



Building the West's On-Ramp to China's Belt and Road: Opportunities in the South Caucasus

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Abstract: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is already changing infrastructure and production across much of the world. The three states of the South Caucasus and their counterparts in Central Asia need diverse connectivity to preserve their economic and political independence amid China's expanding influence. Despite some rhetoric and practical measures, the United States and the European Union (EU) continue to underestimate the BRI. This article identifies recent international and regional developments that converge to create a unique opportunity for the West and South Caucasus partners. They may develop integrated, long-term infrastructure of lasting mutual benefit. The convergence of events in and around the South Caucasus offers the place for the West to build an "On-Ramp" to the BRI. The South Caucasus provide a potential gateway into Asia's heart that is not dictated solely by the priorities of Chinese foreign or commercial policies, just as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline of a generation ago served a similar role.

Launched in 2013, China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) already has profoundly challenged the West.¹ Despite increasingly loud calls for the United States, the European Union, and the West generally to devote attention to the long-term, transformative implications, the responses, and resourcing remain limited, and belated.² Responses are necessary, considering the global transformative effect the BRI—which is not simply a transportation network but a full-scale industrial and developmental system that will direct all those on its path to toward China. Beijing's geo-economics then constitute “war

¹ Also called the “One Belt, One Road,” BRI is used here.

² Among early calls, but even themselves appearing relatively late after the launch of BRI in 2013, include: Nadège Rolland, “China's ‘Belt and Road Initiative’: Underwhelming or Game-Changer?,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2017), pp. 127–42; and more recently, James Crabtree, “Competing with the BRI: The West's Uphill Task,” *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 4 (Aug. –Sept. 2021), pp. 81–88.

by other means.”³ The February 4, 2022 declaration by China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin of a “No Limits Friendship,” and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine, only underscored both the geopolitical significance of the challenge posed to the West, as well as the independent states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

In fact, this article contends that the recent convergence of several regional and international developments affords a unique opportunity for the West to build an “On-Ramp” to the BRI in the strategic region of the South Caucasus. Not doing so risks strengthening China's hand in this vital crossroads, and allows it, figuratively and literally, to build unprecedented inroads. But this new Chinese challenge to Western interests occurs alongside the self-interest of each of the South Caucasus's three recognized states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—as well as the three neighboring regional powers: Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The United States should coordinate principally with the EU, which has strong foundations of regional economic and cultural influence.

International Opportunities in the South Caucasus

The biggest opportunity to build the Western On-Ramp to the BRI comes from outside the South Caucasus region and precedes the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. It is, in fact, the changed attitude of several key Western actors towards China's ambitions generally, the BRI specifically, and the prospect of taking measures to counter it. Despite divisions on domestic matters, there is US “bipartisan support” for a “tougher approach to China.”⁴ Others call “for an effective Western response to China's rising geo-economic power.”⁵ A range of Western actors have recognized the BRI's global game-changing potency and are advancing potential responses.

Specific views of major Western actors demonstrate the change. The US response to a general need for global infrastructure development involves

³ Among growing literature, Bruno Mações, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* (London: Hurst, 2020). For the latter, Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geo-economics and Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁴ Jennifer Hillman and David Sacks, *China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States*, Independent Task Force Report no. 79 (March 2021), Council on Foreign Relations, Foreword, vi, <https://www.cfr.org/report/chinas-belt-and-road-implications-for-the-united-states/>.

⁵ See Crabtree, “Competing with the BRI.”

the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act.⁶ The BUILD Act, passed by the US House of Representatives in January 2018, also created the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC), a positive holdover from a Trump-era initiative. Supportive analyses saw the BUILD Act as a belated pushback and alternative to the BRI, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Other analyses, however, saw it only as broad developmental stimulus, and without any reference to the BRI.⁷ The BUILD ACT did not mention the BRI or China, but was followed in July 2021 by the Ensuring American Global Leadership and Engagement (EAGLE) Act, which contains several sections that specifically refer to China, and explicitly counteract China's global influence.⁸

Even if these are generalized instruments, for use in diverse geographic areas, BUILD and DFC build on those from other agencies such as US AID. These have been analyzed positively, with important contradistinction to Chinese practices of state-to-state lending and ignoring the private sector and smaller firms⁹ The South Caucasus is a region with a history of strategic US investment in physical infrastructure. One US development program alone—the Millennium Challenge Corporation—funded hundreds of millions of dollars in roads and integrated agriculture projects in Armenia and transportation and energy supply in Georgia.

The EU has an ambivalent record. It initially did not plan to include the South Caucasus in its new external relations program that anticipated its 2004 “big bang” enlargement to eastern- and southeastern Europe. The EU was nevertheless estimated to have invested over €1 billion in the South Caucasus in the decade after 1991. It also appointed a Special Representative

⁶ One Hundred Fifteenth Congress of the United States of America, https://www.dfc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-08/BILLS-115hr302_BUILDAct2018.pdf.

⁷ See examples from Brookings Institution and Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/07/10/how-the-build-act-advances-development/>; and Daniel F. Runde and Romina Bundura, “The BUILD Act Has Passed: What’s Next?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Oct. 12, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/build-act-has-passed-whats-next>.

⁸ “A Bill to revitalize and reassert United States leadership, investment, and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and globally,” Foreign Affairs, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/cache/files/b/9/b98fd569-3e49-47c0-bb23-8fccf88d7274/4E5106A7CF429C5C518C8C6003A94AFC.eagle-act-for-introduction---signed.pdf>.

⁹ Runde and Bundura, “The BUILD Act.”

for that region in 2003.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the European Neighbourhood Policy that emerged in 2004 bundled the South Caucasus with other post-Soviet states, as well as North African and eastern Mediterranean. When Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, the Union gained borders on the Black Sea, and post-Soviet conflict zones. Consequently, the South Caucasus became immediate or near neighbors. The EU responded with its most ambitious external relations program to date, the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

That said, the EU arguably has deluded itself about its relative attractiveness and its capacities in the south of the former Soviet Union. It claims to be the main trade partner for Central Asia, when it has been overtaken by China.¹¹ While the European Commission wrote about building East-West pipelines from Central Asia, particularly from Turkmenistan, China acted. In the past fifteen years, China has financed, built, and made operational multiple parallel pipelines from Turkmenistan, now the single largest source of imported Chinese energy.

