

From Grand Chessboard to Card Table:  
The Great Powers, Keystone States, and the Emerging Order in the Silk Road Region\*

by

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“But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it.”

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* XV.1

Good afternoon, audience.

Thank you all for coming this afternoon.

It’s an honor to join you as a Ludovika Scholar. I wish to express my appreciation to your Rector, to the Director of the Ludovika Program and his staff, and to the deans and other colleagues in the various faculties, departments, and research institutes with whom I have met and engaged at the University of Public Service.

There is a palpable sense of both tradition and renaissance on this campus—of learning and of doing—that I find exhilarating.

And I’m quite glad to be here. For centuries, Serbs have felt at home in this city and throughout what was for a time called the *Archiregnum Hungaricum*. And I’m happy to report this remains the case here and now, in Hungary. So, thank you for your kind invitation and for your warm hospitality.

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I should add that I have long been fond of matters Hungarian. And this goes back to my childhood. When I was eleven years old—this was in late January 1988—I sang Kodály’s *Psalmus Hungaricus* in Carnegie Hall, as part of a Sunday matinée concert put on by the

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\* I have delivered earlier versions of this lecture at events organized by the Program in History and the Practice of Diplomacy at Princeton University, the Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East at Hudson Institute, the Silk Road Studies Program and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, the Tillotoma Foundation, the Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies, and the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University. I am in the early stages of preparing a book manuscript on the basis of the ideas contained herein. Comments and criticisms are welcome (dkrnjevic@ada.edu.az).

Montreal Symphony Orchestra and its Choir. Later, I discovered the occasion for which this piece was originally commissioned, and the date on which it was first performed; and this went quite far towards explaining the Davidic overtones, the reworked psalmic lamentations that constitute part of the libretto, and all the rest of it. I remember it fit rather well with another piece we performed that afternoon: Fauré's *Requiem*. I remember, too, that the night before, we had performed, also in Carnegie Hall, Britten's *War Requiem*—with no intermission, which was difficult. I also remember that it snowed heavily in New York, then: everything was at once white and grey and somber, and the sounds of the city were muted. We stayed at the Empire Hotel, I remember now. There is some irony in all of this when one puts it all together.

Well, enough of that.

Perhaps the map on one of the walls of your Rector's antechamber brought back all this to my mind. We Serbs, like you Hungarians, are both a mournful and a joyous people: a great poet from Montreal, where I grew up, as you may have gathered, once called a collection of his work *A Wild and Peculiar Joy*. And *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is the title of the first book by his pupil, another poet from Montreal, who outshone his teacher, both in ability and renown.

Where was I? Yes: Serbs and Hungarians... We Serbs have an expression: the pessimist says: "it can't get any worse" and the optimist says, "oh, yes; it can." I wonder if you have something similar... If you don't, somehow it seems to me that you should. It could be understood, after all, as a healthy conservative understanding of the flow of history.

Well, I may have weirded some of you out with how I began. Let me therefore "hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest"—this is a formulation Kodály's librettist would have easily recognized—by getting as directly into the topic as I can, which, as announced, has something to do with the emerging order in what I call the 'Silk Road region.'

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Now, before I get into the substance of what I want to discuss with you today, I want very quickly to make a terminological point.

When we speak about the South Caucasus and Central Asia—the eight former Soviet republics, and perhaps some neighboring countries—some still use the term 'Eurasia.'<sup>1</sup>

I don't like it for a number of reasons, so let me quickly present some of these.

As far as I can tell, the first scholar to use of the term "Eurasia" was an Austrian geologist, Eduard Suess, in 1885.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief history of the term "Eurasia," see Stephen Kotkin, "Mongol Commonwealth: Exchange and Governance Across the Post-Mongol Space," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2007), 487-531, especially 493-498. Intriguingly, the author substitutes the term 'Eurasia' for 'post-Mongol space.'

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Suess, *Das Antlitz der Erde*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Vienna and Leipzig: Tempsky-Freitag, 1908-1909) 1:768-771, as referenced by Mark Bassin, "Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space," *Slavic Review* 50:1 (Spring 1991), p. 10.

Then, about 20 years later, an Englishman named Halford Mackinder for the first time used the term “Eurasia” in a geopolitical context. He famously referred to Eurasia as the world’s “heart-land”—the globe’s “pivot area.”<sup>3</sup> So, you know, the idea that Eurasia is the ultimate geopolitical playground—the key to the acquisition and maintenance of global power. Some 20 years later, Mackinder expanded his original thesis into a book and sublimated his teaching into a sort of combination of warning and prescription. This is what he wrote:

“Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World-Island commands the World.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s obviously more complex than that—and I have no time to get into his policy prescriptions, or to discuss criticisms of his thesis—but I think you get the basic idea.

So, that’s the Western origin of the term.

And there’s also a Russia connotation, because the term “Eurasia” was used in the 1920s and 1930s, in émigrés circles in Paris and elsewhere. Here the writings of Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy are a good reference point. So is something that Petr Savitskii wrote in 1926: “whoever dominates the steppes will easily become the political unifier of all Eurasia”—a clear borrowing from Mackinder.<sup>5</sup> The conceptual roots, in the Russian context, ultimately go back to the famous debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers in czarist times. And here you can read the pioneering work of Pyotr Chaadayev, and various writings by Dostoyevsky, and, of course, those of Mackinder’s Russian contemporary, Vladimir Lamansky.<sup>6</sup>

Now then, the view represented by those in both the West and Russia that made use of the term “Eurasia” was revived—with modifications—after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

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<sup>3</sup> Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4, (April 1904), 431, 436 (on 434 he used the related term “pivot region”).

<sup>4</sup> Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: NDU Press 1996 (1919)), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Petr Savitskii, *Evrasiistvo: Opyt sistematicheskogo izlozheniia* (Paris: Evraziiskoe knigoizdatel’stvo, 1926), 378.

