

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 4 | No. 1 | Fall 2020

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Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-2017)

My Friendship with America's Geopolitical Sage

Hafiz Pashayev

History is never at a stand-still for us in Azerbaijan. Over the past century or so—not to go back further in time—we have witnessed multiple revolutions, coups, and regime changes in our neighborhood; participated in two world wars; and experienced the travesties and tragedies of successive foreign occupations of our lands. The renewal of our independence coincided with the implosion of the Soviet Union—one of the largest empires in human history; the entrenching of American pre-eminence; the return of China and India as economic powerhouses; and the evolution of the European Community into the European Union.

All these historical trends have been felt in modern Azerbaijan, a country that belongs to an overlapping set of regions and civilizations. We are, in a sense, a quintessential “borderland country,” a formulation made famous by prominent historian Tadeusz Swietochowski; but unlike quite a few other borderlands, the political and economic emancipation of today’s Azerbaijan has helped to complete the transformation of our country from an object of great power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others—into a strong and independent actor in international affairs: a keystone state imbued with a strong and unified national identity in a part of the world that remains a critical seam of world politics.

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I had a responsibility to advance this national endeavor throughout my tenure as Azerbaijan’s inaugural ambassador to the United States (1992-2006)—a period of service to the state that more or less coincided with what has been described as America’s unipolar era. It was truly a unique moment in history: the old diplomatic manuals were no longer of much use whilst the new ones had not yet been written. Most thoughtful, seasoned practitioners in America and across the globe were at a loss to predict with confidence the course of events to come. Some celebrated, other mourned; many were hopeful, many more were confused or even frightened.

It is against this backdrop that I came to meet a truly extraordinary individual: one of America’s elder statesmen and most renowned geopolitical strategists, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-2017). By the time I met him, Zbig (as his friends called him without exception) no longer held any formal position in American government. But his influence had hardly waned. He was, in short, the “American foreign policy sage,” as his most prominent biographer called him, alongside, one could say, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, and perhaps one or two others.

Zbig’s career in public service began more than thirty years before we met in Washington, DC: he served as an adviser to the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Hubert H. Humphrey. He served on the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Council from 1966 to 1968. In the early 1970s, he co-founded the Trilateral Commission together with David Rockefeller, serving as its director from 1973 to 1976. He was presidential candidate Jimmy Carter’s principal foreign policy adviser in 1976 and went on to serve as President Carter’s national security adviser from 1977 to 1981. At various points in his career, he was a member of the faculty of Harvard University, Columbia University, and the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), a division of Johns Hopkins University. When I met him, Zbig was a member of the Board of Trustees and Advisory Board Co-chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), arguably Washington’s most influential think tank. He was a prolific writer, a sharp policy advocate, and an exceptionally thoughtful geopolitical strategist who authored hundreds of books and essays over his career. His body of work was so large, in fact, that at the time of his death in 2017 there was no complete record of it.

Zbig was also one of the most prominent foreign witnesses and American advocates of Azerbaijan’s national achievement—of our reemergence onto what he called the “grand chessboard” of world politics—and our stratagem

to position ourselves in “axial Eurasia” (again, his words) most advantageously within that geopolitical context. He was one of those interesting and powerful people from whom I came to learn a great deal, but also someone who was willing to learn from me and my country’s experience and history. Certainly, many of these people became good, lifelong friends; yet Zbig continues to carry a special place in my heart and I deeply miss him these days.

As already mentioned, Zbig and I first met in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union had just collapsed in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Just like other ambassadors of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, I was eager to promote my country’s interests within the American political establishment, strengthen bilateral relations, and help secure state sovereignty. Zbig was, of course, quite a sophisticated expert on Russia and on our part of the world—and he was also someone who fully understood the geopolitical importance of supporting the newly independent states. He grasped the tectonic changes that were taking place in the world and possessed the ability to examine emerging trends and consider their likely consequences like few others.

