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Breaking Free from Parochial Geopolitical Complexity

Azerbaijan's Quest for a Third Path

Vasif Huseynov

Though geographically small at 186,043 square kilometers—and dwarfed by neighboring Iran, Türkiye, and especially Russia—the South Caucasus is home to over 50 distinct ethnic groups, encompassing a diverse tapestry of languages, religions, and cultures. Another unique characteristic for a region of this size is its consistent role as a microcosm of global geopolitics. This has been the case since the region's three countries regained their respective independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, with each aligning with different geopolitical centers. While Georgia pursued Euro-Atlantic integration, Armenia aligned with Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and

the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Azerbaijan, adopting a balanced foreign policy, opted for neutrality, maintaining equidistance and cultivating friendly, mutually-beneficial relations with both Russia and the West.

This status quo remained largely unchanged until recent years. This was due, in no small measure, to the fact that two territorial conflicts in the region—Armenia's occupation of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and Russia-backed secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia—had solidified the geopolitical orientations of the three regional countries. Armenia became heavily dependent on Russia across nearly all spheres in exchange for Russia's security guarantees. Georgia, seeking to solidify

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its pro-Western stance, pursued EU and NATO membership following the 2008 war with Russia and the secession of its two aforementioned regions. Azerbaijan, in turn, sought balance between Russia and the West, while navigating the ways to restore sovereignty over Karabakh.

The outcome of the Second Karabakh War (2020) and the full restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over all the formerly occupied territories as a result of its "antiterrorist measure" (2023) represented the first shocks to this heretofore relatively static regional landscape. These two events, taken together, fully put an end to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and seriously undermined Armenia's faith in Russian security guarantees, which formally could not be extended into the Karabakh theater as it was *de jure* Azerbaijan's territory.

In its wake, Azerbaijan began to pursue a more assertive foreign policy toward major powers. This represented a major shift in the country's political approach. Baku strengthened its geopolitical standing and began to capitalize

on its key role as a hub for regional transport and connectivity corridors and as an energy supplier. The growing influence of Türkiye, Azerbaijan's closest ally in the South Caucasus following the 2020 war, added further confidence to the conduct of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

The de-occupation of Azerbaijani territories also had a transformative effect on Armenia. The country sought to move beyond its dependency on Russia for military and political support, which in large measure had been seen as part of a national strategy to maintain the illegal occupation of Karabakh.

Consequently, Yerevan gained the confidence to approach the West more closely, reducing its participation in the CSTO while maintaining its active membership in the EAEU for its continued economic benefits.

Azerbaijan's success in liberating its territories also caught the attention of Georgia, whose leadership appears to have concluded that their own conflict is unlikely to be resolved unless

This essay examines what I take to be an evolution in Azerbaijan's foreign policy that can be called a "third path" or "alternative regionalism" approach.

Tbilisi repositions itself geopolitically—namely, by balancing relations between major powers and easing tensions with Russia. The geopolitical logic of this recalibrated approach amounts to the following reasoning: the road to regaining Abkhazia and South Ossetia certainly does not pass through Brussels or Washington, but through Moscow.

The new dynamics in the South Caucasus entered a much more confrontational and potentially dangerous phase following the start of the present phase in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022. The intensification of the Russia-West rivalry, which has reached the point of a military escalation through proxy, strained tensions between them in other theaters, including, with some delay, in the South Caucasus. Armenia's newfound drift to the West began to receive more support from leading Western countries starting towards the end of 2022, with France deciding to provide military supplies and the EU deploying a monitoring mission to this country under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Russian officials clearly warn that Armenia is following the path of Ukraine that eventually ended up with a war with Russia.

The situation in Georgia has also reached a critical point. The government, led by the Georgian Dream party, became the target of Western criticism following Tbilisi's decision to compel local NGOs to reveal the sources and amounts of their foreign funding (from entities like the now-suspended USAID) and its resistance to being drawn into the Russia-Ukraine war by opting to "pick a side" in what amounts to a binary fashion. This criticism by the West escalated into a strong campaign of political pressure, economic sanctions, and further scrutiny after the party's victory in the parliamentary elections in October 2024 and its subsequent suspension of EU integration efforts.