<sup>6</sup> Lamansky wrote of the concept of *Средний мир*—a “middle world” on the “Asian-European continent” that is its own “special type” with its own “special character,” as Lamansky put it. In other words, “not real Europe, not real Asia,” as he wrote. Lamansky also wrote this: “Entering the limits of this *Средний мир* from Asia, we must say that here Asia ends, but Europe does not begin yet; in the same way, entering it from Europe, we have the right to say: Europe ends here and Asia does not begin yet.” At bottom, his was a geostrategic concept, concerning the spread of Russia’s smart power and influence on the world stage. It also had cultural and civilizational connotations, obviously. The key was to bring Eurasia into Russia’s expanding orbit, by “quite sharply” distinguishing the countries of the *Средний мир* “from their own Europe and from their own Asia,” since Europe, *Средний мир*, and Asia had their own, “exclusively peculiar, geographical, ethnological, and historico-cultural features.” In the Russian context, the shift to the term “Eurasia” is illustrated by the works of Trubetzkoy, who wrote a decade or two later than Lamansky and Mackinder. He spoke of the “integral whole” of Eurasia and defined it as a “self-contained geographical [and] economic whole, distinguishable from both Europe and Asia proper.” Here is Trubetzkoy’s conclusion: “It is the natural environment itself that teaches the peoples of Eurasia [today] to recognize the need to [...] create their own national cultures while working co-operatively with one another.”

In Russia, it was updated and expanded—and this story is complicated and not directly relevant to what I want to discuss today. If you want to know more, read Dmitri Trenin for a serious view and Aleksandr Dugin for what I’ll call the “rock ‘n roll view.”

And in the West, a new version of the idea of Eurasia was promoted by people like Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser.

So, at the height of his own authority and in the midst of the “unipolar moment,” Brzezinski came up with this famous definition of Eurasia, which he argued extended from “Lisbon to Vladivostok.”<sup>7</sup> This was in 1997.

As it happens, this definition—from “Lisbon to Vladivostok”—corresponds, more or less, to the present-day OSCE space, minus North America. And, by the way, it also just about matches the boundaries of the superstate “Eurasia” as depicted in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Now, the narrower, everyday contemporary definition of “Eurasia” corresponds to what Brzezinski termed the “Eurasian Balkans” or, less polemically, “Eurasia’s vast middle space.” The sentence Brzezinski uses is this: “stretching between the western and eastern extremities [of Eurasia]”—pay attention, now—“is a sparsely populated and currently politically fluid and organizationally fragmented vast middle space.”<sup>8</sup>

This reads a loose paraphrase of formulations employed by Trubetskoy in the 1920s.

Of course, unlike Trubetskoy, Brzezinski famously advocated for “benign American hegemony” in this “vast middle space” of the “Eurasian Balkans”—with the United States playing the role of “Eurasia’s arbiter,” and so on.<sup>9</sup>

So, my basic point is that there is something artificial, imperialist, even “orientalist,” one could say, about this word “Eurasia” and the concepts that lie behind it—whether Western or Russian in origin.

This is one reason why I prefer the term “Silk Road region.”

So, in terms of geography, my definition is purposefully and constructively ambiguous.

Basically, the Silk Road region comprises that part of the world that *looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards 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; and then looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.*

Now, another advantage of the term ‘Silk Road region’ is that “it does not define the region in terms of any external power or national ideology. Instead, it focuses discussion where it should be focused: namely on the character of the region itself; [on] its distinctive

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<sup>7</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 123, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 199, 34, 123-150, 194.

geographical, cultural, and economic features; and [on] the question of whether those features may be the keys to its future.”<sup>10</sup>

Of course, in terms of the political map, the *core* of the Silk Road region comprises the countries we call the South Caucasus and Central Asia—eight former Soviet republics that are now sovereign states. Some add Afghanistan to the latter category. And there are various other countries that are bound, in whole or in part, to this region.

Thus, we can think of the Silk Road region as a single geopolitical theater with multiple stages.

My point is that when you hear me speak of the Silk Road region, I’m more or less using a synonym for what some of you may call Eurasia. Ok? And, by the way, this is the term and the definition adopted as a point of reference by *Baku Dialogues*, the quarterly journal I co-edit. This was done at the start of my tenure in 2020. You can find more on this in our Editorial Statement, which is found on the publication’s website.<sup>11</sup>

Ok? So, that’s all that I have to say about that.

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Now, today, I will make three main substantive points.

One: the balance of power in the Silk road region is not just shifting, it’s transforming. The three main events accelerating this strategic trend are:

- the Second Karabakh War,
- the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan, and
- the escalation of the conflict over Ukraine.

I’ll explain this first point by looking at some of the most important geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of these events.

I can summarize the cumulative effect of these in the following manner: regionally-driven economic connectivity is on the way in; outside power agenda-setting is on the way out. And some outsiders are seeing their relative power decline, others are seeing an increase. But in the aggregate, the power of outsiders is likely to be reduced overall in, say, the next decade or so.

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<sup>10</sup> The quote is from S. Frederick Starr, “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” Policy Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, September 2008, p. 6. Starr does not adopt or consider the term ‘Silk Road region’ but does reject the term ‘Central Eurasia’ in favor of the term ‘Greater Central Eurasia.’ The quoted text is part of his defense of this term.

<sup>11</sup> The definition is taken from “Editorial Statement,” <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/editorial-statement>. To my knowledge, the closest approximation to the definition adopted by Baku Dialogues was made by the Central Eurasian Studies Society: “We define the Central Eurasian region broadly to include Turkic, Mongolian, Iranian, Caucasian, Tibetan and other peoples. Geographically, Central Eurasia extends from the Black Sea region, the Crimea, and the Caucasus in the west, through the Middle Volga region, Central Asia and Afghanistan, and on to Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet in the east.” See *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 49, <https://www.centraleurasia.org/publications/cest/back-issues/>. Cf. Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), xiv: “The halfway point between east and west, running broadly from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the Himalayas. Two pages later, the author points out, correctly, that the term ‘Silk Roads’ is a Western neologism coined by Ferdinand von Richthofen, “Über die zentralasiatischen Seidenstrassen bis zum 2. Jahrhundert. n. Chr.,” *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 4 (1877), 96-122.

So, that's point number one. And I'll have to get into some detail to make this point clearly. This will take up about half of my lecture, because the argument needs to be set up properly.