The EU may have lost trade and investment opportunities in Central Asia, but such setbacks remain avoidable in South Caucasus. The EU, like the United States, has processes available for enhancing its capacity for developing connectivity in the South Caucasus. Launched in 2008 as the EU's foremost external relationship strategy, the EaP involves the South Caucasus. The EaP is being invigorated and serves as a platform for potential connectivity projects that could aid infrastructure re-development in the South Caucasus.

The EU has been developing policies for infrastructure and has a significant presence in the South Caucasus—including its Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus Asia (TRACECA)—first discussed in 1993.¹² The EU stance on connectivity to the South Caucasus is evidenced further by its 2019 Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) plan for the EaP, which could include €12.8 billion between 2018 and 2030.¹³ However, that plan has two significant infrastructural shortcomings. *First*, it separately develops connectivity between Ukraine and Moldova, on one hand, and the South Caucasus on the other. *Second*, the plans for Armenia did not connect it to the

¹⁰ Bruno Coppieters, “An EU Special Representative to a New Periphery,” in Dov Lynch, ed., “The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU,” (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2003), p. 159.

¹¹ Rick Fawn, “‘Not Here for Geopolitical Interests or Games’: the EU’s 2019 Strategy and the Regional and Inter-regional Competition for Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey*, 2021, online <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1951662>.

¹² Tracey German, *Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus: Good Neighbours or Distant Relatives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 149–52.

¹³ See the EU’s *Eastern Partnership: Indicative TEN-T Action Plan*, 2019, https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2019-01/ten-t_iap_web-dec13.pdf.

region—TEN-T gave Armenia transport offshoots that create a cul-de-sac in that country. It neither significantly aids Armenia to escape its physical isolation nor develops regional connectivity, nor with the West. Perhaps that approach was understandable during the Karabakh stalemate. After 2020, unprecedented and urgent opportunity arose to correct this situation. Infrastructure is not overtly hard politics. But even if it were, the EU is encouraged by interlocutors in the South Caucasus to enhance its role.¹⁴ The EU can be applauded for securing verbal agreement in December 2021 from Armenia and Azerbaijan that they would seek to re-open a railway. Yet, that remains a partial measure, one that does not guarantee security nor longer-term regional connectivity.¹⁵

Another actor reconsidering the BRI is the 57-state Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The organization was the international platform for mitigating the Karabakh conflict through its Minsk Group and the South Ossetian conflict through co-chairing discussions in Georgia. Yet, the OSCE risks being excluded from post-war regional planning. This development is troubling because the OSCE provided an additional platform for Western involvement in the South Caucasus, with the United States, Canada and all European countries being participating States in the Organization.

The OSCE Minsk Group, never able to solve Karabakh, risks being marginalized, both by unilateral Russian efforts and the new 3+3 format that substitutes for the Minsk Group (elaborated below). A planned meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers at the annual council of OSCE foreign ministers in December 2021 failed to materialize. The OSCE also lost in-country missions. Azerbaijan expelled the OSCE Mission in 2015, with one month's notice; the OSCE's presence in Armenia ended two years later. And in 2008, Russia uniquely among 56 countries, refused to renew the OSCE Mission to Georgia.

The OSCE has embraced connectivity since the German Chairmanship of 2016,¹⁶ and could assist the South Caucasus. The Organization itself, however, lacks resources and is not a development agency (even if some of its

¹⁴ Laure Delcour and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Mind the Gap: Role Expectation and Perceived Performance of the EU in the South Caucasus," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2021), pp. 156–77.

¹⁵ "Statement of President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan," European Council, Dec. 14, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2021/12/14/>.

¹⁶ Gernot Erler, "Key Issues of the German OSCE Chairmanship 2016," *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 26 (2015), p. 5.

projects are related). Nevertheless, the organization's "Climate Change and Security in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus" works with the EU (and other international bodies). To date its work in the South Caucasus has been bilateral, but this could be another forum, and established stakeholder communities could work alongside region-wide infrastructure considerations.¹⁷

The United States and the EU, and other Western states could still try to use the OSCE, which has capacities to offer. The OSCE has also been keen for its underused Economic and Environmental Dimension to play greater roles, including in confidence building across conflict lines.¹⁸ Russia and Turkey likely will work either to exclude it entirely, or in Moscow's case, give it a symbolic role.¹⁹ Western powers therefore have added reason to develop and coordinate policies alongside but also outside the OSCE.

These changed perceptions and evolving policies are converging at the level of the leading market-economies that meet in the Group of 7 (G7) format. The EU is represented as well, and the EU would come with policies agreed among its 27 members.

The West, as represented by the G7 leading economies, gave additional bases to that in 2021 through the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. Announced at the G7 summit in June 2021, B3W provides a Western platform for funding infrastructure development globally. Whether it proves to be a serious counter proposition to China's BRI remains to be seen. However, its framing suggests an appetite for cooperation among the liberal democracies on policy response. True, some EU member-states have taken positions contradicting EU policy in other bodies, regarding China and which are

¹⁷ "Climate Change and Security in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus," OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/projects/climate-change-and-security>.

¹⁸ *OSCE Confidence Building in the Economic and Environmental Dimension: Current Opportunities and Constraints* (Vienna: OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institution, 2017); Rick Fawn and Nina Lutterjohann, "Confidence-building Measures in Eurasian Conflicts: New Roles for the OSCE's Economic and Environmental Dimension in Easing East-West Tensions," *Global Society*, vol. 33, no. 2 (April 2019), pp. 262-84.