For a grand strategist like Zbig, those were exciting times, indeed. His analyses of the events taking place in our region, together with his speeches and activities, were very helpful to us—both in order to draw attention to our region and to provide a better understanding of American policy.

Above all else, Zbigniew Brzezinski was a great American patriot. In every one of his endeavors, his main priority was always to defend the national interests of the United States and, if at all possible, advance American relations with other countries. He also considered it improper to receive financial or other sorts of contributions from lobbying groups, including those linked to promoting the narrow interests of ethnic minorities residing in his country. His main vision and goal was to do what he thought best for the United States, at both strategic and tactical levels.

In that context, Zbig was consistently sincere and frank in offering friendly criticism of this or that aspect of American foreign policy-making, including the process whereby particular financial considerations advanced by various groups unduly influenced that process. In our private conversations as well as in public fora, he repeatedly expressed concern that special interests could deleteriously affect American democracy and

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American national interests. For instance, this led him to publicly criticize Section 907 (entitled “Restriction on Assistance to Azerbaijan”) of the Freedom Support Act (1992) and its ban on any kind of direct U.S. government-to-government aid to Azerbaijan. This section was incorporated into the bill as the result of a successful lobbying effort on the part of ethnic-Armenian organizations and hurt the development of U.S.-Azerbaijan strategic relations.

For such views, he was often disliked by ethnic lobbies. But he didn’t care because he always spoke his mind and acted in manner entirely consistent with his understanding of the principles and beliefs that constitute American patriotism.

For example, Zbig famously disagreed with the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003. When Barack Obama became president, Zbig was very hopeful about him. He thought that Obama, who had been elected with the help of millions of grassroots donations by ordinary Americans, would be able to launch a new era in U.S. politics in which the role of corporate contributions and special-interest lobbying efforts would diminish. He was impressed by this young, dynamic, and promising leader. Yet after a few years I could tell that his expectations had turned into disappointment.

Zbig came to believe that Obama did not fully understand the importance of continuing American leadership in the world, that he failed to put together the right team of foreign policy advisers, and that he lacked interest in the post-Soviet space. Notwithstanding breakthrough agreements with Iran and Cuba, Obama’s efforts to reset relations with Russia did not produce good results—and during his presidency, the United States effectively retreated from the Silk Road region, or broader Eurasia as some still call it.

In the person of Zbigniew Brzezinski I had found someone who well understood Azerbaijan’s dream for full and secure independence, our strong national desire to protect our sovereignty, and our country’s challenges with governance issues. He saw the passion in our people and he helped us to keep that fire alive. “There is a personal sense of satisfaction in having been a witness to your nation’s emancipation and to the consolidation of your independence in shaping your national destiny, which is now fully in your hands. For all of you here, it is a time of national renaissance. There is an element of ecstatic emancipation in the sense of having obtained—regained—one’s independence. It is now a destiny of

the future—fuller, more hopeful, more fulfilling,” Zbig would say in 2003 in Baku, on the occasion of the receipt of an honorary doctoral degree from Baku State University.

Over the course of my ambassadorship and after I returned to Azerbaijan, Zbig and I had many discussions and conversations about the successes and mistakes of the country’s young democracy. Notably, he always looked at the larger, more strategic picture rather than criticizing us for one or another sort of concrete political act. He knew well that democratic development is a long process and requires many years of hard work. “In essence, every person knows that these three processes—consolidation of independence, transformation of economy, and democratization of politics—do not happen overnight. They are difficult and slow processes. Some move ahead of others,” Zbig said during his Baku State University address.

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In short, Zbigniew Brzezinski knew well that it was critically important for Azerbaijan to preserve its national freedom, and he supported our vision.

Zbig also made concrete contributions to helping my country and our region stand on its own two feet. For instance, it was precisely he who delivered in 1996 an important letter from U.S. President Bill Clinton to President Heydar Aliyev regarding the strategic potential of a new oil pipeline that would carry Caspian oil to world markets whilst bypassing both Russia and Iran. At the time, this proposed pipeline was very much contested by regional powerhouses, with major oil companies also questioning the wisdom of such an investment.

