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Azerbaijani Exceptionalism:

Baku's Strategic Independence Amid
Russian Policy Against GUAM

Joseph Shumunov

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<u>Key Abbreviations</u>

AA   Association Agreement

BoP   Balance of Power

EAEU   Eurasian Economic Union

EU   European Union

CIS   Commonwealth of Independent States

CSTO   Collective Security Treaty Organization

GU(A)M   Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova

GUAM   Organization for Democracy and Economic Development

GUUAM   Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (including Uzbekistan)

NAM   Non-Aligned Movement

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PfP   Partnership for Peace

Introduction

The antagonistic relationship between the proverbial "East" and "West" is gradually re-entering the discourse of International Relations scholars amid what many see as the resurgence of great power competition. This dichotomy between two spheres of influence—from the colonial Occident versus Orient, to the modern Pax Americana versus the so-called "Axis of Upheaval"—shall survive forever in international politics so long as great powers seek to "maximize [their] share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states" (Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Nowhere is this East-West rivalry more evident than in Eurasia[1], where for nearly three centuries Western powers have sought to encroach on the sphere of influence of the Kremlin, especially when the Russian bear appeared weakest. The nations inhabiting the vast expanses surrounding the Black and Caspian Seas—Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—have borne the brunt of this geopolitical struggle, often finding themselves pawns in Russian and Western alliance-making. Their unique territories, histories, and cultures have forced them to choose sides, navigating a precarious balance of survival.

Realist scholars have long studied this struggle, primarily through the lens of great powers, focusing on how one state—through force or diplomacy—manages to bring smaller nations under its sphere of influence, thereby outmaneuvering its rival. This narrow perspective overlooks the agency and experiences of the nations caught in the crossfire. For these states, the East-West rivalry is not merely a theoretical game of power but an existential fight for survival. While Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova have struggled to deter Russian domination, Azerbaijan has emerged as an exception to this trend. Following its victory in the 2020 Karabakh War, Azerbaijan successfully removed Russian forces from its territory, maintained strong diplomatic ties with the Kremlin, and simultaneously cultivated a robust partnership with NATO—all without provoking significant Russian reprisal. This strategic independence sets Azerbaijan apart and challenges conventional narratives about the post-Soviet space.

What unites the four GUAM nations (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) is their shared aspiration to integrate with the West, as exemplified by their formation of the quadrilateral partnership in 1997, and then their formal Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) in 2005. However, three of these states have faced persistent challenges in their efforts to escape the Kremlin's grip:

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[1] The term *Eurasia* is complex and often contentious, gaining prominence through the intellectual and political movement of "Eurasianism." This movement, which emerged during the Soviet era with influential figures like linguist Nikolay Trubetzkoy and historian Lev Gumilyov, and continues with contemporary thinkers such as Aleksandr Dugin, asserts that Russia and the former Soviet sphere constitute a unique civilization distinct from both Europe and Asia. This ideology has been used to justify Russian dominance in the region. For sole purposes of expediency and practicality, this study will use the term Eurasia to refer specifically to Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, regions which the GUAM states inhabit.

Georgia endures dual Russian occupations while seeking EU membership; Ukraine defends against a full-scale Russian invasion while aspiring to join NATO; and Moldova struggles with the Russian-backed breakaway region of Transnistria. These ongoing conflicts underscore the adage, "the Russians never leave." Yet Azerbaijan has defied this trend, demonstrating an ability to foster ties with the Euro-Atlantic[2] bloc while avoiding aggression from Russia, or the Eurasian bloc[3] more broadly. This monograph explores Azerbaijan's exceptionalism and answers the following question: Why has Azerbaijan maintained its strategic independence while other GUAM-member states have faced Russian incursions in response to their attempts at Euro-Atlantic integration? Ultimately, the study argues that Azerbaijan has achieved strategic independence through a foreign policy of 'pragmatic non-alignment.' This approach has enabled three key factors that reinforce its independence: positive regime relations with major powers, economic independence, and security guarantees. Each of these factors contributes directly to sustaining Azerbaijan's strategic independence.

Aims and Contributions

This study addresses two often-overlooked areas of International Relations: small-state alliance theory and the geopolitics of Eurasia. While Realist scholarship has predominantly focused on the strategies of great powers, this research emphasizes the agency of small states. Through an analysis of Azerbaijan and its fellow GUAM members, this study highlights the pragmatic strategies small states employ to survive amidst competing great powers. Such research is vital in an international system dominated by few great powers but populated by numerous small states. By examining the successes and struggles of these nations, the study offers valuable insights for small states navigating similar geopolitical challenges.

Additionally, this research sheds light on regional conflicts in Eurasia—such as those in Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Karabakh—that have been overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By contextualizing these conflicts within the broader East-West rivalry, the study develops more pragmatic models for postwar resolution and small-state survival in contested regions.

Hypotheses and Methodologies

This study examines three hypotheses that purport to account for Azerbaijan's strategic independence, each corresponding to one of the three levels of analysis in International Relations theory.

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[2] Euro-Atlantic bloc is used to refer to the great powers and multilateral organizations that form the institutional "West" i.e., the United States, European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

[3] Eurasian Bloc is used to refer to the great powers and multilateral organizations that form the institutional "East" i.e., the Russian Federation, Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

1. Systemic Level: Pragmatic alliances and/or defense guarantees from other regional powers have deterred potential Russian incursions, minimizing the risk of escalation.
2. State Level: Economic and financial independence from both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs has allowed Azerbaijan to remain unbound and unobliged to either alliance.
3. Individual Level: Public positions and/or interpersonal relationships with the Russian leadership have enabled Azerbaijan to maintain a balancing act despite its Western ties.

To test these hypotheses, the study will compare Azerbaijan's strategies to those of the other GUAM member states, examining whether such factors are present in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Evidence will be drawn from primary sources, such as interviews with Azerbaijani and regional experts, as well as secondary sources including academic literature and policy reports. The study acknowledges the limitations of relying on publicly available information, particularly in the opaque decision-making environments of authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, this comparative approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping Azerbaijan's exceptionalism.

Roadmap and Limitations

The study begins with a review of alliance theory literature, focusing on the strategies small states employ to survive between two competing great powers. This theoretical framework will define key terms and establish the foundation for analyzing GUAM and Azerbaijan. The subsequent historical overview addresses:
1. Key characteristics of the GUAM member states outlining the historical relations between their respective nations and the West;
2. NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's 'near abroad' doctrine;
3. The evolution and devolution of GUAM, highlighting its role and relevance in the conflict between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian bloc;
4. The conflicts that emerge in Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova during this period;
5. The degree to which each hypothesis explains Azerbaijan's strategic independence;

The core analysis focuses on Azerbaijan, comparing its strategies to those of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The findings aim to identify the necessary conditions that have enabled Azerbaijan to strengthen its ties with the West while avoiding Russian aggression. The analysis of these hypotheses is limited by its reliance on the publicly available understanding of the Russian foreign policy apparatus, since it does not account for hidden decision-makers or discussions made behind closed doors, which remain inaccessible to outside observers. Moreover, numerous variables influence the Kremlin's decisions to take actions in countries like Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Ultimately, this study offers a framework for understanding small-state

resilience within a world dominated by great power competition, focusing on a region of critical significance and a nation exemplifying exceptional pragmatism.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In the words of International Relations scholar Robert Keohane, when a small power like Azerbaijan is wedged between two great powers[4], it is faced with the "Lilliputians' Dilemma," whereby its relative weakness forces it to choose between an alliance with one of the great powers (Keohane 1969, 291). The dilemma is exacerbated by a "military disparity" between great and small powers, such that the proliferation of Lilliputian nation-states since the start of the 20th century provided new opportunities for power-seeking giants like the US and Soviet Union to accumulate smaller states in their spheres of influence (Ibid.).

However, for the larger part of two centuries, IR literature rarely explored this dilemma, and in fact rejected the very premise that small states in Europe face unique challenges. Realist thinkers are often cited as the source of this bias, not only because thinkers like Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau founded contemporary alliance theories and terminologies, but broadly because they assert that "great power action is directly applicable to small states, or that small states are not important as a discrete object of study due to their lack of influence in international politics" (Bailes and Thorhallson 2016, 2). Fundamentally, alliance theory is written from the point of view of great powers, projecting the assumption of an equal behavioral field onto an asymmetric relationship. Given the growing influence of small powers and an ostensible return to a multipolar international order, a revisionist group of thinkers and analysts has chosen to fill in the gaps by creating theoretical frameworks that help explain small powers' behaviors vis-a-vis alliances, and emphasizing the "importance of small states' diplomatic capacity, and how it compares with the diplomatic capabilities of large states" (Ibid., 4).

In doing so, a debate appears between two groups trying to address the Lilliputians' Dilemma: a "standard" literature of Realist theorists that extends the universality of power-seeking behavior to smaller actors, and an "alternative" literature of theorists concerned with the unique strategies and behaviors of small states.

Continuing with the Lilliputian narrative, one key question is as follows: When a small state[5] is placed between two competing great powers, what *can* it do? The focus here is on what small powers *can* do rather than *should* do, because this question is not a normative one, but rather a framework for exploring the concerns, calculus, and behavior of small states offered by the standard and alternative literatures respectively. Therefore, this chapter will review the literature of both groups. First, it presents a short section on standard theories that—because of the already extensive body of knowledge—is used to introduce key ideas and terminology. Subsequently, it sets forth a

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[4] Great power, as defined by Keohane: "a state whose leaders consider that it can, alone, exercise a large, perhaps decisive, impact on the international system" (Keohane 1969, 296).
[5] Small power, as defined by Keohane: "a state whose leaders consider that [it] can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system" (Keohane 1969, 296).

longer section on alternative theories that explores the internal debate among small states-focused thinkers and their underrepresented approaches to alliance theory. Reviewing both bodies of literature offers a broad overview before these theories are later applied to Azerbaijan's strategies in the context of NATO and Russia policy. In other words, this section offers a theoretical basis that could shed light on how Azerbaijan's actions reflect its "Lilliputian" character.

Standard Alliance Theory

The essence of the standard body of alliance theory asserts that "all states are 'functionally undifferentiated units' that face the same task in the international system," i.e., a state's survival (Waltz 1979, 79). Survival in an anarchic system forces states to enter into alliances in order to: 1) "supplement each other's capability" and in turn address their respective weaknesses; or 2) create a "means of reducing the impact of an antagonistic power" by posing a greater threat (Liska 1962, 26). However, alliance-making has far deeper implications than merely augmenting power or ensuring a state's survival. Standard theorists debate the likelihood that an alliance affects a state's power through the systemic, state, and individual levels of analysis. These theories are not clearly delineated and often build off of each other, but are distinguished in order to clearly explain the multilevel effects of an alliance on a state's survival.