Having signed a strategic partnership agreement with China in July 2023 and de-escalated (without, however, re-normalizing) relations with Russia, Tbilisi sought to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy approach. However, this shift has been rejected by domestic pro-Western groups, who view the suspension of efforts to move toward Euro-Atlantic integration as a step toward authoritarianism (they seem to equate a non-Western-oriented Georgia with a non-democratic Georgia). As of now, the situation in Georgia remains unstable and could potentially escalate into a

regional crisis, should the country come face to face with a campaign of enhanced external interference in its domestic affairs, or, even worse, overt external intervention.

The situation in Georgia has not only further complicated geopolitics in the South Caucasus; it has also added a new variable to

the already complicated Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and various processes aiming to re-open transport and connectivity corridors in the region. Some Western officials have made it clear that they expect the South Caucasus to play a role in their attempt to reduce the dependence of Central Asian countries on Russia and China by providing an alternative transport path to world (read: Western) markets.

The United States also still seems to oppose (caveat: the position of the Trump Administration has not yet crystalized fully) broader regional cooperation proposals (e.g., Türkiye + South Caucasus + Central Asia) that would involve Iran, Russia, and China. This, along with Georgia's refusal to take part in any regional formats that

include Russia, has undermined the 3+3 regional cooperation initiative that was proposed after the Second

Azerbaijan faces an increasingly precarious position as it navigates the challenges to its traditional foreign policy balancing act, exacerbated by the intensifying geopolitical confrontation in the region.

Karabakh War. In parallel, present impediments to completing the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, coupled with the overall regional situation, have also undermined intra-regional cooperation proposals

involving the three South Caucasus states (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).

In light of these developments, Azerbaijan faces an increasingly precarious position as it navigates the challenges to its traditional foreign policy balancing act, exacerbated by the intensifying geopolitical confrontation in the region. This pressure translates into an attempt (mostly by the West) to force regional countries to make clear choices between competing power centers.

Driven by a desire to avoid unequivocal alignment with any major power blocs and to strengthen its independent geopolitical standing, Baku is striving to chart a nuanced course aimed at securing the

viability of Azerbaijan's non-alignment. In this context, Azerbaijan is expanding its relations with alternative power centers, advocating for deeper integration within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and seeking full membership in other regional and global organizations. President Ilham Aliyev's unequivocal endorsement of the OTS during his 14 February 2024 Inauguration Address highlights Azerbaijan's commitment to the deepening integration of the Turkic world, thereby reaffirming Baku's refusal to participate in Western- or Russia-led integration initiatives. Azerbaijan's application for full BRICS+ membership in August 2024 and its accession to the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation in December 2024 are clear manifestations of this foreign policy trajectory.

I contend in this essay that the foregoing represents a "third path" (or, one could say, "alternative regionalism") in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Herein, I will examine the rationale behind this choice by Azerbaijan, which is predicated on Baku's persistent refusal to align with either the Western or Russian bloc. I will explore the opportunities and challenges that this choice presents for Azerbaijan. I will also argue that while Azerbaijan's efforts to break free from the geopolitical

complexities of the South Caucasus and emerge as a regional "island of stability" are both rational and pragmatic, it remains unlikely that Azerbaijan can avoid regional threats and challenges by seeking regionalism beyond the South Caucasus.

Baku's Rationale

Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of non-alignment in international relations, although unlike, for example, Moldova, its constitution does not prohibit joining military alliances. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has been a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an international movement uniting 120 member and 17 observer countries. Predicated on the rejection of participating in military blocs, NAM was formally established by 25 states, including India, Egypt, and Yugoslavia, at the Belgrade NAM Summit in September 1961.

Azerbaijan chaired NAM from 2019 to 2024 and actively promoted the goals and principles of the movement in international relations. Based on these principles, Azerbaijan used to characterize its policy of non-alignment as an imperative conditioned by its geographical location. According to presidential adviser Hikmet

Hajiyev, the geopolitical realities of the region urge Baku to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy course and develop close relations with various regional and global players.

In upholding these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid aligning with one geopolitical pole at the expense of the country's relations with other poles or players. A quick overview of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in recent years supports this contention. For example, in June 2021, Azerbaijan signed the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations with Türkiye. The countries vowed to support each other militarily if either is attacked by a third state or group of states. In February 2022, Azerbaijan and Russia signed another such document—this time with Russia: the Declaration on Allied Interaction. This move was interpreted by some Azerbaijani experts largely as a reassurance for Baku that, in the words of one commentator, Moscow will not "pursue similar policies toward Azerbaijan [as Russia has carried out against Georgia and Ukraine] in exchange for Azerbaijan recognizing Russia as a dominant power in the broader former Soviet region." However, this declaration does not bear the same legal status for Baku as the one it signed with Ankara (i.e., the Shusha Declaration has been ratified by the parliaments of both

states, which effectually grants it the status of a treaty).

