordinate the efforts

to develop and maintain the Silk Road region as one of these globally vital keystone regions. It also means managing relations with the major power centers to incentivize their acceptance of the Silk Road region as a keystone region—that its effective neutrality and integrative position is a greater benefit than attempting to deny others access to the area. In other words, Azerbaijan must embrace its position as a keystone state for a keystone region.

Keystone State

In the immediate post-Soviet period, Azerbaijan and the other states of the region wanted to escape the legacy of imperial control from Moscow (both during the rule of the tsars as well as the Soviet experience) and firmly establish their independence and sovereignty.

To rebalance its international relations, a country like Azerbaijan had to pursue what in the short term would be a zero-sum approach; re-establishing former relationships (with Turkey and Iran) or new linkages (with Europe, the Middle East, India, and China) of necessity subtracted from the overall tally of Soviet-era connectivities with

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a post-Soviet Russia. Matters were not helped by a clumsy approach taken by Boris Yeltsin’s administration, which attempted to corral the states of the Silk Road region into Russian-led regional institutions and tried to block the establishment of corridors and links that would bypass Russian territory. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, a post-Soviet Russia could not maintain the artificiality of an iron curtain in the Silk Road region, as not only Turkey and Iran but more importantly the European Union, NATO, and China could penetrate the region even without Russia’s permission.

As long as Russia posed a threat to the independence of the states of the area, starting with Azerbaijan, it was only natural that governments in Baku and other capitals would seek partners that could counterbalance Moscow. However, President Heydar Aliyev correctly assessed that the United States or Europe would not be prepared to risk confronting Russia in order to fundamentally reorder the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the region. He instead committed Azerbaijan to a policy of favoritism towards none with

all the major regional and global actors and to avoid dependence on any one power.

Under Heydar Aliyev’s leadership, Azerbaijan sought to position itself as the central terminal uniting the north-south route from Europe through Russia and Iran to India with the emerging infrastructure network connecting China and the West. The government found ways to make sure that every key player had incentives to maintain Azerbaijan’s stability and independence.

Baku marketed itself to Turkey and Europe as a source for Eurasian energy independent from Russia, but still found ways to give Moscow and Tehran stakes in its energy industry. It cultivated its position as a nominally Shia Muslim state interested in good ties with Israel without compromising its outreach to the Arab world and Iran. The Baku Process that has emerged from these dialogues further promotes interaction and discussion between the Council of Europe and the Islamic countries of the Middle East. Finally, in geoeconomic terms, Heydar Aliyev ensured that

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positions in major energy and infrastructure projects were extended across a wide range of American, European, Middle Eastern, Russian, Eurasian, and Asian firms, so that no one would be excluded from the development of the country's oil and gas deposits and no one would have any incentive to block the shipment of these resources to global markets.

This approach has continued under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev. In a February 2019 interview, he stressed the importance of the region's keystone position:

We live in this geography, in this region. Of course, relations with neighbors are of particular importance for any country. I believe that any country wants to see a friendly country in its vicinity. In recent years, we have further strengthened friendly relations with all our neighbors [...]. If we did not have good relations with our neighbors, could we have implemented energy and transport projects? Of course not! I have already mentioned that Azerbaijan has become a transport center of Eurasia. Could we have achieved this without our neighbors? Of course not! We are already creating a cooperation format covering a wider geography—not only with close neighbors. It is this format of cooperation that allows us the opportunity to successfully and promptly implement giant transnational projects. This is why such an approach is of strategic importance for us.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is predicated on safeguarding open access to the region whilst ensuring it is not subject to the whims of the major players but has the military, economic, and political resources to project a degree of influence in world affairs. Azerbaijan also has a defense posture configured around what is sometimes termed the “porcupine defense”—having enough capabilities in play to make the costs of trying to use military force as a tool of coercion against the country too costly for any would-be aggressor.

In other words, Azerbaijan's embrace of a neutral status—formally affirmed in 2011 when the country became a member of the Non-aligned Movement—is taken from a position of strength, not weakness. This is because Azerbaijan, while not pursuing formal membership in different security institutions, does not keep its distance from them but engages with each—and uses that engagement to bolster its capabilities. As Baku-based regional analyst Rahim Rahimov concluded:

Azerbaijan frames neutrality as key to its independent foreign policy. However, making a sovereign choice on which bloc (if any) to join is also an independent policy. Due to its small power limitations, Azerbaijan is not in a position to influence the positions of big powers or single-handedly change the regional geopolitical situa-

tion. Therefore, Baku pursues a foreign policy strategy that seeks to alter those aspects of the status quo it sees as unfavorable, instead of siding with a specific bloc. [...] Pursuit of this strategy, thus, has meant diversifying Azerbaijan's foreign policy partnerships with different multilateral unions and military alliances by developing closer ties with individual member states but without committing itself to any one specific bloc.

Moreover, for every move to engage with Western institutions, there is a corresponding initiative towards a non-Western organization. This is not, as Ilham Aliyev has noted, because the country is pursuing a balanced policy for the sake of balance, but comes out of an assessment of the country's national interest—and the importance of positioning the country as a keystone interlocutor and trusted intermediary. It is the outgrowth of what Valiyev and Mamishova describe as an “‘interest-based’ multidimensional policy.”

