

# Presidential Discourses on Regionalism in Azerbaijan: Turkic Solidarity and the Silk Road

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## Abstract

Drawing on theories of comparative regionalism, this article examines the construction of regionalist frames in Azerbaijan covering the period from 1993 to mid-2023. By examining more than 60 text passages from presidential speeches and statements, the study identifies two framings of regionalism that have dominated presidential discourses in Azerbaijan: the discourse of Turkic solidarity or unity (in the political-security domain) and the narrative of an East-West corridor or the revival of the Silk Road for transport of cargo and hydrocarbon resources (in the economic domain). By constructing these discursive frames, Azerbaijani state leaders crafted an alternative regional order reconstituting the geographic category of “South Caucasus” into a new, spatially broader area. In this formulation, “South Caucasus” is viewed as a central pillar of the Silk Road, and Azerbaijan as one of its focal points or nodes. While the study underscores a key role that actors and ideas play in the formation of regions and regional institutions, it also highlights how social construction of regional identities is embedded in and shaped by historical experiences and country-specific political-economic conditions such as historical memories, experiences of war, collective identities and cultural affinities, geographic location, domestic political economic structures, and international linkages.

**Keywords:** regionalism; South Caucasus; Azerbaijan; regional cooperation; elite discourse

## Introduction

Despite its potentially considerable economic benefits (Ismailov 2006), regional integration in the South Caucasus – a region consisting of three independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Cornell 2001, 4) – is largely seen as a failure (de Waal 2012; Smith 2015).<sup>1</sup> Ongoing territorial disputes have hindered an integration of all three states into a common political-economic community (Ismailov and Papava 2008). Instead of regional integration, the region went through a period of regional fragmentation. Understandably, some scholars called this region the “most fractured of the post-Soviet regions” (Broers 2018) while others either questioned the very existence of the “South Caucasus” as a distinct “region” (German 2012) or, citing enduring conflicts, proposed to label it a “negative region” (Broers 2018).<sup>2</sup> Three decades after independence, a political or economic system of intra-regional cooperation – such as the one embodied in the concept of the “South Caucasus Community” proposed by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in 2000 (Emerson, Tocci, and Prokhorova 2001) – failed to emerge. In the security domain, rather than establishing a regional security governance order, these small states have been preoccupied with devising various strategies of survival amidst great power rivalries and regional balance of power

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politics. Among other policies, these strategies ranged from forming bilateral alliances with more powerful states (Russia in the case of Armenia and Turkey in the case of Azerbaijan) to entering a military bloc with a regional hegemonic power (Armenia's membership in the Russian-led CSTO; Collective Security Treaty Organization) and to pursuing membership in a defense alliance (Georgia's bid to join NATO), rather than trying to establish a regional security governance framework that would encompass all three South Caucasian states. There has been modest progress in deepening economic ties within the region, with a notable exception of trilateral Azerbaijani-Georgian-Turkey cooperation on energy and regional connectivity projects. However, such interactions have largely been confined to bilateral or trilateral economic relationships rather than involving all three states. Armenia has been left out of all major regional energy projects, such as oil and gas pipelines and transit routes.

How to explain the apparent failure of regional integration in the South Caucasus? As discussed below, while the persistent legacy of protracted ethnic conflicts is often advanced as one of the most plausible explanations for a low degree of regional integration in the South Caucasus, scant attention has been paid to the role played by ideational factors. The in-depth case study of Azerbaijan presented here details the links between perceived interests of political leaders and regional identity construction in this country.

In a (neo)realist tradition of International Relations, security is the primary goal pursued by states, and small states must align or bandwagon with great powers to protect themselves (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). National security considerations stand out as a key factor explaining low levels of regional integration in the South Caucasus. The fear of state disintegration, secessionist movements and large-scale conflicts that haunted all three countries since the early 1990s – so aptly depicted by Charles King in his book *The Ghost of Freedom* (2008) – instilled a deep sense of insecurity and vulnerabilities in national governments – especially in the face of the former colonial power Russia's attempts and the rise of Putin to power – to establish its hegemonic dominance in the “southern tier” of the ex-Soviet Union (Suny 2010). As Fiona Hill and Angela Stent (Hill and Stent 2022, 122) have recently argued, “Putin is insistent on bringing tsarist Russia back.” Challenges to state-building and the uncertain geopolitical environment in which these states find themselves in continued to pose security risks well into the 2000s and to shape individual country's foreign policy choices. Ongoing territorial disputes in many Eurasian countries locked them in intractable conflicts and recurrent vicious security dilemmas. Many of them remain “fixated with issues of territorial integrity” (Sperling 2003, 10). It is therefore unsurprising that the South Caucasus is often referred to as a “region of conflicts” with exceptionally heightened levels of insecurity (Nodia 2004). These distinct political conditions and national security challenges that each of these states is facing have had a profound impact on their respective foreign policy agendas and the regional cooperation initiatives they have advanced. State leaders' ideas of regionalism reflect some of these distinct country-specific territorial sovereignty considerations, perceptions of security threats, and historic memories.

The South Caucasus is not unique in its limited performance on regional integration. Central Asia is viewed as another example of regionalism failure (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020). As Amitav Acharya (2016) shows, the need to safeguard national sovereignty has motivated much of the regional integration projects across regions outside the Western world: “the foundational goal of most regional groups in the post-colonial non-Western world was autonomy, defined as the protection and preservation of state sovereignty and developing resilience against external intervention, whether from within or outside the region” (Acharya 2016, 117).

Such national sovereignty considerations have been instrumental in shaping political elites' views on, and predispositions with regards to, region-building initiatives and their discursive construction of *alternative regional orders*, which did not necessarily overlap with the Russian imperial or Soviet-era mappings of these territorial areas or externally imposed views of these three countries as constituting a single integrated region called “South Caucasus.” State elites thus engaged in discursive reconstructions that often went beyond conventional topographic mappings

or commonly used geographic designations. Weak regionalism in the South Caucasus thus stems, in part, from the ways in which state elites engaged in social construction of alternative regionalist narratives, which often eluded the common views of this part of Central Eurasia being a region labeled “South Caucasus.” Georgian elites have emphasized their country’s geographic location in the Black Sea area closer to Eastern Europe – rather than the South Caucasus – to signal their country’s belonging to the broader European civilization. This vision, of course, springs from Georgia’s acute sense of vulnerability, exacerbated by Russian military invasion in 2018, and the determination of Georgian elites to become part of Euro-Atlantic political and defense structures (Gvalia et al. 2013; Abbasov and Siroky 2018). Landlocked Armenia, on the other hand, aspires to be part of the West but, until recently, has been pushed into dependence on Russia because of “its desire to hold on to Nagorno-Karabakh” (Nodia 2017, 72).