Such a positioning is critical for several reasons, but primarily because of the lack of any capable balancing power that would dare to openly and militarily confront Russia in the case of a challenging security situation that might involve Azerbaijan. This cautious approach is related, among other factors, to the fact that Azerbaijan-Russia relations have had problematic phases, both historically and in recent years (the downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines flight in Russian airspace in late December 2024 being the latest example). Russia's traditional support for Armenia in the conflict over Karabakh, Moscow's military supplies to Yerevan before and during the Second Karabakh War, and the deployment of Russian troops as peacekeepers in parts of Karabakh after the 2020 war constitute the rationale for Baku's vigilance in its Russia policies.

Azerbaijan continued to uphold this posture in the wake of the agreed withdrawal of the peacekeeping contingent from the Karabakh region in April 2024. This development was indeed unexpected and unprecedented as it was the first time in the South Caucasus that Russian armed units left the territory of a post-Soviet

state voluntarily and prematurely. Many analysts in the region contemplated the reasons behind this move and raised questions about how the two countries (Russia and Azerbaijan) came to terms.

For some observers, Moscow would not have withdrawn from the region in such a peaceful manner had there not been a quid pro quo deal for the Kremlin. Therefore, many analysts pointed to the possibility of Azerbaijan's membership in the EAEU, which is critically important for Moscow's geopolitical ambitions. However, on 23 April 2024 Aliyev made it clear that Baku has no such plans at the moment, although he did not rule out this possibility in the future should EAEU membership be judged to be economically beneficial to Azerbaijan.

In reality, however, this as well as similar comments about the represent nothing more than the polite rejection of alignment with any major geopolitical powers, including the two main pillars of the Western "rules-based" liberal international order in Europe.

This had not always been the case. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Azerbaijan did indicate a desire to turn institutionally toward the EU or NATO.

Azerbaijan's 2007 National Security Concept (it has not been updated subsequently) indicated an intention to pursue "integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures," which was clearly outlined in the aforementioned document as a "main direction of national security policy." Aliyev clearly articulated the above as early as in April 2004 in an address before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

Today, our strategic choice towards integration into Europe and into the European family—European structures—is continuing. We are strongly committed to that policy. We will do our best to ensure that Azerbaijan will meet all the standards and all the criteria that are common in the Council of Europe and in other European countries. That is our policy, which we have been conducting for a long time.

Providing a detailed genealogical account of the shift away from this position is beyond the scope of this essay. But the impact of two events in 2008 surely played a role. The first was the decision by a majority of NATO and EU member states to take the lead in supporting the secessionist drive of Kosovo's ethnic-Albanians, which culminated in a declaration of independence in February 2008, which was swiftly and enthusiastically supported by the West, thereby violating the

cornerstone international legal principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity on the pretext that Kosovo was sui generis—a unique case. The claim to "uniqueness" was directly challenged by Russia just a few months later in Georgia.

For Azerbaijan, the lessons drawn from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and, later, the developments involving Russia and Ukraine since 2014, were considerable. The tragic experience of Ukraine that came on the heels of the country's abandonment of neutrality and the launch of efforts to accede to the EU and NATO demonstrated the failure of the West to protect effectively some of the countries belonging to Azerbaijan's geopolitical theaters against the threats that their Euro-Atlantic choice brings about. Baku read this as a reaffirmation of the importance of a balanced approach to its foreign policy.

That said, Baku has not abandoned its relations with the West. Quite the contrary, Azerbaijan has become a major player in European energy security and, as Damjan Krnjević Mišković has put

it, "Azerbaijan has become an indispensable country for the advancement of Western strategic connectivity ambitions in the Silk Road," centered on its geographical place along the Middle Corridor route.

Today Azerbaijan is negotiating with its European partners about the possibility of increasing natural gas exports to the EU, which would help EU member states to mitigate the risk of dependence on single sources and supply routes. The two sides have forged a strategic partnership in the field of energy that is pivotal for both sides' economic prosperity and energy security. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, called Azerbaijan a "reliable [EU] partner" as she and Aliyev were signing the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy.