Balance-Based Models

The first and foremost theory is focused on the external implications of alliances, specifically how alliance-making can deter foreign threats. This is exemplified by Kenneth Waltz's Balance-of-Power (BoP) framework, which claims that the international system—under an assumed anarchy in which states are the primary actors—provides stability and security by maintaining an equilibrium of power among major states (Waltz 1979, 88). Such states can reach this equilibrium by increasing their own relative power position in two ways: through internal efforts, by increasing economic capability and military might; or through external efforts, by strengthening, enlarging, and realigning their alliances and/or weakening and shrinking others' alliances (Ibid., 118). Such external efforts typically involve three or more powers, wherein a group of two or more powers creates an alliance to challenge the dominant power. The new alliance causes a disturbance in the BoP but with this disequilibrium comes a redistributive effect that ultimately leads to a new equilibrium (Ibid., 118). Waltz also describes "bandwagoning," which refers to joining the dominant power, as an alternative strategy to that of balancing (Ibid., 126). Bandwagoning is normally practiced by less powerful states who seek to join or rally behind the stronger party to avoid conflict and gain favor because they perceive it as the winning side (Ibid., 124). Both balancing and bandwagoning have served as the cornerstone strategies for alliance-making, and thus a foundation of alliance theories thereof.

Stephen Walt reconfigures Waltz's BoP theory in his own Balance-of-Threat model, which posits that states "seek allies not to balance power but, rather, to balance threats" (Walt 1987, 263). A threat reflects not just a state's aggregate capabilities including economic resources or military might, but additional risks such as geographic location, posturing, and intentions, that incentivize all parties to de-escalate tensions. Walt specifies that balancing threats is the strategy of choice for dominant powers, whereas bandwagoning is more often used by weaker powers because it "requires trust and increases the resources available to the threatening power" (Ibid., 126-7).

Randall Schweller builds upon Waltz and Walt by arguing that the great stabilizer of international politics is in fact a Balance-of-Interest, where the "most important determinant of alignment[6] is the compatibility of systemic political goals, not the imbalances of power or threat" (Schweller 1994, 98). In this case, a state that benefits from the status quo will likely join the alliance that maintains it; meanwhile, a state that seeks to maximize its interests will likely join the growing revisionist alliance (Ibid., 93). Schweller also regards the "promise for rewards rather than the threat of punishment" as what motivates lesser powers to bandwagon with the revisionist great power (Ibid.). Schweller elucidates a clear difference between balancing and bandwagoning as secular strategies: balancing is used within an international order in "stasis" because the lesser power has little to gain but much to lose; while bandwagoning is used during a system in "flux" because they lesser power has little to lose but could gain something—or a lot (Ibid.).

In the same way a state uses alliances to survive external threats, an alliance can help maintain a state's domestic stability. Deborah Larson argues that when states choose to bandwagon, it is important to analyze their decision to ally with great powers by looking at their internal affairs (Larson 1991, 101). Her so-called "institutionalist approach" posits that a regime chooses to bandwagon with a great power, not primarily to maintain their territorial integrity and increase power, but to "retain authority" internally (Ibid., 103). A great power offers a weaker state three guarantees: 1) an end to "internal subversion" from external actors by extinguishing domestic opposition and rivalry; 2) economic assistance that lessens domestic discontent for their regime; and 3) a boost in domestic approval whereby association with the great power's successes boosts the small state's reputation (Ibid., 102). Therefore, alliance-making should also be examined at the state-level of analysis, and simultaneously, be regarded as another mechanism through which regimes can "prolong their position in power" (Piccoli 1999).

<u>Standard Theories at the Individual Level</u>

Furthermore, the Realist scorn of the "black box"—a state's internal characteristics, regime type, and bureaucracy—motivated few theorists to explore

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[6] The terms *alliance* and *alignment* refer to different concepts in International Relations. For the purposes of this review, they will be used interchangeably as they refer to close informal or formal obligations and associations between states.

individual-level effects on alliance formation. Whereas the state is the primary *actor* in the international system, the individual leader is the primary *executor* of the foreign policy of the state. By overlooking a leader's decision-making in the bolstering of alliances, root causes remain hidden under the surface level. This becomes especially problematic for analyzing the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes, insofar as their demarches are often determined by their leader alone. Alternatively, authoritarian foreign policies may reflect influences from a few key individuals and bureaucratic organizations that also need to be taken into account.

Herbert Kelman recognizes that leaders' socio-psychological motivations and behaviors can affect foreign policy decisions. Without having defined these variables clearly, he claims they are effectual in three areas of diplomacy: foreign policy decision-making, public opinion in the foreign policy process, and personal interaction across national boundaries (Kelman 1970, 4). He contends that personal, intergovernmental interactions—although not a determining factor for the "probability of war or peace between two nations"—can shape long-run agreements on trade and alliances (Ibid.). Namely, Kelman identifies four political effects from these personal leader-level interactions: 1) enhancing openness, trust, and a willingness to communicate; 2) reducing tensions that in turn create an "atmosphere" open to negotiations and political settlements; 3) advancing an "internationalist ideology" that promotes international political institutions and readies their states for global crises; and 4) creating cross-national leadership networks around professional, national, and personal interests that counteract "tendencies toward polarization along national lines" (Ibid., 15-16). These effects depend on the "special character" of the nation-states involved. Among authoritarian states, where securing one's power and national sovereignty is paramount, meetings may have these effects or even have the opposite impact e.g., sowing mutual mistrust or undermining each others' authority.

Perhaps the state's "black box" is not convincingly important, but the "dark matter" surrounding leader-to-leader interactions is vis-a-vis alliance-making. Minseon Ku and Jennifer Mitzen explore this so-called "dark matter" in the context of leader-level meetings and summits. States, which are amorphous "structures of political authority," are functionally anthropomorphized into the leaders that represent them, who have "intentional action and humanlike feelings and relations, including trust"—a sort of "state personhood" (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 800). Their *modus operandi* is a "phenomenological transformation," a mental leap from observable experiences and practices to the state as a unified, person-like entity. In doing so, they argue that statesmens' *interpersonal trust* at the individual level will ultimately rise to the systemic level as *system trust* (Ibid.). The trust produced between the leaders is not "reducible to individual psychology of relationships," but rather, constitutes a "feeling of confidence" in their shared belief in the institutional order or alliance (Ibid., 810).

The art of *summitry* i.e., the "staged performance of interstate rapport" during bilateral or multilateral summits, exemplifies state personhood in that statesmens'

charisma, confidence, and intimate communication, or lack thereof, modifies trust between states (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 817). Summits are thus a multilevel theater that can enhance or undermine *system trust*: through 1) "production of estrangement," whereby individual heads of state become members of a much larger "international society of states" which serves to blur their state identity; 2) "repertoires, forms of action and self-presentation" such as diplomatic procedures, ceremonies, and pageantry that build mutual assurances; and 3) "communicative virtuosity," which is the personal chemistry and expressions between leaders that finalize the interpersonal trust (Ibid., 820).

Ku and Mitzen thus analyze US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's successive meetings in 1985 as exemplifying the forging of state ties through individual means. The Geneva Summit demonstrates this state-as-person theory via three accounts: 1) the boathouse meeting, where Reagan's private walk to a boathouse with Gorbachev turned a candid discussion of mutual distrust into a bonding moment thereby thawing US-Soviet relations; 2) the joint communiqué, which was presented by the two leaders to mark a significant movement toward nuclear disarmament and partnership, but more importantly fostered by constant in/formal meetings and a dinner together that deeply humanized each other; and 3) the public response, which showed that the two leaders' outward embrace and handshake reassured their respective citizens and reinforced future talks (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 821-823). The theories of "state personhood" and summitry can directly apply to alliance-making. Trust built through interpersonal interactions can extend to trust requisite for a military alliance, while the theatrics of leader-level summits can reinforce shared goals, interests, and identity-formation of alliances. For authoritarian states, built-up leader-to-leader trust is especially important with respect to their view of leaders as manifestations of the state apparatus.

Alternative Alliance Theory

Despite the varying, multilevel explanations that standard alliance theory provides, it does not grapple with the far more dynamic and delicate strategies required for small states. Likewise, alternative alliance theory asserts three basic prescriptions: 1) proper alliance analysis requires more nuanced approaches to smaller states; 2) small states do not behave like great powers; and 3) alliance behavior is not one-size-fits-all. Instead of dividing this next section into systemic, state, and individual-level analyses, it is more effective to focus on the systemic-level as it explains the condition of small states that are situated between great powers.

Robert Keohane's article, *Lilliputians' Dilemma*s, illustrates this discussion as it reviews early thinkers' (i.e., Robert Rothenstein, David Vital, and George Liska) writings on small states in international politics. He begins with Rothenstein, who defines a small state as one that "cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities" and thus relies on aid from other states or institutions, to the extent that it recognizes its

lack of self-reliance (Keohane 1969, 293). He narrows this predicament into three unique aspects: a necessity for outside help, a narrow margin of safety, and a recognition of "inalterable" weakness (Ibid.). With this in mind, Rothenstein argues that small states "ought to prefer mixed, multilateral alliances" because they garner more security and political influence in the international system when in these groups (Ibid., 301). When such alliances are not available, small states should create alliances with other small states as a consortium pursuing political goals. With regard to bilateral alliances with great powers, they are deemed unequal and meant for those small states facing immediate military threats, not political challenges—a sort of last resort (Ibid., 301-303). Vital emphasizes that a small state, "only when acting alone rather than in concert with other, greater states," is incapable of pursuing foreign policy since it is "thrown back on its own resources" (Ibid., 298). The small state cannot therefore pursue "neutrality or non-alignment" as it exposes small states to great power security policy. Creating an alliance with a great power would bring conditions for exerting "small-power influence" through two effective weapons, "maneuver and exploitation of position" (Ibid., 298-300). Liska argues that because small states are "unlikely to transcend the limitations inherent in small-state alliances," they ought to combine these alliances with a great power. (Ibid., 302). He contends that the best international order for this patronage alliance is multipolar, where small states can maximize autonomy by "combining competition with concert" (Ibid., 300). For Keohane and thinkers mentioned, the Lilliputians must realize that although "they may be able to do little together, they can do virtually nothing separately" (Ibid., 296).

Whether or not small states can exert power through independent or allied means, three options have been made clear: alignment, inter-alignment, and non-alignment. Thus, this section will explore these options for securing the safety of small states, from the perspective of small states, at the systemic level.

<u>Alignment Theories</u>

The Lilliputian Dilemma requires the existence of equally Brobdingnagian powers and this commonly results in great powers exerting influence on the small states through an alliance. Whereas standard alliance theorists see this as great powers exerting influence *upon* small states, alternative alliance theorists see this as small powers surviving *under* great powers—a subtle switch in perspective. This is no better explained than by Bailes and Thorhallson's Alliance "Shelter" Theory, wherein alliances between small states and great powers are "neither one of complete subordination or annexation... nor one of formal equality and autonomy" (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2016, 6). Furthermore, small states can employ "shelter" through a series of strategies they adopt to "alleviate the inherent vulnerabilities of being small," such as joining "great power or regional or international organizations," thereby yielding effective control of its foreign policy in specific areas (Bailes and Thorhallson 2016, 2).