Point number two: the “grand chessboard” metaphor that has for a long time framed geopolitical thinking about the Silk Road region is outdated, flawed, and just plain wrong. It's a term and a concept popularized by Zbigniew Brzezinski, and I'll briefly propose and explain its replacement: that of a card table.

Point number three—which derives from the first two—is that the Silk Road region stands a chance of no longer remaining merely an *object* of great power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others; it is on the cusp of becoming a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated *subject* of international order.

I'll come to this assessment by examining some of the Silk Road region's emerging set of initiatives and institutions that, taken together, may herald the onset of a stable and lasting order in that part of the world.

My argument is not perfect, but I hope that by the end of it you'll see that there's something to it—and that thinking along the lines I will sketch out will help you in your further thinking about this issue.

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Ok? So, let's begin by getting into the first main point.

The balance of power in the Silk Road region is in the midst of a transformative shift. It's a balance of power that favors home-grown integration—with both its main architects and core participants *belonging to the region itself*.

Like I said a moment ago, this great shift has been both accelerated and entrenched by the geopolitical consequences of the Second Karabakh War, the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Russia's preoccupation with the conflict over Ukraine, coupled with the Western response...economic sanctions, and so on.

Let me give you my top ten list of these consequences.

One, conflict mediation, economic development efforts, and state-building campaigns engineered—or at least actively encouraged—by the West are in a state of flux.

So, here's what we have:

On the one hand, such Western efforts in the Central Asian part of the Silk Road region have been either ineffective or unsuccessful. Think of Afghanistan. And the point generally holds for the five other countries of Central Asia, as well.

And this has had an impact on how a whole bunch of other states perceive Western postures and power in that part of the world. This was obviously the case before February 2022, but I would argue that it has not gone away since then, either. It may, in fact, reinforce the perception of double standards that long predates the conflict over Ukraine—certainly, the onset of its present stage.

On the other hand, conflict mediation, economic development efforts, and state-building campaigns actively encouraged by the West in the South Caucasus part of the Silk Road region are being boosted. There's no doubt about that.

The possibility that a country like Georgia could one day become an official EU candidate country is a good example. So is the promise of eventual NATO membership.

The other obvious example is the EU's role as facilitator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and America's companion role as a supporter of this endeavor. Now, this facilitation effort began *before* the war in Ukraine, but it has accelerated since then, although, admittedly, it has slowed down again in recent months—the effort has been saved from failure by the good sense of the United States to pick up the ball our European friends dropped quite unnecessarily—in tennis, the term they use is “unforced error.”

Still, the EU's facilitation of the peace process, supported by the United States, should not be understood to mean that the Russians are down for good, much less out. But, obviously, Ukraine created an opening for the EU, which, again, I believe was unnecessarily squandered in the past several months—and I'd be happy to explain why later on.

But, well, you know, at the end of the day, peace in the South Caucasus—just like peace in Ukraine—is going to be impossible to achieve without Russia. And at least in Yerevan and Baku, this is quite well understood. In the Silk Road region—like pretty much everywhere else beyond the West—liberal internationalist illusions don't drive statecraft.

Geopolitical consequence number two: the use of force by a Silk Road region state can propel cornerstone regional security objectives, *especially* if the military approach accords with the basic tenets of universally recognized international law as enshrined in the UN Charter and deriving documents. I'm referring obviously to Azerbaijan, here. In other words, those that claimed there was no military solution to the protracted conflict over Karabakh were manifestly incorrect. The rhetoric of debellicization turned out to be “mere wind and void,” as the prophet Isaiah would say.

And this was also the case when it comes to Afghanistan—at least to a certain degree and obviously in a different way. Just remember how power-sharing agreements brokered by the West quickly went out the window: outright victory in a civil war was achieved on the battlefield. And quite rapidly, at that. And there was nothing the West could do to turn the tide.

Now, Afghanistan is obviously to be contrasted by the recent turn of events in Ukraine. You know, on the issue of the Western response to the use of force to attain geopolitical objectives in a part of the world not traditionally understood to belong to the Western sphere of interest—to use this traditional term of geopolitics.

However, I should underline that *no state* in the Silk Road region has joined the Western-led sanctions against Russia. At the same time, pretty much all of them have affirmed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, as a matter of principle.

Sure, some countries in the Silk Road region informally adhere to the Western sanctions out of fear or solidarity or a combination thereof, but none have formally imposed all of these

Western-led sanctions on Russia. And neither has the majority of UN member states, as I'm sure you know.

The point is that the Silk Road region is a very non-aligned place, as it should be.

Let's move on to geopolitical consequence number three: the Moscow-mediated document that ended the Second Karabakh War represents far more than a narrow ceasefire agreement between belligerents. When you read this document, then you see that it mandates a broad, interconnected set of economic normalization arrangements that, once fully put in place, will reverberate far beyond Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Now, the strategically most important one is what Baku calls the Zangezur Corridor.

Upon completion, it will become the most direct connectivity corridor from Anatolia to Central Asia—you know, the Middle Corridor. And the Middle Corridor's strategic importance has further increased since February 2022. If Zangezur does not happen, the overall point still holds—the Georgian route will remain the sole way. The main difference would be that Armenia would lose out—again—on a flagship regional connectivity project.

And Azerbaijan is the indispensable country of the Middle Corridor, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the Global Gateway, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Just look at the map. None of these flagship projects can work without Azerbaijan, given present geopolitical realities and likely trajectories over the next decade, or what have you.

Consequence number four: the end of the Second Karabakh War marked a geopolitical sea-change that few have noticed. It's the first time *ever* that troops *not* belonging to Russia are deployed in the South Caucasus with Russia's *explicit* consent, which had for two centuries held a monopoly on this matter in the South Caucasus. I'm referring obviously to Turkey, here, and its presence alongside Russian troops in the Joint Monitoring Center. Yet it's more important than that. The numbers are small, but the symbolism should not be dismissed. Thinking through the implications of this goes a long way to explain recent Iranian behavior in this theater. More on Iran in a minute or two.

Geopolitical consequence number five: we can now say that the South Caucasus part of the Silk Road region is *truly* geopolitically heterogeneous.