This partnership, as highlighted by back-to-back meetings of the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council and the Green Energy Advisory Council that took place in Baku in early March 2024, is

For Azerbaijan, the lessons drawn from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and, later, the developments involving Russia and Ukraine since 2014, were considerable.

founded on tangible achievements and shared goals, particularly in the realm of energy co-operation. “Faced with increased Russian violence and a continued unjustified war on our doorstep, it is increasingly clear that, for [the] Europe[an Union], there will be no return to business as usual in its energy relations with Russia. That space is now filled by other trusted and reliable energy partners. And we found exactly that in Azerbaijan,” said Kadri Simson, the then-EU Energy Commissioner, during her speech at that event, which was attended by the representatives of 23 countries.

Azerbaijan has also been a close partner of NATO in its operations in Afghanistan and the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija. This was commended by Jens Stoltenberg, then-Secretary General of NATO, during his visit to Baku on 17-18 March 2024. “We appreciate very much your contribution to our KFOR mission in Kosovo, but also, of course, your presidency and your contributions to our mission in Afghanistan over many years were extremely important. You are absolutely

The regional situation is, however, growing more tense and confrontational, which produces immense pressure on Azerbaijan’s cautious balancing and non-alignment.

right, one of the last troop contingents to leave Afghanistan was the Azerbaijani. Because you were responsible for the protection of the airport, which was a key task in the evacuation of the NATO presence in Afghanistan.”

This is a clear manifestation of Azerbaijan’s balanced foreign policy approach and Baku’s keen interest to maintain friendly relations with all power centers within the framework of advancing the country’s national interests. Located in the highly precarious geography neighboring Russia in the North and Iran in the South, Azerbaijan is compelled to cautiously consider geopolitical realities and the balance of power in the region. The regional situation is, however, growing more tense and confrontational, which produces immense pressure on Azerbaijan’s cautious balancing and non-alignment.

For instance, on 15 November 2023, during a hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs on “the future of Nagorno-Karabakh,” Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O’Brien

made a series of statements that stirred significant concern in Azerbaijan. While addressing the Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes and developments in the South Caucasus, he asserted, “A future that is built around the axis of Russia and Iran as the main participants in the security of the region, the South Caucasus, is unstable and undesirable, including both for the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia. They have the opportunity to make a different decision now.” This statement came in the wake of a series of developments indicating a shift towards a new security order in the South Caucasus, including the October 2023 3+3 ministerial meeting.

O’Brien made several damaging comments during this hearing, including the repeated use of variants of the phrase “no chance of a return to business as usual.” On the other hand, near the end of his testimony—in response to a question—he did make the following analytical point:

President Aliyev has traditionally tried to balance his ties to the regional players, Russia, Iran, particularly Central Asia, as well as to the West. And I think he’s reaching a point, in my analysis, that if he makes peace [with Armenia], he has the opportunity to become more prosperous and to be in a stable area where

there are counterweights to Russia and Iran. If he fails to make peace, he’s really saying that in the future, I want to be beholden to Russia and Iran at a time when those two powers are getting much closer to one another than they are to him. And that puts him in the position of being very much the odd man out in a three-way game.

This was quickly followed by another foreign policy move by the West toward the South Caucasus that stirred concerns in Baku. On 5 April 2024, Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and Antony Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State, in an unprecedented trilateral setting in Brussels. According to the readouts made public by sides, the meeting was aimed at increasing Armenia’s resilience in the economic sphere. This meeting was largely interpreted in the region as a significant milestone in Armenia’s foreign policy, underscoring its efforts to depart from Russia’s and a shift towards seeking security support from Western nations—although the publicly known results of the meeting seemed to be insignificant.

Given the highly sensitive geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus and the context of the

Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, this meeting was closely followed in Baku. Above all, Baku expressed concerns that the meeting, which excluded Azerbaijan, would create geopolitical divisions in the South Caucasus, which by construction threatens regional peace and security.

The meeting was presented as the extension of geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West into the South Caucasus, which poses huge security risks to all the neighborhoods. On the other hand, the Armenian premier's shift towards the West at the cost of his country's relations with Russia creates expectations in the Western capitals for a similar move from the Azerbaijani government, which is somehow expected to support the actions of the Armenian leader based on the view that comes down to saying, 'what's good for Armenia is also good for Azerbaijan.' This 'wishful thinking' approach by external actors ignores Azerbaijan's calculus: to seek to maintain its traditional balanced approach in foreign policy and develop friendly relations with all major powers.

In this context, building closer bonds with alternative geopolitical centers is critical for Baku to maintain its balanced positioning and safeguard the country's interests.