Bailes and Thorhallson provide six basic assumptions to their theory: the theory 1) rejects the neorealist assumption that all states are "fundamentally undifferentiated" units with similar weaknesses; 2) acknowledges domestic incentives behind small states' alignment with great powers; 3) argues that "relative gains" are not a convincing way of measuring small states and relations with other states; 4) asserts that small states require political, economic, and societal "shelter" from great powers, not just a security umbrella; 5) emphasizes the intangible social and cultural relationships of small states with the rest of the world, which are otherwise neglected by standardists; and 6) recognizes that the relationship between small states and great powers does not differ in "capabilities," but rather, involves the great power deeply influencing and transforming the small state, often at the expense of the small state's domestic society (Bailes and Thorhallson 2016, 5-6). Thus, alliance shelter theory is not a theory of action but of analysis: a lens through which small states are not seen as helpless, but rather as capable of exerting power beyond their borders.

Thorhallson and Bailes test their assumptions through comparative case studies, having chosen three small states (i.e., Cuba, Armenia, and Singapore) that are under the shadow of a great power and lie within geographically strategic and politically asymmetric areas (Bailes and Thorhallson 2016, 8). The case studies confirm some of the points made. Generally, the studies recognized that alternative frameworks of alliance-making complement standard ones, and offer new potential subsets. Second, elements such as ethnicity, demographics, and regime type/ideology were found to extremely influence small states' foreign policy decisions. By that same token, *local* threats rather than gross geostrategic calculations can determine whether a small state creates an alliance with a nearby or distant great power. Third, small states benefit "disproportionately" from strategic alliances with great powers, which undercuts the standard framework that these alliances are a form of patronage or servitude. Fourth, the case studies demonstrate the importance of global/regional institutions for small states. Institutional membership proffers political, economic, and cultural shelter to small states, beyond standard means of balancing. Fifth, due to small states' limited diplomatic resources, they must be flexible in their means, and as demonstrated by the case studies, this can take the form of many extra-governmental means like diaspora manipulation (Armenia), revolutionary subversion (Cuba), or donations to foreign institutions (Singapore). Last, the bifurcated framework of standard alliance theory between balancing vs. bandwagoning is limiting, and requires more multi-dimensional theories that analyze the deep complexities (Ibid., 13-14).

Inter-aligned Theories

At this point in this discussion, alignment can be understood as a means of "sheltering" small states within the international system, and at the fundamental level, is the rationale of small state alliance-making. So, rather than extending this discussion on standard alignment any further, it is best to analyze truly uniquely alternative,

small-state strategies i.e., inter-alignment and non-alignment. Regarding inter-alignment, this term is not used in alliance theory literature, nor an established term in IR. For the purposes of this discussion, "inter-alignment" is a term used to group all alignment strategies that operate between, among, or in the midst of two or more great powers. As for non-alignment, this is defined as the lack of alliance or affiliation, especially with great powers in the international system. This definition, however, becomes inconsistent as the "Non-Aligned Movement" (NAM) continues to be a forum predicated on advancing the interests of less-developed countries (LDCs) since the Cold War.

If an alliance with one great power does not benefit a small state, it may choose to maneuver itself between two great powers to acquire a position of maximum strategic importance. Peggy James and Kunihiko Imai regard this as "situational power," accrued not by traditional means of "absolute power," but instead by a state's "unique position" (James and Imai 1996, 1104). In fact, small LDCs, although regarded as insignificant in foreign policy, actually "benefit from being caught in the middle between two major actors." In the Lilliputian Dilemma, small states and LDCs alike can "play the major powers off each other" by receiving "incentives from both powers and allying with neither" (Ibid., 1105). James and Imai test this by analyzing small, developing states' relations with the USSR and US during the Cold War, particularly the way their "situational," geostrategic location benefits the great powers and how they court the small states with "trade, arms transfers, and economic aid" (Ibid., 1106). The lure of "foreign economic and/or military" supply and the "threat of canceling that assistance" is meant to build
consensus i.e., alignment or agreement among LDCs and the great power partners regarding international policies or actions. If consensus is not met, the small state will choose to align with the opposing great power (Ibid.).

Their case studies conclude that the traditional BoP model is valid for analyzing great power-small state alliances, but also requires an understanding of *competition* i.e., the power dynamics and inequalities among major powers, as perceived by small LDCs (James and Imai 1996, 1110). As small states gain situational power, they gain confidence and negotiating power which better positions themselves to take advantage of such competition. Therefore, the far wiser choice for small states is to accept aid and alter allegiances, so as to constantly take advantage of the great power courtship. Unlike traditional theories that work in "absolute" terms, James and Imai contribute to the study of small state alliance theory by highlighting the increased role of variables like competition and consensus, in addition to the value of power (Ibid., 1126-1128).

However, it is far too simple to claim that small states are positioned in "situations" of power, and instead, the situation they are under ought to be defined and formalized. Yu-Shuan Wu attempts to define the "strategic roles" of small states between "two competing great powers" through critical case analyses of Taiwan and Ukraine. Wu explores the factors that "explain why a specific role is chosen" by a small

state and how that role changes over time vis-a-vis the shifting position of great powers (Wu 2017, 198). Wu presents another option for small states within the Lilliputian Dilemma—hedging. Unlike bandwagoning or balancing completely, hedging is a mixture of engagement with, and balancing against two great powers: engagement with a great power creates a "friendly relationship" that allows the small state to "transform the values and institutions of the target country" and stop the great power from posing a threat; while balancing serves to provide a "security guarantee through either military buildup or an alliance" with another great power (Ibid., 198). Wu illustrates the practice of hedging using one small state (L) and the two great powers (G1 and G2). If L views G1 as the bigger threat, L balances against G1 by allying with and relying on G2, thereby managing both balancing and bandwagoning strategies. If L views G2 as the bigger threat, it does the opposite. Another option for L is to hedge, meaning it can keep some economic ties with G1 while building up its defense, and if G1 is viewed as more powerful or dangerous, L might try hedging against it while aligning militarily with G2 for extra support (Ibid., 200).

Wu further defines the relationship between two great powers and a small state in "strategic triangle theory," including four specific triangle types: 1) ménage à trois, where all three players are "friends;" 2) marriage, where two of the players are "partners" that go against the "outcast;" 3) romantic triangle, where two "wings" court a "pivot;" and 4) unit veto, where all players are "foes" to one another. In summation, there are four possible scenarios (i.e., ménage á trois, marriage, romantic triangle, and unit veto) and within them, six roles (i.e., friend, partner, outcast, wing, pivot, and foe). Wu concludes that the most optimal role for the small state is the "pivot," because it can maintain friendly relations with both great powers while they are "at odds with each other," preventing any joint-collaboration between the G1 and G2 against L (Ibid., 200). As a pivot, L must adopt a hedging strategy by allying with G1 for security purposes but maintaining some flexibility to attract the interest of G2, thereby ensuring that L is not entirely committal (Ibid., 201). The theory of hedging reiterated that small states should not pursue full alignment, and instead should take a multi-vector, inter-aligned approach, where alignment according to military, economic, or political interests are distinct, dynamic, and shift according to the roles of the two great powers.

Non-Alignment Theories

In light of the proliferation of small states in the 20th century, it is possible that, due to their shared interests and strategic positioning, they no longer needed to seek full or inter-alignment. This resulted in the ideation of 'non-alignment' against the bloc-making of the Cold War, and the subsequent formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. Drawing upon the principles of the Bandung Conference of 1955, NAM did not have a very strong institutional structure, and instead was led by

middle powers[7] such as Yugoslavia, Indonesia, and India. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, both non-alignment as an non-alliance strategy and as an organization has lost its global significance and internal ideological consistency, and yet, not aligning with a great power remains a strategy that many small states pursue.

Muhammad Badiul Alam critically analyzes the concept of non-alignment, its principles, goals, and in the process, similar strategies like neutrality, and his self-titled "neutralism." First, neutrality is defined as "non-involvement in war" and thus the avoidance of participation in active, overt war such as between great powers. Neutrality can occur in two ways: voluntarily, by adopting "permanent neutrality" as an act of choice; or involuntarily, by imposing neutrality onto other countries as a result of multilateral agreements (Alam 1977, 169). Commitment to neutrality has proven to safeguard small states like Switzerland, which "irrespective of governmental changes," remained neutral even during wars between its neighboring great powers. Neutralism, in slight contrast, is the desire for "non-involvement in the cold war" or generally the desire to "remain aloof from bloc conflict." Neutralist states seek to not pick a side, and instead "reduce tensions between blocs with a view to maintaining peace or bringing about peace, and more particularly to prevent the outbreak of war." (Alam 1977, 169). Alam makes a clear distinction between neutrality and neutralism, describing the former as complete "isolationism" from war as it occurs, and the latter as intervening in bloc conflict to de-escalate tension and pursue any measures that can prevent the outbreak of war (Alam 1997, 169-170).

The third and more pertinent strategy is non-alignment, which Alam defines as "non-participation in military pacts with great powers." Like neutralism, it has two features: the refusal to take sides in bloc conflicts or *a priori* alliances, and the preservation and "furtherance of national interests" (Alam 1977, 170). Alam considers the non-aligned strategy as a "means to achieve the aims, and not an end in itself" of the small state's national interests, in other words, small states' concern for the "preservation of peace" and open relationships with all great powers ensures their ability to decide their own policy without external threat (Ibid., 172). Under the conditions of peace and mutual relations, small states would likely stop worrying about external threats and instead focus their energies on "banishing poverty and disease," and building their new societies (Ibid., 172). Moreover, Alam codifies these interests into five dynamic goals: 1) to defend national security while fighting against colonialism's ramifications, 2) to pursue the attainment of world peace, 3) to avoid international conflicts through peacebuilding via transnational institutions like the United Nations, 4) to help modernize LDCs in order to spread "political freedom and human welfare," and 5) to stop the spread of alignment to other countries (Ibid., 175). Rather than a

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[7] Middle power, as defined by Keohane: "a state whose leaders consider that [it] cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systematic impact in a small group or through an international institution" (Keohane 1969, 296).

single alliance-making strategy for small states, Alam clearly describes non-alignment as a comprehensive ideology, and perhaps a sort of small state alliance unto itself.

Houman Sadri continues this discussion by saying that non-alignment, as both a movement and strategy, can still be applicable to the "current world order and entails intrinsic and instrumental values in the post-Cold War period" (Sadri 1999, 114). According to Sadri, what was originally an East-West ideological conflict is now a world divided into North-South spheres, wherein small LDCs of the Global South "hope to achieve unity in confronting power blocs in order to gain political benefits for their economic goals" (Ibid., 117). Small states must therefore refrain from "joining any pact with other states and practice a policy of avoiding a formal commitment toward other states," yet realistically, members of the NAM have a commitment to each other (Ibid., 119). Sadri also argues that despite the end of the Cold War, clashes among great powers have grown significantly because of the "increasingly interdependent world" and the new "cultural/religious dimension of interactions" (Ibid., 130) This current international system characterized as ever-divided, and by multiple great power conflicts, thus provides "the nonalignment strategy with a window of opportunity" by balancing the interest of one power against another, or by trying to "maintain and expand mutually beneficial ties with states" (Ibid., 133). Sadri concludes that nonalignment will be "center stage" because small states' attempts at surviving and nurturing their respective regime, protecting their autonomy, and maintaining policy-making independence is far too impossible in a multipolar, interdependent world (Sadri 1999, 135). Although non-alignment is an achievable strategy in a bipolar world, a theoretically multipolar world can also contain small, non-aligned states, so long as they are in cooperation with one another.

