

Geography as Destiny

Global Wobbliness and its Effects on the Silk Road region

Jahangir E. Arasli

The second term of Donald Trump’s administration unlocked a period of a worldwide strategic uncertainty and ambiguity. The present-day focus of international attention is centering now on the evolving progression in the U.S.-EU-Russia triangle, mainly in relation to the European War (a.k.a. war in Ukraine). That “grand matter” shades other regions of the globe, which, nonetheless, remain entirely exposed to the direct and unintended effects of the unfolding dynamics. One of such areas is the Silk Road region—the geoeconomic and geocultural amalgam of Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus, which stretches along the ancient East-West trade route. This IDD Analytical Policy Memo evaluates how the condensing “strategic haze” at the global level and the growing polarization between major powers can affect the [Silk Road region](#) locus and forge both challenges and opportunities to the region’s actors.

China: Enter the Dragon

At first glance, China is not involved directly in the course of action related to the European War. However, it will be unwise to overlook its massive gravitation. Beijing is keeping careful watch on the latest developments, viewing them through the lens of its geopolitical rivalry with the United States. The connotations related to a would-be realignment between Washington and Moscow make Beijing concerned for three particular reasons. The first reason is the declared intention of Trump’s team to [drive](#)

Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, who may be contacted at jangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk.

[a wedge](#) between China and Russia to set the latter apart from the former. The second reason is that the conceived American-Russian reconciliation and the resulting ceasefire in Ukraine could leave the European Union weakened and sandwiched between two poles and then potentially confront assertive Russia. The third reason is the solution of the European War can accelerate the long-expected shift of U.S. efforts and resources to the Indo-Pacific region. Such a complex endgame would not necessarily materialize, in part or as a whole (in particular, Moscow already [dismissed](#) the likelihood of a break with Beijing, given their “no limits” strategic partnership). However, even a low chance of potential fallouts that would compromise China’s global strategic posture is compelling it to react to the shifting status quo.

In his 15 February 2025 address to the Munich Security Conference, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi [stressed](#) that “all stakeholders in the Russia-Ukraine conflict” should participate in peace talks, and the EU has a crucial role in it (this statement was interpreted as being in opposition to the U.S. posture). On 5 March 2025, Lu Shaye, China’s special envoy for European affairs, publicly [reiterated](#) that the U.S. and Russia have no right to monopolize the peace deal in Ukraine and sideline other actors, underscoring the “appalling treatment” of the European powers by Trump’s team. Strikingly, the aforementioned diplomat, who has assumed his office just a week before he made the quoted statement, is known for his fairly [tough approach](#) towards European politics. Such a U-turn indicates an adjustment of China’s strategy towards the EU’s affairs. There are other signposts in this regard. In particular, in March 2025, China and Ukraine [signed two agreements](#) in the field of economic cooperation, while one of China’s public television networks provided a [report](#) from the Ukrainian side of the frontline for the first time (previously, such war stories were limited to the Russian side only).

The said facts and events could point to the certain changes in the Chinese approach towards the EU and the European War. The swinging currents in the Euro-Atlantic space and the perspective of a U.S.-Russia détente fit the broader context, which encompasses the Trump team’s China-centered hostile narratives, escalating tariff wars, a U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific (for real this time), and the establishment of a web of formats (AUKUS, the Quad, and the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral), which Beijing perceives as elements of an informal anti-Chinese alliance.

The ensuing outcome could represent the beginnings of a Chinese “two Wests” policy that treats the U.S. and the EU as strategically decoupled actors. In the same way that the start of the second Trump Administration ends the EU’s long-endured illusion of “peace dividend” predicated on an “end of history” worldview, it also arrests China’s stratagem of remaining above the fray as “the wise monkey on the hill” (as detailed in one of my [IDD publication](#) from 2022). Such a precondition increases the likelihood that China becomes inspired to engage the EU in a sort of a counterbalancing alignment, to which Europeans would respond reciprocally. Hence Wang Yi’s indication, also put forward at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, that his country is willing to “synergize

high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with the European Union’s Global Gateway strategy, so as to empower each other and empower the entire world.”

In such a case, these two global actors, which are detached geographically, will need to entrench a firm and reliable physical (geographic) connection that links them to one another. This brings us to the Silk Road region.

