

# BAKU DIALOGUES

## POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 9 No. 1 Fall 2025

### **The Strategic Logic of TRIPP**

**Trump's 'Business Diplomacy' in the Caucasus**

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

### **Contrasting Visions for the Silk Road Region**

**The 3Bs Framework (Brussels-Baku-Beijing)**

Nargiz Azizova

**Will the Chinese Dragon Outfly the American Eagle?**

Chingiz Mammadov

**Azerbaijan's Active Non-Alignment**

Farid Shukurlu and Joseph Shumunov

### **Energy Geoeconomics Trailblazers**

**The Evolution of the EU's Regulatory Role in Energy**

Samuel Furfari

**Azerbaijan's All-of-the-Above Energy Strategy**

Artem Krashakov

**Baku's Green Finance Policy**

Fuzuli Aliyev

[bakudialogues.ada.edu.az](http://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az)



ISSN Print: 2709-1848  
ISSN Online: 2709-1856

# The 3Bs Framework: Brussels-Baku-Beijing

## Power Poles in the Silk Road Region

*Nargiz Azizova*

In today's world, connectivity and global supply chains have evolved into a distinct language of power, one that reflects how states project influence and pursue geopolitical ambitions through geoeconomic competition. Unlike traditional hard power (built on the ability to coerce through the credible threat of military projection and the use of force), or the normative soft power approach (based on the cross-border promotion of specific "values" and the belief that these are attractive), connectivity projects influence through economic integration, interdependence, and infrastructural development.

Traditionally serving as a facilitator of trade and mobility,

connectivity now functions as an instrument of strategic influence for sovereign states that know what they're doing through transforming economic assets such as energy pipelines, transport corridors, and digital networks into tools of power. By shaping routes, standards, and access, connectivity affects how dependencies, cooperation, and alignments get structured as well as influences decisionmaking outcomes and geopolitical preferences.

In other words, connectivity operates both as a geoeconomic practice and a geopolitical narrative. Thus, transport routes and supply chains have evolved from their initial function into power-determining elements of the

architecture of strategic cooperation in the Silk Road region. This architecture will likely take on institutional form one day. This

transformation is evident in the rise of connectivity initiatives across the Silk Road region—from China's Belt and Road Initiative to the EU's Global Gateway and Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor. Each of these projects reflects a distinct vision and a distinct set of power-projection tools (i.e., connectivity versus coercion).

Together, these are forming what I call the 3Bs framework—Brussels, Baku, and Beijing, representing connectivity as the new language of power in the Silk Road region and interpreting distinct models of power and order for each "B."

Here, the first B, Brussels, represents regulatory power, normative influence, and multilateral diplomacy. Its flagship foreign connectivity initiative, Global Gateway, stands for standards and rules, using market access to shape regional norms.

Positioned in the heart of the core Silk Road region and at the geographical crossroads of its

*Connectivity operates both as a geoeconomic practice and a geopolitical narrative.*

main east-west and north-south connectivity routes, the second B is Baku. A "keystone state" possessive of "brokerage power," it is the region's "network broker"—terms that will be explained below.

The third B, Beijing, stands for geoeconomic power and represents economic growth for the world at large, rooted in large-scale infrastructure investments. Unprecedented and breathtaking in scope, ambition, and financial commitment, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a surge of interdependence across more than half the globe, centered increasingly on the states that belong to this part of the world.

The 3Bs framework, therefore, conceptualizes the Silk Road region as a space where competing conceptions of world order meet through their respective embodiments of three poles of power language. Together, these three power types define interaction with the 3Bs. These dynamic shapes the broader Silk Road region through corridors and alliances, creating new opportunities for "keystone states" as well as for smaller and medium-sized states seeking greater autonomy.

*Nargiz Azizova is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University. She focuses on the geopolitics and foreign relations of the Silk Road region and the EU. She teaches courses on EU external relations at ADA University. The views expressed in this essay are her own.*

How, then, does the interaction among the 3Bs reshape power dynamics in the Silk Road region and strengthen the quest of its three “keystone states” (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) for strategic autonomy?

Before this question can be examined, I wish to clarify a few terminological matters.