¹⁹ Vladimir Socor, "The Minsk Group: Karabakh War's Diplomatic Casualty (Part Four)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 17, no. 173, Dec. 7, 2020.

accounted for by their Chinese interests.²⁰ And Italy and Greece, EU states that joined the BRI, would have to agree with EU positions.²¹

The B3W is an initiative, as the White House explained, for “Meeting the Tremendous Infrastructure Needs of Low- and Middle-Income Countries,” even if the geographic references were broad.²² A White House official elaborated that “until now we haven’t offered a positive alternative that reflects our values, our standards and our way of doing business.”²³ In November 2021 at COP26, President Joe Biden elaborated that the initiative was “mobilizing trillions of dollars of investment capital that’s sitting on the sidelines.”²⁴ While Biden’s remarks may sound cavalier, the idea has merit, providing a mechanism to promote connectivity on Western terms. None of these statements, however, established where these vast sums would be applied. Belatedly, but auspiciously for the South Caucasus after 2020, Western actors are coming to “view the BRI as a key tool through which China is pushing for change in the global system,”²⁵ and are now acting to counter it. New regional dynamics in the South Caucasus have positioned the region as the place where the Western On-Ramp to the BRI can begin.

Regional Dynamics After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the West’s On-Ramp

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War changed the strategic and infrastructural needs of the six states of the Caucasus: (1) Azerbaijan; (2)

²⁰ “Greece blocks EU statement on China human rights at U.N.,” *Reuters*, June 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-un-rights-idUSKBN1990FP>; and “Hungary blocks EU statement criticizing China over Hong Kong, diplomats say,” *Reuters*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hungary-blocks-eu-statement-criticising-china-over-hong-kong-diplomats-say-2021-04-16/>.

²¹ Italian experience could also prompt reconsideration in view of problems with its two ports they have under the BRI.

²² “FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership,” June 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/>.

²³ Unnamed official, cited in Steve Holland and Guy Faulconbridge, “G7 rivals China with grand infrastructure plan,” *Reuters*, June 13, 2021.

²⁴ “Remarks by President Biden in Meeting on the Build Back Better World Initiative,” White House, Nov. 2, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/11/02/>.

²⁵ Stefan Wolff, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the OSCE* (Vienna: OSCE Network, 2021), p. 14

Armenia; (3) Georgia; (4) Turkey; (5) Russia; and (6) Iran. The actions of some of these actors naturally impact on the others.

Azerbaijan and the 2020 War: Regional Victor. Though a highly-successful hydrocarbon extractor and exporter (partly through Western economic and infrastructural investment), Azerbaijani officials did not want their country to fund reconstruction caused by Armenian aggression and occupation.²⁶ Early proposals for a peace, dating from 1994 and the ceasefire, had already suggested a donor conference.²⁷ While the Azerbaijani government has been keen to fund resettlement of displaced Azerbaijanis, it has done so without addressing long-term, regionwide infrastructure.

Azerbaijan began some reconstruction weeks after the fighting ended, creating both opportunity and urgency for the West to win the country over on not just reconstruction but larger-scale, long-term infrastructure development. Implementing this investment should be encouraged in a manner that reassures Armenia and promotes regional stability and cooperation. Azerbaijan began reconstruction of the Soviet-era railway to reconnect Nakhichevan to the core of that country, from which it has been separated by Armenia for 30 years. In February 2021, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev laid the foundation for the replacement trainline. As important, especially symbolically, as that construction can be, it is but a 100-kilometre segment, and only a part of a plan to reconnect the exclave.²⁸ It does not fundamentally change transportation across the South Caucasus. The short-termism is understandable from Baku's viewpoint, but Azerbaijan should be convinced of the larger, more secure, and longer-term benefits of an integrated transport network.

More importantly, the Azerbaijani initiative causes consternation for Armenia. As one analysis wrote: "Most of the Armenian public and experts consider the transit corridor to be a geopolitical threat rather than a new opportunity for enhanced connectivity."²⁹ Armenia should be reassured of this need again, and the West is well positioned to fill this role. Previous Armenian support came substantially from France and the United States, each having

²⁶ A key source prior to the 2020 war on reconstruction costs and possibilities is Nazim Muzaffarli and Eldar Ismailov, *Basic Principles for the Rehabilitation of Azerbaijan's Post-Conflict Territories* (Stockholm: Central Asia & CC Press, 2010).

²⁷ John J. Maresca, *War in the Caucasus: A Proposal for Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, Aug. 1, 1994).

²⁸ Vasif Huseynov, "Azerbaijan Embarks on Construction of Nakhchivan Railway (Part One)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 54 (April 5, 2021).

²⁹ Natalia Konarzewska, "Armenia and Azerbaijan at Odds over Planned Transport Link," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13674-armenia-and-azerbaijan-at-odds-over-planned-transport-link.html>.

organized, articulate diaspora communities. Therefore, new and reconstructed transport links should be undertaken under a broader Western mandate that provides political and security reassurances simultaneously and ensures all new regional connectivity fits logically together.

Post-war Azerbaijani security considerations provide openings for the West as well, not least because of lasting fears of Russia. Shortly after the 2020 war, experts assessed that Russia might seek a new “template” that eschews the confrontation that has marked several of its other post-Soviet state relations.³⁰ That materialized when Vladimir Putin invited Aliyev to Moscow just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two presidents signed an agreement that made their countries “allies,” and which potentially gives each (and primarily Russia) a veto over the other’s foreign, energy and security policies.³¹

Previous Russian involvement in the South Caucasus, and indeed across post-Soviet conflicts, suggests the pursuit of unilateral interests. Azerbaijan likely remains wary of Russian interests. Its capital, Baku, never willingly joined Russia’s regional inter-governmental formats. It was forced into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1994, much like Georgia the preceding year, as part of the Russian-arranged ceasefire. Azerbaijan refused to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Customs Union. Rather, it co-founded an alternative regional formation in the former Soviet space, the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development.³² Notably, the other member states of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine sought closer Western relations, even integration. They also had either Russian-backed conflicts or latent territorial issues. Importantly, GUAM began work on connectivity within its region, and to make its region a conduit between Europe and Asia. This ambitious work remains primarily in a planning stage; its Development Concept makes no specific reference to the BRI.³³

³⁰ Nikolas K. Gvosdev, *Russia’s Southern Strategy*, Black Sea Papers, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Nov. 2019.