Owing to its vast oil and gas resources as well as its geopolitical location, Azerbaijan appears to be a key player not only in terms of advancing regional cooperation in the South Caucasus, but also as an indispensable actor in the geoeconomics and energy politics of a much larger Central Eurasian region (Cutler 2020). It is also the EU’s largest trading partner in the region (Bayramov 2022), supplying around 4.3% of the European Union’s oil imports in 2021 (EEAS 2021) and 5.9% of the EU’s non-LNG gas imports in the third quarter of 2023 (Eurostat 2023).

The goal of this article is twofold: first, it aims to identify key narrative frames in the presidential discourses on regionalism in Azerbaijan. Second, it seeks to uncover conditions underpinning the emergence and crystallization of these specific discursive frames in Azerbaijani leaders’ construction of regionalist projects. Drawing on the realist and ideational approaches in regionalism studies, this article looks at how a distinct set of country-specific variables – a landlocked location, national sovereignty vulnerabilities, Turkic cultural affinities, and the political-economy of oil and gas – conditioned the construction of a specific regional identity through presidential discourses in Azerbaijan. It shows how distinct national security threats shaped Azerbaijani leaders’ views with regard to regional initiatives and strategic allies driving preferences for alternative integrationist initiatives centered around the idea of Turkic solidarity and the construction of an East-West transit route – these two projects often portrayed as mutually reinforcing. In the security realm, the conflict with Armenia over the Mountainous Karabakh region – a region situated within Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized borders but claimed by Armenia (Huseynov 2010) – has shaped Azerbaijan’s foreign policy choices and strategies influencing the state elite’s construction of a specific conception of a region and Azerbaijan’s place in it. The article identifies two key narratives in Azerbaijani presidential discourses on regionalism: a political one emphasizing Baku’s “brotherly ties” and military partnership with Turkey crystallized, over the past decades, into the idea of the “Turkic World.” On economic regionalism, the key discursive theme can be identified as a set of ideas packaged under various labels such as the revival of “The Great Silk Road,” the construction of an “East-West Corridor” or the “Trans-Caspian Corridor” (Starr 2007; Guliyev and Akhrarkhodjaeva 2009; Ziyadov 2011). While the first frame is concerned with the Turkic cultural and political integration within the Turkic World, the second regionalist frame – for which the shorthand of “Silk Road” will be used – is pivoted around the Caspian Basin area and its petroleum deposits as well as the movement of goods via this route. Rather than the narrowly situated in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan is portrayed by this discourse as a strategically important “node” or a “hub” connecting Europe with Asia. In this account, the Caucasus and Central Asia are designated as two regions that are inextricably linked – both culturally as Turkic-speaking countries and commercially through the centuries-old Silk Road – via the Caspian Sea, with Baku serving as a pivotal connecting point. Notably, this discourse extends the spatial boundaries of the Russian-imposed colonial-era concept of Transcaucasia (*Закавказье/ Zakavkaziie*) to also include Turkey and the littoral states on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea. Both Russia and Iran are either excluded from these discursive frames or are seen as parts of competing transit routes and regional groupings. Juxtaposed against Russia-led regional initiatives (e.g., the Eurasian Economic Union; EAEU) through which Moscow has sought to reassert its influence in this once Russian-dominated region, Azerbaijan’s “Silk Road”

regionalist project – inclusive of all Turkic-speaking countries – thus construed stems from the perceived need to bypass and perhaps even to escape Russia’s orbit physically and overcome the region’s legacy infrastructure that inescapably linked it to Russia in the past. It should therefore be understood as a markedly counter-hegemonic project rooted in Azerbaijani leaders’ and society’s collective memories of Russian subjugation of Azerbaijan in the course of 19th and 20th centuries, as well as Moscow’s efforts to subvert independent Azerbaijani statehood in the early 1990s. The Russian military alliance with Armenia and Moscow’s efforts to undermine Caspian energy and transit projects in the 1990s contributed to the dominant perception of Russia as a source of threat (Ismayilov 2018), giving rise to alternative projects for regional cooperation.

The article proceeds by laying out a theoretical framework and methodology. Then, it looks at Azerbaijan’s approach to security- and political-economy-driven discursive constructions of both political and economic regionalism and their respective framings by Azerbaijani leaders. It concludes by assessing the viability of the “Silk Road” concept and a discussion of challenges in its implementation and broader implications for regional integration.

### Theoretical Framework

A growing body of literature in comparative regionalism tends to define regions as socially constructed – by politically-relevant elites and actors – rather than merely geographically pre-determined and fixed entities or processes. Börzel and Risse (2016) define regionalism “as constituting a primarily state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organizations among at least three states.” Other scholars define regionalism as “those state-led projects of co-operation that emerge as a result of intergovernmental dialogues and treaties” (Breslin, Higgott, and Rosamond 2002, 13), suggesting “a policy of cooperation and coordination among actors within a given region” (Fawn 2009, 13).

While there are ongoing scholarly debates on the precise meaning of regionalism, one school of thought defines regionalism as “the ideas, identities and ideologies related to a regional project” (Söderbaum 2003, 7). This approach to regionalism that evades geographically fixed notions also views regionalism as constantly changing and shifting. Similar to Benedict Anderson’s insightful definition of nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), a region may also be thought of as “a process and a social construction” (Hettne 2003, 28). Using the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Acharya (2000), highlights the importance of regionalist discourses to the processes of region construction. Moving beyond the conventional understanding of a region as something defined by geographic location and shared cultural and historic experiences, regions can be better conceptualized as “imagined communities created by processes of interaction and socialization which may lead to different conceptions of what constitutes a given region at different points of time” (Acharya 2000, 27).

This view of regions as social constructs is often contrasted with a more traditional understanding of regions as territorially “bounded spaces.” In the social constructivist approach, regions are sets of social relations and power constellations undergirded by the material base. In Anssi Passi’s apt definition, regions are “institutional structures and processes that are perpetually ‘becoming’ instead of just ‘being’” (Paasi 2009, 133).

Even though regions can be viewed as socially constructed or imagined spaces, the process of constructing a region takes place within a given country’s political and historical context and cannot be separated from it. As Fawcett (2015) points out, elite ideas and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping dominant discourses about regions and regionalism in Europe and beyond. In Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, collective identities and ideas acted “as a guide and constraint, setting parameters for what is possible and acceptable” (Fawcett 2015, 38).

A regional integration project cannot be successful without the shared ideas and expectations about the future of the region. Construction of a shared regional identity occurs through social

interactions and elite discourses in participating states and involves a complex interplay of actors, institutions, identities, and norms (Acharya 2000).

However, regional construction involves both identity and material factors (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002). Social and political realities form a set of background variables that shape relevant policymakers' beliefs and ideas about regionalism. Such ideas are constituted by state interests, defined primarily in terms of power and national security considerations. Interests and preferences of elite actors in small states threatened by more powerful neighbors from the outside and secessionist movements inside will inevitably revolve around the issues of independence and sovereignty. Constraints on sovereignty are one of the key factors in explaining state capacity and willingness to cooperate with other states: "It is sovereignty that still matters for states, and the attachment to sovereignty will always check and balance any cooperative project – particularly where that sovereignty is fragile, having only recently been obtained" (Fawcett 2004, 443).