The delivery of Clinton’s missive reinforced Heydar Aliyev’s confidence to boldly move ahead with this idea. In future meetings and negotiations, our president would make reference to this letter: in many ways, Zbig’s special delivery came to be seen as a solid foundation for intense talks that culminated in the landmark Istanbul Declaration in support of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which was signed on the margins of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit in the presence of presidents Clinton, Aliyev, Süleyman Demirel of Turkey, Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, and

Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. Later, I read somewhere that the American president had said that the series of agreements that made BTC possible constituted one of his administration’s “most important foreign policy achievements.”

Azerbaijan eventually managed to build what ended up being a lengthy, 1,340 km-long pipeline through Georgia and Turkey thanks to the strategic vision and strong political will of Heydar Aliyev, thus permanently linking Azerbaijan to its Western friends and strategic energy partners. The leadership skills and diplomatic wherewithal required to achieve such a game-changing project were truly of exceptional caliber. My country and our partners will all continue to reap the benefits of this grand endeavor, which for many decades to come will continue to affect the strategic map of the Silk Road region. BTC has gone on to serve as a magnet for other regional connectivity projects, such as the South Caucasus gas pipeline (SCP) and its expansion (SCPX), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway project. The communities straddling these strategic projects—in fact, the populations of the region as a whole—have gained much in terms of prosperity and development from the moment these began to see the light of day.

Another way Zbig helped Azerbaijan was to provide guidance in helping me and my embassy staff understand how to better position ourselves diplomatically in the American capital. At times, listening to his explanations was akin to attending a private master class in American foreign policy decisionmaking. Zbig repeatedly stressed that the United States was too big to be able to focus on small, individual countries. A successful strategy, he said, would require uniting with likeminded regional allies in order to position ourselves in Washington as a larger grouping. The three Baltic states, he told me in one of our early meetings, were quick to learn this strategy and began acting as one in their lobbying efforts to gain support for acceding to NATO and, later, the European Union. Unfortunately, the three South Caucasus republics, despite early hopes and aspirations, failed to repeat that same strategy and instead got bogged down in regional hostilities. For example, Georgia openly aspired to NATO membership whereas Armenia allied itself with Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Azerbaijan later tried to create another regional grouping—the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM)—that

brought our country on the same page as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This novel regional grouping soon became very popular in those American decisionmaking circles that focused on our region, seeing some potential in this collaboration. When Uzbekistan joined GUAM a few years later, it further increased hopes for deeper cooperation and integration. Most importantly, GUAM helped draw the attention of the American political establishment to this part of the world.

It is hardly coincidental that Zbig's influential book, *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), focuses on three GUAM countries—Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan—and called them linchpins of greater Eurasia: Uzbekistan as a powerhouse and focal center of Central Asia, Azerbaijan as a hub of the South Caucasus and the Caspian region, and Ukraine as an important republic southwest of Russia. “Without Ukraine, Russia can't be an empire,” he would famously write.

In short, Brzezinski believed in the potential of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. He saw their strategic importance and felt that the development and progress of these states might have a positive impact on Russia itself. He was hopeful and optimistic about our region, which helps to explain why he proposed to bring students, academics, and civil society actors from our respective countries, as well as from Russia and others, to the United States to learn more about the American system of governance. He was very supportive of all such people-to-people contacts.

Was he afraid that Azerbaijan and other states in the Silk Road region would lose their independence? Perhaps he was. He was rooting for us and he didn't want us to fail. I remember Zbig's reaction to some negative remarks about Iran made by Abdulfaz Elchibey during the brief period in which he served as president of Azerbaijan (1992-1993). Zbig was quick to say that this was not the right move because troubled relations with Iran is the last thing a war-torn Azerbaijan needed at that particular time (by 1993 Azerbaijan was severely suffering from the occupation, refugee, and IDP crisis, and was being threatened by further Armenian military incursions).