Bending too far in any direction would not advance that objective. It sometimes seems as though the Western powers fail to make a basic distinction, rooted in geography, between the South Caucasus and a region like the Western Balkans: the former does not belong exclusively in the Western sphere of interest whereas, arguably, the latter is or at least could.

New Avenues

Azerbaijan's foreign policy has entered a dynamic phase as the country seeks to adapt to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment while preserving its strategic autonomy. This effort is characterized by a proactive search for partnerships beyond the conventional spheres of influence as defined by Russia and the West, respectively. Azerbaijan's approach reflects a deliberate strategy to strengthen its sovereignty, diversify its partnerships, and capitalize on its geographical and economic advantages. To emphasize the point: it is not in Azerbaijan's national interest to allow itself to belong to any major power's sphere of interest, or even to be the object of major power competition—a prize to be won or lost in something resembling a binary approach to the conduct of international relations.

One of the key new avenues for Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the quest to sidestep or overcome such major power perceptions is its deepening engagement with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS offers a platform for Azerbaijan to bolster its ties with culturally and historically linked nations whilst enhancing economic and strategic collaboration (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan are OTS member states, while Hungary and Turkmenistan, and the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is only recognized by Türkiye, are observers). Aliyev's unequivocal endorsement of the OTS during his 2024 Inauguration Address marked a pivotal step in this direction: "This is the main international organization for us because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world."

By aligning itself more closely with the Turkic "family," Azerbaijan is not only reinforcing its cultural and political ties but also positioning itself as a central player in a network that spans the Silk Road region and beyond. This alignment serves to enhance Azerbaijan's regional influence while offering an alternative framework for cooperation that is distinct from the polarized, zero-sum

agendas of major powers. This stance serves as a message directed towards both Euro-Atlantic military and political structures and Russia-led integration projects, indicating that Baku has no intention of aligning with either.

The OTS grants Baku significant potential to counterbalance other regional powers, assuming a more important role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Similarly, the institution holds considerable importance for other OTS member states amid escalating geopolitical tensions. Consequently, they are moving toward deeper integration in various spheres.

Simultaneously, Azerbaijan has sought to amplify its role within global organizations that align with its strategic goals. Its application for full membership in BRICS+ in August 2024 and accession to D-8 in December of the same year underscore this ambition.

While Baku's bid was not successful at the BRICS Kazan summit in October 2024—reportedly due to the intervention of India—it has not withdrawn its application. Azerbaijan views its eventual membership in BRICS+ as part of a strategy to strengthen its geopolitical standing by expanding ties with other member states in a new

and increasingly important global platform. It is important to add that this view rejects the interpretation, prevalent in some Western circles, that this bid represents a departure from the country's balanced foreign policy or its cooperation with the West.

In this context, it is worth noting that Azerbaijan's intent to join BRICS+ was first announced in the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Strategic Partnership between Azerbaijan and China. This was adopted by the two countries' leaders on 3 July 2024 during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Astana. This document highlighted Azerbaijan's intent to join BRICS+ and emphasized China's support for this initiative.

Expanding relations with China—a growing power that has traditionally not been an active actor in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus—

is fully in line with Baku's strategic diversification policy. Evolving through initiatives within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and

the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor (TITR, commonly known as the Middle Corridor), heightened Baku-Beijing cooperation also supports Azerbaijan's efforts to become a key Silk Road region logistics and transit hub, capitalizing on its advantageous geographic location—the (unsanctioned) crossroads of TITR and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

The admission of Azerbaijan to the D-8 in December 2024 can also be analyzed along these lines, in addition to the economic opportunities D-8 membership of-

fers to the country. As Inara Yagubova wrote in a recent IDD Analytical Policy Brief, “also known as the ‘Islamic Eight,’ the D-8 was established under Türkiye's leadership in 1997 and also includes Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan as member states—

each of which is a majority-Muslim developing country that is either a middle power or a keystone state as well as a key economic player.

Together, they constitute one-seventh of the world's population (i.e., 1.1 billion), with 60 percent of the world's Muslims residing in D-8 countries.”

The D-8 represents a collective GDP of \$6.4 trillion, its members account for nearly 5 percent of global trade, and the Organization aims to reach \$500 billion in intra-member trade by 2030. Azerbaijan's inclusion bolsters the D-8's energy and transport capabilities, aligning with its strengths in oil and gas and its strategic location linking Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history, a point to which Aliyev referred in a wide-ranging interview on 7 January 2025: “Out of approximately 60 Muslim countries worldwide, Azerbaijan has been chosen as the newest member. This is both a great honor and a significant responsibility for us.” He then enumerated the reasons why Azerbaijan was unanimously chosen: “We view the interests of all Muslim countries as our own, which is likely why Azerbaijan was the first choice after the decision to expand D-8 was made. Of course, our country's economic potential, political influence, and military strength were also considered.

