INTRODUCTION

The Second Karabakh War and a New Caucasus: The Regional Peace Dividend Playing Out at the Card Table

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As editors of this volume—a post-mortem on the thirty-year territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh—we began planning for the book's publication about a year after the end of the 2020 war. However, the manuscript is only now going to press, more than four years later, just as an announcement was made that the text of the peace treaty had been agreed but was not yet able to be signed. Various reasons account for this interval, none of which warrant exposition—although we do wish to stress that the distinguished authors whom we commissioned to contribute individual chapters to this project are blameless for its deferment. Still, we do not believe that the delayed timing negatively affects the project's salience. Quite the contrary, in fact: subsequent events in this and neighboring theaters deepen our conviction that the outcome of the Second

Karabakh War was a watershed event in the modern history of the region. Indeed, we are even more persuaded that it represents the moment of conception of a new South Caucasus—the geopolitical and geoeconomic reverberations of which will continue to be felt far beyond this part of the world for decades to come. The ongoing fallout from the war in Gaza, including Assad's departure from Syria, and the increasing tensions between China and the United States, coupled with the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022, has made the foregoing line of reasoning more straightforward. The imposition by the West of a sanctions and export regime against Russia in response to its renewed armed offensive deeper into Ukraine, coupled with the various sanctions regimes imposed by the UN and the West against Iran, means that the South Caucasus, in general, and Azerbaijan, in particular (for reasons of basic geography), has become indispensable in advancing—in a politically unimpeded manner—the strategic east-west (and north-south) Eurasian connectivity ambitions of all major neighboring and outside powers. This characterization is even more convincing given that Azerbaijan is now evidently the preeminent political and military power in the South Caucasus—a state of affairs that appears quite unlikely to change for a long time to come.

The historic document that ended the Second Karabakh War is, in terms of scope, more than a narrow ceasefire agreement but less than a general peace settlement. Strictly speaking, only its first article dealt with the cessation of hostilities in Karabakh. The others laid out various interconnected and concrete measures that, taken as a whole, aim towards a future predicated implicitly on the establishment of peaceful relations between two

sovereign states, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Such an outcome, which subsequent events have demonstrated is not illusive yet remains elusive as of this writing (Spring 2025), is increasingly likely to serve as a catalyst for the instauration of a peace dividend—centered on optimizing the region's strategic connectivity potential—the ripened fruits of which this part of the world has not born in centuries.

The Card Table, Not the "Grand Chessboard"

Parts of the peace dividend already seem to be taking shape in ways in which at least some of the major neighboring and outside powers could find objectionable, for they appear to still cling to, or at least prefer, to envision the South Caucasus as separate from Central Asia. If they do emphasize conceptual cohesion, then they tend to view this part of the world—traditionally called Eurasia (or "core Eurasia") but better termed the "Silk Road region" or the "Trans-Caspian region"[1]—through Zbigniew Brzezinski's metaphor of the "grand chessboard."[2] We believe

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1 See Damjan Krnjević Mišković, "On Some Conceptual Advantages of the Term 'Silk Road Region': Heralding Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Emancipation," *Baku Dialogues* 6, no. 4, Summer 2023, pp. 20-27. For an alternate moniker, see S. Frederick Starr, "In Defense of Greater Central Asia," Policy Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, September 2008.

2 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997. He may have adapted the phrase from the comments of military historian Spencer Wilkinson, who was the formal respondent to Halford Mackinder's 1904 lecture: "Whereas only half a century ago statesmen played on a few squares of a chessboard 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." See Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4, April 1904, pp. 421-444 and Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1996 (1919). Cf. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, p. 272: "the extreme flexibility of the balance of power resulting from the utter unreliability of alliances made it imperative for all players to be cautious in their moves on the chessboard of international politics and, since risks were hard to calculate, to take as small risks as possible."

that this metaphor is outdated and misleading, for it presupposes that the Silk Road region was, is, and will remain an *object* of great power relations.

We disagree with Brzezinski's presupposition of a "chessboard," for it requires of its adherents to make an argument along the lines of "the Silk Road region is too important for the major neighboring and outside powers to allow its core states to be given the opportunity to build up and manage it on their own." In fact, the "grand chessboard" metaphor does not provide conceptual room for any substantive agency on the part of the states that actually belong to the core region, viewing them simply as pawns on the chessboard, to be moved around at will by the larger players.[3] However, we do subscribe to Brzezinski's offhand remark that the core Silk Road region has the prospect of becoming an "assertive single entity, the concrete beginnings of which are being set in motion."[4]

This last is neither to be feared nor is it likely to be stifled, for the balance of power in the Silk Road region is in the midst of a transformative shift that was at least in part sparked by the outcome of the Second Karabakh War. In making this assertion, we are hardly alone. And yet, relatively few observers of the region are today ready to admit to the possibility that this ongoing shift strategically favors the onset of home-grown integration—with both its main architects and core participants belonging to the region itself. Fewer still would suggest, as we do, that this could open the door for the region to become a fully-fledged, distinct,

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3 See Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, "Chessboard No More: the Rise of Central Asia's International Agency," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 3, 2023.