³¹ At the time of this article, the Declaration was not included in the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs website section for bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. See, “Declaration on Allied Interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation,” Feb. 22, 2022, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Declaration_on_allied_interaction_between_the_Republic_of_Azerbaijan_and_the_Russian_Federation-2024876.

³² The official website is <https://guam-organization.org/en/>.

³³ “Development Concept for the GUAM Transport Corridor,” GUAM, June 6, 2017, <https://guam-organization.org/en/development-concept-for-the-guam-transport-corridor/>.

Although Azerbaijan is emboldened by its 2020 military victory and retains Turkey's support, it now has heightened worry about Russia. Azerbaijan has established excellent cooperation on hydrocarbons with Western governments and companies; the paragon of South Caucasus connectivity was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC). History and post-war dynamics give renewed opportunity for the West and Azerbaijan to work together.

Armenia: Strategically Vulnerable. More than the military defeat of 2020 makes Armenia vulnerable. The ad hoc, unilateral redesigning of regional infrastructure will increase the country's insecurity. This insecurity has at least two aspects, which the West is well-placed to address. *First*, Russia, long Armenia's patron and defender became its betrayer. Moscow did not defend Armenia in the 2020 war. Armenia was more dependent on Moscow's CSTO than the seven other post-Soviet member states. It had integrated its own air space and defense into Russia's. Moscow apparently made clear that it would not engage in fighting in Karabakh, a condition which then prompted the Armenian military to target civilian areas in Azerbaijan. The hope was that the latter would attack Armenia, thereby legitimating Yerevan's (Armenia's capital) call for Russian military support. But Armenian rocket attacks on Azerbaijani residential areas distant from Karabakh did not provoke Azerbaijani retaliation. Regardless, Russia did not come to Armenia or Karabakh's defense, and that refusal contributed to the Armenian defeat.³⁴

Armenians had feared betrayal by Russia many times before, such as in the 2014 downing of an Armenian helicopter by Azerbaijani forces believed to have been armed by Russia.³⁵ These dissatisfying experiences could help sway Armenia to follow the geocultural and geopolitical direction that it might naturally seek had the Karabakh conflict not arisen and its dependence on Russia become so intense. It is in Armenia's strategic interest to preserve options of Western cooperation.

Armenia has been excluded from infrastructure developments since the end of the Soviet Union, and risks exclusion from further development. A cursory glance at energy pipelines in the South Caucasus shows that the BTC should run through Armenia, but does not, instead skirting the country entirely. Building the BTC through Armenia would not only have saved an estimated US\$600,000,000 (in mid-1990s value), but also might have engendered

³⁴ Ron Synovitz, "Armenians See Russia As 'Savior' Not 'Scapegoat' in Nagorno-Karabakh War," RFE/RL, Nov. 24, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenians-see-russia-as-savior-not-scapegoat-in-nagorno-karabakh-war/30966988.html>.

³⁵ Marianna Grigoryan, "Armenia: Feeling Betrayed by Russia?," *Eurasianet*, Nov. 20, 2014.

cooperation. For proponents of regional cooperation Armenia's exclusion was "a harsh disappointment."³⁶

Armenia has said little in post-2020 infrastructural developments, reacting to Azerbaijani initiatives with both fear and haphazard efforts at creating alternative roads.³⁷ Armenia seeks inclusion in the BRI. An Atlantic Council analysis said: "Armenia could benefit from participation in the ambitious Middle Corridor international railway infrastructure initiative."³⁸ But Armenia, a country of only two million people and the region's most modest per capita GDP, risks being a pure consumer, with little say on initiatives.³⁹ It would be far better off embracing an overall regional strategy, one backed by the United States and EU, partners that Armenians trust.

Armenia has also wanted closer EU relations. However, it withdrew from the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in September 2013—a missed harbinger for Ukraine's parallel retreat in November 2013. This change sparked the Maidan protests and ultimately led to revolution (and territorial annexation and war). Armenia's conflict-related dependence on Russia contributed to Yerevan's *volte-face*.

Armenia's approach to reconstruction could be cooperative and productive. However, its initial efforts at new road construction provoked an Azerbaijani blockade and required Russian intervention, demonstrating the need for a region-wide and internationalized approach.⁴⁰

Since 2013, the EU has worked to bring Armenia back despite Muscovite pressures. The European Union even renegotiated a trade agreement as part of the Comprehensive and enhanced Partnership Agreement that resulted from the European Council decision in 2017 and came into force in 2021.⁴¹ But more can be done now, including planning and funding

³⁶ Aram Harutyunyan, "Armenia as a Factor of Balance in the Southern Caucasus Region," *Security sector Governance in South Caucasus*, Feb. 2004, p. 176.

³⁷ Ani Mejlumyan, "Armenia Scrambles to Rebuild New Road Away from Azerbaijan Border," *Eurasianet*, Sept. 7, 2021.

³⁸ Ani Yeghiazaryan, "Infrastructure Cooperation Could Hold the Key to Armenia's Future Security," July 20, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/infrastructure-cooperation-could-hold-the-key-to-armenias-future-security/>.

³⁹ Estimates of Armenia's population vary, but that upwards of one-third of its 1989 population work either temporarily or permanently abroad are accepted.

⁴⁰ See also Mejlumyan, "Armenia Scrambles to Rebuild New Road Away from Azerbaijan Border."

⁴¹ "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of

interlinking transport systems for both within the South Caucasus and to Europe through revisions of TEN-T plans. Cash-starved Armenia might be most receptive to Chinese investment in the South Caucasus, and the West should be wary. Huawei began negotiations with the Armenian government in 2017 and China subsequently quadrupled its humanitarian aid and began constructing in Yerevan what is expected to be its second-largest embassy among post-Soviet states.⁴²

Georgia: The Sino-Euro-Atlanticist? While not directly a party to the Karabakh conflict, Georgia leveraged that situation to make gains that would otherwise have been unavailable. Georgia became host to the BTC, for example, and was a trade route for isolated Armenia (until the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 closed those borders). These dynamics might now lessen Georgia's significance and the benefits it enjoyed.