First, this paper uses the term “Silk Road region” in line with the *Baku Dialogues* Editorial Statement, which considers it to be a “single geopolitical theater with multiple stages. We define it loosely as comprising that part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond, north across the Caspian towards the Great Steppe, east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan, and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.” In terms of the political map, this is the region that encompasses the three South Caucasus and five Central Asian states. Other near-synonymous terms in use include “Central (or “Core”) Eurasia,” “Greater Central Asia,” “Inner Asia,” “Middle Asia,” “Caspian Basin,” “Greater Caspian region,” and “Caspian Sea Region.”

Second, the term “keystone states” refers to a concept whose principal author is Nikola K. Gvosdev, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College, and which was subsequently taken up by various authors, including Damjan Krnjević Mišković. It refers to countries that have the wherewithal to acquire and maintain autonomous or (ideally) independent agency, are seen by others as “being (or having the potential to become) trusted interlocutors, reliable intermediaries, and go-betweens or conciliators between major powers” (Krnjević), and possess what Amitai Etzioni called “integrative power.”

The foregoing, Gvosdev argues, can be derived from “a number of sources: the existence of important transit and communications lines that are vital for trade traversing its territory; the position of the state to promote regional integration and collective security among its neighbors; its role as a point of passage between different blocs, or its position overlapping the spheres of influence of several different major actors, thus serving as a mediator between them; or its willingness to take up the role as a guaranteed barrier securing neighbors from attack.” In other words, “a keystone state connects and protects its neighbors.” Moreover, keystone states “give coherence to a regional

order. Such countries are important because they are located at the seams of the global system and serve as critical mediators between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.” Lastly, a keystone state’s integrative power is supplemented by the fact that “an effective keystone state can [also] serve as a pressure-release valve in the international system, particularly as the transition to conditions of nonpolarity continues, by acting as a buffer and reducing the potential for conflict between major power centers.”

The concept of “keystone states” is preferred to the term “middle powers,” whose “real-world application” and “analytical utility” have been delegitimized convincingly by scholars Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr in a lengthy 2023 academic article in *International Theory*. Their basic conclusion is that “the middle power concept does not capture anything substantive about the behaviour of mid-sized states. It should therefore not be used by scholars any further.”

To sum up, “keystone states” have limited hard power but pursue active diplomacy, coalition-building, and multilateral engagement, and are increasingly able to shape

regional politics. To repeat: the Silk Road region’s three keystone states are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Third, the terms “network broker” and “brokerage power” were defined by Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler, and Alexander H. Montgomery in a 2009 *International Organization* article. Azerbaijan’s “brokerage power” enables Baku to capitalize on its status as a keystone state by transforming its geographical facticity into a strategic strength to mediate flows, diversify partnerships, enhance regional influence, and link the interests of other stakeholders through its pragmatic multi-vector foreign policy and the adoption of a posture of “strategic transactionalism,” as Krnjević has called it. Brokerage power refers to actors (Baku within the 3Bs framework) occupying a brokerage position (in the Silk Road region) and exercising power by mediating interactions between others (along the Middle Corridor).

In the context of 3Bs framework, these terms stand for how the keystone states of the Silk Road region build on their brokerage power derived from geographic location and connectivity role to enhance their strategic autonomy and bring coherence to the region’s

geopolitical and geoeconomic endeavors, with an emphasis on heightened strategic cooperation that falls short of EU-style integration (which limits an independent state's sovereignty and the unique prerogatives that go along with it).

### *Brussels: Normative Power*

Amid global transport disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine, the deterioration in Russia-West relations, and the continued growth in prominence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the European Union introduced its flagship connectivity strategy, Global Gateway, in 2021.

Global Gateway was designed to enhance the EU's visibility and influence in global connectivity projects. Senior EU officials recognized that, despite being the world's largest development assistance donor and a major investor in developing economies, EU-led connectivity efforts had not achieved the geopolitical and geoeconomic recognition of BRI. Global Gateway was explicitly positioned as the EU's answer to BRI and today is being positioned as its strategic counterpart, particularly in the Silk Road region, where both frameworks compete for

influence through infrastructure and connectivity investments.