Conclusion

Exploring the discourse of both traditional alliance theories and alternative perspectives focused on small states provides a foundation for understanding key strategies and terminology, setting the stage for the next chapters' discussion of Azerbaijani foreign policy strategy. Terms and broad strategies such as bandwagoning, balancing, BoP, and hedging will all be used to characterize the strategies employed by Azerbaijan and its GUAM counterparts, and therefore determine their success. Similarly, discussion on non-alignment as a strategy and a movement will be used when discussing Azerbaijan's leadership, and advocacy for the NAM.

Alternative alliance theory clearly shows the need to think outside the bandwagon versus balancing binary that is forced by traditional alliance theorists: small states cannot simply join, or be against one great power over the other, and instead should look to strategies such as sheltering, hedging, or creating new non-aligned institutions. Standard alliance theory is deficient in its recognition of factors that are pertinent to small states but not great powers, such as existential invasion or patron-client relationships. The Republic of Azerbaijan, as a state strategically located in the South

Caucasus, blessed with desirable natural/commercial resources, and shaped by its ambivalence toward the East and West, cannot simply be regarded as an ordinary unitary actor —and the same can be said of almost any other small state given their individually specific and unique considerations.

The following chapters will further illustrate how these small state-focused alliance strategies are more appropriate to analyzing Azerbaijan's foreign policy between NATO and Russia, specifically defining it as hedging. The next chapter will describe the history of GUAM through its development, disengagement, and divergence, and will highlight how the four member states' diverging paths are reflective of their own foreign policy strategies, as wedged between the NATO and Eurasian blocs.

Chapter 2: Histories of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Moldova

The formation of GUAM was neither abrupt nor casual. Instead, it reflects the distinct yet interconnected histories of its member states, rooted in shared experiences that span many phases of Russian imperialism. This shared history underscores their desire for autonomy from Russian domination and their broader aspiration of Westernization. This section examines the journeys taken by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova toward these objectives by exploring: (1) the Interwar Independence era (1917-1922), and (2) the Post-Soviet Independence era (1989-1992). These historical contexts establish a foundation for understanding NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's response through its "Near Abroad" campaign, with a focus on the doctrines underpinning these developments.

Beyond the twin goals of Westernization and independence, the member states also share common characteristics as nationalistic yet multi-ethnic societies located in geostrategically significant regions that have been periodically subject to Russian occupation. To highlight their unique stories, the following section offers a state-by-state analysis detailing: (1) the nations' general characteristics, and (2) successive iterations of statehood in the early and late twentieth century.

Characteristics and Independence of the GUAM States

What unites these four nations is their shared experience of nearly two centuries of Russian domination, first under the Russian Empire and later by its successor state, the Soviet Union. Unique among the Kremlin's former colonies, they declared full independence during the interwar period, seizing the opportunity after the February Revolution of 1917. Although their independence was short-lived, ending with their forced incorporation into the USSR between 1920 and 1922, they made significant strides in decolonization and self-determination, led by their Westernized intelligentsia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991, these nations once again declared

independence and have since remained sovereign, Western-oriented republics in the Eurasian region.

Georgia: "The Wolves Who Face West"

The historical and modern territory of Georgia is situated in the north-west ranges of the South Caucasus, along the Black Sea coast. Known as *Sakartevelo* (Land of Wolves) by its people, the area has long been home to several ethnic groups, including the Kartvelians—the indigenous population of the region—consisting of national groups like Georgians, Mingrelians, Svan, and Laz. The region also hosts long-standing communities of Azerbaijanis, Turks, and Armenians. These many ethnic groups now collectively identify as Georgians, united by a common history and ethno-linguistic nationalism. However, other national groups like Ossetians and Abkhazians have sought independence from Georgian rule, a topic that will be explored throughout the discussion of the destabilization of the Georgian state. Due to its strategic location along the Black Sea, the region has also been a site of great power competition, with the Russian Empire emerging as the victor. In 1828, after the *Treaty of Turkmenchay*, the Qajar Empire ceded its northern territory to the Russian Empire, marking the beginning of two centuries of control over the Caucasus.

Amidst the Russian Revolution, the Georgian National Council, the nation's legislative body—led by nationalists such as President Noe Ramishvili and Prime Minister Akaki Chkhenkeli—declared Georgia an independent republic on May 26, 1918. The Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG), primarily governed by the Georgian Menshevik party, was a social-democratic state, with a constitution considered on par with those of "contemporary advanced countries" and of "full democratic character" (Janelidze 2018, 168-171). The nation was forever transformed by the *Tergdaleulebi*, an intellectual movement led by Marxist Georgian exiles in Germany and Austria, who sought to cure "Georgia's poverty, its backwardness, and its physical isolation from Central and Western Europe" by aligning it more closely with the West. In this period, the DRG sought recognition from Western powers, with the German Empire being the first to officially recognize its independence and become the "guarantor of Georgia" by stationing troops in Tbilisi (former Tiflis) in response to the Ottoman invasion (Janelidze 2018, 180). However, by March 21, 1921, the DRG fell under complete Soviet occupation, forcing its nationalist leaders into permanent exile (Janelidze 2018, 189). Despite this, the Westernizing project could never be tarnished, as former DRG Prime Minister Noe Zhordania remarked, Georgia is "...indissolubly tied to the West, and no force can break this bond" (Jones, 2018).

Indeed, on April 9, 1991, Georgia restored its independence as the modern Republic of Georgia, following a decade of large-scale nationalist demonstrations demanding greater autonomy. On May 26, 1991—symbolically seventy-three years after the DRG's declaration of independence—the new independent state elected former Georgian SSR President Zviad Gamaskhurdia as its first head of state. Soon after,

Georgia's independence victory became a "tragedy" as the country was embroiled in a political crisis fueled by ethnic divisions and slow reforms to promote Western integration. (Demetriou 2002, 4).

Between 1991 to 1994, Georgia faced three major conflicts:

i. *The War in Ossetia (1991-1993)*: Ossetian separatists rebelled against Georgia's "abolition of the region's autonomous status," seeking to unify with their brethren in Russian-controlled North Ossetia. The conflict resulted in a ceasefire known as the "Sochi Agreement," which has since left South Ossetia as a *de facto* independent state.

ii. *The War in Abkhazia (1991-1993)*: A federal crackdown on Abkhazian nationalists escalated as they sought to assert control over the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. This led to a 1992 ceasefire, after which Abkhazia became a *de facto* independent state.

iii. *The Georgian Civil War (1991-1994)*: This internal conflict engulfed all of Georgian society ruled by the leadership vacuum caused by Gamskhurdia's regime, which "added to the troubles of an already beleaguered transition" (Demetriou 2002, 4).

These crises coincided with a coup d'état led by paramilitary groups under warlords and criminals such as Jaba Ioseliani. Between December 1991 and January 1992, these factions seized parliament and ousted President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, eventually installing Eduard Shevardnadze as the head of state once the presidency was reestablished in 1995 (Ibid.) The swift removal of the "old guard" fortunately gave Shevardnadze the mandate to commit to "democracy and a pro-Western foreign policy," ultimately leading to Georgia's accession into several multilateral organizations and its application to join NATO in 2002 (Sartania 2021).

Ukraine: "Toward an Independent Borderland"

The Ukrainian nation is, as its name suggests in Ukrainian, truly a "borderland"—a liminal space between Europe and Russia, and between independence and dependence. Modern Ukrainians are the descendants of the Kyivan Rus', an early East Slavic polity that inhabited Eastern Europe, and whose forebears have "continued to occupy approximately the same lands" for a millenia (Bachynski 1920). This vast territory, home to communities of ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Hungarians, and Crimean Tatars, holds immeasurable value due to its "belt of deep, black earth" ideal for agriculture (Ibid.) Additionally, Ukraine boasts the longest coastline on the Black Sea, including much of the Sea of Azov, making it a critical hub for maritime trade between Eurasia and the West. Therefore, after a series of partitions between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire absorbed the remainder of modern-day Ukraine by the 1790s (Düben 2020). Ukrainians subsequently became victims of Russification, a policy that persecuted "expressions of Ukrainian culture and made continuous attempts to suppress the Ukrainian language" (Ibid.).

This process formally concluded on November 20, 1917, when Ukraine was declared an independent state by the Central Rada, the provisional Ukrainian parliament. The newly established Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) was led by Marxist revolutionaries who, while aligning with the Bolshevist platform, rejected Russian rule due to the centuries of oppression. The UPR aimed to transform Ukraine, previously exploited as a former resource colony for Russian coal and wheat production, through the "cooperative movement," which promoted land reform, broad "democratic principles" of self-organization, and self-defence against exploitation of the workers (Starodubtsev 2024, 5). For that matter, historians argue that the Ukrainian identity is "not only a national identity but also a social identity," as Ukrainians were largely excluded from the ranks of 'landowners' or 'capitalists,' positions dominated by Russian overlords. Ukrainians were to Russians as the serfs were to the nobles (Starodubtsev 2024, 6). Except for pleas to the German Empire to defend Ukraine, the UPR focused solely on separating from Russia, without seeking full alignment with the West. Unfortunately, this was a lofty goal; the Ukrainian Revolution against the Red Army ended in defeat, with Ukraine's incorporation into the Soviet Union on December 30, 1920 (Starodubtsev 2024, 19).

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, Ukraine declared independence on August 24, 1991, marking the start of "some of the biggest transformations in [its] national identity" (Subtelny 2009, 60). A nation long denied the ability to define itself was suddenly granted the freedom to do so. However, Ukraine's post-Soviet elite, including its first president, Leonid Kravchuk, struggled to develop and implement cohesive policies due to a lack of "traditions and institutions of self-government, decision-making, and policy formulation" (Subtelny 2009, 597). Throughout the 1990s, Ukraine maintained a policy of neutrality, seeking partnerships with both the East and West. These borderlands gradually turned to the West, as economic relations with the EU fostered a cultural revival and a process of Europeanization.

Azerbaijan: "The Paris of the East"

The exception in this journey was Azerbaijan. Unlike the other three Black Sea states, Azerbaijan is located on the Caspian Sea and lies predominantly in Asia rather than Europe. Its name originates from the ancient Persian name "Land of Fire," a testament to the region's historical allure to fire-worshippers. Today, however, the country is primarily home to a Turkic majority, alongside ancient communities of Jews, Armenians, Talysh, and other Caucasian groups. Notably, it is the only Muslim-majority member of the GUAM states, shaping its self-perception within the European context as a close neighbor, yet still an "outsider" among predominantly Christian nations.

Like Georgia, Azerbaijan came under Russian control following the *Treaty of Turkmenchay*, which not only expanded the empire's foothold in West Asia but also secured dominance over the Caspian Sea—a resource that would later become one of the most valuable oil-producing regions for any iteration of the Russian state. Despite this

annexation, Azerbaijan retained a unique degree of autonomy under the Khanate system, where local lords governed alongside imperial administrators during certain periods of the Kremlin's rule.

After the 1870s, Baku became the epicenter of a booming oil industry, attracting European elites and migrants while fostering an indigenous class of Azerbaijani oil tycoons, such as Zeynalabdin Taghiyev. These tycoons sought to emulate their European counterparts, channeling their wealth into philanthropy and investment that modernized the region, thereby giving Baku the title "Paris of the East."