Sovereignty concerns are particularly pronounced for smaller states such as the three states in the South Caucasus. Smallness here indicates the "small" level of power and capabilities (Elman 1995, 171; Jesse and Dreyer 2016, 6). The level of resource capabilities influences the scope of foreign policy, and small states command limited capabilities to confront or defend themselves against regional hegemonic powers such as Russia, China, or the United States. Jesse and Dreyer (2016, 10) define small states as those states that are "always weak at global and regional levels, but strong at a sub-regional level." In the realist tradition, to defend themselves against an external threat, small states must either align or bandwagon with great powers (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). In the South Caucasus and Central Asia, small states have engaged in an intricate alliance politics reflecting these incentives of state survival amid geopolitical competition: Georgia has sought membership in the Euro-Atlantic community, Armenia chose to bandwagon with Russia by joining the Moscow-led CSTO military alliance and hosting the Russian military bases (Abbasov and Siroky 2018), and Azerbaijan pursued a more balanced foreign policy strengthening ties with Turkey to counterbalance Russia (Cornell 2017). Gvalia and colleagues (2013) argue that Georgia's pursuit of Western-oriented foreign policy cannot be explained by material factors alone – that is, without also taking into account the dominant political elite discourse emphasizing a distinct identity of Georgia as a European country and European integration as a conduit for the country's modernization.

Other scholars have emphasized market forces and the preferences of domestic political coalitions or individual leaders as driving forces behind regional cooperation. For example, economic integration on the European Union model was explained as being triggered by the so-called spillover effects whereby "the creation and deepening of integration in one economic sector would create pressures for further economic integration within and beyond that sector, and greater authoritative capacity at the European level" (Rosamond 2000, 60). In this neo-functional view, increased economic interdependence creates market pressures prompting states to establish supra-national regional institutions that help to reduce uncertainty and transaction costs for various transnational actors (Mattli 1999). Outside the European Union, domestic preferences of state elites are considered to be key to understanding regional cooperation. In the context of Africa, for example, Herbst (2007) argues that participation in multiple international and regional platforms are often viewed by African leaders as a way to strengthen their country's national sovereignty. However, due to the heightened sense of insecurity in office, African leaders have used membership in regional organizations to maintain their domestic power and ensure their regime's survival. In the case of Central Asia, membership in regional organizations dominated by Russia, short of tangible efforts to promote intra-regional market integration, has been a strategy by state elites to preserve their stay in power and as a shield against the liberal agenda promoted by the West (Allison 2008). Some scholars even coined a new term of "authoritarian regionalism" to describe regional organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) established by non-democratic regimes or led by a powerful

authoritarian hegemon (such as Russia), which function mainly to prolong authoritarian rule in their member states (Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

In some political-economy theories of regional integration, economic integration is driven by states seeking to maximize expected economic gains from greater cooperation (Börzel 2016). In the Global South, regional cooperation may also be pursued by state leaders' desire to gain access to international export markets and to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) (Krapohl and Fink 2013). Finally, a regional hegemonic power can play an important role in promoting or obstructing regional integration. In Central Asia, the growing competition between China and Russia has had a divergent impact on region-building in that region. Some scholars have argued that preference for Russia-led regional projects reflects the Central Asian leaders' interests in deflecting western pressures for liberalization (Allison 2008) while others believe that Central Asian regionalism was "captured by Russia and its Eurasian integration project" and is being increasingly challenged by the growing influence of China (e.g., through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative) (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020).

In sum, the literature review above suggests that on the one hand, fragility of national sovereignty, a history of militarized conflict, and the small state status are predicted to be negatively related to the pursuit of political integration or comprehensive forms of security cooperation at a regional or sub-regional level. However, in the Global South, membership in regional organizations is viewed positively when it helps to solidify national sovereignty. On the one hand, participation in specific forms of regional institutions is also more likely when political leaders believe that regional platforms will shore up their legitimacy and extend their tenure in power. Furthermore, states in the Global South are more likely to promote regional cooperation when they expect to maximize economic benefits from regional trade or seek access to export markets or when attracting FDI is seen as key to promoting national economic growth. Finally, regional integration in Eurasia is influenced by actions of regional hegemons, notably Russia and China, each pursuing its own integrationist project.

## Methodology

Data sources used in this study include publicly available presidential speeches, interviews and official statements that refer to the themes of regionalism and regional integration. The period covered spans 30 years between 1993 and mid-2023, and focuses on regionalism discourses of the two presidents, Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003) and Ilham Aliyev (2003–present) (for more details on data sources, see [Appendix A](#) in the online Supplemental Material).

To examine presidential speeches and statements, the study uses qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014), which proceeds in three steps. First, the relevant material was identified by scanning presidential speeches, statements, and interviews using key words such as region, integration, and geographic references to the region of South Caucasus or the Caspian region. Second, the selected segments were compiled and translated into English. In total, 62 text passages were included in the analysis. Third, the text passages were categorized and manually coded by the author ([Appendix B](#) in the online Supplemental Material provides more details on the coding of data). The analysis followed "intensive reading" of textual passages to identify recurring themes and commonly used narratives (Gibbs 2007). [Table 1](#) gives examples of text passages and their respective coding.

There are two key limitations to this research. First, the selection of speeches is limited to those of presidents and may therefore not be considered representative of the views of the entire political elite, although it is reasonable to suggest that presidents play a paramount role in shaping foreign policy and public discourses in super-presidentialist regimes such as that of Azerbaijan. Second, narrative analysis is by nature an interpretivist exercise. The selected material can be read and interpreted differently by other researchers.

Table 1. Coding with Examples

Analytical Dimensions	Examples
Political–Security Regionalism	<p>“Full security conditions should be created in the Caucasus. To achieve this [goal], all conflicts, especially the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, must be resolved as soon as possible. The recognition of the territorial integrity of each independent state is of particular importance. It is very important to create stability and peace in the Caucasus.” (Heydar Aliyev, January 25, 2000) <i>Codes: Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Territorial integrity</i></p> <p>“The strengthening of relations with Member States of the Organization of Turkic States in all fields is one of the top priorities of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. Azerbaijan has always contributed to the close unity of the Turkic world and will continue to be committed to the goals of unity of the Turkic world.” (Ilham Aliyev, November 11, 2022) <i>Codes: Turkic World</i></p>
Economic Regionalism	<p>“I want to emphasize the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway connecting Europe with Asia. This railway line will link continents. Our countries will become transit states... This is a huge geopolitical and geo–economic project, a project of cooperation. I am confident that we will celebrate completion of this project in the near future, next year, thus reviving the historic Silk Road.” (Ilham Aliyev, August 16, 2013) <i>Codes: Transit route, Silk Road</i></p>

Source: Appendix B in online Supplemental Material

### Examining Azerbaijani Presidential Discourses on Regionalism

Restoring sovereignty over its entire territory in a geopolitically hostile environment (Russia to the north and Iran to the south) has been a foreign policy priority for Azerbaijani leadership since the full-scale war with Armenia in the early 1990s. Therefore, the pursuit of a regional security arrangement that would include Armenia has been ruled out outright. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a war in which Azerbaijan lost its former autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts around it. As a result, more than 700,000 Azerbaijanis were forcibly displaced from the conflict-affected areas. A Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement ended that war in 1994. In the autumn of 2020, the conflict that had been considered to be “frozen” for decades erupted again into a full-scale war.<sup>3</sup> The Second Karabakh War that lasted 44 days resulted in Armenia’s defeat and Azerbaijan’s recovery of most of its previously occupied territories. On November 10, the sides signed a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement. According to the Trilateral Statement (2020), Armenia agreed to withdraw its troops from remaining occupied districts and from Mountainous Karabakh itself. The sides also agreed to allow for the deployment of some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to Mountainous Karabakh and the Lachin road to patrol the area.