Speaking of IDPs and refugees, Zbig showed genuine compassion and concern about their plight and sorrow. Azerbaijan's humanitarian catastrophe upset him so much that during a 2003 visit to a temporary IDP camp, Zbig refused to join the lavish dinner that the local mayor had unwisely arranged in his honor.

I remember how in planning for that trip, Zbig had asked me to organize a meeting with prominent Azerbaijani intellectuals: poets, painters,

sculptors, and writers. Now I understand why he wanted to speak to that particular group. He wanted to see in their eyes the passion and thirst for freedom and independence. And he saw it indeed: the tea-time discussion lasted almost two and a half hours. “Azerbaijan is a country with profound intellectual potential, great cultural achievements, and a genuinely proud history,” Zbig would later say in aforementioned speech at Baku State University.

It is worth to note that Zbig always had in focus the values shared by Azerbaijan and the Euro-Atlantic community, alongside his understanding of where Baku fit in the range of American national interests and broader geopolitical considerations. He certainly felt our two nations shared the values of democracy, freedom, equality, and tolerance.

It is those same shared values to which U.S. President Woodrow Wilson has referred in May 1919 when he met with Alimardan bey Topchubashov, chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's parliament, during the Paris Peace Conference. This august co-founder of the first secular republic in the Muslim world had impressed the American president so much, that Wilson later remarked, in a speech he delivered in September of that year at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club, that the delegation from Azerbaijan “talked the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in respect of conceptions of right and justice.”

I think this legacy of shared values provided a historical foundation upon which Zbig and I were able to build in order to bring our countries closer to one another in the present.

One particular “project” with Brzezinski rises to my mind with a special joy of memory. In 1997, when we were planning a state visit for Heydar Aliyev to the United States (the first official visit by this grand statesman to the capital of the superpower), I had sought Zbig's advice on how to enrich the program of the agenda. He told me that many American policymakers would surely want to discuss the president's past experience as a non-voting and then full member of the Soviet Politburo (1976-1982, 1982-1987) and First Deputy Prime Minister of the USSR (1982-1987). Zbig then suggested we jointly organize a luncheon in Blair House (the official guesthouse of the President of the United States) with senior American establishment figures, who would surely enjoy conversing with President Aliyev.

The eleven-day visit in 1997 was a chance for Heydar Aliyev to show himself to the American political elite in a new form: as the proud head of state of an independent Azerbaijan who had parted with his Politburo past and

come to selflessly devote his life to the advancement of his nation's interests. Together, Zbig and I developed a list of invited guests to the event, which my friend had kindly agreed to moderate. Amongst those who accepted our co-signed invitations were Richard Armitage, Dick Cheney, Alexander Haig, Anthony Lake, Jessica Matthews, Colin Powell, James Schlesinger, and Brent Scowcroft. It was a fascinating discussion and constituted, in my view, the intellectual highlight of the state visit.

I remember how during the luncheon, one of the American dignitaries had asked the president if the Soviet Union would still have collapsed had he, Heydar Aliyev, been in charge instead of Mikhail Gorbachev. The president replied “no,” showing strong confidence in his leadership and managerial capabilities. A few minutes later, he came back to the subject: “it would have collapsed later, because its economic system was not right,” he said, adding that he would have managed the collapse in a much more orderly fashion. Such excellent discussions also continued later on in Zbig's own home, where the president had been invited to attend a private dinner as the guest of honor.

During the historic visit, Zbig was also asked by Georgetown University to introduce our president's public lecture at a specially organized public symposium. Instead of offering merely perfunctory or courteous remarks, Zbig seized the opportunity to make a substantive speech on what he called the “most strategically critical country” of the region. He recalled how a senior Clinton administration official had called the South Caucasus a “second grey zone,” with Central Europe being considered the first such zone. Zbig interpreted that to mean the following: “a zone of some strategic uncertainty, but a zone in which the United States has to be more actively engaged so that the area ceases to be a gray zone.”

