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ANALYSIS

LEVERAGING THE PRESENT: GEOPOLITICAL TAKEAWAYS FOR THE SILK ROAD REGION

The world finds itself in an international environment characterized by multipolarity, no global leadership, and the onset of de-globalization— centrifugal trends that the coronavirus pandemic has not caused but by its effects is accelerating. This essay will briefly sketch the origins of these trends, quickly discuss their effects on present global circumstances, and conclude with a short assessment of how all this can best be leveraged by Azerbaijan (and other middle powers) in the overlapping set of subregions to which it belongs.

As the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War came to an end, Western decisionmakers on both sides of the Atlantic adopted a view of international relations that was predicated on Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis. This view can be summarized in the following manner: in principle, humanity was now done with geopolitics and stood on the brink of spontaneously and collectively refashioning itself into homo economicus: economic personhood relating to the world primarily through the lens of consumption. As Fukuyama put it, there would be "no need for generals or statesmen; what remains is primarily economic activity." Henceforth, economic betterment would supersede the need for geopolitical competition, which heralded the obsolescence of balance of power politics.

In truth, the "end of history" survived, virtually unopposed, only from 1989 to 2008. The brief period of time in question corresponded to the unipolar moment: the period when American hegemony was seen to have no real competition, with European soft power serving as a handmaiden thereof. The United States came to embrace the "end of history" from a position of strength. The European position was somewhat different. What has become the EU is undoubtedly a noble creation, a grand peace project, and an economic binding agent; but one must not forget that the EU is also fundamentally based the weakness of its members to continue to practice balance of power politics at a global scale, for the simple reason that no European state emerged from the Second World War strong enough to remain a major player in world affairs. It is against such a backdrop that European politicians attempted to mask the weakness of their respective states by beginning to create the European Union.

However, that may be, the moment at which "end of history" actually came to its abrupt end is properly understood to be a period of only forty days in 2008. It began in August 2008 with the Russo-Georgian conflict and the correct judgment made by Moscow that the West could not make a credible attempt to prevent it. And then, not even two months later, the world watched as Lehman Brothers went into bankruptcy, quickly triggering the collapse of Western stock markets and the onset of the global financial recession.

This forty-day period in 2008 marked the moment in which the credibility of the West began to crack on two critical fronts: international politics and international economics. This called into question, in a fundamental way, the West's claim to primacy in global leadership, which rested not insignificantly on predictability and prosperity. Moreover, the events of 2008 signaled clearly the onset of a world without acknowledged leadership and opened the way for the onset of de-globalization that looks now to be taking place as a result of specific conditions related to miscalculations that are leading to rapid escalation of Sino- American tensions (i.e. high-tech bifurcation spilling over into most other parts of their bilateral economic relations, precipitating feverish demands for all others to take sides).

This brings the narrative to the onset of the global crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, which has accelerated the geopolitical trends triggered by the events of 2008. It must be underlined that there was no requirement for the effects of the pandemic to accelerate pre-existing geopolitical trends. Polytropic policy options were available to the leaders of the West: there could have been a turnaround that would have effectively slowed down, perhaps even reversed, what was triggered by 2008.

But it was not to be. Consider in this context the implication of the fact that the coronavirus crisis is the first time—not only since 2008, but since 1945—that America has not even tried to lead a global response to a crisis of this magnitude. At least the European Union tried—not very successfully, as it happens, and certainly not successfully at the onset of the crisis, when its leaders could have made a strategic difference in helping the world stem the pestilence's tide. Instead, the Brussels bureaucracy and member states of the European Union—stalwart champions of soft power since 1945 and especially since 1989—were unable to rise to the occasion when the ultimate soft power moment appeared.

It must be said that, although no one who even aspires to great power status appears to be emerging from this crisis looking very competent, the relative re-distribution of geopolitical power in the wake of the pandemic crisis is quite unlikely to favor the West. That being said, no one has expressed an interest, much less has the capability, to replace Western leadership. This is the first time in centuries that an evident vacuum of power is not being filled, in part because no state or alliance of states believes they could see a reasonable rate of return on their investment in even making a successful play for the mantle of global leadership, much less actually assuming it. This last calculus has only grown in the wake of extremely costly measures, hopefully successful, that have been taken by states to reduce the likelihood of the onset of a full-scale economic depression.

The geopolitical takeaway can be formulated in the following manner: in the time ahead, international relations will be characterized by ever-deepening rivalries taking place against the background of all the major players having fewer resources at their disposal to fund these same rivalries. The situation will not be eased by the fact that a preponderance of the major players are not yet ready to commit to working in concert to establish agreed terms framing a new global balance of power. All this is a recipe for skyrocketing unpredictability and increased instability.

It is in this context that we turn to a big picture assessment of how the above pertains to the overlapping set of subregions to which Azerbaijan belongs. The bottom line is that this part of the world is presented with an opportunity to strengthen its position as a critical seam of international relations and thus remain one of the few strategic sempiternities in this tumultuous and unprecedented era of change. Most broadly described as the Silk Road region—encompassing what is variously referred to as Eurasia, Central Asia, Caspian Basin, South Caucasus, and what else may have you—this part of the world will likely continue to serve as a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies, an important intercessor between major powers, and a hard-to-avoid gateway between different blocks of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.

In other words, the Silk Road region is poised to graduate from being an object of the geopolitical maneuvers of the great powers and those who aspire to join them. Instead, an opportunity is presenting

itself for the region to come into its own as a fully-fledged subject of international relations and keep moving cogently in the direction of establishing sturdier contours of a fledgling regional order that build upon classical balance of power principles. Doing so would go a long way to ensure outside rivalries are kept at bay and in check.

Certainly, an important prerequisite for building such a regional order is the existence of a number of states of substantially equal strength, which can enable the Silk Road region to maintain and possibly deepen its own balance of power system. At least five reasons immediately rise to the mind. First, the unique complexities involved in transporting hydrocarbons and other natural resources to market, as well as infrastructure provisions necessary to facilitate trade, require a region-specific type of cooperation and compromise. Second, no state belonging to the region is strong enough to dominate the others, economically or otherwise, which encourages equilibrium. Third, virtually no state in the region is weak enough to succumb to crude attempts at domination without others aligning to significantly limit the depth and scope of said attempt. Fourth, no outside power behaves hegemonically.

The fifth reason is perhaps the most interesting: the burgeoning set of arrangements characterizing the Silk Road region appear on their way to being anchored by what Giovanni Botero, a late sixteenth-century political and economic thinker and diplomat, was the first to call “middle powers,” which he defined as states that have “sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others.” Unquestionably, Azerbaijan is one such middle power—a rare contemporary example of successful national statecraft made rarer still when one bears in mind the fact that just thirty years ago the country was widely considered to be a failing or even failed state.

Especially for the middle powers in the Silk Road region, avoiding the myriad pitfalls of an unprecedented international environment, characterized by centrifugal geopolitical trends quickened by the pandemic, will require having even stronger diplomatic abilities and resources, informed as always by far-sighted leadership.

It is hard to think of a recent period of time where ensuring that the Silk Road region remains an oasis of stability and moderation has been more important. It is also hard to think of a recent period of time where it will be harder for a nation's diplomacy to be truly effective. Thus, continuing to invest in diplomatic capacity-building in all areas of government must remain an imperative for all the Silk Road region's middle powers, including Azerbaijan.

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