The Azerbaijanis broke with the status quo when, on May 28, 1918, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) established the "Muslim world's first parliamentary republic" (Reynolds 2019). Led mostly by the social-democratic *Müsavat* (Equality) Party, the ADR, under pro-Western leaders like the first President Mammad Amin Resulzadeh, enshrined three foundational principles into Azerbaijani society and politics—symbolized by the three colors of its flag:

1. *Turkism*: Emphasizing unity with other Turkic-speaking nations in Eurasia, in stark contrast to its former Slavic and Iranian rulers.
2. *Republicanism*: Championing civil rights and universal suffrage, making Azerbaijan the first Muslim-majority state to enfranchise women and grant proportional representation to ethnic minorities in its multi-party parliament.
3. *Secularism*: Establishing complete religious freedom and introducing secular reforms, particularly in education and women's roles, challenging the dominance of the Shia clerical elite (Ibid.)

The Azerbaijani nation "emerged as a new category of identity" (Ibid.) It was neither fully Eastern or Western, nor entirely Turkic, Caucasian, or Islamic. Aware of its novelty, ADR leaders displayed a "sense of prudence and realism uncommon among new state elites" in seeking patronage from great powers (Reynolds 11, 2019). To be sure, the second Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, Fatali Khan Khoyski, outlined the ADR's national security doctrine in parliament, emphasizing that Azerbaijan's "independence does not mean alienation from other nations" (Darabadi 2018, 17). He advocated for fostering a "close relationship with other states that formed in the territory of Russia, as well as with central Russia itself," diverging from former colonies that saw Russia as their main antagonist (Ibid.). Khoyski also prioritized territorial integrity through military strength and established a lasting alliance with the Ottoman Empire (later Türkiye), promoting "closer relations, eternal friendship and sincere neighborliness" (Ibid., 17-18).

Meanwhile, the first Foreign Minister, Alimardan Topchubashov, actively pursued Western recognition, including participation in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (Abutalibov and Mamulia 2018, 32). His efforts culminated in *de facto* recognition of the ADR by the Entente states on January 10, 1920, which led to the stationing of British troops in Baku to counter the Bolsheviks (Ibid.). However, these measures were

ultimately insufficient, as the Red Army invaded on April 28, 1920, resulting in Azerbaijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union.

The ADR's legacy has been deeply embedded in Azerbaijan diplomatic doctrine, as will be seen later on, with the following policies: open and non-discriminatory diplomatic relations, engagement with Russia, cooperation with the West, a strong Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance, and the prioritization of a robust military.

Azerbaijan's second independence was marked by bloodshed and revolution. It began with the events of Black January, from 19-20 January 1990, when Soviet troops brutally suppressed Azerbaijani demonstrations against President Gorbachev's failure at *perestroika*. These protests culminated in a million-man march, representing all ethnicities and communities of Azerbaijan, in front of the former Baku Soviet Palace (Cornell 2011, 60). Months of urban warfare ensued between the Red Army and local dissidents, ultimately forcing the Soviets to relinquish control. This paved the way for the Republic of Azerbaijan's formal declaration of independence on August 20, 1991.

While the former SSR President Ayaz Mutalibov remained in power until his ouster in May 1993, what distinguished Azerbaijan's rebirth from other, early post-Soviet states was "the existence of an increasingly assertive political opposition, motivated by rekindled nationalism, which had actually sought to replace" the existing regime—namely, the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) (Cornell 2011, 61).

Although their government, led by Abulfez "Elchibey" Aliyev, represented a "unique instance of true democrats taking control of a post-Soviet Muslim state" and initiated sweeping reforms, it struggled to manage the ongoing Karabakh[8] conflict (Cornell 2011, 60). The First Karabakh War (1991-1994) saw clashes between Azerbaijani forces and Armenian separatists, who attempted to establish an Armenian ethno-state, the so-called "Republic of Artsakh." This entity occupied the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and seven surrounding regions, resulting in the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijan Turk communities exemplified by the atrocities such as the Khojaly Massacre in 1992 (Cornell 2011, 62). Struggling to build a functioning democratic state, deal with a failing economy, and strengthen a military force, the APF's reputation was thoroughly ruined (Cornell 2020, 60).

Elchibey's foreign policy was widely criticized as it was driven by ideology rather than the ADR's original doctrine of peace and pragmatism. His approach alienated Azerbaijan's neighbors while exacerbating instability by: (1) adopting a radical Pan-Turkist platform that excluded potential allies among non-Turkic states, (2) repeatedly "blasting Iran as a doomed state," which provoked hostility from Tehran, (3)

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[8] Karabakh is a historical region in the southwestern territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, encompassing the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven surrounding regions. Contemporary literature often refers to this as Nagorno-Karabakh, a term introduced by Soviet scholars, while Armenians seeking to assert territorial claims refer to it as "Artsakh." For the purposes of this study, the region will be referred to as Karabakh to decolonize the language used in existing literature.

withdrawing from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),[9] a move that angered the Kremlin's leadership prompting more military support for Armenia; and (4) making supremacist remarks that alienated the West (Cornell 2011, 70). Such remarks, combined with effective Armenian lobbying in the U.S. Congress led to the adoption of Section 907 of the United States Freedom Support Act, which "prohibited U.S. government assistance to the Azerbaijani government because of its 'aggression on Karabakh' (Cornell 2011, 71).

During this period, Heydar Aliyev, the former President of the Azerbaijan SSR, returned to politics from his six year political exile (1987-1993) in the remote region of Nakhchivan. Following the overthrow of Abulfez Elchibey in a Russian-backed military coup d'état on June 24, 1993, Heydar Aliyev was installed as the new head of state. Once a beloved and highly-ranked member of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, his return promised much-need stability (Cornell 2011, 81).

And bring stability he did, particularly in statecraft, through:

1. Consolidation of power by restoring a "monopoly of power" through unifying the state's politically and economically fragmented sectors.
2. Reconstruction of "presidentialism" by the ratification of a new constitution in 1994, which centralized decision-making, especially in matters of foreign policy.
3. Ending the Karabakh War by signing a 1994 ceasefire agreement, known as the Bishkek Protocol
4. Leveraging Baku's oil wealth by attracting Western capital investment and establishing a "consortium of multinational corporations" to build relationships with foreign leaders.
5. Diplomatic finesse epitomized by utilizing his "experience[s] as a seasoned diplomat" and "personal charisma" to gain Western support from leaders such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and former Vice President Richard Cheney (Cornell 2011, 82-92)

With Heydar Aliyev's return came the revival of Azerbaijan's original, pragmatic foreign policy doctrine, emphasizing balanced and strategic statecraft. These tenets, along with Aliyev's consolidation of the state apparati, remain influential today and will continue to shape Baku's East-West interplay, as will be discussed further. Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan has remained a highly centralized security state with much of the political power exercised by the presidential administration.

Moldova: "Where Great Powers Meet at Rivers"

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[9] The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is an international organization comprising the former Soviet republics, established in 1991. In practice, it operates as a Russian-led organization within the broader constellation of Eurasian institutions. As of 2025, the CIS no longer includes countries like Georgia and Ukraine, which left the organization in response to Russian aggression, while Azerbaijan and Moldova remain full members.

As for Moldova, the smallest of the GUAM states, it has a relatively brief history of national and state sovereignty. Before 1918, the area now known as Moldova was called Bessarabia, which refers to the land "between the Dniester [river] and the Prut [river]" (Waters 1997, 1) However, its precursor, the Principality of Moldavia (1359-1811), distinguishes Moldova as a unique sovereign state compared to other GUAM members. The Moldovan territories historically served as a border between the Russian empire and the Balkans, specifically Romania, its culturally closest neighbor. Notably, Moldova borders both the Black Sea and the Dniester River, a crucial waterway for maritime shipping across Eastern Europe. Throughout history, control over the area shifted among the Ottoman Empire, Romania, and Russia. In 1812, the Russians finally took control, turning the region into a "Romanian province under Russian rule" (Mitrasca 2003, 23). From this point, the Moldovans, a mix of Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians, and Gagauz Turks, live primarily as an agricultural society.

On December 17, 1917, the Moldavian Democratic Republic declared its independence. However, this independence was short-lived, lasting one year. Unable to manage its affairs effectively, the Moldavian National Council facilitated the union between Moldova and the Kingdom of Romania on April 9, 1918 (Mitrasca 2003, 167). Under the Kingdom of Romania, Bessarabia benefited from being aligned with the so-called Little Entente, which fostered relations with the West far longer than the previous iterations of GUAM member states. However, the union of Bessarabia with Romania was never formally recognized by major powers like the United States or France, with the exception of Great Britain (Mitrasca 2003, 167). This lack of recognition is ultimately moot. With the onset of World War II and the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia—modern-day Moldova—to the Soviet Union on August 2, 1940 (Waters 1997, 1)

After centuries of imperial rule, the Republic of Moldova declared its independence on August 27, 1991. However, this decision was not without controversy. A parliamentary referendum was conducted to determine whether the region would unify with Romania or become a sovereign state, during which "a Russian-backed coup d'état attempted to assert Moldova's independence" (Wolff 2011, 2). Recognizing its precarious position as a militarily weak and impoverished state, Moldova adopted the 1994 Constitution, which established "permanent neutrality whereby the Republic of Moldova undertakes not to take part in military conflicts, in political, military or economic alliances aimed at war preparations, not to allow the use of its territory for the location of foreign bases and not to possess, produce or test nuclear weapons" (Cebotari 2010, 84). This makes Moldova the only GUAM state to have formal neutrality written into law.

Despite this neutrality, Moldova became a victim of separatism through the ongoing Transnistria conflict. In 1990, a small area on the left bank of the River Dniester, which is home to a diverse group of Russian-speaking communities backed by Russia and indigenous separatists, attempted to break away from the Republic of

Moldova and proclaim independence as the so-called Republic of Transnistria. A ceasefire signed in 1992 froze the conflict, but "the appearance of Russian troops on the territory has since put into question its neutrality," pushing Moldova to rely on "its brother nation Romania, in pursuing Western integration" (Baban 2015, 1).

Since 1994, the foreign policy apparati of these newly independent states have had to navigate an international system often described as a "unipolar moment" between centuries of hegemonic instability. While the distinction between the "West" and "East" may have seemed less clear under the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO) beginning in the 1990s, two key realities emerged for the future of the GUAM states: 1) In the Eurasian region, Russia would seek to reassert its sphere of influence, requiring strategic responses; and 2) Despite the temporary nature of unipolarity and the uncertain future of a US-led international system, the states needed to prioritize their full integration in the West without delay.

Chapter 3: Evolution of GUAM

An empire's loss is a colony's gain. Just as the GUAM states had briefly pursued self-determination during the interwar period, the Soviet Union's collapse—and the emergence of its weaker successor, the Russian Federation—presented a renewed opportunity not only to establish independence but to secure it through Western integration. With their shared historical trajectories, the GUAM states found themselves in similar positions in the post-Soviet era, seeking to distance themselves from Russia's sphere of influence. Common economic and, by extension, security concerns ultimately united Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova into a quadrilateral partnership in 1997. However, despite its promising beginnings, GUAM's remarkable goals have been largely unfulfilled given the complex and turbulent histories of the region from 1990 to the present.

