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The Rise of the Silk Road Region

By Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic

The ongoing conflict over Ukraine is accelerating divisions within what Westerners often call the “international community.” Among its myriad manifestations is the worrisome prevalence of what social scientists term “false universalism.” In this case, it is the tendency to present as global in scale and scope something that is in fact predominantly Western or Western led. Hence, the current political and journalistic rhetoric giving the public impression that the entire world has effectually joined the West in imposing sanctions and export restrictions against Russia. One example is the way that the outcome of a series of almost entirely symbolic votes in the UN General Assembly is presented discursively in the West. But in real life, votes on symbolic, non-binding resolutions at the UN are rarely indicative of a given state’s actual foreign policy. More importantly, there is little correlation between the outcome of such votes and practical policy shifts. Thus, while the US and its allies might herald recent UN General Assembly tallies that show a majority of countries condemning Russia for its actions against Ukraine, other resolutions—such as the November 2022 measure that condemned the continuation of the US economic embargo against Cuba with 185 countries out of 193 in favor—continue to pass by even greater margins. Yet, they rarely lead to any substantive changes in policy. And these Cuba resolutions have been essentially an annual event for decades. They mean next to nothing in real life.

Another consequence of this type of discursive “false universalism” is what psychologists call “consensus bias” or the “false consensus effect” on Western decisionmakers and Western publics. It has a blinding effect not only on the prudence of making use of nuance and compromise in a state’s policymaking toolkit, but also a blindness to the charge of hypocrisy and double-standards—not to mention on the disadvantages of the charge of “Atticism,” a Thucydidean neologism that I have defined as “alignment to a stronger power by a subordinate one acting under constraint at a time of crisis.”⁴ I remember a March 26, 2022 tweet by Gérard Araud—France’s former permanent representative to the UN, as well as the country’s former ambassador to the United States—that made this point succinctly: “We, in the West, underestimate the resentment of the rest of the world against us.”

⁴ See Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic, “Atticism and the Summit for Democracy: A Little Thought Experiment,” *Baku Dialogues*, vol.5, no. 2 (Winter 2021-2022), pp. 140–165.

Regarding the war, we can look at the actual number of countries that have imposed sanctions on Russia. And here we see a much more divided world than is generally presented in the West, or that is reflected in votes taken at the UN General Assembly. As for March 2023, the Russian Foreign Ministry lists some 50 countries as “unfriendly” due to such measures. It includes nearly every NATO country along with the EU and all of its member states, as well as some other US treaty allies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. It also, however, includes Lilliputian players like Andorra, Liechtenstein, Micronesia, and San Marino. This is basically a “usual suspects” list that constitutes what the Russians call the “collective West,” but it has the advantage of drawing attention to some deeper and oftentimes downplayed realities. The absences on this list are telling. They reflect, for instance, the reality that not a single non-Western G-20 country and not a single core country of the Silk Road region⁵ has formally adhered to *all* the Western-led sanctions. The Russian list does not include NATO member Turkey. Absent also are cornerstone US allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. Certainly, a larger number of states adhere informally to *some* of the Western-led sanctions, but a case can be made that this is due to a combination of fear of punitive economic retribution by the West and diplomatic or humanitarian solidarity with Ukraine. Yet, even making this sort of looser or longer list probably would not produce a majority of UN member states. At the same time, there *is* a very large majority of UN-member states that affirms support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity as a matter of principle. This stance may be important, but it seems quite a stretch to conclude that this alone will decisively affect the future status of Crimea and the Donbass.

Consider some recent developments: the latest Non-Aligned Movement Summit declined to condemn Russian actions; the G20 does not speak as 19 members aligned against Russia but remain divided; OPEC Plus

⁵ As defined in the Editorial Statement of *Baku Dialogues*, which I co-edit, “the Silk Road region is a single geopolitical theater with multiple stages. We define it loosely as comprising 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, looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.” See <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/editorial-statement>.

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Heads of State at the 2018 SCO summit in Qingdao, Shandong, China. (kremlin.ru)

continues to operate with Russia as a co-convenor; and even at the 2023 Democracy Summit, of the 120 invited countries, 47 did not completely endorse the communiqué that condemned the Russian government. While the G7 grouping of Western industrialized democracies has attempted to impose greater economic sanctions against Russia, its impact has been partially countermanded by the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping—which roughly balances the G7 in its overall contribution to global GDP.

I certainly do not mean to downplay the force and impact of the Western-led sanction regime on the targeted country. It is doing real harm to the Russian financial system, its economy, and its technology base. Still, it seems unlikely that the increasingly harsh Western-led sanctions will *fundamentally* impact the Kremlin's pursuit of its national interests as it defines them.

Amidst this backdrop, one of the most unheralded developments to arise out of the war has been its effects on the South-Caucasus-Central Asia core of the Silk Road region. Russia's strategic distraction in the Ukraine theater, coupled with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the impact of the outcome of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, are

contributing factors to the ongoing transformation of the regional balance of power. I observe an under-the-radar trend taking strategic shape, perhaps even doing so rapidly: regionally driven economic connectivity is on the way in, and outside power agenda-setting is on the way out. Some outsiders are seeing their relative power decline while 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.