I remember him saying in his speech that this “grey zone” terminology—in public he did not name the person who used it—could turn out to be a very significant signal if there was policy follow-through at the top decisionmaking level, because it would mean that America was ready to shift towards thinking about our region in terms of its strategic potential. Zbig went on to say this required deeper American engagement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which in turn required his country to exercise “impartiality.”

He was aware that the United States had just recently become a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, joining France and Russia. In light of this, Zbig

said America needed to “correct those elements in the American posture which detract from that impartiality”—and that failure to do so would “hurt the promotion of American national interests.” This was a clear reference to the aforementioned Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, among other things. Zbig went on to conclude his remarks with his typically scientific way of thinking about foreign policy matters. Resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue with enhanced participation by the United States, he said, is “in our interest, as well as in the interest of Azerbaijan. That, in my judgment, is a strategic agenda that we confront in order to advance that strategic relationship. To advance a strategic agenda we have to have genuine geostrategic cooperation with Azerbaijan.” Until his passing, I know this remained Zbig's considered view.

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The opportunity to observe Heydar Aliyev and Zbigniew Brzezinski up close during the president's 1997 official visit to the United States, as well as in several subsequent meetings, was a special delight: two great statesmen and grand strategists deep in thoughtful conversation. The topics they touched upon included the Soviet Union, Iran, Russia, the Cold War, the future of the region, and indeed the future of the international system.

I remember Zbig sharing with the president his vision for our part of the world: a region of open access, multiple participation, and the involvement of many nations in the development of future prosperity of the Caspian basin and beyond, including Central Asia. Zbig was against the idea of looking into our region from the perspective of Russia, advocating a more balanced policy.

Another time we met, Zbig had with him some words that Heydar Aliyev had recently spoken and proceeded to signal agreement with them:

I regard Azerbaijan's policy over the last ten years and in the future as independent of anybody's interests. It must be based on observing our own values. [...] We have no specific orientations in foreign policy. Our orientation is based on promoting by means of foreign policy activity the attainment of set objectives, the strengthening of Azerbaijan's place in the world, and also our economic development via mutually advantageous cooperation.

This strategic framework has been further enhanced under President Ilham Aliyev, whom I have heard describe Azerbaijan's approach to foreign relations in the following terms: “we pursue a balanced and independent

policy in the true sense of the word, uninfluenced by any external actor, and based on national interests and justice.”

I think Zbig would approve of the clarity and predictability of our foreign policy, of our striving to maintain full reliability with the world’s great powers and all our strategic partners, of our emphasis on economic self-empowerment, and of our principled adherence to the diplomatic golden rule of reciprocity. Because of the geopolitical importance he ascribed to our region, I am confident that Zbig would also encourage us to continue demonstrating a willingness to negotiate in good faith on the cardinal issue of liberating our occupied lands whilst endorsing the importance we have placed on verifying the sincerity of the other side’s intentions.

But I think most of all Zbig would salute Azerbaijan’s grandest achievement on the world stage, which I have already mentioned: namely, the transformation of our country from a mere object—a plaything of others—of international affairs, which had put our very existence in jeopardy in the early 1990s, into a strong, free, equal, proud, and active participant in the international system, which thanks to Ilham Aliyev’s leadership is fully capable of charting its own destiny.

Zbig was also willing to help develop bilateral economic ties. Back in 1995, a decision was made to set up the U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) in Washington, DC. The aim of this non-profit organization was to help foster economic and business ties between our two countries. Zbig was very supportive of this new and promising initiative and attended our events on several occasions whilst serving on its Board of Trustees. For instance, in 2000 Zbig moderated a USACC gala event in honor of Heydar Aliyev, going on to host in 2007 First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva at a USACC dinner as part of her tour of America in her capacity as Chairwoman of Azerbaijan’s parliamentary friendship group with the United States.