This in turn implies that the strength of Russia's sphere of influence has been diluted, at least somewhat. And this was before war in Ukraine started up again; remember now: the Second Karabakh War ended in November 2020. And to the Kremlin's credit, it embraced this paradigm shift with grace, even managing to secure leverageable tactical gains in the process. And it has never gone all-out to try to put a stop to the EU's facilitation—supported by the United States—of the consequent peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Of course, one reason Russia hasn't tried to do this is because of the conflict over Ukraine. But I would argue that this is not the main reason. Russia knows that all that new connectivity will cost a lot, and it has little interest in serving as the principal donor or investor. This was clearly the Kremlin's position even before 24 February 2022.



There's also the Iranian factor, which I will not get into for reasons of time. But however one interprets Tehran's motivations, their actions reinforce my point, namely, that this part of the world is becoming *truly* geopolitically heterogeneous.

Deriving from this heightened geopolitical heterogeneity is geopolitical consequence number six: geo-economic regionalism is moving forward in the South Caucasus part of the Silk Road region.

And sometimes this is happening in unexpected ways.

So, bilateral trade numbers between pretty much any two countries in the Silk Road region are on the upswing, for example.

Ankara's growing economic (and political) influence is obvious—I don't have much time to get into this; but raise this, if you wish, later on and I will get into the details.

Now, I have mentioned Iran a few times already, and I want to return to this actor for just a moment. Geopolitics and geo-economics are distinct categories in this part of the world. Economically, Iran is coming back into the regional fold, so to speak, after more than two centuries of basically being excluded. The North-South International Transport Corridor project is the obvious connectivity example—and it seems to be moving in the direction of completion, notwithstanding the Western sanctions regime against Russia and its ongoing political dispute with Azerbaijan.

So, what we're seeing, overall, is a trend to, in one way or another, compensate Iran, regularize Turkish gains, and account prudently for Russia's continuing presence while making room for the West.

In this context, when I speak of the West, I'm focusing on the EU. But "making room" does not mean "wholehearted embrace." The Eastern Partnership had its original run, but we all know that Brussels is still trying to figure out what to do with it now.

Now, the "regulatory superpower" stuff is still a factor, sure. But I'll bet you that a consequence of the EU making headway through peace process facilitation will be a financial one: you know, paying for connectivity to happen.

And this, of course, will have economic and commercial benefits for everyone—the EU included. But it seems unlikely that the EU will seriously expand its values-based, political sphere of interest at much expense to other player—in this or any part of the Silk Road region.

Ok, now we come to geopolitical consequence number seven: the *prospect* has never been greater for establishing a formal peace not only between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but between Armenia and Turkey.

I've written about this in various places, so I will skip the details. But my bottom-line assessment is that peace has never been closer, but that does not mean that a comprehensive settlement will actually be reached. Ask me about this later if you want more.

Meanwhile, let me go back to the other main part of the Silk Road region with geopolitical consequence number eight: Central Asia (including Afghanistan) has also been making strides towards institutionalizing regional economic connectivity. The scale and scope of the plans now being laid call to mind older arrangements in other geographies: ASEAN,<sup>12</sup> the Nordic Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the original European *Economic Community*. As an aside, it is useful to draw attention to the fact that the EEC's founding charter—the Treaty of Rome (1957)—contains not a single reference to “democracy,” “human rights,” or “European values.” Remember, now, that the original focus of the European construction was on fostering economic interdependence through a reduction of trade barriers, the establishment of an embryonic customs union, and the setting of terms for a single market characterized by common policies on agriculture, transport, and the like.

Now, in Central Asia, integration efforts began in the 1990s thanks to Nursultan Nazarbayev's endeavors,<sup>13</sup> but they really got off the ground when Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan in late 2016. I don't have time to go into a detailed explanation. Suffice it to say that an ongoing text-based process of Central Asian economic connectivity and regionalization began in November 2017 in Samarkand.

A Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was held in Astana in March 2018, another in Tashkent in November 2019, a third in Turkmenbashi in August 2021, a fourth in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, in July 2022.

We're now more or less at the point at which the Central Asian Five are moving ahead with a formal treaty text of institutionalized cooperation, titled Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the Twenty-First Century.” Again, ask me about the details later on. Let me here underline the game-changing importance augured by this development.

So, what can be observed from all this activity? Well, economic integration proposals have gained a new impetus on both sides of the Caspian.

We've also seen some interesting new trilateral formats taking place. Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan, for example. This took place late last year.

What I'm predicting will happen reasonably soon is that we will see the start of regular trilateral summits involving the presidents of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. I'll say a bit more about the significance of this in a few minutes when I talk a bit about the concept of “keystone states.”

Now, here's consequence number nine: dividends for energy producers from the Silk Road region. I spoke about this at some length during yesterday's workshop, so I'll keep it short.

Azerbaijan is one of the main beneficiaries of the conflict over Ukraine—through no fault of its own, of course. The EU's decision to divest itself of Russian oil and gas has been a

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<sup>12</sup> See Juheon Lee, Aleksey Asiryanyan, and Michael Butler, “Integration of the Central Asian Republics: The ASEAN Example,” e-international relations, September 17, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/17/integration-of-the-central-asian-republics-the-asean-example>.

<sup>13</sup> Early outcomes included the establishment of the Central Asian Union, later called the Central Asian Economic Community, still later the Central Asian Cooperation Organization. This was folded into the Eurasian Economic Community that morphed into the Eurasian Economic Union.

strategic bonanza for this country. And it has also gotten countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to take steps to look to opportunities presented by the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor, and the BTC oil pipeline, and so on.

The July 2022 MoU deepening the strategic energy partnership between the EU and Azerbaijan is the cornerstone of this.

We've also had the December 2022 MoU on the green energy deal—the Black Sea electricity cable to transmit wind and solar and hydro electricity from Azerbaijan and Georgia to Southeast Europe, including Hungary. And in early February 2023, we had the most recent SCG Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting and the inaugural Green Energy Advisory Council Ministerial meeting.