The initiative seeks to strengthen the EU's strategic presence by moving away from its traditional, grant-based technical assistance and capacity-building model toward investment mobilization and blended financing that combines public guarantees, loans, and private capital. Initially, the strategy prioritized digital and green connectivity, transport, health, education, and research. Following the events of February 2022, energy access and critical raw materials gained prominence. Global Gateway has since become more relevant amid intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, supply-chain reconfiguration, and the search for resilient connectivity routes traversing the Silk Road region.

The October 2025 Global Gateway Forum was intended to showcase its relevance, timelines, and development. The event strengthened Global Gateway's positions and expansion (the initiative has already overshot its €300 billion target by 2027; the new aim is €400 billion by 2027) as a tool of the EU's geopolitical presence and what it calls its "external action." The event also drew a pathway to resilience and presented itself as a solution

in a "volatile, complex, and unpredictable world where the challenges are obvious: economic uncertainty; trade weaponization and disruption; and geopolitical rivalry"—to quote EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas. The foregoing signals the EU's intention to transform Global Gateway from a financial instrument into a geopolitical platform.

The Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda, launched at the 2025 Global Gateway Forum, aims to establish a secure and resilient connectivity framework between the EU and Central Asia via Türkiye and the South Caucasus. This showcases Brussels' enhanced focus on the Silk Road region as a strategic space for the EU's energy, trade, and digital diversification priorities, which it claims will reduce its dependence (through diversification of options) on less friendly actors whilst extending its strategic influence beyond its eastern frontiers.

The Silk Road region has become one of the world's key geographies for implementing this new EU approach, institutionalizing its turn toward geoeconomic instruments. This shift can be illustrated by several new initiatives in which investment-led projects and the blended finance logic of Global

Gateway have replaced traditional grant-based models. Examples include an EIB Global €200 million loan to Kazakhstan's Development Bank for sustainable transport and energy infrastructure, and an EIB-EU €60 million digital connectivity package supporting broadband access in rural areas of Central Asia.

In Uzbekistan, EU support still heavily relies on grant funding (the EU allocated €119 million of grant funding to support its partnership with Uzbekistan), but is starting to combine this with the application of Global Gateway financial instruments, as in the case of the memorandum of understanding on critical-raw-materials cooperation that the two sides signed in 2024. Most recently, the EU and Uzbekistan signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, marking a significant milestone in bilateral ties and deepening regional cooperation. This document establishes a new legal basis for reinforcing political dialogue and for deepening cooperation in trade and investment, sustainable development and connectivity, critical raw materials, and so on.

South Caucasus-based activity examples under Global Gateway include signing a €43 million loan with AzInTelecom to build two

state-of-the-art data centers and accelerate e-government service in Azerbaijan and the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding to prepare the Baku Metro upgrade, which couples technical assistance with future investment in low-carbon urban mobility. Together, these moves illustrate the EU's shift from a grants-based model to a repayable loan and investment one. The foregoing exemplifies Global Gateway's blended financing model and reflects the EU's shift from traditional aid to investment-based (geoeconomic) engagement in the Silk Road region.

In this sense, Global Gateway operationalizes the EU's evolving foreign policy logic: using investments rather than donations to increase its influence, resilience, and strategic autonomy. Yet, the EU also seeks to stay true to its self-understanding as a normative power. Its engagement in the Silk Road region (and everywhere else) remains grounded in governance standards, sustainability, and values-based cooperation.

Normative conditionality of financing within the Global Gateway

framework is provided through standard EU mechanisms. These include democratic values/high standards, good governance/transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, security-focused, and catalyzing private investment. Other documents add specificity. The aforementioned Uzbekistan-EU 2024 Strategic Partnership on

Critical Raw Materials, for example, commits both parties to sustainable, resilient, and diversified value chains, linking investment facilitation to environmental, governance, and research and innovation cooperation—an example of pragmatic geopolitical engagement tied to a value-based partnership.