To achieve its goal, Azerbaijan has generally shunned away from pursuing membership in regional security organizations. Azerbaijan has remained a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but Baku saw little value in joining other Eurasian integration projects advanced by Moscow (Cornell 2014). Within-regional integration in military and security domains was ruled out due to the ongoing conflict with Armenia. Azerbaijan enthusiastically embraced partnership with NATO and joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace Program; but unlike Georgia, it did not formally seek membership. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, deepening the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration seemed too costly for Baku considering threats emanating from a more assertive Russian policy in the “near abroad.” As for the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Azerbaijani elites suspected that this was the Kremlin’s plan to extend its influence in the region and chose to opt out. Instead, Azerbaijan aligned itself with Turkey with which it shares identity-based affinity rooted in language and culture (MacFarlane 2015). In short, limited or non-participation in regional security organizations has been a key strategy of Baku, which focused instead on the policy of balancing and pursuing a bilateral military partnership with Turkey within the discursive frame of “one nation, two states.” As an extension of this ideology, in

recent years Baku cultivated ties with Turkic-speaking nations in Central Asia within an increasingly institutionalized regional initiative known as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) (see Table 2). The OTS has become an important tool in Azerbaijan's foreign policy toolbox, especially after summits began to be held since 2011; and the OTS evolved into a full-fledged regional organization over the following decade (Shafiyev 2023). The Turkic unity discourse is a good example of what Paasi calls the "mobilization of collective memory" whereby identity narratives are mobilized for the process of region-building (Paasi 2009, 133).

On economic regionalism, Azerbaijan's comparative advantage in hydrocarbons and its geographic location gave rise from the mid-1990s onward to the discourse on "The Great Silk Road" or the "East-West Corridor" as a meta-narrative. The discourse has its intellectual roots in a new identity search in the early 1990s when Azerbaijan emerged as a newly independent state out of the painful collapse of the Soviet Union. This discourse aligned well with Azerbaijan's Western-leaning foreign policy course adopted at that time, which was gradually replaced by a more balancing posture vis-à-vis Russia. One local expert summed up this discourse in the following words: "Baku will act as a gateway to Central Asia for Europe and a door to Europe for Central Asia and China. It has the potential to become a 'hub of hubs' on the Caspian Sea" (Ziyadov 2011, 5). Table 3 presents key themes in presidential discourses that emphasize the centrality of the Silk Road in the political discourse; but of course, these ideas are not new and date back to the Heydar Aliyev's era in the 1990s and early 2000s. For example, in his speech delivered during the meeting with the US Senator Sam Brownback on September 8, 2000, Heydar Aliyev is quoted as saying: "As you can see, the Caspian Sea is at the center of the Great Silk Road... Azerbaijan is located in the most important strategic region of the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, connecting Europe with Asia and the West with the East" (Aliyev 2000).

Unsurprisingly, Azerbaijan's "Silk Road" discourse encompasses Georgia and Turkey, but not Armenia. It partly overlaps with some of the visions espoused by Georgia's elites – with a focus on its

**Table 2.** Key Themes in Political-Security Regionalism Discourse

	Key Themes
Obstacles to regional integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict as an obstacle to regional integration</li> <li>• State sovereignty</li> <li>• Territorial integrity</li> </ul>
Meaning(s) of regionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crossroads between Europe and Asia</li> <li>• Caspian Basin</li> <li>• Central Asian connection</li> <li>• Turkic World</li> </ul>

Source: Appendix C, Tables 3 and 4 in online Supplemental Material

**Table 3.** Key Themes in Economic Regionalism Discourse

	Key Themes
Meaning(s) of regional economic integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transit route</li> <li>• Energy exports</li> <li>• Energy transportation</li> <li>• Regional hub</li> <li>• East–West Corridor</li> <li>• Silk Road</li> <li>• Caspian energy (oil and gas)</li> <li>• Railway connection</li> <li>• Cargo shipment</li> <li>• Infrastructure projects</li> </ul>

Source: Appendix C, Tables 3 and 4 in online Supplemental Material

connection to the Black Sea region – but Tbilisi later appears to have been distancing itself from its counterparts in the South Caucasus as the (post)-Rose Revolution elites announced membership in the European Union and NATO as their desired end goal. This highlights how political elites in these two countries advocated divergent and frequently shifting concepts of regionalism, which offered competing or even conflicted narratives.

### **Explaining the Framing of Political and Security Regionalism**

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus was in disarray. Secessionist movements, ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and economic disintegration tore the three countries apart. Describing this period with the Russian word *raspad* (“collapse”), Huttenbach wrote, “In sum, ethnic disputes ranging from non-violent secession movements, open rebellions, violent separatism, to civil war, and quasi-inter-state war have characterized the last twelve months in Caucasia.” In all three countries, war and chaos of the early 1990s still leaves “a heavy legacy” (1992, 90).

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the breakaway region of Mountainous Karabakh contributed to further regional fragmentation as the borders between the two states have been closed and railway connections discontinued. The war in and around Karabakh has been the single most important factor inhibiting regional integration for decades and has dominated Azerbaijan’s foreign policy agenda ever since. At present, there is no overarching regional security institution to which all the three countries can refer for guaranteeing security – instead, individual states pursue different security alliances. As a result, regional security in the South Caucasus can be characterized by a “security deficit” since the 1990s (Ismayil and Yilmaz 2022). In the military-security domain – lacking a stronger integrationist drive and shared views of a regional identity – Azerbaijan’s elites opted out of the dichotomy of Western vs. Russian security blocs, pursuing instead a pragmatic policy of bilateral partnership with Turkey and, by extension, with other Turkic-speaking states in Central Asia. Azerbaijan’s long-standing conflict with Armenia, Yerevan’s strategic alliance with Russia, and Georgia’s strategic orientation toward NATO minimized the chances of the establishment of a regional security integration scheme. In fact, Armenia is the only state in the South Caucasus with membership in all the major Russian-led regional organizations: the CIS, the CSTO, and the EAEU (German 2022). In its balanced foreign policy, Baku has been treading a thin line balancing between the West and Russia without seeking formal membership in either NATO or the CSTO. Azerbaijan carefully leverages its strong and reliable partnership with Turkey and ties with OTS member-states to counter Russian influence and to promote its security goals vis-à-vis Armenia.