You know who came to all four of these events? The EU Commission president and the EU Energy Commissioner. That's about as unambiguous an indication of political commitment as the EU can make in the Silk Road region. It amounts to an acknowledgment by Brussels that Azerbaijan is the indispensable country for the advancement of the EU's strategic ambitions in the Silk Road region. And this, in turn, seems to reinforce the point about regional geopolitical heterogeneity.

And all this brings me to the tenth and final major consequence: geopolitical *and* security *and* economic integration developments on either side of the Caspian are being driven *by those belonging to the region itself*.

So, you know, all the outsider stakeholders participating in, for instance, various Central Asian conferences are welcome, but they're not driving the agenda. They're merging onto a highway that is already being built, one could say.

Now, a moment ago, I mentioned the two most recent Baku energy ministerial meetings.

I can also mention the major international conference promoting “economic connectivity” between Central Asia and South Asia, which took place in Tashkent in July 2021.

And there was the EU-Central Asia connectivity conference—the EU's unveiling of Global Gateway, as it were. This took place in Samarkand in November 2022.

There have been lots of others.

Now, this is another important takeaway: nothing that's happened on either side of the Caspian is predicated on the embrace of contemporary Western preferences in governance or growth models.

I'll draw an overall conclusion from this fact in a moment—so please bear with me.

But just remember what was the point of all this: to give you a top ten list of consequences resulting from the Second Karabakh War, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the conflict over Ukraine. All together these have significantly affected the balance of power in the Silk Road region.

We can sum up these geopolitical consequences with a formulation I used earlier: regionally-driven economic connectivity is on the way in; outside power agenda-setting is on the way out. And some outsiders are seeing their relative power decline, others are seeing an increase. But in the aggregate, the power of outsiders is being reduced overall.

Now, the unspoken shadow being cast across the Silk Road region is the China-led Belt and Road Initiative. Whatever else one can say about BRI, it's about building infrastructure and binding economies to one another in a region eager to catch up. In other words, BRI augurs globalization without the controversial tenets of the Washington Consensus. That's the likely future trajectory of the Silk Road region that Mackinder perceptively called a "non-oceanic economic system."<sup>14</sup> More on this later.

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This brings me to the second main point I want to make today. And here I will be brief—just so you can get a basic understanding of what I'm driving at.

Now, I want to take you back to Brzezinski again.

Even before 9/11, he was arguing that America should pursue a strategy of "geopolitical pluralism within the former Soviet Union."<sup>15</sup> The success of such a strategy, Brzezinski argued, would be predicated on, amongst other factors, increasingly drawing Eurasia's 'middle space' into the expanding orbit of the West.

Brzezinski also emphasized that "maneuver, diplomacy, coalition building, co-optation, and the very deliberate deployment of one's political assets have become the key ingredients of the successful exercise of geostrategic power on the Eurasian chessboard."<sup>16</sup>

We'll get back to geopolitical pluralism in one moment. Let's focus first on the metaphor of the "grand chessboard," which is the title of his 1997 book.

At first blush, the metaphor of the grand chessboard sounds like a classic 'adjusting the balance of power' argument, akin to the one, say, that Bismarck made prior to the Congress of Berlin; but this is deceptive. Neither in the 1990s nor subsequently was there an equivalent summit of great powers coming together as sovereign equals in congress to really agree on the new rules of the road, like earlier at Vienna or Berlin—or even at Yalta.

Be that as it may, Brzezinski's argument in favor of forging and maintaining "geopolitical pluralism" in Eurasia was predicated on three flawed premises, each itself premised—ironically—on the enduring validity of a unipolar or end-of-history worldview.<sup>17</sup>

So, we may ask, what were those flawed premises?

First, that the United States should feel free to attempt to extend its influence into a part of the world in which none had ever existed.

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<sup>14</sup> Mackinder, "Geographical Pivot," 443.

<sup>15</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Premature Partnership," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March-April 1994), 79.

<sup>16</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see my "Back with a Vengeance: The Return of Rough and Tumble Geopolitics," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2021), 118-135, as well as my "Atticism and the Summit for Democracy: A Little Thought Experiment," *Baku Dialogues* 5:2 (Winter 2021-2022), 140-165.

Second, that the other great powers—especially Russia—should simply accept the legitimacy of this American *ex nihilo* extension and just make room for the new kid in town: this new kid in town who—by the way—liked to tell the locals all about to-them foreign concepts like democracy, free markets, human rights, and so on.

And third, that the Silk Road region is basically too important to be left to its core states to build up and manage on their own.

Classic balance of power concepts like restraint, deference, and moderation were noticeably absent. In effect, Brzezinski's advice was for 'Eurasia's middle space' to go directly from being a non-interest to, basically, becoming a central if not vital interest of the United States. Again, this was *before* 9/11. In practical terms, at least, the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan from Afghanistan bookends the attraction of this sort of thinking—not only in Washington, but in Brussels, London, Berlin, Paris, and so on.

Now, as I've said, Brzezinski's the one who popularized the metaphor of the "grand chessboard" in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> This image went on to frame mainstream geopolitical thinking about the Silk Road region in the post-Cold War period. My argument is that it's outdated, flawed, and just plain wrong. I'd like to propose its replacement: that of a card table.

Picture—if you will—in your mind's eye a room with a card table...

What do we see?

*Various players are staying in their chairs; some are re-taking their seats after a break; others are coming through the door for the first time; a few just decided to get up from their chairs but seem to want to remain in the room; and all the while, the deck is being reshuffled and new cards will soon be dealt.*

Ok? You've pictured this?

This is my mental snapshot of what the Silk Road region looks like at present.

Now, an evident conceptual advantage to seeing the Silk Road region as a card table is that there can be more than two players. This is not the case with chess, right?

And Brzezinski was obviously aware of this. Still, it's his metaphor. And its unavoidable implication is that the White House and the Kremlin are the region's only truly independent players: they and they alone controlled the board, the movement of pieces, and the formulation of strategies. This is the inescapable discursive logic of the metaphor.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brzezinski may have adapted the phrase from the recorded comments of military historian Spencer Wilkinson, who was the formal respondent to Mackinder's lecture at the British Royal Geographical Society back in 1904: "Whereas only half a century ago statesmen played on a few squares of a chess-board of which the remainder remained empty, in the present day, the world is an enclosed chess-board, and every movement of the statesman must take account of all the squares in it. [...] Any movement which is made in one part of the world affects the whole of the international relations of the world."