Thus, within the 3Bs framework, Brussels stands for regulatory and normative influence, seeking to establish itself in the Silk Road region through rules and quality benchmarks. At the same time, the EU's approach exposes an obvious limitation to its self-positioning: reliance on a value-driven agenda while aspiring to act as a geopolitical power.

Global Gateway illustrates this dissonance, revealing gaps between

---

*The EU's approach exposes an obvious limitation to its self-positioning: reliance on a value-driven agenda while aspiring to act as a geopolitical power.*

---

means and ends as well as inconsistencies between the EU's geopolitical ambitions and its self-image as a civilian and regulatory actor shaping an increasingly defunct "rules-based" liberal international order. This tension between norm-driven cooperation and strategic pragmatism defines the inherent limits of the EU's capacity to project influence effectively. It tests its ability to reconcile the idea of a "geopolitical Europe" with its contemporary values.

### *Beijing: Geoeconomic Power*

Since the late 1970s, China's long-term foreign policy strategy has been inspired by a famous guideline commonly attributed to Deng Xiaoping: "Hide your strength, bide your time," which later came to be understood as a geoeconomic-first approach to engagement abroad—the key to its "peaceful rise" at home, supplanted in time by its "harmonious diplomacy" doctrine that would bring about the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The country's current leader, Xi Jinping, has spoken of the "Chinese Dream," a formulation that now has constitutional standing and, along the way, has acquired a military dimension.

All in all, China now sees itself as being in the business of restoring its traditional historical role of the principal power within the region (and beyond). What we can call China's "Make China Great Again" policy is articulated, inter alia, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which serves as a tool for expanding Beijing's geopolitical influence globally using geoeconomic instruments, including foreign direct investments, acquisitions, and infrastructure financing, all of which have, in turn, enhanced trade flows between China and scores of participating countries. Not only does trade with them account for more than half of China's total imports and exports, but China is now the top trading partner of around two-thirds of UN member states.

The Silk Road region occupies a particularly important place in BRI's land routes, as it constitutes the first non-Chinese territory traversed by Chinese overland cargo heading in a westerly direction to foreign markets. Similarly, BRI holds significant importance for the Silk Road region states, particularly the Central Asian ones, influencing their national development policies and strategic alliances. Kazakhstan has long synchronized its national priorities with Beijing's connectivity vision, as the initiative's infrastructure investments



have been aligned with the government's domestic development program, *Nurly Zhol* ("Bright Path"). The China-Kazakhstan strategic partnership has since expanded and today covers cooperation in nuclear and conventional energy, aerospace, digitalization, customs regulation, agriculture, e-commerce, tourism, intellectual property, medicine, media, science, and interregional development.

A similar multidimensional engagement can be observed in Uzbekistan, where a comprehensive strategic partnership with China has deepened across trade, infrastructure, and energy domains. Energy cooperation has intensified, with Uzbek natural gas exports to China increasing and a strategic reorientation toward green infrastructure and technological modernization. At the same time, Tashkent's support for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway represents a structural shift in national transport planning toward China-West connectivity.

In the South Caucasus, Beijing has deepened its presence through both infrastructure development and strategic partnership agreements with all three countries. Participation in BRI aligns with Azerbaijan's goal of promoting economic growth, strengthening its

position as a strategic logistics hub linking Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea, and its national development strategies.

Azerbaijani-Chinese cooperation initially deepened through logistical and transport projects such as the Baku International Sea Trade Port, the Alat Free Economic Zone, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, and has since grown into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2025. Today, the two strategic partners actively enhance collaboration across key industrial sectors, including oil and gas, renewable energy, chemicals, metallurgy, mining, textiles, automotive manufacturing, construction materials, pharmaceuticals, and food production. A developing area of cooperation is renewable energy, where China has invested in the construction of floating solar and offshore wind power plants, as well as a battery energy storage system.

Similarly, Georgia signed a strategic partnership agreement with Beijing in 2023 as part of an enhanced effort to attract Chinese investment into the country's transport and logistics sectors and industrial zones, all of which align with Georgia's connectivity agenda. Armenia also signed a strategic partnership agreement in mid-2025.