Thus, this chapter examines the institutional trajectory of GUAM, focusing on its evolution from its 1997 to 2007, including its formation, expansion, and consolidation. By studying GUAM's interesting trajectory, the broader dynamics of great power competition between the Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic blocs will become evident, highlighting how, alongside their shared goals, GUAM members grappled with shared anxieties—most notably, the resurgence of Russian domination.

1992-1996: Pre-GUAM Institutions and Power Balance

Between 1991 and 1992, the fifteen former Soviet Socialist Republics consolidated their independence—a process for which they had little precedent or clear pathway, given their deep economic, social, and political interdependence under Moscow's top-down structure. This transition was 'softened' by the creation of the Commonwealth

of Independent States (CIS) on December 9, 1991, an organization designed both as a "mechanism for managing the collapse of the USSR" and as a "cooperative community of countries based on mutual interest" i.e., integration into the globalized, capitalist international system (Nikolko 2019, 29). That said, the CIS initially included only eleven of the fifteen independent states, as the Baltic states and Turkmenistan opted to remain outside the organization (Mite 2005).

Previous economic interdependence was partially restructured through the establishment of the "Economic Union," which aimed to create common customs and monetary unions as well as integrated markets—though with little success (Brindusa 2020, 20). Most notably, the creation of the Free Trade Area in 1994 sought to reduce trade barriers and facilitate further economic integration (Ibid.). Beyond economic cooperation, the organization also incorporated a defensive component through the Collective Security Treaty (CST), ratified in May 1992 as a successor to the Warsaw Pact. The CST marked the initial steps toward the "formation of new security architecture in Eurasia" (Kulik et al. 2011, 3), reflecting an attempt to maintain regional stability in the post-Soviet landscape.

There were also no illusions that CIS was anything other than an instrument of Russia's resurgent great power status in the new world order, given Russia's economic and political predominance over the member states from the early 1990s. Moscow's overbearing posture further isolated these states from their Western European neighbors while also making the West broadly apprehensive about CIS's vision of global integration (Nikolko 2019, 29). Meanwhile, Russia grappled with its own economic crisis, rise in organized crime, and separatist conflicts such as the Russo-Chechen War from 1994 to 1996, thereby distracting the would-be leader of CIS. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that declining leadership and rising conflicts had resulted in "not a single development goal that any of the states could be said to have adequately achieved" (Ibid.).

As the Iron Curtain was lifted and Russia became increasingly unstable, the Euro-Atlantic bloc, through NATO, sought to ensure that none of the newly independent states of the former Warsaw Pact were excluded from "new security arrangements" (Gallis 1994, 2). These efforts culminated in the Partnership for Peace (PfP), endorsed by NATO members at the Brussels Summit in January 1994, with the goal of strengthening "ties with the democratic states to [the] East" (Ibid.). States wishing to join the PfP had to meet four key objectives, the most notable being building "cooperative military relations with NATO for the purpose of joint planning and training to be able to undertake joint missions for peacekeeping, search and rescue, and humanitarian operations" (Ibid.). However, fulfilling these objectives did not automatically qualify a state for NATO membership; rather, accession remained contingent on an official invitation from NATO itself (Ibid.).

Aligned with President Clinton's strategic vision, the PfP served two purposes: (1) enhancing NATO's ability to respond to security threats beyond the existing alliance

structure; and, most importantly, and (2) establishing a "path to Partnership countries for future membership in NATO." (Gallis 1994, 3). Thus, by 1994, nine post-Soviet states joined the PfP, including Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, as well as the West's former adversary-turned-partner, Russia.

At this point, the international system had clearly entered a 'unipolar moment,' in which centuries of great power competition and hegemonic rivalry had nearly come to a halt. The traditional BoP dynamic was effectively overshadowed by the U.S.-led LIO and the Euro-Atlantic institutions that sustained its near full-spectrum dominance across political, economic, and security spheres. In Eurasia, the PfP helped to maintain this dominance in three ways.

First, it aligned the post-Soviet states under NATO's collective security umbrella and cooperation, such that they *could* become full allies in the future (Gallis 1994, 5). This became apparent through NATO's eastward expansion, beginning with reunified Germany on October 3, 1990, and continuing throughout the mid-1990s, when plans were developed to incorporate the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland into NATO, eventually forming the Visegrad Group in 1999 (Urbanski and Dolega 2015, 20). Seeing the rapid economic development and the decoupling of former Eastern Bloc states from Moscow, other Eurasian states like Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova believed that bandwagoning with the Euro-Atlantic bloc via the PfP would be a far better alternative to Moscow's aimless leadership of the CIS. This was especially true as the Euro-Atlantic institutions were seen as appendages of the dominant great power—the U.S.—offering a more stable and prosperous path forward compared to Russia's uncertain trajectory.

Second, the PfP included a role for Russia that was intended to promote cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic institutions. From the view in Washington, the newly created Russian Federation—though an empty shell of the hostile and intimidating Soviet Union—still held the potential for cooperation due to its Western but distinctly Eurasian identity. U.S. officials, seeking to promote 'peace' by "not drawing new lines in Europe" between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasians blocs, recognized that integrating Russia as a 'junior partner' in the emerging BoP was essential (Gallis 1994, 4). This approach was most evident during the Bosnia War (1992-1995), where Russia played a "constructive role in devising the proposed settlement" alongside the U.S. and EU (Ibid.). Slowly incorporating post-Soviet states into the LIO would, therefore, require their former overlord, Russia, to be a part of it as well.

Third, the PfP aimed to foster cooperation with post-Soviet states to preempt the resurgence of great power competition in the region. As former Secretary of Defense William Perry remarked, the PfP served as a "protective grouping against Russia if things go wrong in Moscow" (Lippman, 1994). In other words, if Russia abandoned its experiment as a Western-facing, liberal democracy and resumed its role as an expansionist power, seeking to challenge the existing regional BoP, the U.S. and its allies

would be strategically positioned to counter this shift through newly established regional alliances. This strategy was substantiated by early signs of Russian irredentism in the 1990s, particularly through Moscow's involvement in previously mentioned ethnic conflicts within the GUAM states. Policymakers such as Secretary Perry feared a resurgent Russian bear, warning that Moscow was once again "relying on the old Soviet practices of intimidation and domination" (Ibid.).

Western fears were ultimately based upon on-the-ground realities. It did not take long for the Kremlin to perceive 'junior' as synonymous with 'inferior' and to begin contemplating the restoration of its former dominance over Eurasia. Domestically, this shift was evident in the rise of ultra-nationalist figures like Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of the ironically named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), whose party secured the largest share of seats in the 1993 Russian legislative elections (Gallis 1994, 2). At the same time, Moscow's foreign policy apparatus began to perceive NATO's eastward expansion as an "aggressive and destabilizing move," seeking to blur the lines between Europe and Eurasia at the expense of Russian regional hegemony (Ibid.).

Moscow's perceptions of the expanding Euro-Atlantic bloc led to its nearly three-decade 'near abroad'[10] campaign beginning in 1993, which aimed to "exercise influence over European and central Asian regions that have escaped Moscow's direct control in the last several years" and thereby restore Russia's former share of power (Gallis 1994, 5). Viewing NATO's troop deployments and installations near its borders as an "immediate threat," Russia's military doctrine shifted to justify stationing troops in neighboring PfP-member states often under the pretext of "peacekeeping" while actively provoking interethnic conflict (Gallis 1994, 5-6). This pattern was evident in all GUAM member states, a process that will be examined in detail later. However, the 'near abroad' campaign—whether executed through direct Russian intervention or facilitated by Moscow-led Eurasian institutions—became a persistent strategy in the region. As such, it should serve as the primary framework for analyzing Azerbaijan's exceptional case in contrast to the more conventional trajectories of the other GUAM states.

This 'near abroad' campaign was later subsumed into the Primakov Doctrine, named after Russia's second Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, who sought to counter the U.S.-led 'unipolar moment' by rebuilding a distinctly Eurasian pole. The doctrine rested on three key pillars: (1) Russia's strategic autonomy i.e., Russia's right to "pursue its own interests" and "develop partnerships and alliances" despite rhetorical cooperation and concessions with the Euro-Atlantic bloc; (2) regional integration i.e., strengthening ties with neighboring states to "establish a sphere of influence;" and (3) non-intervention i.e., a principle ostensibly advocating for non-interference in neighbors' internal affairs, though repeatedly contradicted under the 'near abroad' pretext of defending Russia's "national interests and protecting its citizens abroad"

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[10] The 'near abroad' refers to the neighboring regions of the Russian Federation that were formerly under Soviet rule, otherwise known as Eurasia. Despite the empire's collapse, these regions, in Moscow's eyes, continue to remain in the sphere of influence of the Russian state.

(Shabbir 2023, 1). The next chapter will demonstrate that the Primakov Doctrine continued into the 2020s, such that the 'near abroad' campaign embodied the Kremlin's clear "return to the aggressive, expansionist policies" vis-a-vis the Euro-Atlantic bloc's expansion, primarily NATO (Ibid.).

1996-1997: Institutionalization of GUAM

These conditions—the failures of Russian-led multilateral organizations, NATO's eastward expansion into the post-Soviet sphere through the PfP, and Russia's resistance to expansion via the 'near abroad' campaign—help to explain the rise of "regional initiatives and the desire for regional cooperation to halt the economic downturn and stabilize growth" by 1996 (Nikolko 2019, 29). In essence, this led to the formation of "smaller-scale, neighbor-state associations" built around shared identities and interests (Ibid.).

Indeed, with similar geostrategic locations and histories, along with guidance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)[11], Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Moldova established the quadrilateral GUAM partnership on October 10, 1997 (Nikolko 2019, 30). At face value, the four states united under this banner to promote "economic development, democratic transformation, trade and security," (Ibid.). GUAM was nonetheless founded as an economic initiative (Valiyev 2024). However, as will be demonstrated, GUAM's economic agenda was deeply intertwined with security considerations. Due to the already limited literature on GUAM, which primarily focuses on economics and trade, this section will rely largely on Milana Nikolko's work, particularly her 2019 article, "The Annexation of Crimea and Continuing Instability in the Black Sea Region," which examines GUAM's security cooperation.

The most evident security threat was, of course, Moscow's neo-imperialism, which posed a direct challenge to the sovereignty and Western-oriented trajectory of the GUAM states. Thus, depending on the frame of alliance-making, GUAM's formation can be interpreted in two ways: as a countermeasure against the expanding Eurasian bloc, or as a strategic effort to align with and secure support from the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

Experts' perspectives on the position of GUAM during its formation can be broadly categorized into four distinct views:

1. *Euro-Atlantic Integration*: The member states unified as a cooperative organization not as an end unto itself, but as a means to mutually enhance economic relations, coordinate democratic reforms, and ultimately position themselves for long-term, full integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, namely the EU and NATO. This perspective remains widely held among regional experts, given that these states

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[11] The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is a multilateral organization comprising the U.S., Europe, and former Eastern Bloc states, aimed at promoting democracy, human rights, and security in its member regions. Given the U.S.'s leadership role, some regional experts view the OSCE as an extension of the Euro-Atlantic bloc, intended to integrate the post-Soviet sphere.

individually advocated for Western integration during the early period of hope in the 1990s (Chiragov 2024; Shiriyev 2024).