<sup>19</sup> In contemporary social science this is called "implicit bias." In the old days we used to call it wishful thinking—a dangerous illusion for any grand strategist to entertain. Another danger is "false universalism," or what psychologists call "consensus bias" or the "false consensus effect."

But that's not how it works at a card table, right? At a card table, there's plenty of room for more chairs to be added without disrupting the general flow. New players can join, old ones can fall by the wayside, anyone can pretty much cash out at any time.

A further problem with the Brzezinski metaphor is that chess involves no hidden information. Calculating the odds and thinking ahead is important to both chess and cards; but at a card table, the ability to bluff effectively is an integral part of the game.

So is making sure a player can conceal his or her own tell whilst trying to uncover the respective tells of the other players.

Let me formulate my bottom line in classical Greek terminology, for those in the audience who are familiar with this sort of thing: the games played at the card table give their full due to *thumos* or spiritedness, the part of the soul that drives the human desire for recognition, glory, honor—and, which, if left unchecked by *logos* or reason, can produce disastrous, even tragic outcomes.

Or I can formulate my bottom-line assessment another way: chess is too much like quantitative political science. It's simply too cerebral, too mathematical, and too informed by a Pascalian *esprit de géométrie* to serve as an adequate metaphor for the 'rough and tumble' and 'huff and puff' of geopolitics. Game play at the card table comes closer to the Pascalian understanding of behavior informed by an *esprit de finesse*.<sup>20</sup>

In chess, moreover, moving is compulsory: no player may skip a turn, even when doing so is detrimental to his or her position. In contrast, some of the more complex card games, like poker, do not have this requirement. Players can 'check'—they can essentially choose not to make a move, draw a card, and so on. This adds layers of subtlety and complexity that correspond more closely to the reality of geopolitics.

Another such layer is the existence in some card games of what are called community cards—cards dealt face up and shared by all the players during the hand.

Each hand played at a card table also involves commonly agreed but potentially changing rules of the road that apply to all: minimum buy-in, ante and raising procedures, and so on.

And, of course, at a card table all partnerships and alliances are temporary.

In addition, at a card table—depending on the game—other players and even spectators can "stake" fellow-players. If you've read Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* or seen the movie, you know how staking works.

Furthermore, there are disparities in stack sizes amongst the players seated around a card table—and, well, they matter; and this also changes over time, with real consequences affecting players' subsequent strategies.

I should also mention that at a card table, starting hands are never even: we all know the expression: "to play the hand you're dealt." So, in other words, equality of opportunity and

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<sup>20</sup> Blaise Pascal, makes reference to an "esprit de finesse" and to its opposite, the "esprit de géométrie" in his *Pensées* L512 (B1).

notions of fairness and transparency are not concepts that can be effectively executed by players seated at the card table.

At the card table, the importance of oral declarations and announcements can also be important—decisive, even—as can be positional priority...you know, the position of players seated at the table in relation to the dealer—this, too, affects each player's strategy at the card table. I can add this detail, too: in the Texas Hold'em variant of poker, the rules dictate that some players, depending on their table position, must place compulsory bets at the start of each hand; others, again depending on table position, do not have this obligation.

All in all, how things work at the card table is much, much closer to how geopolitics works in practice. This is true in general, and it's particularly true in the context of the Silk Road region.

Now, I can spend quite a bit more time working through this metaphor by delving into the intricacies of various card games, particularly poker, but for present purposes, I think what I've said is sufficient.

Ok?

So, card table, not chessboard—just like, to remind you, Silk Road region, not Eurasia.

Yes?

But before moving on, I want to re-emphasize inclusivity. This is the principle that lies at the heart of the card table metaphor: it's not just about Moscow and Washington, which is what Brzezinski's chessboard metaphor is about. Astana, Tashkent, and Baku can take their seats. So can Delhi and Tehran; and Ankara and Beijing, of course. Brussels, Berlin, Paris, London—sure, why not? And Islamabad, too. Kabul, likewise. And so on.

So, you know, the overall point of my card table metaphor is actually quite simple: essentially, if you have what it takes—or if you *think* you do—you can pull up a chair, take a seat at the card table, and partake in the great game. And if you don't, you can pack it up—even walk out of the room. If your fortunes change and circumstances allow, you can be dealt back in. But regardless, the great game goes on.

Ok?

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This brings me to the third and final main point I want to make to you this afternoon. It builds on the first two, and it ultimately has to do with *independent agency*.

The metaphor of the grand chessboard presupposes that the Silk Road region was, is, and will remain an *object* of great power relations. Well, my metaphor of the card table works better because I believe that the Silk Road region might very well become a fully-fledged, distinct, and emancipated *subject* of an international order.

In other words, the metaphor of the card table accepts the possibility of the autonomous geopolitical and geo-economic development of the states that geographically belong to the core of the region itself.

And this conforms to the overarching reality we see in this part of the world today—a whole possibly greater than the present sum of the Silk Road region’s emerging set of initiatives and institutions.

Now, that reality is characterized by the fact that its leading states are all middle powers.

This is very important to explain, so please bear with me.

The person who coined the term “middle powers” centuries ago was someone named Giovanni Botero.

Botero defined middle powers as states that have “sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others.”<sup>21</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 promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbors and their neighbors’ neighbors.

Unquestionably, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are such middle powers or “keystone states”—this is a concept first put forward by Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College. And we have developed it, separately and together, in various writings.

Now, the way we and other likeminded folks see it, keystone states are “trusted interlocutors, reliable intermediaries, and critical mediators” that can “act as buffers [...] between major power centers.”

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>22</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”—this concept was set out by Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini—it recognizes, Gvosdev tells us, that “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>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* I:2.

<sup>22</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Keystone States: A New Category of Power,” *Horizons* 5 (Autumn 2015), 120.