More importantly, Georgia has been the most active South Caucasus country for Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2014, it signed an Association Agreement and a DCFTA. Despite domestic political issues, even democratic backsliding, Georgia's foreign policy efforts have garnered it great favor in Euro-Atlantic circles.⁴³ But despite Georgia's keen Euro-Atlanticism, it also has attracted Chinese interest. While initially minimal, bilateral trade has expanded significantly⁴⁴

The World Bank notes a measure of Georgian involvement in the BRI, despite alternative possibilities because of its seacoast and how it may become enmeshed in other Chinese economic developments.⁴⁵ With Georgia possessing all of the South Caucasus Black Sea coast (Abkhazia discounted), development of major ports and ones connected to eastward road and rail

the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part," Jan. 26, 2018, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126(01)).

⁴² Grigor Atanesian, "Armenia Mulls Chinese Surveillance Tech," *EurasiaNet*, Feb. 20, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-mulls-chinese-surveillance-tech>.

⁴³ Recent empirical analysis of EU and US elite views of Georgia are Natia Gamkrelidze, "From Failing State to Strategic Partner: Analyzing US and NATO Political Elite Images of Georgia and Policy Implications from 1991 to 2020," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 6 (2021), pp. 578-99, and "From a Willing Partner to Close Political and Economic Partner: Analysing EU Political Elites' Images of Georgia from 1991 to 2020," *European Security*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1987892>.

⁴⁴ See Nino Kemoklidze, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges for Georgia" *Lex Portus*, no. 7, vol. 2 (2021), pp. 64-105.

⁴⁵ *South Caucasus and Central Asia—The Belt and Road Initiative: Georgia Country Case Study*, World Bank (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34122>.

networks was deemed a “game changer in the region,” and potential means by which the West could access to Central Asia.⁴⁶ The United States joined various backers, including China, for the construction of Georgia’s first deep sea port at Anaklia. Even with US backing, the port was “designed to turn Georgia into a global entrepot as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.”⁴⁷ Anaklia’s cancellation for unclear domestic reasons, and with international litigation for past losses, nevertheless opportunities remain for Western initiative.⁴⁸ The US DFC is supporting the renovation of Poti, Georgia’s outdated 100-year-old Black Sea port. Although Poti remains primarily used for military purposes, the US’s DFC states that its financial support for that port “advances U.S. interests in a region of critical strategic importance, by supporting an alternative to Russian ports used to transport goods between Europe and Central Asia.”⁴⁹ In January 2022, the US Ambassador to Georgia noted that the United States was pleased to support the initiative which doubled the port’s cargo capacity, and which provided “a big opportunity for Georgia to realize its goal of becoming an East-West hub, bringing goods from Central Asia all the way to Europe.”⁵⁰

Although construction of Georgian ports has provoked domestic political controversy, port development is fundamental to the On-Ramp and its wider expansion. The EU and the United States already have supported the concept. Securing funding would be likely, and more so with Western support for such infrastructural development generally.

⁴⁶ Beka Kiria, “Anaklia’s Deep Seaport—a New Strategic Pivot in Eurasia,” *New Eastern Europe*, June 12, 2019. For overviews, see Maximilian Hess and Maia Otarashvili, *Georgia’s Doomed Deep-Sea Port Ambitions: Geopolitics of the Cancelled Anaklia Project* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/georgias-doomed-deep-sea-port-ambitions.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Giorgi Lomsadze, “Georgia Cancels Contract for Black Sea Megaport,” *eurasianet*, Jan. 9, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-cancels-contract-for-black-sea-megaport>. See also Hess and Otarashvili, *Georgia’s Doomed Deep-sea Port* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020).

⁴⁸ “Perfect Opportunity to Reaffirm U.S. Government Support for Anaklia Port Project,” Nov. 13, 2020, <http://anakliadevelopment.com/news/anaklia-development-consortium-welcomes-u-s-secretary-of-state-pompeo-to-georgia/>.

⁴⁹ “Expanding Trade and Port Capacity in Georgia,” <https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/expanding-trade-and-port-capacity-georgia>.

⁵⁰ “Ambassador Degnan’s Remarks to Media at Pace Terminal Opening,” U.S. Embassy in Georgia, Jan. 29, 2022, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/ambassador-degnans-remarks-to-media-at-pace-terminal-opening/>.

Turkey: Energized and Determined. Turkish assertiveness may have been the most interesting development to emerge from the 2020 war. Turkish involvement in the war and its settlement was reminiscent of Turgut Ozal's leadership in the 1990s.⁵¹ Turkish support for Azerbaijan is just one of several places (Syria, Libya) where Ankara has found itself at odds with Russia.

Once keen on EU membership, and an applicant long before the tranche of states that leapfrogged it into membership, Turkey has developed an activist and militaristic foreign policy. While still a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey has been turning from the West. In December 2020, *The Economist* listed Turkey among several mid-sized authoritarian regimes projecting considerable power abroad.⁵² Russia's Ukrainian onslaught should refocus Turkish attention westward.

Among the most significant changes arising from the 2020 Karabakh war was Turkey's decisive activism during and after the conflict. Azerbaijan could not have gained the military edge that gave it victory in 2020 without Turkey's military assistance. Turkey's diplomatic and physical presence in the region is now vastly enhanced.

It is therefore even more important for the West to redouble working relations with Ankara. Turkey has a long and significant history of providing construction materials and know-how across the arc of post-Soviet Turkic countries. The West and Turkey partnering in post-war development in the South Caucasus provides low-cost political means to enhance relations and yield Western influence on this important country.

It will be interesting to see whether the 2020 war opens a Turkish reconciliation with Armenia. It will be hard; deep feelings endure on both sides. Yet an end to Turkey's blockade of Armenia and improved infrastructure that includes it would benefit all parties. Armenians have missed many of the economic benefits accruing from regional cooperation, such as the BTC pipeline or the BTK railway. Efforts should be made to correct that.

In December 2021, both the Armenian and the Turkish governments announced intentions to appoint special envoys to negotiate normalization of relations.⁵³ This significant step appears to have the support of Washington, Moscow, and Baku, which gives normalization of relations its best opportunity for success since the failed 2009 attempt.