2. *Euro-Atlantic Alignment*: The member states formed a region-specific organization as the immediate objective, but their long-term goal was to align and coordinate with the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Rather than seeking full integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, they aligned more with the first objective of the PfP—building cooperation and partnership—rather than the latter objective of eventual NATO membership (Krnjević 2024).

3. *Eurasian Balancing*: The creation of GUAM was aimed at resisting Russia's challenge to the regional BoP by seeking explicit institutional and military support from the Euro-Atlantic, with the goal of pressuring Russia to abandon its expansionist ambitions in Eurasia. Many analysts have described GUAM as an "'anti-Russian,' even 'Russophobic' coalition set up under the US aegis to diminish the role of Moscow" (Nanavov and Mamishova 2020, 19). While this characterization was never explicitly stated by the member states themselves, it remains the dominant perspective among regional experts (Valiyev 2024; R. Huseynov 2024).

4. *Eurasian Containment*: The creation of GUAM was not intended as an anti-Russian strategy per se, but rather as a form of "retaining [the member states'] autonomy from Russia" and resisting Moscow's failing regional leadership (Ibid.). In fact, some analysts argue that its formation has, in some ways, served Russia's long-term interests, as "the existence of strong, responsible neighbouring states" could foster more stable regional partnerships rather than perpetuating systems of dependence (Nikolko 30-31, 2019).

Regardless of GUAM's alignment, the primary goal of the member states was, at the very least, "retaining their autonomy from Russia" (Nanavov and Mamishova 2020, 19). In this regard, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, along with the Baltic States, stood apart from other post-Soviet nations as "daredevils," actively challenging Russia's influence in the region (Ibid.). This was done, as will be seen, through primarily economic means that necessarily required security measures to counter Russian interference.

1997-2000: Institutionalization of GUAM

Creating a strong, independent regional institution required proper administration. The organization's highest decision-making body became its Council, composed of the members' heads of state, foreign ministers, and other permanent representatives (Ibid.). The Council was created alongside the yearly chairmanship position, whereby a member state was selected to host summits, help steer discussions and initiatives across various sectors such as "production, trade, transport, energy, international lending services, customs and fiscal services, communications, science, technology, education and culture" (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 24). Lest it be forgotten, the working languages of GUAM were primarily English, the national languages of its

members, and, unsurprisingly, Russian—reflecting both their shared history under Russia and their pursuit of independence away from Russia.

Near the end of the millennium, the member states increasingly turned their attention to security-related matters, particularly conflict resolution within their respective territories. Addressing territorial disputes—especially those involving Russia, which occupies strategic positions that complicate trade routes, such as obstructing direct land-based transit between Ukraine and Georgia—became essential. Resolving these conflicts was seen as a prerequisite for fostering "favorable conditions for economic growth" and ensuring unimpeded trade among the member states (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 24).

2001-2005: Expansion of GUAM

Faced with competing expansionist agendas from both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs, what initially appeared to be a fledgling regional institution began to take on a more distinct and defined form at the turn of the new millennium. This became evident with Uzbekistan's accession as the fifth member in 1995, temporarily expanding the organization into GUUAM (as it was known from 2001 to 2005) and broadening its scope of cooperation (Nikolko 2019, 31). By integrating a Central Asian state, Uzbekistan "brought the potential to bridge the Asian market with the Black Sea, thereby expanding GUUAM's political and economic footprint while placing Uzbekistan's trajectory on the same track away from the Eurasian bloc (Ibid.).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led Global War on Terror, at least temporarily, integrated several post-Soviet states—including Russia—into a new global security framework. The shift was evident during a joint US-GUUAM meeting held on November 8, 2001, where both sides pledged to "stand together against terrorism" and collaborate on "securing transportation corridors, preventing drug smuggling, illegal arms trafficking, and migration" all while reaffirming the "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, as well as the democratic development" of GUUAM states (GUUAM-USA Joint Statement 2001). These commitments materialized as Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan not only allowed NATO and U.S. forces to use their airspace but also deployed their own battalions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 under the pretext of "peacekeeping" (Carrey 2011, 1-18). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan supported the intervention in Afghanistan by offering its Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base "for the transit of aircraft and troops to Afghanistan" until 2005 (O'Connor 2020). Consequently, from 2001 onward, security and addressing "challenges and threats to peace and stability at the national, regional and global levels" unequivocally became part of the GUUAM agenda (Nikolko 2019, 32).

Economically, 2001 also marked the beginning of discussion on establishing a free-trade agreement among the GUUAM member states. During the 2001 Yalta Summit, they drafted and ratified the Yalta Charter, the working declaration of cooperation, which outlined their key objectives e.g., "promoting social and economic

development" and "strengthening and expanding trade and economic links" (Yalta GUUAM Charter 2001). However, these goals remained broad and loosely defined, reflecting a lack of concrete initiative despite the organization being in its fourth year of operation.

Then, in a sudden turn of events, Uzbekistan suspended (rather than withdrew) its membership in GU(U)AM[12] in June 2002, citing the organization's clear inefficiency and slow moves to "promote economic and trade integration" ("Uzbekistan" 2002). This decision came just one month before GU(U)AM's Yalta Summit in July 2002, which was its last-ditch attempt at "forging a viable free-trade zone" (Kuzio 2002). Despite Uzbekistan's temporary departure, the remaining member states managed to draft a resolution, and by December 10 2003, the *de jure* GU(U)AM Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was enacted (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 24).

In keeping with GU(U)AM's characteristically vague language, the protocol on FTA rules merely stated the goal was "creating conditions for the free movement of goods and services" ("Protocols on rules" 2002). However, the FTA did align with GATT/WTO principles and was considered "more ambitious than the one signed" by the CIS (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 25) The FTA nominally aimed to establish rules of origin, harmonization of customs procedures, and freedom of transit. Additionally, cooperation in eradicating technical barriers to trade, protecting intellectual property rights, and ensuring fair competition and transparency in granting subsidies were emphasized. Another key priority was creating conditions for the mutual liberalization of services and public procurement based on non-discrimination (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 32).

The FTA was a relative success, as evidenced by the trade flow among the GU(U)AM states, which increased from $20 billion in 2002 to $40 billion by 2005 (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 25). This growth suggests that "flows between and within the GU(U)AM states started to intensify slightly" (Ibid.). However, this relationship cannot be attributed solely to the FTA, as the young and developing nature of the member states' economies must be considered. To that end, the increase in trade flows could partly reflect a natural recovery of economic activity following the disruptions caused by the Soviet collapse.

In other developments, the GU(U)AM states began to view Euro-Atlantic integration as a viable prospect during this period of interregional solidarity, regardless of whether the organization's original principles emphasized mere alignment or full integration. Whereas NATO's PfP served as the Euro-Atlantic bloc's security arm in the post-Soviet sphere, the European Union, as its economic and political arm, launched its own European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) between 2003 and 2004. This initiative aimed to "foster stability, security, and prosperity in the EU's neighboring regions," including Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa ("European

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[12] Since Uzbekistan remained an official member but suspended participation until 2005, the organization will be referred to as GU(U)AM when discussing the period between 2002 and 2005.

Neighbourhood Policy" 2021). The ENP facilitated close collaboration through the creation of "action plans" for each neighboring state, outlining reforms in market development, democracy, and security. According to the framework, if a country demonstrated sufficient progress in these areas, the EU could move forward with intensifying mutual relations and deepening integration. The policy falls in line with Article 8 of the Treaty of European Union (TEU), stipulating that "integration objectives extend beyond its boundaries to include (at least) its non-member neighbours" (Cremona and Shuibehne 2022, 158). In that same year, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova all joined the ENP.

Prior to this, in 1994, several post-Soviet states signed Association Agreements (AAs) with the European Union, intended to make neighboring countries "consistent with the essential conditions for candidate countries to obtain EU membership" based on the Copenhagen criteria (Madatali and Jansen 2022, 2). Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova—collectively known as the "Association Trio"—signed AAs that year, although Azerbaijan did not (Ibid., 1). Instead, Baku signed a lesser variant known as a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), allowing the EU to support it in "building a strong free market economy, a healthy climate for business and foreign investments, and providing aid in fostering trade relations" without having to meet the necessary criteria for EU membership ("Partnership and cooperation agreement" 2023). Thus, while Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova were independently seeking to be "folded into the EU," Azerbaijan pursued a "strong but limited partnership"—though discussions of a possible pathway to integration remained on the table.

By the end of 2005, three significant developments had emerged: (1) enhanced defense and security cooperation between GU(U)AM and the Euro-Atlantic bloc, especially in counterterrorism; (2) implementation of a Free Trade Agreement that increased trade among the member states; and (3) forging of a strong relationship with the European Union that paved the way for potential EU membership. This herd-like push toward Euro-Atlantic integration, however, isolated Uzbekistan as the sole Central Asian state, which, due to its geographic location, could not fully benefit from the FTA. As a result, Uzbekistan formally withdrew from the organization in 2005, reverting the organization back to GUAM.

2006-2007: Revitalization of GUAM

Despite Uzbekistan's withdrawal, the GUAM member states remained stalwart in their sub-regional ties, alongside their Europeanization, and thereafter reconsolidated themselves and their efforts. Economic development remained stable, with trade flows among the members nearly reaching a peak of $75 billion by the end of 2007 (Brindusa and Daniel 2020, 25). However, the most significant progress occurred in security cooperation—so much so that some analysts described 2006 as the "apex" of the organization's unity and power (Nikolko 2019, 34). This was demonstrated during Ukraine's chairmanship of the organization in 2006, headed by then-president Viktor

Yuschenko, who launched a new campaign aimed at changing the "security model in the region" (Ibid.).

The 2006 Kyiv Summit, which brought together all four heads of state, had several major achievements:

First, the transformation of the semi-formal quadrilateral partnership into a fully-fledged multilateral organization led to the creation of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (ODED). Despite the formal name change, it continues to be referred to as GUAM, as the original four members have remained the only consistent members since 2006. As an independent institution, GUAM member states drafted and ratified their own Charter on May 23, 2006, clearly defining the organization's principles, including commitments to "strengthening international and regional security and stability" ("Charter of Organization for democracy and economic development – GUAM" 2006). Additionally, GUAM explored the possibility of expanding its membership to include neighboring European countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria, with the goal of "promoting security and energy transport initiatives in the Black Sea region"—a proposal that ultimately did not materialize.

Second, the member states shifted their focus from counterterrorism efforts to addressing their own ethnic and separatist conflicts, which impacted their sovereignty and interconnectivity. In response, the Kyiv Declaration—a joint GUAM-OSCE communiqué on conflict resolution—outlined nine principles aimed at strengthening state sovereignty. The first seven clauses are particularly significant:

1. All conflict resolution must respect "sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders of these states."
2. Member states cannot be "subject to acquisition or military occupation," and likewise "self-declared entities may [not] be recognized as legal under any circumstances whatsoever."
3. States must practice "non-interference" and refrain from influencing other nations' affairs, politics, or economics.
4. The "use of force, ethnic cleansing, and territorial seizures" must be prevented, as these actions contradict so-called 'European' values.
5. Territorial "re-integration" should be pursued for breakaway regions, along with the return of forcibly displaced persons.
6. Conflict zones must be "demilitarized" through peacekeeping, namely missions from the OSCE and UN.
7. Following territorial re-integration, self-governance should be promoted through the "formation of legitimate regional authorities at all levels" (Ukraine Press Release 2006, 2).