<sup>23</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region,” *Baku Dialogues* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2020), 31. Regarding the concept of a G-Zero world, see Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini, “A G-Zero World,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:2 (March/April 2011), p. 2. Another way of making the same general point is to examine the criteria by which “buffer states” can avoid “violent state death.” This is the argument put forward in Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). A summary of the criteria of this line of thinking is found on p. 229: “Buffer states are likely to die because surrounding rivals are typically unable to make credible commitments not to take them over. But in certain, atypical situations, the security dilemma can be resolved such that buffer states survive. If rivals’ resources are simultaneously constrained, they cannot take over buffer states. If rivals must become temporary allies in another theater, they prefer not to sap each other’s resources by fighting over buffer states. And if a more powerful third party intervenes to protect the buffer state,



And keystone states are the anchors of the Silk Road region. None by itself is indispensable, but together they provide equilibrium whilst setting the tone, pace, and scope of the overall cooperation agenda. External powers exert some influence, sure, but developments in the Silk Road region are unlikely to keep being decisively driven—much less determined—by the oftentimes clashing agendas, preferences, objectives, and priorities of the great powers.

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So, to summarize what I have said so far: one characteristic of the Silk Road region is that it is anchored by keystone states sitting around a card table along with other players. And its keystone states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan—are committed to building a region with more partners and fewer enemies.

A second characteristic of the Silk Road region is that these keystone states embrace elements of both strategic autonomy and strategic restraint—one of the scholarly terms for this is “soft-balancing.”<sup>24</sup>

A third characteristic of the Silk Road region I want to mention is the salience of a twenty-first century version of what in the 1990s was called “Asian values.”<sup>25</sup>

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rivals will refrain from conquest because costs will exceed benefits.” The keystone state argument can be understood as constituting the consolidation of such and similar “atypical situations.”

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Pape, “Soft-Balancing Against the United States,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 7-45.

<sup>25</sup> The “Asian values” concept was developed in practice by the likes of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad and propounded in documents like the Bangkok Declaration (1993), adopted at the Regional Meeting for Asia for the World Conference on Human Rights. The full text of the Bangkok Declaration is available in a UN document identified as A/CONF.157/ASRM/8 and A/CONF.157/PC/59, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/167021?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>. Article 8 of this document reads, “we recognise that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds.” Primers, studies, and reflections on the original Asian values debate are great in number and include: Lee Kuan Yew, “The East Asian Way: Interview with Lee Kuan Yew,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1992), 4-13; Kishore Mahbubani, “The West and the Rest,” *The National Interest* 28 (1992), 3-13; Bilahari Kausikan, “Asia’s Different Standard,” *Foreign Policy* 92 (Autumn 1993), 24-41; Fareed Zakaria, “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994), 109-126; Bilahari Kausikan, “An East Asian Approach to Human Rights,” *Buffalo Journal of International Law* 2, no. 2 (1996), 263-83; Bilahari Kausikan, “Hong Kong, Singapore, and ‘Asian Values’: Governance that Works,” *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (April 1997), 24-34; Nathan Glazer, “Two Cheers for ‘Asian Values,’” *The National Interest* 57 (Fall 1999), 27-34; Michael D. Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew and the ‘Asian Values’ Debate,” *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (September 2000), 309-334; Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002); Daniel A. Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Chang-Yau Hoon, “Revisiting the Asian Values Argument Used by Asian Political Leaders and its Validity,” *Indonesian Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2004), 154-174; Bilahari Kausikan, “The Idea of Asia,” Address to the Singapore Writers Festival, November 1, 2014, excerpted as “1990s ‘Asian values’ Advocate Bilahari Explains the Real Reason Behind the ‘Asian Values’ Debate,” *Mothership*, November 4, 2014, <https://mothership.sg/2014/11/1990s-asian-values-advocate-bilahari-explains-the-real-reason-behind-the-asian-values-debate/>; and Bilahari Kausikan, “The ‘Asian Values’ Debate, 30 Years On,” *The Straits Times*, March 16, 2121. The original “Asian values” debate arose at least in part in thinking through the strategic implications of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, itself a response to the worldview contained in Francis Fukuyama’s writings on the “end of history.” For more on this, see my “Back with A Vengeance,” 118-135. Cf. Xi Jinping, “Deepening Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations for an Asian Community with a Shared Future,” keynote address of the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, Beijing, May 15, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1663857.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1663857.shtml).

Now, I don't have the time now to provide a full typology of these values.<sup>26</sup> But five traits can help illustrate this underappreciated phenomenon of contemporary Silk Road values.

*One*, they're more compatible with strictly observing universally recognized international law, including the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, than with conducting affairs of state in accordance with what is called by its proponents a 'rules-based liberal international order.'<sup>27</sup> Hence, my earlier reference to the discomfort with some of the tenets of the Washington Consensus. I can explain a bit more about what I mean by this critical distinction later in our time together, if you'd like.

*Two*, Silk Road values are broadly suspicious of outsiders placing soft law-driven limitations on national sovereignty. One example is the narrowing of the scope of the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states.<sup>28</sup> Another is the expanded conception of individual liberty that prioritizes the political dimension of the doctrine of human rights.<sup>29</sup> A third example of soft-law limitations on national sovereignty is being penalized for not enforcing sanctions unilaterally adopted by a few states or an alliance of countries, i.e., sanctions that have not been ratified by the UN Security Council.

Trait number *three*: Silk Road values prioritize allegiance to a strong state with an economically interventionist government. The logic here is that—at least in this part of the world—a weak state more easily produces a failing state. And a weak state also allows foreign capital to leverage economic decisionmaking, which necessarily limits the scope of governmental power. This also explains the increasing emphasis on *meritocratic governance* pioneered by Singapore over U.S.- or EU-style liberal democracy.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> One notable articulation of something similar to what I am arguing is provided under the moniker "Shanghai spirit" as defined in the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2001, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents>. For more on this, see Thomas Ambrosio, "Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 8 (October 2008), 1321-1344. More broadly, see David Lewis, "Who's Socialising Whom? Regional Organisations and Contested Norms in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 7 (2012): 1219-1237 and Alexander Lukin, "Eurasian Integration and the Clash of Values," *Survival* 56, no. 3 (2014), 43-60.