⁵¹ Gareth M. Winrow, *Turkey in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995); and Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵² "Why Medium-sized Autocracies are Projecting More Hard Power Abroad. And Why This is Alarming," *The Economist*, Nov. 27, 2021.

⁵³ Ani Mejlumyan, "Turkey, Armenia to Appoint Envoys to Normalize Relations," *Eurasianet*, Dec. 14, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/turkey-armenia-to-appoint-envoys-to-normalize-relations>.

The Turks have strong linguistic and cultural connections with Central Asian states. In 2011 they formed the Turkic Council, which encompasses all of these countries and Azerbaijan.⁵⁴ Not shy of its regional affiliations, the Council awarded Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev a special victory award when it convened for the first time since the 2020 war. Will they make Azerbaijan, the Turkic country that they are closest to geographically and culturally, a gateway to Central Asia? And what would be the implications of a pull from the West to match the Chinese pull from the east?

After the 2020 war, Turkey and Azerbaijan proposed a new “3+3” format for postwar discussions. One set of “threes” includes the South Caucasus countries, the trinitarian counterpart being Russia, Turkey, and Iran. That might have remained a consideration until December 2021, when Turkey announced that Russia would convene its first meeting.⁵⁵ The forum attempts to dispense with the quarter-century-old Minsk Group, which included France and the United States. Turkish diplomacy in the South Caucasus, therefore, appears to exclude Western actors. Before 2020, the United States might have believed that it saw “eye to eye” with Russia on conflict resolution for Karabakh⁵⁶ After 2020, the United States was side-lined by both Russia and Turkey. The war in Ukraine, however, provides a necessary opportunity for Ankara to reconsider any relations with Moscow. Additionally, the solidarity expressed by both NATO, of which Turkey is a member, and of the EU against Russian aggression must signal a new stage in Turkish relations with its allies and partners. Enhanced work on trade and infrastructure in the South Caucasus can now advance with little concern for Russian desires, even as Moscow’s influence remains.

Turkey has begun cooperation with China, but the outright benefits to Ankara are questionable.⁵⁷ The West should coordinate with Turkey; the former risks being excluded from the region, working with Turkey presents an opportunity for improved Western-Turkish relations, as well as a more inclusive approach to the reconstruction of the South Caucasus.

⁵⁴ Turkmenistan joined the Turkic Council in 2021 as an observer.

⁵⁵ “Turkey Says Russia to Host Initial South Caucasus Peace Meeting Friday,” *Reuters*, Dec. 9, 2021.

⁵⁶ Stephen Blank, “Missing in Action: US Policy,” in Svante E Cornell, ed., *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 125-48.

⁵⁷ Xiaoli Guo and Giray Fidan, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Turkey’s Middle Corridor: ‘Win-Win Cooperation’?”, June 26, 2018, Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-win-win-cooperation>.

Russia: Advantaged and Disadvantaged. Another transformative effect from 2020 is Russia's new physical presence in Karabakh and between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Veteran Caucasus analyst Tom De Waal stated "Russia and Turkey are traditional rivals in this region," and 2020 presented "a strange flip back a century to what was happening in the period of the end of the First World War, when Russia and Turkey were the great powers in the region, and suddenly Turkey was back a century later."⁵⁸ Russian advantage in 2020 was undermined somewhat by Moscow's visible strategic demands on China following the self-inflicted wound of its Ukrainian invasion in February 2022.

Unlike other ceasefires that Russia oversaw in the South Caucasus in the early 1990s, where it injected its own Russian-run CIS "peacekeepers," this was a military achievement that Russia may have wanted in 1994. Yet, it did not achieve it, when Moscow brokered the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan that became the uneasy contours of the Karabakh conflict until 2020.⁵⁹ Following 2020, regional analysis warned that the "track record of Russian peacekeeping forces shows that once Russian troops are in, they never leave."⁶⁰ The Russian deployment may be benign theoretically and may give security reassurance to ethnic Armenians remaining in areas of Karabakh that Azerbaijan did not regain. However interpreted, that Russian military presence presents a strategic regional change. Azerbaijan welcomed a post-war Turkish military presence, and likely prefers it over a Russian one.

Soviet hub-and-spoke infrastructure ensured that raw materials such as hydrocarbons, extracted in the Caucasus and Central Asia, were transported to Slavic parts of the USSR for processing, and thus what Western liberal economists call "value added." After the Soviet collapse, the South Caucasus broke the old system of center-periphery control. The idea of the BTC pipeline, introduced by Aliyev in 1994, diluted Russian influence. The antecedents, therefore, for more EU-US/Western infrastructure are present in the South Caucasus in ways absent from the BRI's swath across Eurasia. Chinese

⁵⁸ In "FP Virtual Dialogue: Great-Power Plays in the South Caucasus," Dec. 8, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/events/fp-virtual-dialogue-great-power-plays-in-the-south-caucasus/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign.

⁵⁹ Among comparative literature of Russian "peacekeeping" and the use of force in the post-Soviet space are: Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan* (Palgrave, 2000); and Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Post-2020 analyses are especially offered by Vladimir Socor, "Russian 'Peacekeeping' in Karabakh: Old Model, New Features, Mission Creep," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jan. 21, 22, and 26, 2021.

⁶⁰ Farid Guliyev, "Azerbaijani-Russian Relations: Transactional Diplomacy in Action," *Russian Analytical Digest*, vol. 273, Oct. 30, 2021.

investment, albeit expanding in the South Caucasus, has not made this branch of its BRI a core area of activity. So much the better for the West.

Before its Ukrainian invasion, Moscow may have attempted to gain and exercise leverage in the South Caucasus, even in terms of infrastructure. Russia unilaterally convened the first post-war talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which included discussions of road repairs. And, in a second meeting in January 2021, there was an agreement to unblock transport. Plans were never finalized, nor an agreement reached on seemingly apolitical technical matters. Moreover, the plans provoked threats of violence, and discussions, promised in Russia's 2020 peace, have stalled.⁶¹ Even if President Putin had persuaded both presidents in November 2021 to reiterate their agreement to the earlier trilateral terms, Armenia claims that it stopped Azerbaijan from building infrastructure on its territory.⁶² Any Russian infrastructural plans would run north-south, by their nature excluding Western involvement and benefit and returning the South Caucasus to pre-1991 dependency on their northern neighbor.