The “Box of Gems:” Supply Chains, Hydrocarbons, and “Philosopher’s Stones”

In my [IDD Policy Brief](#) published in 2022, I dubbed Central Asia (an important segment of the Silk Road region) both as a “Box of Gems” (given its abundant natural resources and key geographic location) and a “Pandora Box” (given its inherent social, economic, and security problems, and complex geopolitical environment). Nowadays, this allusion grows in relevance.

One of the direct upshots of the European War has been the transformation of the geoeconomic landscape of broader Eurasia, with the Silk Road region as its composite part. The vital logistics and supply chains linking China with the European geography have shifted from Russia to the Silk Road region—the geography through which the only unsanctioned connectivity corridor between Asia and Europe passes.

A particular outcome became the operationalization of the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route (TITR, a.k.a. the Middle Corridor), which opens up numerous advantages and opportunities for the EU, China, and the transit states. The advent of TITR further enhances Chinese strategic export capabilities. This corridor considerably supplements the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) global network and the emerging Northern Sea Route (NSR), which are also vectoring towards premium European markets (China is the EU’s second-largest trade partner, and vice versa: their bilateral trade turnover in 2024 peaked at [\\$762 billion](#)). The European Union, in turn, executes its strategic [Global Gateway initiative](#), part of which centers on the Silk Road region. The “tariffs offensive” launched by the U.S. will certainly provide additional impetus for China-EU trade and economic relations, as will the willingness of the key Silk Road region countries to play a greater role in the realization of the strategic plans of Beijing and Brussels.

Meanwhile, BRI’s maritime leg remains exposed to potential contingencies in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, as shipping lanes used by Chinese vessels remain dependent on vulnerable chokepoints controlled by outside powers (i.e., the Malacca Strait, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal). Additionally, a specific focus of the ongoing American-Russian negotiations is the prospective mutual exploitation of the NSR (as well as U.S. investments in the exploration and exploitation of natural gas and mineral deposits in the polar areas). In the event of Washington and Moscow finding common ground, China fears it can be sidelined from this Arctic track. Add to that the [mess](#) on the

China-Russia border, where since the end of 2024 Russian border and customs services, for unknown reasons, impede the transit of Chinese export commodities. All this objectively increases the relevance of the Silk Road region in Beijing's strategic calculus.

Finding itself in a problematic geopolitical situation after the U.S. swing away from its heretofore reliable commitment to Trans-Atlanticism, Europe (i.e., the EU and its member states, the UK, Norway, Switzerland, and the Western Balkans) seems to be raising its stakes in the Silk Road region. Their vested economic interests go in a package with security issues (such as preventing the spread of violent religious extremism, interdicting Russia's influence, managing migration, and other similar challenges). It is possible to expect that in the currently emergent condition, EU actors would have to reduce the level of political conditionality they have traditionally adopted in their interaction and cooperation with the core states of the Silk Road region. As expected, the upcoming [EU-Central Asia summit](#) in Tashkent in April 2025 will speed up and deepen the EU's engagement in the Silk Road region. Regrettably, the EU has yet to incorporate fully the South Caucasus half of the region into a holistic strategy, not yet designing policies that acknowledge it as integral to the realization of its ambitions in that part of the world. Instead, Brussels continues to conceptually distinguish the two halves of the Silk Road region, in contradistinction to the new Chinese posture.

Beyond strategic logistics and access to energy resources, both China and the EU have another highly important incentive to establish themselves in the Silk Road region: access to its rare-earth elements (REE), considered the "philosopher's stone" of the twenty-first century. These substances, in particular, are strategically important for the ambitious "[Made in China 2025](#)" program, whose implementation would propel China from the position of being the "world's factory" of consumer goods to the elite status of global technology leader. At present, China has already seized command heights in manufacturing electro-mobiles, solar panels, and drones. It leads in shipbuilding and space technologies and strengthens its positions in producing electronic microchips and semiconductors. All those activities require a strong-as-possible REE base.

For the same reason, the futuristic technological breakthrough projects promoted by the hi-tech oligarchs behind Donald Trump's team have an REE prerequisite. The U.S. is evidently going after those minerals [globally](#). At the same time, they [perceive](#) the "Made in China 2025" program to be a challenge that would enable Chinese technological domination and upset U.S. economic supremacy and national security. The quest for REE (besides other causes) sets the stage for the potential acceleration of strategic competition in the Silk Road locus between the U.S., China, and the EU (the latter two can provisionally pool their political efforts to push back against American ambitions, but this is unlikely to reconcile their distinct economic interests). Add to that the GCC states, India, Japan, South Korea, and Türkiye.