<sup>27</sup> For more on one view on this distinction, see Sergei Lavrov, "On Law, Rights and Rules," *Russia in Global Affairs* 19, no. 3, 229. The 'liberal international order' has been defined as the combination of practices designed to advance a vision of "open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law." John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2. See also Stacie E. Goddard, "Embedded Revisionism: Networks, Institutions, and Challenges to World Order," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (May 2018), 763-797; Beate Jahn, "Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018), 43-61; John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (June 2019), 395-421; and Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2021), 611-634.

<sup>28</sup> A classic formulation is found in Carlile Aylmer Macartney, *National States and National Minorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 296: "The doctrine of state sovereignty does not admit that the domestic policy of any state—the policy which it follows towards its own citizens—can be any concern of any other state."

<sup>29</sup> A soft law example of the former is the Responsibility to Protect; of the latter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>30</sup> On the concept of political meritocracy—"the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue"—including the contrast between the Singaporean and Chinese experiences, see Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). The definition quoted in the foregoing sentence is found on p. 6.

Trait number *four*: Silk Road values generally downplay ethnic and even civil nationalism in favor of what Anatol Lieven calls “state nationalism”—fidelity to the state as embodied by loyalty to its leadership.<sup>31</sup>

Related to this is trait number *five*: Silk Road values do not entail the sublimation of distinct state identities in the name of institutionalizing cooperation.

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Now—and this is really important to understand—*everything* I’ve discussed today is all-the-more consequential given that the Silk Road region *as a whole* is becoming an increasingly important geopolitical theater: certainly, its global importance today is greater than it has been in centuries.

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So, if there’s one take-away I’d like you to remember from my lecture, it’s this: *the Silk Road region’s keystone states are attempting to establish their own set of initiatives and institutions; and this burgeoning posture represents a surge of interdependence, connectivity, and integration.*

And you know what else? I want to give Brzezinski full credit for being the first to raise the possibility of the core of the Silk Road region becoming an “assertive single entity.” But I also want to draw your attention to the strategic consequence he identified would result in the event this possibility becomes reality: “America’s primacy in Eurasia shrinks dramatically.”<sup>32</sup>

The point of *my* most important takeaway goes far beyond Brzezinski: if, in fact, the core of the Silk Road region institutionalizes its cooperation; and if this institutionalization is anchored by its three keystone states, then I believe that it will indeed become an “assertive single entity” capable of repelling any outside power’s hope for primacy—not just that of the United States. But that of Russia and that of China, too.

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<sup>31</sup> This argument has been made regarding Vladimir Putin in particular, but it holds generally for the leaders of the countries of the Silk Road region, including, critically, for the statesmen presiding over its three keystone states. See Anatol Lieven, “National Responsibility,” *The Point: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 22 (Summer 2020), <https://thepointmag.com/politics/national-responsibility>: Putin is “a *Russian state* nationalist—a very important distinction that has escaped many Western commentators. The criterion for membership of the Russian power elites is not ethnic origin but loyalty to the Russian state, as presently embodied in Putin” (emphasis added). Lieven adds that “Putin seems to me to exemplify something John Maynard Keynes once said about George Clemenceau” and goes on to illustrate this with a passage from Keynes, a slightly different selection of which I reproduce here: “He felt about France what Pericles felt of Athens—unique value in her, nothing else mattering; but his theory of politics was Bismarck’s. [...] His philosophy had [...] no place for ‘sentimentality’ in international relations. Nations are real things, of whom you love one and feel for the rest indifference—or hatred. [...] The politics of power are inevitable, and there is nothing very new to learn about this war or the end it was fought for [...]. Prudence required some measure of lip service to the ‘ideals’ of foolish Americans and hypocritical Englishmen; but it would be stupid to believe that there is much room in the world, as it really is, for such affairs as the League of Nations [...] except as an ingenious formula for rearranging the balance of power in one’s own interests.” The quote is taken from *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume II: The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, eds. Austin Robinson and Donald Moggridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 20-21. Also, it is important to mention that Ernest Renan first made explicit the distinction between civil nationalism and ethnic nationalism. He identifies the former with the French conception of the nation as a free choice or an “everyday plebiscite” and the latter with the German conception of the nation as a community of language and race. All the relevant texts by Ernest Renan on nationalism have been collected in *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Et autres écrits politiques*, ed. Raoul Girardet (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, coll. Acteurs de l’Histoire, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 35.

And all this may very well result in the construction of a genuinely stable and lasting regional order—a regional order that advances, first and foremost, the interests and values *of* the region, *by* the region, and *for* the region.

The Silk Road region is not the Balkans; it's not the Americas; it's not Belarus; and it's not the South China Sea, either. No outside power should harbor aspirations of domination, primacy, sphere of interest, or whatever other term folks in Brussels, Washington, Moscow, or Beijing may employ to paint over their ambitions.

Because the Silk Road region is not a prize; it's not a bridge; it's not a fiefdom; and it's certainly not a chessboard. Not even today, much less tomorrow.

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Now, at the beginning of today's lecture, I said I wanted to make three basic points.

Let me summarize these three points, by way of conclusion.

One, the balance of power in the Silk Road region is not just shifting, it's transforming. And I gave you three main events accelerating this strategic trend and list of its geopolitical consequences. Remember my formulation? That the cumulative effect of all this can be summarized in the following manner: regionally-driven economic connectivity is on the way in; outside power agenda-setting is on the way out. And some outsiders are seeing their relative power decline, others are seeing an increase. But in the aggregate, the power of outsiders is being reduced overall.

Ok? Well, that was point number one.

Point number two was that the “grand chessboard” metaphor that has for a long time framed geopolitical thinking about the Silk Road region is outdated, flawed, and just plain wrong. And I proposed and explained its replacement: that of a card table.

And point number three—which derives from the first two—was that the Silk Road region is moving away from no longer being merely an *object* of great power relations—a plaything of others; it is on the cusp of becoming a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated *subject* of international order. And I came to this assessment by examining the Silk Road region's emerging set of initiatives and institutions that, taken together, may herald the onset of a stable and lasting order in that part of the world, held together by a particular set of Silk Road values.

Thank you very much.