But for a country that has investors from all the major players and has cargo transiting along east-west and north-south routes, having a state that can guarantee access through this important zone is critical. Thus, Azerbaijan is both a “dialogue partner” of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has a robust partnership with

NATO; it also has a bilateral security relationship with both Russia and the United States. This creates, in the words of Deputy Secretary General of NATO for Political Affairs and Security Policy James Appathurai, a “unique orientation: Baku is not an ally of Russia, but it does not seek membership in NATO,” he continued. NATO has “excellent cooperation with Azerbaijan. A good example is that it hosts meetings between our military leadership and the Russian top military leadership on its territory. We are developing important cooperation in this direction.”

This enables Azerbaijan, acting on behalf of the Silk Road region as a whole (one could say), to take important steps to secure it from the risks of geopolitical competition. For instance, the Caspian Convention neutralizes the sea, barring the military forces of any non-littoral states from operating there—which helps to reassure Russia and Iran, among others, that this vital maritime zone cannot become a vulnerability. This is why Caspian-Eurasia Center's director Ksenia Tyurenkova sees the ratification as setting a “new stage in [the] development of relations between the Caspian states, about [the] possibility of intensification of integration processes”—especially between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.

At the same time, outside countries, starting with the United States, have worked to enhance Azerbaijan's own capabilities. The United States, the European Union, and even China can trust that Azerbaijan will be able to keep the Caspian Sea open for transit—whether U.S. assistance to Central Asia or Chinese shipping transiting to Europe. Thus, as member of the Majlis Rasim Musabeyov noted, “the strengthening of Azerbaijan's control over its land, sea, and air borders meets the strategic interests of the U.S., whose companies have invested many billions of dollars in oil and gas projects in the Caspian, and the U.S. military conducts transit to Afghanistan via Azerbaijan.”

Similar trends can be observed in economic matters. Azerbaijan maintains trade relationships with both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the European Union, but in a way that avoids the trap which befell the Ukrainians in 2013-2014 of having to choose between productive relations with both blocs. In fact, Azerbaijan is positioned to create preferential customs zones with both the EU and Russia, which makes Azerbaijan more attractive as a center for commerce and trade.

Moreover, Baku's engagement with both the EU and the EAEU does not come at the expense of taking part in the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, as member of the

Majlis Javid Osmanov has noted: “Azerbaijan, which is one of the important countries of the historical Silk Road, located in the center of Eurasia, at the junction of East and West, today is actively involved in the creation of international trade corridors, based on its historical traditions.” This includes the north-south corridor connecting Russia to Iran as well as the trans-Caspian cargo fleet and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway for east-west transit, with trade in all directions utilizing Baku cargo terminals and the Alat trade port.

For Moscow, the Azerbaijani keystone is essential as part of a much larger arc designed to connect the Arctic Ocean basin with the Indian Ocean. As Elkhan Alasgarov of the Baku Network concludes: “The geopolitical project of the North-South corridor, which is of strategic importance for Russia and which the country is implementing jointly with Azerbaijan and Iran, has its logical continuation to the East.”

At the same time, Azerbaijan has been marketing itself as an alternative conduit for Russia to Western markets and as a sanctions-free interconnector between Europe and Russia. In turn, Europeans also see the benefits. Outgoing British MEP Sajjad Karim noted that Azerbaijan, as the keystone state of the region, “has the opportunity to be a real transport hub and a link between east and west, north and

south. These are the ambitions that it has, and it's certainly in Europe's interest to be part of the attainment of those ambitions.”

Strategic Hedging

In essence, Azerbaijan has decided on a foreign policy of not having to choose between good relations with Russia, China, and Iran, and good relations with the countries of the Middle East, the United States, and the European Union (the latter being Azerbaijan's single largest trading partner).

Because of this, Azerbaijan has emerged as a trusted mediator and interlocutor, bringing together partners, rivals, and competitors. As Ilham Aliyev himself noted, beyond Azerbaijan's bilateral relationships (with the U.S., Russia, Turkey, etc.) “there are already formats of trilateral and even quadrilateral cooperation with our neighbors. I should also note that Azerbaijan is the initiator of this.”

At a time when most other channels of communication have closed, Azerbaijan serves as the host for regular meetings between senior Russian and American military officials, as noted above. Reiterating Appathurai's comments, it is not accidental that Baku was chosen to host these contacts—because both countries' military establishments have trust in their

Azeri partners and view Baku as neutral ground. Azerbaijan has also emerged as the linchpin of the trilateral Russia-Iran-Azerbaijan and Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan formats, and as one of the key bridges between OPEC and non-OPEC members in regulating and stabilizing global energy markets. Thus, Baku can emerge as one of the centers where the leading geopolitical players can dialogue—and this helps to sustain support among all for Azerbaijan's ability to maintain its independent stance.

Thus geographic position and the deft wielding of diplomacy allows Azerbaijan, on behalf of the larger Caspian area and perhaps the entire Silk Road region, to engage in “strategic hedging.” Every major global actor now has an interest in maintaining an effective keystone region, because their own prosperity and security are best served by this arrangement. Rather than relying on great power competition and a zero-sum approach, Azerbaijan's focus is on complementarity, not rivalry, within the framework of a regional transport and energy hub in which all of these countries participate and benefit. No wonder that in that famous *Foreign Affairs* essay, Zbigniew Brzezinski concluded that Azerbaijan was a strategic pivot state. ^{BD}