On the eve of Soviet collapse, Azerbaijan entered a period of internal political turmoil exacerbated by the conflict with its ethnic Armenian minority, which was backed up by Armenia proper in the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region. The conflict began in 1988 and escalated into a full-blown war from 1992 to 1994. As the central communist government’s grip on the Caucasus region continued to loosen, the local struggle for power intensified. The struggle involved the (former) communists who tried, with Moscow’s help, to retain power, and their opponents representing the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF), the pro-independence nationalist movement established by Azerbaijani academics and intellectuals in 1988 (Fuller 1996). On January 19–20 of 1990, the Kremlin sent troops and tanks to Baku to suppress the pro-independence movement, a tragic event in which 147 civilians were killed and hundreds were injured. That event went down in history as the “Black January.” After Soviet violent crackdown on mass protests in Baku in January 1990, Ayaz Mutalibov was installed by the Kremlin as the first secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, and in September 1991, he assumed the newly created office of the presidency in the election poll in which he was the only candidate. In late February 1992, Armenian troops occupied the Azerbaijani-populated town of Khojaly in Nagorno-Karabakh and massacred its almost entire civilian population. The 366th Russian Motorized Rifle Regiment had a hand in the massacre of 613 Azerbaijani civilians in Khojaly, and reportedly supplied weaponry and troops to

the Armenian side after it got disbanded (Goltz 1993). Facing criticism in the Supreme Soviet for allowing the massacre to happen, Mutalibov was forced to resign. Yagub Mammadov was appointed as interim president. In May, Mutalibov made a comeback but was expelled from office following the APF-led mass protests in Baku. Isa Gambar, one of the leaders of the APF, assumed the duties of interim president pending presidential elections. In June, presidential elections were held and the chairman of the APF and former Soviet dissident Abulfaz Elchibey won the race with 60% of the vote. The APF government remained in office for only one year, and by the end of its tenure in office, the Popular Front lost much of its initial popularity. Analysts believe that three factors contributed to the failure of the APF government: their lack of administrative experience and competence, their inability to address declining socioeconomic conditions, and the poor performance of the Azerbaijani army in the Karabakh battlefield (Altstadt 1997, 133–137).

In June 1993, Elchibey's government was facing a threat of an armed coup by Colonel Suret Huseynov, backed by his private army stationed in the city of Ganja and allegedly supported by Russia. By the time of the coup, Elchibey had no effective control of his cabinet and some of his ministers were openly quarrelling with each other. When Elchibey dismissed Isgandar Hamidov, the minister of internal affairs who had the loyal troops under his personal control, Elchibey was left defenseless. In an attempt to save his position, Elchibey turned to Heydar Aliyev, a former first secretary of the country's communist party (appointed in 1969), Politburo member and KGB general. But, as a *New York Times* journalist allegorically observed, "calling on Mr. Aliyev for help was somewhat like calling in the fox to restore order among the chickens" (Schmemmann 1993). Aliyev arrived in Baku from his political base in the exclave of Nakhchivan and took the chairmanship of the parliament on June 15. On June 18, Elchibey fled to his home in Nakhchivan to later continue his political career as an opposition leader. In October 1993, Aliyev won the presidential election with 99% of the vote and thereafter succeeded in consolidating his power. In 2003, the poor health of President Heydar Aliyev engendered a potentially destabilizing succession crisis. But the problem of succession was resolved by orchestrating a transfer of power to his son. Ilham Aliyev, the son of the ailing president, was nominated as a candidate and was running for presidency together with his father until the latter pulled out of the race in favor of his son (Mydans 2003).

It is well known that in the early 1990s the government of Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993) took a staunch anti-Russian stance. Under Elchibey, Baku forced Russia to withdraw its troops from Azerbaijani territory, refused to join any Russian-led regional integration initiatives, prioritized its strategically important ties with Turkey, and took a pro-Western foreign policy course. The Elchibey government also declined to ratify the CIS treaty and opposed to becoming a member of the Collective Security Treaty signed in May 1992 (Cornell 2014). Because this angered Russia, Moscow used the conflict in Karabakh as a tool to exert pressure on Azerbaijan (Eyvazov 2016, 68) for its Western-leaning course, which the Kremlin was not prepared to tolerate. It was Russia's military support that tilted the first war in Armenia's favor, leading to Azerbaijan's military defeat. In 1993, the Azerbaijani army retreat and territorial losses produced a domestic political turmoil and a Russian-backed military coup that led to Elchibey's downfall.

When Heydar Aliyev came to power in June 1993, he reversed some of the policies of the previous government by pursuing a more "balanced" foreign policy (Cornell 2001, 347). Russia should not be discounted completely, Aliyev argued, but Western oil companies were prioritized in developing Azerbaijan's oil sector (Eyvazov 2016). US-based oil majors, in particular, were seen by President Aliyev as an important element of a strategy to elevate Azerbaijan's importance in US foreign policy (Cornell 2001, 364). Baku reluctantly rejoined the CIS, despite the widespread perceptions that this and other Moscow-led integration frameworks were "instruments of Russia's political strategy, specifically to recreate something akin to the Soviet space, to which Azerbaijan was compelled to take part in order to avert state failure" (Cornell 2014, 147). Due to unfavorable views of Russia and collective memory of Russia following the Black January of 1990 as

well as Moscow's support for Armenia in the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijani leadership sought to evade Russian-led regional integrationist projects, and Baku declined to join the CSTO when the military bloc was formally established in 2002. The perception of Russia as a "hegemony-seeking power" dominated the public opinion; for this reason, Russia was viewed as a "source of threat" to the country's sovereignty (Ismayilov 2018, 181). Azerbaijan has kept membership in the CIS, which itself is viewed as a failure and "almost anachronistic and frequently irrelevant to political, economic, and security considerations in the post-Soviet" (Kubicek 2009, 256).

Balancing (against Russia) continued to be a key foreign policy strategy when Ilham Aliyev became president in 2003 (Ismayilov 2018; Guliyev 2021). Azerbaijan took steps toward Western integration. Azerbaijan signed an Independent Partnership Action Plan with NATO in 2005, and Azerbaijani troops participated in NATO peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Azerbaijan and the EU signed the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1999; Azerbaijan joined the EU's Eastern Partnership Program in 2009, and negotiations are currently under way to sign a new partnership agreement (Kamilsoy and Zamejc 2022).