4 Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, p. 35.

and emancipated subject of an international order. In other words, we believe that regionally driven economic connectivity is on the way in, and that outside power agenda-setting is on the way out. While some major neighboring or outside powers are seeing their relative power decline in this part of the world, others are seeing an increase; but in the aggregate, the power of outsiders is on its way to being reduced overall. We do not see this happening in one fell swoop, and we are not suggesting that institutional arrangements akin to those of some existing regional fora are destined to be established. Rather, we envision the onset of a predominant reality in the Silk Road region consisting of a combination of formal documents and informal understandings in which no single power dominates, equilibrium (but not necessarily equidistance) is maintained, a general balance is kept, and cooperation in various fields increases with no negative impact on sovereign prerogatives.

Our alternative to the "grand chessboard" metaphor, which framed Western (and, to a lesser degree, non-Western) mainstream geopolitical thinking about the Silk Road region in the post-Cold War period (and to some extent continues to do so), is that of *a room at the center of which is a circular card table*.[5]

Think of it this way: Various players are opting to stay 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;

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5 The card table metaphor was first put forward publicly by one of us (Krnjević) during an online event hosted by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute on 25 November 2021 to launch a study by Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr, and Albert Barro, "Political and Economic Reforms under President Tokayev," Silk Road Paper, November 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKWqRrMHrz8.

and all the while, the deck is being reshuffled and new cards will soon be dealt.

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

Chess is a game played between two players, although Brzezinski imaginatively conceives of his grand chessboard as accommodating four players.[6] But at a card table, there is plenty of room for more chairs to be added smoothly, without disrupting the general flow of play. New players can join, old ones can fall by the wayside, and anyone can pretty much cash out at any time.

In addition, 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 a tell while trying to uncover the respective tells of the other players.

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 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 the way the geopolitical game is played in the Silk Road region.

Another useful layer of metaphorical complexity is the existence in some card games of what are called community cards—cards that are dealt face up and shared by all the players during the hand. Relatedly, each hand played at a card table also involves

6 See Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, pp. 31-34: "Although geostrategy—the strategic management of geopolitical interests—may be compared to chess, the somewhat oval-shaped Eurasian chessboard engages not just two but several players, each possessing differing amounts of power. The key players are located on the chessboard's west, east, center, and south."

commonly agreed but potentially changing rules of the road that apply to all: minimum buy-in, ante and raising procedures, and so on. At the same time, all partnerships and alliances are temporary at a card table.

Furthermore, at a card table—depending on the game—other players and even spectators can stake fellow players. Furthermore, there are disparities in stack sizes amongst the players seated around a card table—and this can matter quite a bit. Players' stack sizes also change over time, with real consequences affecting their subsequent strategies.

In addition, starting hands are never even at a card table: we are all familiar with the expression "to play the hand you're dealt." So, in other words, equality of opportunity and 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 (that is, the position of players seated at the table in relation to the dealer), which also affects each player's strategy at the card table. For example, 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.

In sum, the overall point of our card table metaphor is quite simple: essentially, if a player has what it takes—or if he *thinks* he does—he can pull up a chair, take a seat at the card table, and partake in the great game. And if he does not, he can pack it up—even walk out of the room. If his fortunes change and

circumstances allow, he could be dealt back in. But regardless, the game goes on.

This is quite different from how the great game is played on the "grand chessboard," where, according to Brzezinski, four not precisely identified major neighboring and outside powers are the region's only truly independent players. They and they alone control the board: they and they alone are equipped with the independent agency needed to formulate strategies and tactically execute them by moving pieces on the board, including the choice to sacrifice. This is the inescapable logic of the metaphor.

Thus, while the principle of *exclusivity* lies at the heart of the grand chessboard metaphor, its opposite—*inclusivity*—lies at the heart of the card table metaphor. The game is not played just between Moscow and Washington. Astana, Baku, and Tashkent have also taken their seats, and they are being joined by their core Silk Road region neighbors, some of which play intermittently, while all remain in the room. Ankara, Beijing, Delhi, and Tehran each have chairs, alongside more obviously external players like Abu Dhabi, Athens, Baghdad, Brussels, Budapest, Berlin, Delhi, Doha, Islamabad, Jerusalem, Kabul, London, Riyadh, Rome, and Paris—on some days, at least, or for some rounds of play.