Zbig was not only my guide—one could even say my mentor—for understanding American politics; he was also my good friend. One of the highlights of our friendship was the annual New Year’s Day brunch he held at his home, and I always felt honored to be included on his carefully curated guestlist. Prominent policymakers and politicians, such as U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, the aforementioned Brent Scowcroft, and others were among those invited. These brunches provided me with invaluable opportunities to promote Azerbaijan and further

put my country on the radar of the American political establishment. Of special value were conversations I had with some of America’s most influential journalists and editors who also regularly attended Zbig’s New Year’s Day brunches. And on a more personal level, I was happy that our families quickly bonded and often exchanged visits to each other’s homes in DC.

It had been my dream of many years to return to academia after the completion of my diplomatic service. After my departure from the United States, I was honored to become the founding rector of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. We all know how Azerbaijan’s strengthening economy provided the country with both the need and the resources to open new embassies and diplomatic missions. Although the first years of independence witnessed many ambassadors that came from other fields, such as history, Arab studies, and the hard sciences, the new era and the country’s expanding diplomatic administration brought forth the need for a specialized training school. Many people

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jokingly called Azerbaijan’s embassy in DC the country’s “original diplomatic academy,” because the diplomatic skills of seven or eight future ambassadors were cultivated there during my tenure.

I had used the opportunity of my many meetings with my friend to discuss my plans with him and he very much supported the idea of establishing a full-scale university. Zbig’s encouragement helped us all to transform the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy into ADA University, the country’s flagship English-speaking institution of higher learning. Early on, I had invited Zbig to join our Board of Trustees, and I was gratified by his kind acceptance. It had been my dream to show him in person how our “green” campus continued to grow, but unfortunately we were never able to schedule another trip for him before he passed away. Although Zbig was not able to see our new facilities, his son Mark visited us in 2017 and together we planted a tree in the center of the campus in my friend’s memory.

Zbig very much valued Azerbaijan’s focus on development, our investment in education, our economic diversification plans, and the emphasis we put on building up our nation’s human potential. He knew well that the future of Azerbaijan greatly depended on such matters and saw how my vision for ADA University fit into that strategy. During his visit to our country

in 2003, he was awarded Honorary Doctorate degree at Azerbaijan's oldest and most reputable university, Baku State University. I only wish we could have done him the same honor at ADA University.

I recall also how I would call on Zbig each time I went back to DC for a visit after my ambassadorial term had come to an end. I somehow felt that on each occasion we were able to resume our wonderful and interesting discussions as if hardly a day had passed since the last conversation. His clear, sharp, and concise arguments continued to mesmerize. I remember one visit coincided with his return from China—a country he had visited regularly since the late 1970s, when as U.S. National Security Adviser he had played a pivotal role in establishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries, building on the foundation laid by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger a few years earlier. Zbig's eyes were full of spark and positive impressions about China's economic progress. He saw something big was coming and he kept talking about China all day long.

China was for him an opportunity more than a threat. Zbig understood there would be increasing policy differences between Washington and Beijing but thought that prudential management of what he felt was turning into the most important bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century could ensure things would not boil over. He had come across some articles that predicted a new cold war was looming on the horizon. I remember him talking about two key differences this possibility held in comparison to the actual Cold War. The first was political: China was not in the least interested in trying to impose its system on the rest of the world, he said. The other was economic: America and the Soviet Union never competed economically and were never interdependent economically. But China, he underscored, was growing in economic stature.