These developments illustrate how BRI's expansion into the Silk Road region, which initially focused on physical infrastructure, has evolved into a mechanism shaping national development agendas, policy frameworks, long-term economic orientations, and regional integration priorities. In effect, it has begun to embed the states of the core Silk Road region within the wider geoeconomic architecture of Chinese connectivity. This should not be much of a surprise, since what has evolved into the Belt and Road Initiative was, after all, launched by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in September 2013—that is to say, only months after fully consolidating his position as China's paramount leader.

China's engagement with partners is free of political conditionality, the cornerstone of which is its oft-repeated commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of UN member states. This approach, which is in line with Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, distinguishes Beijing's engagement with the core states of the Silk Road region from that of the European Union, whose Global Gateway and other traditional external action tools are based on conditionality and normative variations, as well as "values." China, in contrast, appeals to partner governments on pragmatic

grounds. Yet, the Chinese non-conditionality narrative is opposed by political and economic asymmetry between China and its BRI partners, as massive capital flows and project financing enable Beijing to impact partner states' development priorities and strategic alliances in ways advantageous to its own interests. For example, 40 percent of Kyrgyzstan's external debt is owed to Chinese creditors. In that and other BRI partner countries, debt obligations have become a persistent source of criticism of BRI.

This represents a cautionary tale for Azerbaijan, which appears to be seeking to maintain a more reserved approach to Chinese investment in strategic industries such as energy (e.g., oil and gas) and critical infrastructure (e.g., railways and ports). Some Western analysts, however, continue to suggest that recipient countries lack a viable option to refuse BRI projects and investments, making them beholden to Chinese strategic interests and preferences.

In this sense, BRI exemplifies the Beijing dimension of the 3Bs framework: a geoeconomic mode of power projection that rejects political conditionality yet achieves influence through asymmetric economic integration, reconfiguring the Silk Road region's power architecture through infrastructure networks

and financial interdependence rather than normative conditionality and political coercion. At the same time, China's strategic influence and its ambition to serve as a regional order-setter are checked by other major powers, such as Russia, the EU, and the United States.

### *Baku: Connectivity as a Tool of Sovereign Agency*

Since February 2022, the connectivity landscape of the Silk Road region has changed drastically as a result of the EU's decision to join the U.S.-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia in response to the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine. One of the consequences of this choice by the West was the disruption of the Northern Corridor and, in turn, increased attention to the strategic potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, and the Middle Corridor, which connects China to Europe via multimodal transport routes through Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea and into the South Caucasus. In less than a decade, the Middle Corridor has evolved from an infrastructure development project into both a geoeconomic

instrument and a political power resource for regional states (understood as a whole).

Civilizations and powers intersected along the Silk Road region for two millennia, ebbing and flowing in response to geopolitical and geoeconomic developments whose causes and consequences came about, for the most part, beyond the region itself. Today, it is again seen by relevant external players as an important bridge (and transport hub) within East-West connectivity with great potential to serve as a connectivity corridor alongside more established maritime and land routes. This potential is derived from both its geographical location and—this is a new variable—the rising capabilities of the core states of the Silk Road region, as well as the strategies and policies they have adopted. This last is reflected in the fact that the countries belonging to the region, led by its three keystone states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), are becoming leading factors in shaping, developing, investing in, and managing this corridor.

Efforts to develop an alternative overland transport network connecting East and West through the south date back to 1993, when the European Union launched the Transport

Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) program with the involvement of eight post-Soviet states (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Although the route has been operational for many years now, it has not been economically competitive due to various bottlenecks.

While TRACECA laid institutional and infrastructural foundations championed by an outside power (i.e., the EU), its successor—the Middle Corridor—represents a regionally owned evolution of that vision. Considered a practical alternative to existing northern (via Western-sanctioned Russia) and southern (via UN- and Western-sanctioned Iran) corridors at its emergence in 2013, the Middle Corridor has since 2022 become a geopolitically strategic route.

At its core, the Middle Corridor comprises three interconnected multimodal transport routes, each combining road and rail transport routes with maritime links across the Caspian and Black Seas. The route from China passes most directly through Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan, where it branches into two parts: one through Georgia and the other through Georgia and Türkiye, onward to the European

continent. Its multimodality and need to cross many borders made the Middle Corridor a suboptimal choice for decades, as numerous actors and standards required to be coordinated along the transport chain.