In the security field, since 1993, Azerbaijan capitalized on its ties with Turkey, viewing it as a way to counterbalance Russian influence (Cornell 2017). Pro-Western Georgia was also seen as part of Baku's strategy of building the east-west corridor for transit of Caspian hydrocarbon resources. In 1997, together with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, Azerbaijan established a regional organization called GUAM as a mechanism to strengthen ties with the West and to promote a Europe-Asia transit corridor, which was viewed as a safeguard against Russian growing hegemonic ambitions in the post-Soviet space (Kubicek 2009, 246).

Turkey, in its turn, saw Georgia and Azerbaijan as its land route to connect to Central Asia (Cornell 2017, 11). Strategic partnership with Turkey has been instrumental in the training of Azerbaijani armed forces and bringing its military capacity up to Western standards (Yalçinkaya 2021). Oil windfalls that began to accrue to the state coffers around mid-2000s enabled Baku to bolster its defense budget and modernize its military forces (Eyvazov 2016, 76). The improved military capacity played a decisive role in achieving military success in the 2020 war. On June 15, 2021, Azerbaijani President Aliyev and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed the "Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey" in the symbolic city of Shusha (Şuşa). This milestone document of strategic partnership envisages "joint efforts aimed at reorganizing and modernizing the armed forces of the two fraternal countries in accordance with modern requirements" (Shusha Declaration 2021).

As an outgrowth of its strategic alliance based on "fraternal relations" with Turkey, Azerbaijan cultivated the idea of deepening political and economic ties with other Turkic-speaking countries in Central Asia by taking steps to institutionalize a new cooperation grouping formed around the idea of Turkic solidarity (or unity). The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is a regional organization with headquarters in Istanbul was founded on November 1, 2012, on the basis of the Nakhchivan Agreement of October 3, 2009, signed by the heads of state of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey. The stated goal is to "promote deeper relations and solidarity amongst Turkic speaking countries... particularly in Central Asia and Caucasus" (OTS n.d.). The idea of the Turkic World is, of course, linked to a similar discourse espoused by the Turkish foreign policy establishment that positions Turkey as the leader of a "pan-Turkic community" and dates back to the 1990s. Baku can be said to reproduce this Turkish discourse. As Köstem (2017) pointed out, "During a period when Turkey's national identity was under fierce contestation, ideologically compatible Turkish decision makers in the 1990s rapidly adopted the idea of the 'Turkic World' promoted by nonstate actors so much so that the concept came to acquire a 'taken for granted' status among the Turkish political elites" (Köstem 2017, 723).

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have overlapping membership in the CIS, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are also member-states in the Russian-led defense bloc CSTO. Through the shared OTS membership, Baku's has been using OTS to garner support of these

Central Asian states in other regional platforms, such as the CSTO. Armenia tried during the 2016 escalation to leverage its CSTO membership against Azerbaijan, but to no avail as the CSTO opted for neutrality (Guliyev and Gawrich 2021). It looks as if Baku's strategy of using overlapping membership might have worked as the CSTO's response in the case of skirmishes on the border with Armenia following the war in 2020 was equally muted. At the outset of the Second Karabakh War, the secretary general of the OTS (then called Turkic Council) issued a statement, which, referring to the UN Security Council resolutions of 1993, demanded "an immediate, unconditional and full withdrawal of the armed forces of Armenia from all occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Turkic Council 2020). The CSTO's non-interference prompted criticism of the CSTO's inaction and Yerevan's refusal to host CSTO military drills planned to be held in Armenia in 2023 (Avetisyan 2023).

To sum up, integration with Georgia and Armenia into some sort of a united South Caucasus community was off the table for Azerbaijani elites due to the unresolved conflict with Armenia alongside Armenia's and Georgia's pursuit of alternative security alignments. These divergent paths taken by each of the three states pulled them even further away from the idea of building a collective security governance structure within the Caucasus. Instead, bolstered by its oil wealth, Azerbaijan pursued a relatively "independent foreign policy" (Broers 2018), balancing between Russian and Western interests but without committing itself to any geopolitical bloc. Turkey has been a key strategic partner allowing Baku to keep Moscow at bay. Furthermore, Azerbaijan leveraged Turkic solidarity through the OTS and Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's overlapping membership of the CSTO to counteract and neutralize Armenia's ability to mobilize a potential CSTO collective military intervention in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict when a second war erupted in 2020.

### **Explaining Economic Regionalism Discourse**

A combination of geography and international linkages are key in shaping Azerbaijan's foreign policy discourse on regional economic integration. The Caspian region is landlocked, which makes construction of cross-border pipelines indispensable in delivering hydrocarbon riches of Caspian littoral states to energy-consuming markets in Europe and China. Partnership with Western oil majors and securing access to European markets has been a strategic choice for official Baku. Coupled with oil wealth, this "landlocked predicament" placed transit and transportation as central issues in Azerbaijan's foreign policy agenda (Idan and Shaffer 2011). In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan needed to attract foreign capital and technical expertise to develop its oil and gas sector (Bayulgen 2010, 87–89). Moreover, a new pipeline infrastructure had to be built to export Azerbaijani oil and gas to Western markets. At the same time, the Caspian Basin gained strategic importance in US foreign policy throughout the 1990s (Bashirov 2023). US-based oil companies were among the biggest investors in the Caspian region, and the US provided diplomatic support for the construction of a strategically important infrastructure project – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline – as part of its East-West Energy Corridor Initiative (Orazgaliyev 2017). This has conditioned a specific mode of linkages of Azerbaijan's oil-dependent economy to the international economic system, tying up the country's oil and gas sector to Western-bound global oil supply chains. Western export pipelines also created Western-vested interest in Azerbaijan's oil and gas sector. This Western-oriented policy was also partly a strategy of decoupling from Russia and gaining national economic independence. Linkage to the West was seen as a strategic priority for Azerbaijan – or to put it in the words of the former foreign minister Elmar Mammadyarov (2007, 41), as "a function of our national sovereignty."

There has been a rather weak demand for economic integration within the South Caucasus as most of the trade is outward-oriented. Top export partners for Azerbaijan are Italy and Turkey; Russia is a key export market for Armenia, and for Georgia, key trading partners are China, Russia, and Turkey. Armenia has been a member of the EAEU, and there are no transactions between

Azerbaijan and Armenia. All three countries vary on levels of economic liberalization, from the highest level in Georgia to moderate for Armenia and the state-dominated economic model of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas, necessitating a specific linkage of the ruling elites to the international oil value chain. The region also suffers due to a lack of a leading economic powerhouse in the neighborhood, similar to the role played by Japan or China for East Asia with strong regional spillover effects. The only form of partially regionalist cooperation is the dense network of energy pipeline projects and railway links connecting Azerbaijan with Georgia and Turkey. In sum, economic preconditions to foster economic interactions in the South Caucasus have been insufficiently advanced, which resulted in a weak demand for greater within-region integration. This indicates a limited applicability of the neo-functional theory to the South Caucasus. Instead, specific economic patterns led to the emergence of alternative regionalist initiatives – notably, the new Silk Road and its reincarnation in the form suited to the comparative advantage of Azerbaijan (namely, its abundant oil and gas reserves). This discourse was first championed by the EU, which, in the early 1990s, initiated a plan to renovate transport links to improve connection to Central Asia and onward to China known as the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus Asia (TRACECA). In recent years, it received a second impetus after China launched its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