Avoiding a cold war with Beijing, in Zbig's view, was in the American interest: increased tension would make no strategic sense for either side. He also understood that sooner or later China would look west across the steppe towards the Caspian littoral and seize the investment opportunities on offer. He thought it would help balance the Russian influence, but he also felt this could be beneficial for both the region and Russia. At the Georgetown University symposium held during Heydar Aliyev's official visit in 1997, Zbig put it this way: "prosperity and peace in the region can help Russia modernize itself, democratize itself, and Europeanize itself"

I often jokingly referred to Zbig as a "mathematical political scientist," but it had more than a ring of truth to it. Rare among thinkers specializing in any subject, Zbig had what Pascal had termed *esprit de géométrie* as much as *esprit de finesse*. The former impressed me more, to be honest, because of my own academic background. I continue to be struck by his rigorously analytic, almost mathematical, approach to geopolitics to be found in his writings, where he is incredibly precise and to the point without ever failing to understand the big picture.

Some of his best works include the aforementioned *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), which I get the impression introduced him to a whole new generation of readers and admirers—especially in our part of the world, because of all his books it is the one most directly focused on the Silk Road region. Alongside a number of Zbig's other volumes, that one holds pride of place on my bookshelf at home.

I remember how on weekends in Washington I would sometimes go to used bookstores, and I would always look for his earliest books—those that

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were out of print at the time. One day, I found the one he had co-written with his lifelong friend Samuel Huntington in 1964 called *Political Power: USA/USSR*. It was at once a groundbreaking work of political systems analysis (including examples of institutional decisionmaking in both domestic and foreign policy), geopolitics

and grand strategy, and comparative political history. I saw Zbig a few days after finding that book and showed it to him. He held it in his hands and I could tell he was thinking back to the time he wrote it. Zbig leafed through the pages until he got to one part of the book and pointed. Seeing it, he said, reminded him about the argument he and Huntington had made that contrary to the conventional view, collectivization of Soviet agriculture did not facilitate industrialization—a bold and provocative thesis, indeed. He decided to re-read the book, he told me, in order to see whether he still agreed with what he had written three decades ago.

For me, this remains a quintessential Zbig story: he was always thinking and re-thinking his positions and views. He never rested on his laurels. The most important thing was not whether *he* was right, but whether the argument was correct. If that required revising his view, so be it. In other words, he had no problem with admitting he had been in error: he was the

opposite of a stubborn careerist or dogmatic defender of his own legacy; in addition to being a genuine American patriot, Zbig was a true intellectual whose primary locus remained the quest for truth until the end.

Several of Zbig's books are taught in various courses at ADA University and almost all the others can be found in our library. Irrespective of whether they are part of our formal curriculum, all his writings are to be recommended because in them one can see how much respect and dignity Zbig brought to the field of political science, which, I, as a former physicist, still have a hard time calling a real science. In any event, his books are must-reads for even the most advanced students of international relations and a number of other disciples. Learning to appreciate the sophistication and intricacy of his mind has been a lesson in humility for many diplomats and policymakers.

It is a true pity that grand figures such as was Zbig are largely missing these days in the American capital, as can be seen by the fact that the expertise and institutional memory on Russia and other parts of the post-Soviet space is weakening. It is my impression that many think tanks and universities that used to focus on our region are losing their potential and that the United States is shifting its focus away from a strategic region that Zbig called, I repeat, "axial Eurasia." But it should not be forgotten that we are located at the crossroads of many empires and civilizations. Our part of the world has been dominant in world politics for several millennia. There is no reason to think this will not continue—quite the contrary. And I believe the United States needs to stay actively involved throughout the Silk Road region for the sake of its own national interests, no doubt, but also for the purpose of supporting its regional allies—a position I have no doubt Zbig would strongly support today, as he did throughout the more than quarter of a century that we shared in friendship. **BD**

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ADA University Foundation in Azerbaijan is a non-profit organization that supports the university's educational activities. We established a permanent endowment fund, an innovative concept in the country's education sector that ADA University has pioneered. ADA University Foundation also operates in Washington, DC, known as ADA International, which has become in short order a significant extension of ADA University and its educational activities in the United States.

Giving to ADA University impacts positively not only on the quality of education we can offer but also provides support that can tangibly impact the lives of ADA students, faculty, and staff by developing their education and research activities whilst enhancing academic excellence.

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