From our vantage point, we see that a new hand is presently being dealt—a clear indication that the next round of play is about to get underway. When it does, it seems increasingly likely to eventuate the autonomous geopolitical and geoeconomic development of the states that geographically belong to the core of the region itself.

The End of the Territorial Conflict Over Karabakh

Although various events that took place on either side of the Caspian and in neighboring theaters—both prior to and in the wake of the Second Karabakh War—have contributed to the latest reshuffling of the cards, we believe that the Second Karabakh War symbolizes the moment when this reshuffling began to be understood as being possible to undertake in practice: when the cards for a new hand to be dealt could be set in motion, as it were. The Second Karabakh War thus represents the moment of conception of a new South Caucasus and, indeed, of a new Silk Road region.

But the moment of conception is not the same as viability, much less birth—to speak nothing of growth, nurture, development, maturity, and so on. One of the questions this raises concerns the actual end of the territorial conflict over Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Strictly speaking, it has not yet ended. Formally, one can say that it will not come to an end until a legally binding peace agreement is signed and ratified by both Baku and Yerevan. But for all *political* intents and purposes, the territorial conflict over Karabakh seems pretty much over. Still, the question needs to be asked: when did the territorial conflict over Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan end?

Was it when Azerbaijan won the war under the terms enshrined in a tripartite statement signed by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and Russian President Vladimir Putin on 10 November 2020—a document that, after all, makes no provision for any consideration of Karabakh outside Azerbaijan's constitutional framework?

Or did it end later? One can point to the Prague document, which was the written outcome of a meeting between Aliyev, Pashinyan, EU Council President Charles Michel, and French President Emmanuel Macron that took place on the margins of the inaugural meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) on 6 October 2022, which "confirmed" a commitment to "recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty?"

Or was it the more explicit Grenada document, which was the outcome of a meeting between Pashinyan (again, on the margins of the EPC Summit) on 5 October 2023 with Michel, Macron, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that reaffirmed a "commit[ment] to all efforts directed towards the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, based on mutual recognition of sovereignty, inviolability of borders and territorial integrity of Armenia (29.800 km^2) and Azerbaijan (86.600 km^2)," as mentioned in President Michel's statements of 14 May and 15 July 2023?

Or was it the direct, un-mediated agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, made public on 7 December 2023, for the former to support the latter's bid to host COP29 in Baku in November 2024, signaling the onset of a "no Russia, no West" approach to the peace talks?

Or did the territorial conflict over Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan come to an end with the text of the 22 February 2022 Declaration on Allied Interaction signed by Aliyev and Putin? After all, this document unambiguously commits Russia to respect—for the first time ever[7]—the "independence,

7 Heydar Isayev and Joshua Kucera, "Ahead of Ukraine Invasion, Azerbaijan and Russia Cement 'Alliance'," *Eurasianet*, February 24, 2022: "Russia has never, at the top level, officially and explicitly confirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity on any occasion, not even in multilateral contexts," Kamal Makili-Aliyev, an Azerbaijani expert on international law, told Eurasianet. "This is why the declaration is important."

state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of the state borders of [Azerbaijan], as well as adhere […] to the principles of non-interference in [its] internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-use of force or threat of force." This formulation—the significance of which is generally underappreciated—may help to explain three crucial postwar developments that revolve around the role of Russian peacekeepers present in parts of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast since the end of the Second Karabakh War: one, their conduct during the Lachin Corridor crisis that began in December 2022; two, their bearing during and after Azerbaijan's 19-20 September 2023 "antiterrorist measure;" and three, the choice to withdraw completely from sovereign Azerbaijani lands as agreed by Baku and Moscow (with seemingly no involvement by Yerevan) and made public on 17 April 2024. The outcome of the withdrawal announcement—coupled with one made the next day indicating that the Russian-Turkish Joint Monitoring Center would cease to function—marks the first time that Baku "enjoys complete sovereignty over all its territories without any foreign troops present."[8]

On the basis of the foregoing, it seems to us that the safest date marking the end of the territorial conflict over Karabakh is this last one, for it allows one to state unequivocally that de jure and de facto realities have fully achieved *political* congruence, after having been in effectual opposition for more than three decades. The start of a border demarcation process between the two countries, complete with the agreed erection of the first border

8 Vasif Huseynov, "Opinion: Russian withdrawal from Karabakh allows Azerbaijan to strengthen its ties with its Turkic 'family,'" commonspace.eu, April 28, 2024. We can go further still: Azerbaijan is the only Eastern Partnership country that "enjoys complete sovereignty over all its territories without any foreign troops present."