Iran: Predator and Partner. Iran is the final regional power to consider here. It is almost a wild card—not least in view of its prolonged pariah status in the West. Iran is a perennial actor in the South Caucasus. Significantly, it is the only regional power consistently to retain diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus states. It created a paradigmatic counterexample to Samuel Huntington's idea of the clash of civilizations by maintaining good working relations with ancient Christian Armenia, even possibly serving as a conduit for arms during the 2020 war. Counterintuitively, it has often frosty relations with fellow Islamic Azerbaijan (though Azerbaijan is a secular Sunni state and Iran is a Shia theocracy). Iran also brokered a peace in May 1992, albeit one punctured on the day of signing by the resumption of fighting.

Among the results of the 2020 war is that Azerbaijan now has full control of all its border with Iran. In fact, Iran has been hostile to Azerbaijan, and may seek, in desperation, to disrupt regional efforts that exclude it (its membership of the 3+3 format notwithstanding).⁶³ In March 2022, Iran concluded an agreement with Azerbaijan which may allow the latter road access

⁶¹ *Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh*, Report, no. 264, June 9, 2021, International Crisis Group; and “Helping Stabilise the New Status Quo in Nagorno-Karabakh,” Oct. 7, 2021.

⁶² “Yerevan says Sochi statement of November 26 refutes theories of Baku getting corridor,” TASS, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1368297>.

⁶³ Emil Avdaliani, “Unhappy Iran Battles for Lost Influence in South Caucasus,” The Center for European Policy Analysis, Oct. 14, 2021, <https://cepa.org/unhappy-iran-battles-for-lost-influence-in-south-caucasus/>.

through Iranian territory to Nakhichevan, bypassing Armenia.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Armenia has become increasingly dependent on Iran as a major trading partner and consumer of its main export—electricity. After the war, some see Iran trying to support Armenia for its own aims, no matter how unlikely, to contain Azerbaijan and Turkey's Pan-Turkic expansionist aspirations in the north.”⁶⁵ It would be a general gain for the South Caucasus and the West to develop connectivity in the region that works against political interference. If Armenia is finally integrated into Western structures, including a revamped TEN-T, it can retain relations with Iran, but it need not be beholden to it.

Iran also supports the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-kilometer connector from the Indian Ocean via its territory to Europe via Russia. Initiated by India, Russia, and Iran in 2000 and signed two years later, the project produced its first India-European train shipment in 2021. Iran is a geographic lynchpin for the system, which would further intensify north-south transportation axes, including for—and through—Russia. Azerbaijan is a party, but if east-west infrastructure development is intensified after the 2020 war, Baku will be a major beneficiary. And, despite some improvements, Azerbaijan continues to have cautious, even fraught relations with Iran.⁶⁶

All these factors point to the opportunity and urgency to develop an integrated infrastructure plan for the South Caucasus. And this need is met by the On-Ramp to the BRI. The West, and perhaps especially the EU, leads the world in establishing global product standards. One of the many risks beyond the BRI (as purportedly only a transportation initiative) is that it seeks to transform these standards to Chinese standards across its vast areas of operation, thereby challenging Western standards.⁶⁷

The Western initiative should be more than hard infrastructure. And arguably intrinsic to it, is that Western attention to human and societal considerations can be far greater than those of its competitor. Two of these areas are in mine removal and investment in human capital. For example, the US- and UK-based Halo Trust continues its work of clearing nearly 500

⁶⁴ Heydar Isayev, “Azerbaijan, Iran Sign Transport Deal Bypassing Armenia,” eurasianet.org, Mar. 18, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-iran-sign-transport-deal-bypassing-armenia>.

⁶⁵ Yeghia Tashjian, “Is Iran Making a Comeback to the South Caucasus?,” *The Armenian Weekly*, Oct. 20, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/is-iran-making-a-comeback-to-the-south-caucasus/>.

⁶⁶ Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Azerbaijan and Iran: A Shift in Geopolitical Gravity,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Winter 2019), pp. 79-90.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Holslag, *The Silk Road Trap* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

minefields.⁶⁸ The second dimension is developing human capital; the West's educational and technological advantages should be utilized. European and American government-sponsored programs like Erasmus, Fulbright, Muskie, and Open World, and universities and other Western-based organizations, have developed extensive higher education capacity-building and exchanges. However, even this *forte*, however, is challenged increasingly by China, which offers scholarships, and in the case of Georgia now boasts over one thousand Chinese-speaking Georgians.⁶⁹

Improving conditions for individuals are also part of the EU's TRACECA, which calls for introducing smart technologies among states to facilitate the smoother movement of people and goods. Scope therefore exists for international cooperation on digital innovations to enhance cross-border movement. GUAM, while only mentioning China once, and that in the context of many other destinations, focuses on TRACECA, underscoring the need and the capacity of the EU (and Western partners) to develop this aspect further.⁷⁰

How to Seize the Moment

The unprecedented transformation of dynamics in the South Caucasus concur, coincidentally and auspiciously, with revised Western understandings of China's assertiveness and the BRI's implications for the region.

The South Caucasus offer huge possibilities as a corridor for goods and ideas into as well as out of the heart of Asia. G7/Western involvement benefits the region overall, while furthering the interests of each of the three countries in the region. These possibilities gained urgency when we read that "the West's interest in the [South Caucasus] region is ebbing—the United States and the EU are increasingly preoccupied with domestic problems stemming from the pandemic as well as with reorienting their foreign policies to deal with China and other regions closer to home."⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Nagorno Karabakh Impact Report 2020*, <https://www.halotruster.org/where-we-work/europe-and-caucasus/nagorno-karabakh/>.

⁶⁹ Nino Kemoklidze, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges for Georgia," *Lex Portus*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2021), p. 67.

⁷⁰ For example, "Transport Facilitation in the Region is One of the Priority Directions along the TRACECA Corridor," Nov. 30, 2021. <http://www.traceca.org/en/news/singlenews/n/transport-facilitation-in-the-region-is-one-of-the-priority-directions-along-the-traceca-corridor/>; and Section 2.2 of Development Concept for the GUAM Transport Corridor.