As noted above, Azerbaijani leaders' key regionalist discourse has been the notion of the Caspian Region in which Azerbaijan is envisioned to play the dual role of a key supplier and an important transit for Central Asian oil and gas and goods (Guliyev and Akhrarkhodjaeva 2009; Idan and Shaffer 2011). Mostly, these are oil and gas infrastructure projects to ship Azerbaijani petroleum resources to Western markets. Notably, while keeping a membership seat in the CIS, Azerbaijan has kept distance from Russian economic integrationist initiatives, such as the Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Baku pursued this policy without alienating Russia completely. Thus, as a way of “appeasing Moscow” (Bayulgen 2010, 93), Russia's Lukoil was allowed to get a stake in the major oil contract – called the “contract of the century,” signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan and a consortium of Western oil majors – and some of Azerbaijani “early oil” was transported through the Northern Route through the Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. The involvement of Western oil majors also played a domestic political function: Western FDI's were seen by the Azerbaijani policy-makers as a tool of garnering Western support for territorial integrity and sovereignty of their state (Bayramov 2019, 171).

In this geospatial narrative, Azerbaijan is viewed as a key node in Europe-Asia transportation corridor (*Avropa-Asiya nəqliyyat dəhlizi*). In Azerbaijani public discourse, Azerbaijan's former president Heydar Aliyev is portrayed as a mastermind behind the revival of the historic Silk Road by being one of the ardent proponents of the TRACECA regional connectivity initiative (Qurbanov 2019), the project launched by the EU in 1993. A milestone conference under the title “TRACECA – Rehabilitation of the Historical Silk Route” was held in September 1998 in Baku. Alongside the construction of a transit corridor integrating the TRACECA transport corridor with the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN), this EU-funded project meant to serve as “a region-building initiative” helping countries along the route to overcome barriers in technical areas (Ziyadov 2007; Abilov and Hajiyev 2022).

As the former presidential aide Ali Hasanov (2015) noted,

from a geopolitical and geoeconomic point of view, Azerbaijan is considered the gateway to Eurasia [*Avrasiyanın giriş qapısı*] and is a pivotal state of the East-West transport and communication corridors [*Şərq-Qərb nəqliyyat-kommunikasiya dəhlizlərinin mərkəzi dövləti*]. Azerbaijan is also the driving force behind the Trans-Caucasian transport corridor (TRACECA) and the strategically important Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

In 2006, a major energy infrastructure project – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline – linking the Caspian Sea with the Mediterranean Sea was launched. The pipeline transports Caspian – mostly

Azerbaijani – oil from the Caspian region to Western markets. The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline was built in 2007. Then came the implementation of the \$40 billion Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) – Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey being main players – to transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz-2 field. The project has four parts: full-scale development of “Shah Deniz” gas condensate field, the expansion of the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCPX) (a gas pipeline connecting Azerbaijan with Georgia), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP project), and its final leg, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project. The Southern Gas Corridor was inaugurated in May 2018 in Baku, and the TANAP pipeline was inaugurated in Eskişehir in June the same year. The supply of Azerbaijani natural gas to the European market through TAP began in December 2020 (Ministry of Energy of Azerbaijan 2023). It has the capacity to ship up to 16 bcm [billion cubic meters] of gas annually, with 6 bcm earmarked for Turkey and 10 bcm to European markets. In July 2022, a memorandum was signed between the European Commission and Azerbaijan to double imports of Azerbaijani natural gas to the EU to 20 bcm per year by 2027, but additional investments are needed to reach this target.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BKT) rail link, with its inauguration in October 2017, is believed to be another milestone in realization of this Silk Road vision. Symbolically, the BTK railway was inaugurated as the “Iron Silk Road” linked to China’s One Belt One Road initiative (TRT 2017).

One has to note the state-centrist, top-down, and elite-driven nature of these initiatives, whereas especially in the oil and gas sector and transportation of energy resources, the state acts as a leading actor – sometimes in partnership with oil multinationals such as BP. Energy initiatives – as state-led projects – have limited scope and spillover effects on regional integration, as would have been the case if these projects were driven by private firms or corporate interests, broadly understood. Oil and gas exports do not require dense networks of intra-regional cooperation to materialize. Infrastructure projects are key here – and they were seen as a major element of Baku’s approach to regionalism. In this respect, the regional economic initiatives are tailored to serve the interests of political-economic elites and their multinational partners, rather than the interests of nascent domestic private companies.

Here, the crucial components of Azerbaijan’s self-identified regional role is to serve as a supplier and transit of Caspian energy to EU markets (Bayramov 2022). This is aligned with EU’s search for alternatives to Russian oil and gas amid the war in Ukraine. The launch of the Southern Gas Corridor was a milestone in laying out a supply line of Azerbaijani gas to Europe. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum on Strategic Partnership to increase supplies of gas from Azerbaijan to the bloc.

In addition to the energy sector, Azerbaijan portends to play a key role as a transportation hub – through the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route (TITR), or Middle Corridor (Kenderdine and Bucsky 2021), which is seen as one of the belts of the BRI announced in 2013 and formalized in 2015. This project is believed to be an area of overlapping EU and Chinese interests and the South Caucasus by being the shortest rail route from China to Europe, and promised to benefit Georgia and Azerbaijan which position themselves as strategically located transit hubs (Rzayev and Huseynov 2018).

Baku endorsed the BRI from the very beginning. President Aliyev paid a visit to China in December 2015 where he signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Promotion of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” between the government of Azerbaijan and China (Bogdan and Najdov 2020). The two governments later agreed on additional investment projects with a total amount of \$821 million. Despite this, Chinese investment into the Azerbaijani economy remained relatively low, accounting for about \$800 million (as of 2018). Azerbaijan is considered to be a part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, chiefly the Trans-Caucasus Transit Corridor (TCTC) linking China with Europe. This corridor is seen as an alternative to the northern Russian route (Bogdan and Najdov 2020).

Despite opportunities and expectations that “China will likely expand cooperation through investing in logistics and infrastructure projects” (Shahbazov 2018), all infrastructure projects along

this Middle Corridor were funded by the Azerbaijani government, including the new Baku port in Alat and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. China has so far invested little into this project (Bogdan and Najdov 2020). As Mardell (2019) noted, “the BKT is often associated with the BRI in official statements, but neither Chinese finance nor Chinese companies were involved. Beijing has also been largely absent from port developments around the Caspian Sea. The new ports of Baku and Kuryk are keen to stress their relevance to the New Silk Road, but China played no role in their development.”