markers in late April 2024, speaks to this point. The signing and ratification of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan would formally enshrine this congruence whilst endowing it with a sense of permanence. This would, as noted above, serve as a catalyst for the instauration of a peace dividend, centered on optimizing the region's strategic connectivity potential (strictly speaking, this process seems already to be underway, albeit without the inclusion of one route that should traverse through a sliver of sovereign Armenian territory, which does not affect the overall viability of what is called, in one prevailing concept, the Middle Corridor). Such a peace agreement would also remove a critical prerequisite for Ankara and Yerevan to come to terms on normalizing their own bilateral relations. The foregoing would, moreover, go a long way toward ending Armenia's regional isolation. Perhaps it might mitigate the negative effects of the West's encouragement—spearheaded by France and the United States—of Pashinyan to diversify his country's political, economic, and security dependence on Russia and Iran, an encouragement that is unlikely to be backed with hard power and which could easily turn out to be too little, too late. Ending Armenia's regional isolation could even be accomplished with the active support of Azerbaijan, which would have an interest in limiting such fallout. This would be entirely consistent with how the game is now quite likely to be played at the card table.

Benefiting from the Future

Conceivably, then, the signing and ratification of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan would provide the EU

with one less reason to consider the South Caucasus as part of what the Union's now former chief diplomat called its "ring of fire" neighborhood, and what Brzezinski had characterized nearly 30 years earlier as the "global zone of percolating violence" and the "Eurasian Balkans."[9]

Unlike perhaps in earlier times, today such and similar views about this part of the world confuse a few nearby trees for the forest. Should these misperceptions linger for much longer, geopolitical and geoeconomic malpractice by those who hold them could be the result. No one with a stake in the success of the Silk Road region can afford to misdiagnose the overriding reality that, taken as a whole, this part of the world is on the cusp of becoming a relatively tranquil and predictable place—particularly when compared to neighboring regions. This assessment should not result in complacency, of course: like anywhere else, circumstances can change for the worse. But postures and policies that look to the entirety of the Silk Road region's future should be formulated with this prevailing trajectory in mind. Especially since the locals seem to have developed effective home-grown firefighting and rebuilding capabilities.

As we noted above, the principle of inclusivity lies at the heart of the card table metaphor, which means that all outside players remain more than welcome to stay in the room, take their seats, and participate in the next round of play—so long as they accept in both theory and practice that the rules of the game are not theirs to either set or revise anymore. For quite a few of these external actors, this would constitute a heretofore largely untried approach. To succeed, they will need to show a degree

9 Josep Borrell, "The World Confronted by Wars," speech at Oxford University, May 3, 2024; Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, pp. 53, 123.

of restraint, humility, and respect that has been traditionally exhibited in a limited manner towards the countries that make up the core Silk Road region. Perhaps this explains why the peace dividend has taken so long to begin bearing fruit.

As things now stand, local suspicions regarding the preferences and aspirations of the various outsiders remain very much alive. These can be mitigated, and perhaps even removed, in the time ahead largely in proportion to the extent that these same outsiders choose to temper their speeches and deeds in such a way as to harmonize them with those now prevalent in the Silk Road region itself. For most external, that is, foreign players, this will be easier said than done. Those for whom more interest-based, transactional approaches represent their diplomatic norm could be said to have an advantage over those habituated to pursue different ones. But this does not have to be a decisive hindrance. Coming to the card table in good faith would be a suitable beginning, especially when combined with a staunch commitment to abide by local conditions and consequent realities—to know and play by the rules consistently and reliably. This kind of conduct will largely determine how each foreign player will be received by those players who, by right of geography, are permanently seated around the card table. Surely, this will have a direct strategic impact on how each player—local and foreign alike—can benefit from the flagship east-west economic connectivity project that represents the backbone of the new Silk Road region in general, and the new Caucasus in particular, and which was brought to life due in no small measure to the outcome of the Second Karabakh War.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE CAUCASUS AND THE ROAD TO WAR

Svante E. Cornell

The escalation to war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 was in many ways a foregone conclusion. While many outside observers were comfortable in the understanding of the conflict as "frozen," to those who looked deeper momentous changes had taken place during the three decades after the May 1994 ceasefire. Changes on several levels—the global, regional, and domestic—indicated that the conflict would escalate to war sooner or later. These processes culminated in 2020, largely as a result of an ill-advised Armenian overreach that triggered Azerbaijan's decision to deal with the problem through military force.

The Origins of the Geopolitics of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus was not immediately obvious to Western