One can think of the infancy period of ASEAN, the Nordic Council, the GCC, and the original European Economic Community. This is what I forecast taking place in the Silk Road region: a text-based process of economic connectivity and regionalization that results in formal, institutionalized cooperation that both broadens and deepens in the future.

States like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—Silk Road region states located at the crossroads of China, the European Union, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and India—are increasingly aware that they must have the dexterity to maintain security and project influence in a prudential manner beyond their immediate borders. And, because of this increasingly salient imperative, such countries—“middle powers” as the Piedmont-born thinker Giovanni Botero defined them in 1589, or “keystone states” as Nikolas Gvosdev calls them today—are apt to have facility in promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbors and their neighbors’ neighbors.⁶ And applying this aptitude is predicated on maintaining an ever-increasing internal stability and security. Undoubtedly, no state in the Silk Road region (and far beyond) buys into what its proponents call the “rules-based liberal international order.”

Looking at the map here is essential. The northern corridor, via Russia, is effectually closed for Western business. And this is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future, whatever the military outcome of the conflict over Ukraine. The strategic potential of the southern corridor route will not be able to be harnessed fully, either, given the West’s strategic posture towards Iran that is also unlikely to change for the foreseeable

⁶ See Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State*, I:2, as well as Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Keystone States: A New Category of Power,” *Horizons*, no. 5 (Autumn 2015), pp. 104–120 and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region,” *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 2020), pp. 26–39. See also Christopher Mott, “Inshore Balancers and Reborn Opportunities: Middle Powers and the Silk Road Region,” *Baku Dialogues*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Summer 2022), pp. 6–20.

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future. By process of elimination, the only open Eurasian land route is the “Middle Corridor.” It is now the only game in town for achieving Asian, Turkish, and European transport and connectivity ambitions. The Silk Road region as a whole—and here Azerbaijan is the indispensable state, the geographically unavoidable hub—is also an integral part of sophisticated EU plans for energy stability, both in securing the reliable supply of hydrocarbons as well as developing new sources of green/renewable energy. Moreover, the core states of the Silk Road region understand the value of serving as trusted interlocutors and reliable intermediaries that can act as buffers between major external power centers.

The strategic logic informing the founding of ASEAN increasingly applies in this part of the world; namely, no state in the Silk Road region is strong enough *by itself* to play such and similar roles, as identified above. But *together* they could provide equilibrium while setting the tone, pace, and scope of the overall cooperation agenda. If what I have forecast comes to pass, then external powers will continue to exert some influence, but developments in the Silk Road region will unlikely continue being decisively *driven*—much less *determined*—by the oftentimes clashing agendas, preferences, objectives, and priorities of those same external powers. In other words, banding together, states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan can take the lead in a strategic project of the geopolitical emancipation of the Silk Road region. This part of the world does not have to remain merely an *object* of great power relations; it stands a chance of becoming a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated *subject* of world order.

Over the past several years, we have seen the leaders of the region taking steps reminiscent of those taken decades ago by keystone states anchoring the other theaters I mentioned. ASEAN is a good reference point. For instance, in the Silk Road region we are seeing the establishment of institutional arrangements to facilitate trade and security cooperation from the borders of China to the shores of the Black Sea. And, at a time of greater international polarization, this move towards greater integration—of the core states of the Silk Road region playing what may amount to a global “keystone” role—is supported at least implicitly by all the major outside powers, including Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. At present, it is the only theater anywhere in the world where the relevant outside powers are not behaving as though geopolitical and geo-economic outcomes have to be entirely zero-sum.

While global attention is focused on developments to the immediate northwest of the Silk Road region (i.e., in Ukraine), in the core of the Silk Road region we may be witnessing the birth of a new reality whereby the region itself is becoming an actor in setting and maintaining a new multipolar world order, rather than being a helpless object caught within the vicissitudes of great power competition. The Silk Road region is cementing itself as a center of non-alignment. And this is particularly consequential given that the global importance of the Silk Road region is more consequential than it has been in centuries—both in terms of geopolitics and geoeconomics.

My fundamental takeaway is that the Silk Road region's keystone states are attempting to establish their own set of initiatives and institutions and that this burgeoning posture represents a surge of interdependence, connectivity, and integration. All this may well result in the construction of a genuinely stable and lasting regional order. This regional order would advance, first and foremost, the interests and values *of* the region, *by* the region, and *for* the region. I think that these values will happen to coincide with Western strategic interests, properly understood. Pushing for something more, along the lines proposed by Zbigniew Brzezinski at the height of the unipolar era and by others more recently,⁷ would be both imprudent and dangerous. Pushing back against the still-nascent consolidation of the Silk Road region's strategic heterogeneity no longer serves the national interests of any great power.

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⁷ See Zbigniew Brzezinski, "A Geostrategy for Eurasia," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1997), pp. 50-64 and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).