In response to the growing need to put the vision into action, the TITR International Association was established, bringing together state railways and port operators from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Ukraine. This multinational consortium aims to improve the long-term potential and sustainability of the Middle Corridor's development by harmonizing tariffs, customs, and logistics procedures and expanding transit capacity. Its goal is to transform the corridor into an integrated, competitive, and viable transport system.

Achieving this requires close collaboration, driven by political will toward regional integration, infrastructure investment, and supranational coordination. Its establishment, following the launch of the Middle Corridor, marks a major shift from reliance on external programs (like TRACECA) toward regional ownership, investment, and leadership. This reflects both the increasing strategic autonomy of the core Silk Road region states

and their determination to become active players in global connectivity systems.

Various other sectoral agreements complement the foregoing. For instance, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan have harmonized their customs procedures. The results speak for themselves. In his November 2025 address at the Seventh Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia in Tashkent, President Ilham Aliyev put it this way: “Over the past three years, cargo transportation along the Middle Corridor through Azerbaijan has increased by 90 percent. Transit time along the corridor has significantly reduced. The Alat International Port, which is expected to reach a throughput capacity of 25 million tons per year in the coming years, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, nine international airports, the region's largest cargo airline, and other factors have transformed Azerbaijan into an international transport hub.”

There is one final point that could turn out to be truly game-changing: the distinction between viewing the Middle Corridor

(and Azerbaijan's indispensable role within it) as a transport corridor versus an economic corridor. Should it become more of the latter, then it could truly serve as the backbone of the Silk Road region's renaissance.

Perhaps this distinction is what China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, had in mind when he indicated, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, that “China is willing to synergize high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with the

---

*The Middle Corridor is not just a transport route or an infrastructure project, but represents, rather, a convergence of normative and geoeconomic powers.*

---

European Union's Global Gateway strategy, so as to empower each other and empower the entire world.” Although the EU has yet to respond directly, Brussels has reaffirmed its interest and sup-

port for the Middle Corridor. It acknowledges it as a flagship route in its newly launched Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda.

In short, there is growing evidence that the Middle Corridor is not just a transport route or an infrastructure project, but represents, rather, a convergence of normative and geoeconomic powers. This convergence does not generate confrontation;

instead, within it, differing approaches to connectivity and power projection coexist in a complementary manner. This constructive approach is at the core of a well-managed synthesis of the Middle Corridor: it transforms potential competition among the 3Bs poles of power into an opportunity to build a more resilient, mutually reinforcing framework for regional cooperation and development.

Within the 3Bs framework, Baku (and other core states of the Silk Road region) embodies this convergence. Framed as a brokerage power, Baku is mediating, setting the agenda, and linking competing frameworks and formats (the EU's Global Gateway and China's Belt and Road Initiative), while maintaining neutrality and enhancing regional autonomy and bargaining leverage. This inevitably leads to broader sovereignty of the Silk Road region's keystone states, making connectivity a vital and existential interest in their foreign policy and supporting a new vision of the Silk Road region as a strategically important transportation and economic hub.

## Strategic Independence

The transformative dynamics of the current global situation, characterized by increased instability and polarization, compel the Silk Road region's countries to seek a strategic balance amid great-power competition. These powers are increasingly aiming to influence their foreign policies to support competing geopolitical interests.

Located at the nexus of major connectivity frameworks, the Silk Road region, led by its three keystone states, aims to leverage deepening cooperation into greater sovereignty, diversified alliances, increased bargaining power, and strategic independence.

The 3Bs framework has been applied to illustrate the Silk Road region's transformation from a peripheral space, long shaped by external powers, into a keystone region—a strategic space in terms of not only geoeconomics and infrastructure, but also geopolitical cooperation. In other words, connectivity is becoming both a new tool and a new source of power thanks to, as Aliyev stated in January 2025, the leveraging of the Silk Road region's geographic location through “consistent effort and strategic planning.”<sup>BD</sup>