Additionally, our policy of Islamic solidarity, which I mentioned earlier, played a role in this decision.”

Azerbaijan believes that membership in these organizations (BRICS+ and D-8) and expanding links with new power centers (e.g., China) will allow the country to tap into diverse economic and political networks, facilitate trade and investment, and enhance its diplomatic leverage. For instance, BRICS+ membership promises access to emerging markets and a multipolar dialogue platform, while the D-8 provides a framework for collaboration with some of the Muslim world's most populous and dynamic economies.

Together with its membership in more established yet still newer multi-state organizations like OTS, as well as maintaining friendly (or “friendly enough”) relations with major power centers (e.g., China, the EU, Russia, the U.S., and the UK, not to mention Iran and Türkiye and others) and military blocs (e.g., NATO and SCO), highlight Azerbaijan's pursuit of a balanced approach—that is to say, its quest for the third path in foreign policy—that diversifies its international engagements without jeopardizing its established relations with existing partners.

Concluding Observations

Azerbaijan's pursuit of a "third path" in its foreign policy represents both a pragmatic and strategic effort to maintain its sovereignty and independence—but also to set the terms for the achievement of regional stability—in an increasingly complex and polarized geopolitical environment. The opportunities presented by this approach are significant, particularly in terms of diversifying partnerships with global and regional powers, strengthening economic cooperation, and enhancing Azerbaijan's role as a central player in key international organizations.

Azerbaijan's recent moves, which complement and even enhance existing priorities and relationships (as they are understood by Baku), demonstrate the country's commitment to expanding its geopolitical and economic influence while avoiding full alignment with either the Western or Russian blocs.

However, it is critical to bear in mind that while Azerbaijan's efforts to (1) break free from the geopolitical complexities of the South Caucasus, which seem in some ways to be unable to rise above parochial considerations, and (2) emerge as an "island of stability" in a region

plagued by chaos and instability are both rational and pragmatic, it is unlikely that Azerbaijan can avoid regional threats by seeking regionalism beyond the South Caucasus.

A proper analysis of Baku's foreign policy since its victory in the Second Karabakh War demonstrates that Azerbaijan is fully aware of the region's delicate dynamics, which is reflected in its efforts to maintain friendly relations with neighboring countries—that is to say, to avoid direct confrontation with Russia and Iran.

Azerbaijan's support of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, which hypothetically includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia "plus" the South Caucasus's three surrounding powers (i.e., Iran, Russia, and Türkiye), is a manifestation of this foreign policy course, which is also aimed at preventing extra-regional actors from both the East and West) from intervening in the security space of the South Caucasus. On 18 October 2024, a third ministerial meeting under the 3+3 format convened in Istanbul, though again without the participation of Georgia.

Above all, that meeting reaffirmed the consensus among the three South Caucasus surrounding powers about the geopolitical order

established in this part of the Silk Road region in the wake of the Second Karabakh War.

This was clearly expressed by Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan during his speech at the event: "Our perspective on the South Caucasus is [...] based on a sense of regional ownership. We believe that the states of the region know the regional problems best and are capable of solving them." This formula—we can describe it as 'regional solutions to regional problems'—started to be clearly pronounced by the participating 3+3 states in the runup to the second ministerial meeting under this format, which took place in Tehran in October 2023. While this approach is in the obvious interest of Russia and Iran, as they oppose the involvement of Western players in the affairs of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia also appear to agree on

this position, as does Türkiye—at least judging by Fidan's words.

In this context, Azerbaijan's third path strategy, while presenting substantial opportunities for economic and diplomatic expansion, must navigate the inherent challenges of maintaining balance in a region increasingly defined by competing external and internal pressures. The country's ability to successfully engage in regional cooperation while safeguarding its strategic autonomy will be pivotal in determining the long-term viability of its foreign policy approach. Ultimately, while the third path offers a promising alternative to the rigid alignments of the past, it will require careful diplomacy, regional cooperation, and adept handling of geopolitical tensions to ensure Azerbaijan's continued stability and growing influence in the South Caucasus and, indeed, in the entire Silk Road region and beyond. ^{BD}

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