There are also two indeterminate factors of a strategic magnitude that are present in relation to the Silk Road region. The first relates to the potential return of the emboldened Russia to its traditional standing in the region after the end of the European War. The second factor reflects the uncertainty surrounding Iran and its nuclear program: will the U.S. strike a deal with Iran or will it strike Iran? Providing the [recent signals](#) coming from Tehran's top establishment, the situation could turn fierce one day or another.

Overall, the cumulative impact of the aforementioned conditions and aspects could result in the Silk Road region's three middle powers (a.k.a. "[keystone states](#)") facing edgy dilemmas in accommodating themselves to the conflicting interests of major outside powers amid looming regional rivalry (call it the "New Great Game" or anything else).

Navigating Amid Challenges and Opportunities

The Silk Road region's three middle powers should find a way to acclimatize themselves to the new strategic environment. It will not be a simple task. If the patterns of Chinese and EU international behavior are known and recognizable toward this part of the world, the White House's foreign policy design is less discernible—at least at the current stage. Many of Washington's already defined outlines are causing concern and confusion: incoherent and fluctuating strategies, impromptu actions, ex post facto (retroactively) brushed-up agreements with allies and partners, megaphone diplomacy, and so on.

One particular example is the declared intention to revise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nation states ([cases](#) include Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Panama, and Palestine (Gaza)), which represents a further time bomb set under the international system (building on the pattern set in 2008 regarding Serbia and Georgia, and then later in Ukraine). However, the Silk Road region states have to deal with what they have and try to engage the Trump Administration positively, exploiting its declared intentions and preferences. Issues involving REE and hydrocarbons can help to facilitate that objective.

It appears that some of the states that make up the core Silk Road region are already capitalizing on the moment. Kazakhstan, which possesses one of the largest REE deposits in the world, is developing [projects and deals](#) on the extraction of minerals with American and European companies. The Australians and South Koreans are also in this game. Moreover, that country has already become one of the leading suppliers of uranium ore to international markets. In March 2025, Turkmenistan for the first time openly [expressed its readiness](#) to supply natural gas to the European continent to substitute the similar Russian product. Meanwhile, Georgia is implementing different [infrastructural projects](#) with China, including the construction of its first deep sea port of Anaklia, which is emerging as one of the Middle Corridor transit transportation nodes.

All of the mentioned projects and other enterprises will require the engagement of Azerbaijan, whose unique geographic position and focal location in the middle of the Middle Corridor remain **indispensable** for the “unboxing” of the Central Asian “box of gems” (rare-earth elements included). The **potential accession** of Azerbaijan to the Abrahamic Accord would facilitate the broader inclusion of the Silk Road region into global markets.

It is worth noting, though, that the ongoing polarization between individual powers and groups of powers poses risks for the Silk Road region. The return to the international arena of a sort of zero-sum, black-and-white approach (“a friend of my foe is my foe” or “who is not with us is against us”) can distress economic cooperation preferences made by the Central Asia and South Caucasus states that make up the core of the Silk Road region. One of the prospective ways to mitigate such a situation is to strengthen both their horizontal multilateral and bilateral collaboration.

Synopsis

- Ongoing global systemic perturbation generates divergent effects in the Silk Road region, producing both opportunities and challenges for its core states.
- The Silk Road region states have to adapt and accommodate themselves to this global rebalancing act, which includes shifting strategic paradigms, increasing polarization between major power centers, transactional terms of international interaction, and the hunt for precision minerals.
- The Silk Road region’s key geographic location and copious natural treasures represent significant advantages.
- Therefore, the utmost strategic objective of the Silk Road region’s states is to advance mutually beneficial cooperation with all willing actors while avoiding exposure to the America-China rivalry and other power contests.
- In the current conditions, that objective can turn into a “Catch 22.”
- To bandwagon and join forces is a prudent strategy that could help the Silk Road region states to moderate emerging risks and challenges.

A saying, attributed to Ibn Khaldun is that “geography is destiny.” It is hard to identify any other part of the world where this insight sounds as appropriate as the Silk Road region. Strategic, economic, technological environments, politics and ideologies may evolve, but geography remains constant. As such, it could become a blessing, a curse, or both. The core states of the Silk Road region must do their best to navigate their way towards the first alternative.