⁷¹ Stronski, "Shifting Geography."

Pushback against China is not a risk in itself—quite the opposite. Both the United States and the EU, and key European governments, have become forthright about the challenges that BRI poses, and the general risks to Western interests. This proposal offers a constructive and pragmatic way forward. The 2020 Karabakh war did far more than change conflict lines; it has transformed the larger geopolitical dynamics for all parties in—and near—the South Caucasus. For the first time in decades, continuous linear travel and transport is possible from Azerbaijan, which gained full control of its southern and western borders, including to and around its enclave Nakhichevan. This continuous access across the South Caucasus region creates an opportunity for renewed Western engagement that could develop its infrastructure and promote a regionally acceptable anchor to the West.

How the South Caucasus On-Ramp should be started:

- (1) Recognize that the Russian-brokered peace in 2020 rightly acknowledged the need for reopening transport, but that it gave no details nor practical plans, such as financing, for such.
- (2) Recognize further that the efforts at reopening transportation or creating new ones, while laudable, have thus far been undertaken unilaterally, and also have caused consternation to other parties, even to the point of requiring third-party intervention. Unilateral efforts at connectivity should be seen as counterproductive for everyone.
- (3) The EU and the United States should coordinate. Already in the early 2000s the US and EU “share[d] virtually identical goals and objectives in the Caucasus, and as EU policy developed into the EaP, the US saw and supported it as a logical extension of its own aims for the region.”⁷²
- (4) A new format for all core parties could then be created. For Western parties, this should be the G7, which has already approved B3W. G7 would also include the UK, which has had significant involvement in the BTC. South Caucasus countries would join and the interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan would

⁷² For the earlier period, Kenneth Yalowitz and Svante E. Cornell, “The Critical but Perilous Caucasus,” *Orbis*, Winter 2004, p. 114; and Jason Bruder, “The US and the New Eastern Europe” (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) Since 1991), in Rick Fawn, ed., *Managing Security Threats along the EU’s Eastern Flanks* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2020), pp. 69-97.

be safeguarded by this international forum. The forum can add interested and relevant parties, and the work would be made suitably public to make all interested parties aware.

(5) A special representative, or international team as a joint task force, supported by 4 above, should be created for coordination and outreach. An historical exemplar comes from the example of Ambassador Richard Morningstar in the agreement to move forward the BTC pipeline. His role as a dedicated official promoting international cooperation in that process and agreement is regarded as a serious precedent.

(6) As the most developed regional plan, the EU's nevertheless limited TEN-T should be reviewed, particularly in light of past limitations, and especially towards Armenia. Where TEN-T has not previously contemplated deeper and wider plans for transport integration more broadly with and among the EaP countries, Russian aggression since February 2022 importantly if tragically opens unprecedented need and opportunity to integrate post-war Ukraine also into pan-European infrastructure.

(7) A review of other international and private funding should be undertaken for past and present connectivity initiatives in the South Caucasus, and the work of international financial institutions (such as the World Bank), included. It is very likely that significant reconstruction aid for Ukraine will similarly be planned, and as in 6, above, should consider geographically wider plans.

(8) Thereafter, the B3W, possibly modified (in light of findings of 6), should be pressed to direct funds to the South Caucasus specifically. Calls for private investment could be made in this formalized inter-governmental coordination of planning for the South Caucasus.

(9) The Georgian ports should be reviewed, and the benefits and potential of Poti and/or Anakli assessed. The major infrastructure, including TEN-T and also smaller initiatives

should be linked physically to what will become an important land-sea facility.

(10) Turkey should be encouraged to rethink its regional financial benefits from a Western partnership, especially in view of its interests in the BRI, but with acknowledgement that it is the junior partner and minor beneficiary to date in its relations with China.

That coordination ideally could be accomplished also in the G7 format to include the UK, with its experience in the South Caucasus, and also Japan, and possibly India, which has been a partner in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

The West cannot undo the BRI, but it has taken far too much of a backseat approach to the most fundamental, long-term developmental geopolitical transformative process of the current century. Importantly, major Western countries and intergovernmental organizations, including the EU and NATO, have recognized China's challenge. If anyone were prudently concerned about Chinese reactions, Western criticism over the BRI has amplified in recent years. A worse situation is one of making those statements but not following through practically. The Chinese have yet to make as deep inroads in the South Caucasus as they have elsewhere. That situation provides fertile ground for Western activism. The West should not wait until further Chinese inroads prompt belated action or foreclose opportunities. These proposals have merits for western commercial ties and influence and for the South Caucasus regardless of extra-regional actors like China or Russia.

Issues remain from the conflict itself that must be addressed.⁷³ Yet, those, too, can only be fulfilled and safeguarded by Western involvement. The financing, engineering and some political will need to be mustered. The Western declaration, however, is that the former is available, and the large-scale public-private partnership that B3W offers is precisely the platform to formulate the specifics. Very likely major reconstruction plans for Ukraine will be devised by the same Western partners. Regardless of the final outcome of the Ukraine invasion, Western unity has shown remarkable resolve. And the

⁷³ A useful assessment with recommendations is the *Implementation Review* of the 2020 Ceasefire Terms Between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, New York, Dec.16, 2021, esp. pp. 15-16, http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/sites/default/files/Implementation%20report%20FINAL_0.pdf.

drive to integrate parts of the former Soviet Union among themselves and with the eastern parts of the Euro-Atlantic world will be even more apparent.

At this unique juncture, the South Caucasus continues to offer multiple opportunities for concerted Western action. The South Caucasus are already part of the Middle Corridor, merely one of several routes within the Chinese BRI megaproject. It is the one, however, where the United States and the West more generally have substantial inroads, political will, and the added and exceptional opportunities afforded from recent regional developments identified in this article. The West's On-Ramp to the BRI offers long-term direction and leadership in at least a sector of a worldwide initiative that is transforming permanently global geo-economics and patterns of influence. Recent events suggest that the West has the confidence to compete.



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