The ongoing war in Ukraine certainly gave an impetus for the Middle Corridor as logistic companies began to divert railway transit of goods from the Northern route to the Middle Corridor as an alternative to the Trans-Siberian corridors passing through Russia (Mammadov 2022). Azerbaijan Railways (ADY) reported that 3.9 million tons of cargo were transported along this route, representing an increase of over half a million tons compared to 2021 (Railfreight 2023).

Nevertheless, there are challenges to the implementation of this promising Middle Corridor concept. First, China has not shown interest in investing in this project whose implementation requires huge capital investment. There are two reasons why China might have been reluctant to more proactively support this transportation route. First, Beijing may fear that a Trans-Caspian corridor, when put in place, would serve the interests of Turkey in reviving a Turkic-speaking world right on the eastern border with China populated by Turkic-speaking Uyghurs. “If Turkey can have direct access to its fellow Turkic states in Central Asia, it could promote the shortest, safest route connecting China and Europe” (Tavsan 2021). The Turkish and Azerbaijani overlapping discourses on the Turkic World may actually go against Beijing’s interests in this region and discourage much-needed Chinese investment. Second, China’s reluctance may also be explained by Beijing’s unwillingness to step on what Moscow believes to be its “own turf,” considering this region to fall within of the sphere of Russian “exclusive interests.” Finally, a realization of a Trans-Caspian pipeline has for decades been blocked by Russia and Iran (Blank 2013, 33). While the Caspian Convention was signed, there are still ways the littoral states can veto projects by raising environmental arguments (Garibov 2019).

While major infrastructure projects have been implemented, economic integration has progressed rather slowly. The vision of this integration initiative, as envisaged by Baku, to be successful requires massive capital investment, which can only come from large economies such as China. However, China has so far invested very little, and most of the regional connectivity projects were funded by Azerbaijan (Bogdan and Najdov 2020). The unlocking of the Trans-Caspian Corridor’s potential also requires neutralizing potential spoilers such as Russia and Iran. The full realization of the Middle Corridor also necessitates more effective policy coordination, and implementation of policies to harmonize border management and customs procedures among the transit countries. Another possible risk is that instead of regional integration, the Middle Corridor could fuel competition between Azerbaijan and Georgia in a bid to become a best regional hub.

## Conclusion

By examining the country’s historic developments and scrutinizing its foreign policies and presidential discourses on regional cooperation and integration over the past three decades, the present study has identified both hard power concerns with territorial sovereignty and leaders’ ideas to be relevant for understanding the construction of regionalism in this country case. The recurrent cycles of war with Armenia first saw Azerbaijan being defeated and losing parts of its internationally recognized territory to Armenia and later its reversal – namely, Azerbaijan’s success on the battlefield in 2020 and recovery of its territories. For decades, the sense of handicapped sovereignty and Russia’s role in seeking to undermine Azerbaijan’s independent statehood – notably, through its efforts to freeze the Karabakh conflict – dominated the domestic public discourse, shaping political leaders’ discourses on regionalism. This led the political leadership to formulate an

alternative regional order whose boundaries were not geographically confined to the South Caucasus. This alternative vision sought to fit Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus into an alternative geo-spatial space. In this view, the South Caucasus is construed to be merely a node on a long transit corridor stretching from Europe to Asia via the Caspian Sea. The revival of the centuries-old Silk Road served similar purposes. Having its self-identity firmly rooted in the sense of shared Turkic historic roots and special – or indeed fraternal – relations with Turkey, Azerbaijani elites also co-produced and promoted a parallel discourse focused on shared cultural identity of Turkic-speaking nations, which in some ways complemented the economic regionalist discourse of the Silk Road.

This regional identity construction and correspondent foreign policy are often taken to be mutually constitutive. In this way, Azerbaijan eschewed membership in either Russian or Western-led regional security organizations or alliances. Russian regional integration initiatives were perceived by national elites as Moscow's aspirations to reestablish Russian hegemonic dominance in this region. In countervailing Russia's assertive foreign policy in the "near abroad" under Putin, Baku opted out of Russia-dominated regional groupings such as the CSTO. Instead, Azerbaijan cultivated closer ties with Turkey and Turkic-speaking countries through the OTS, and at certain points by its participation in the Western-leaning GUAM (Goble 2022).

The Chinese BRI project breathed the fresh air to Azerbaijan's aspiration to revive the Silk Road, which is now focused on the transportation and transit of goods and the development of the Middle Corridor. However, implementation of this ambitious vision is fraught with challenges, such as Chinese reluctance to invest in a Trans-Caspian project that will provide Turkey with direct access to Central Asian Turkic-speaking states, which could spur nationalist sentiments among China's large Turkic-speaking Uyghur population. Without Chinese investment this integrationist initiative can be slow as its realization requires a large injection of foreign capital. On the other hand, rather than promoting economic integration, the Middle Corridor risks stirring a "hub competition" between Georgia and Azerbaijan.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature on comparative regionalism by highlighting discursive construction of regionalism embedded in country-specific contextual variables. It makes the case for an interaction of both ideational and structural-material factors in the processes of regionalist order formation. While previous research on regionalism in the South Caucasus has emphasized the fractured, fragmented or failed nature of regionalism (de Waal 2012; German 2012), the underlying causes for regional fragmentation have been looked at from solely realist or security perspectives. This study highlights the ways in which political leaders may redefine their country's regional identity in order to evade or escape the narrowly established geo-spatial boundaries. Indeed, as the Azerbaijani case demonstrates, political leaders have attempted to construct an alternative vision of a regional space that reflects the country's specific security challenges and geographic and political-economic constraints. Regionalism, thus, cannot be understood without taking into account the structural conditions and economic interests that shape the preferences and ideas of state leaders.

In all three states in the South Caucasus, state elites' ideas and understandings have diverged on their views of an "imagined region" to which their respective country belongs. The vision of a common regional space encompassing all three states was discarded in favor of alternative regionalist models. A lack of interest in creating or perhaps reviving the South Caucasus identity in each of the three republics has resulted in further fragmentation of the "Transcaucasian regionalism." Consequently, as in the famous fable by Ivan Krylov "Swan, Pike and Crawfish," each animal pulled the cart in different directions – and "the cart's still there."

On a broader level, this article contributes to the literature on regionalism in the Global South by providing a nuanced account of the construction of regionalist frames in a landlocked country. Region-construction in Azerbaijan showcases how political leaders have mobilized historical memory and cultural affinity to craft an alternative regionalist order in response to specific

domestic, regional, and geopolitical conditions such as national sovereignty issues, the mode of incorporation into the global energy order, and Russian hegemonic pressures.

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## Notes

- 1 Following the convention, regions are understood as social constructions created by political elites that have both material and ideational elements (Katzenstein 2000; Ravenhill 2009).
- 2 German (2012, 139) notes in this regard: “Notwithstanding geographic proximity, the three states share few cultural, economic or political affinities, practising different religions, following different political paths and experiencing very different levels of economic development.”
- 3 For more on this conflict, see contributions in Yavuz and Gunter (2022).

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