These principles were pursued through President Yushchenko's promotion of the "5+2 format," which established the framework for a comprehensive settlement based on Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. This approach aimed to grant Transnistria a special status within Moldova and

involved seven key participants: Moldova, Transnistria, the OSCE, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States ("Joint Declaration of the Heads of State" 2025).

The joint declaration reflects GUAM's near-"apex" level of cooperation by 2006, representing perhaps the most credible and concrete statement made by its member states. However, in hindsight, these principles now seem unsettling, as few—if any—of the outlined benchmarks have been fully achieved. In some cases, post-2008 events—as will be discussed in the following section—exacerbated the challenges faced by these states in solving their conflicts. The notable exception is Azerbaijan, which, by 2022, had successfully met the first six principles of the seven. Lastly, the 2006 period saw the development of mechanisms for European integration into legally binding doctrine. While GUAM member states individually pursued cooperation with and integration into the EU, the Kyiv Declaration was filled with references to Europe and the goal of EU integration.

The document's preamble explicitly reaffirmed that future cooperation would be based on "democratic norms and values and [a] determination to further proceed on the path of European integration" ("Charter of Organization for democracy and economic development" 2019). Furthermore, Article 1 of the Declaration states that one of GUAM's primary objectives is "deepening European integration for the establishment of common security space and expansion of cooperation in economic and humanitarian spheres" (Ibid.). To be clear, this article represents one of the first direct acknowledgments at the institutional level of integration into the Euro-Atlantic bloc's "security space" (Ibid.). Thus, while GUAM once again redefined itself as an organization dedicated to promoting democracy, security, and economic liberalization in the Black and Caspian Sea regions, by 2006 it had firmly anchored these objectives through an alignment with, or trajectory toward, the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

<u>**Chapter 4: Devolution of GUAM**</u>

Both the aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration and the goal of deepening cooperation among GUAM member states gradually unraveled after 2008, marking the start of the organization's decline. This chapter examines that decline from 2008 to 2024, focusing on the conflicts that emerged or escalated between GUAM members and Russia—with the notable exception of Azerbaijan—to highlight the geopolitical forces that ultimately undermined the organization. To reiterate, this breakdown was not the result of failures in outreach or cooperation, but of each member state's inability to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration amidst Russian threats. GUAM still continued to operate as a functioning organization but due to these clear distractions, the cohesion and cooperation between the member states had to be deemphasized to focus on the conflict resolution within their respective territories. Therefore, the devolution period is examined with a focus on major conflicts that arose, rather than on any organizational development that may have occurred.

This chapter examines three key phases of GUAM's decline: disruption, depoliticization, and divergence. In doing so, it highlights two key dynamics: (1) Russia's 'near abroad' strategy of blocking GUAM member states from advancing Euro-Atlantic integration, and (2) the evolving alignment trajectories of the member states up to the near present.

2008-2020: Disruption of GUAM

The brief period between 2007 and 2008 can be described as the peak of Euro-Atlantic integration for the GUAM member states as a unified body. Although each member had its own position on NATO, as well as differing levels of cooperation and military reform, they shared an eagerness to join the West's security umbrella as Russia's revanchist posture reemerged. However, NATO accession required "that there should be no ongoing armed conflicts in candidate countries or territorial claims to or

from neighboring states" (McDermott and Morozov 250, 2008). This requirement posed a major obstacle for three of the four GUAM states, all of which faced unresolved frozen conflicts: Georgia with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions, Azerbaijan with Armenian separatists in Karabakh, and Moldova with the Transnistrian conflict. In each case, these separatist movements were supported by Russia, serving as a lever for Moscow to maintain its foothold in these post-Soviet states.

In response, at the Baku Summit in June 2007, the member states met to discuss "the protracted conflicts in the GUAM area" and the necessary measures for their resolution ("The Baky GUAM Summit Communique" 2007). This culminated in the signing of the Baku Declaration on June 19, which in Article 7 reaffirmed the "need to continue joint action to resolve the long-running conflicts" and outlined the next step as "enlisting the support of the international community to resolve these conflicts" ("Baku Declaration" 2007). Acknowledging that effective resolution mechanisms were "outside the bounds of their capitals," the GUAM states turned to the OSCE and, ultimately, to their hoped-for guarantor of security, NATO, to play this role (McDermott and Morozov 251, 2008).

At the same time, the Russian security apparatus became increasingly worried about NATO encroachment on Russia's 'near abroad,' such that the accession of the Baltic States—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—in NATO, as well as other "plans to deploy missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic" greatly threatened Russia's hegemonic stability in the post-Soviet sphere (McDermott and Morozov 2008, 250). President Vladimir Putin made this clear during the now-famous 2007 Munich Security Conference, in which he stated that "NATO [had] put its frontline forces on our borders" and therefore constituted a "serious provocation" to the Kremlin's 'near abroad' chokehold (Putin 2007).

To avoid reiterating the extensive literature on these conflicts, the analysis of each member state's disruption period will focus on two primary factors: (1) the underlying causes of the conflict, with particular emphasis on their growing cooperation with, or aspirations to join, NATO; and (2) the post-conflict status quo, which frequently resulted in a stalemate or the freezing of the conflict, thereby preserving Russia's strategic foothold within the respective state. What emerges is a domino effect, with GUAM member states one by one succumbing to the same pattern—until Azerbaijan's successes in 2022, marking a notable deviation from this trajectory.

2008: Russo-Georgian War

This pattern begins with Georgia, which, compared to the other GUAM member states in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, was more closely aligned with the Euro-Atlantic bloc from the outset, particularly following the Color Revolutions of 2003–2004. In the aftermath, the pro-European Saakashvili administration undertook significant reforms of the country's political system, economy, and military. This trajectory was destabilized by Russia's intervention and the brief Russo-Georgian War of

2008. Accordingly, the analysis of the 2008 conflict will draw on McDermott and Morozov's article, "GUAM-NATO Cooperation: Russian Perspectives on the Strategic Balance in the Central Caucasus," which cleverly explains Russia's reasoning in invading Georgia by looking at its balancing with NATO, as well as Diana Janse's report, "Georgia and the Russian Aggression," which details Russia's occupation of Georgia's Ossetian and Abkhazian territories.

Georgia was an early victim of Russia's 'near abroad' campaign, beginning in the early 1990s with its conflicts against Russian-backed separatists in the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These conflicts were effectively 'frozen' following the deployment of Russian 'peacekeepers' after 1993—often cynically referred to as 'piece-keepers' throughout Eurasia, in reference to Russia's expansionist ambitions. Refusing to cooperate with the occupying forces, Tbilisi quickly turned to the Euro-Atlantic bloc for protection.

As explained in Chapter 2, Georgia demonstrated this commitment through its participation in the U.S. campaign in Iraq, hoping that such support would "influence the U.S. in supporting its bid for NATO membership" (McDermott and Morozov 2008, 244). This strategy proved effective when the U.S. Congress passed the NATO Freedom Consolidation Act in March 2007, seeking to enlarge the Alliance into the post-Soviet sphere, specifically naming Georgia and Ukraine (Ibid., 243).

Nonetheless, the Georgian government grew increasingly frustrated with the presence of Russian peacekeepers in its occupied territories, especially after the alleged Russian bombing of Tsitelubani in August 2007—a village located just outside the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, within Georgia's internationally recognized borders (Ibid., 252). NATO radar data exchange systems, provided to Georgian forces, enabled them to track and identify the missile's origin, reinforcing Tbilisi's belief that Russia's presence could be replaced more effectively by other actors (Ibid., 252). Georgia not only rejected Russian mediation outright but also began calling for a review of the Russian peacekeeping mandate, advocating for a more credible guarantor of "peace and stability," such as the United States, the European Union, or, most notably, NATO. To be sure, at Saakashvilli's January 5 re-election rally during the 2008 Georgian presidential elections, he reiterated his commitment to reuniting all of Georgia at "whatever the cost"—intimating direct military force, or forced replacement of Russian servicemen for NATO troops (Ibid., 246). In April 2008, during the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the possibility of Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Georgia and Ukraine was discussed. The Bucharest Summit Declaration welcomed both countries' Euro-Atlantic "aspirations for membership in NATO" and "will become members of NATO" ("Bucharest Summit Declaration" 2008).

Thus, Tbilisi presented the following threats to the Kremlin:

At the immediate level, Georgia's pursuit of reclaiming Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Western support raised concerns for Russia, particularly in light of its National Security Concept, which obligates it to protect the security and lives of its

citizens. This was especially significant since Russia had been granting Russian passports to Abkhaz nationals since 2002 (Ibid., 253).

At the regional level, the Kremlin interpreted Tbilisi's strong advocacy for a NATO peacekeeping mission as complicating the resolution process with new actors. This was exacerbated by a series of Georgian interventions, such as the 'Tiger Attack' operation in October 2007 against the South Ossetian government, leading to both the South Ossetian and Abkhaz governments to formally declare full independence from Georgia (Ibid.).

At the systemic level, Russia saw Georgia moving closer to NATO membership, an organization it perceived as a growing threat to its influence in Eurasia. The potential presence of NATO troops at its borders would destabilize the BoP Russia was attempting to reassert (Ibid., 253).

Therefore, from March to June 2008, both sides began mobilizing their military presence in and around the territories of conflict, such that each side exchanged fire fights and the destruction of military installations and downing of military aviation, and blaming each other for stoking conflict. By August 8, 2008, the war began with Russia's deployment of Kavkaz units into Abkhazia and Russia's 58th Army division deployed into Georgian territory. During the fighting, the UN Security Council sought a resolution to the conflict, and by August 12th, President Medvedev of Russia and Georgian PM Mikhail Saakashvili signed a ceasefire agreement (Janse 2021, 8).

However, the following actions by Russia have maintained the occupation of Georgian territory:

1. *Russian Refusal to Withdraw*: Despite the six-point joint EU-Security Council agreement requiring Russia to withdraw its troops from Georgia, Russia entrenched its military presence and established control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Furthermore, it refused to recognize Georgia's territorial integrity and instead recognized the two separatist regions as independent states, halting progress in negotiations with the OSCE, EU, and UN after 2008 (Ibid.).

2. *Lack of Euro-Atlantic Enforcement*: Although the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) was deployed in September 2008 to oversee the agreement's implementation by all parties—including Georgia, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian governments, and Russia—Russian-backed forces rejected EUMM operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, Russia assigned the Federal Security Service (FSB) to patrol the territories, framing them as Russia's "state borders" (Ibid., 10).

3. *Reinforcing the 'Near Abroad'*: In spite of the ongoing diplomatic efforts such as the Geneva International Discussions (GIDs) to address security and humanitarian concerns in the occupied regions, the status quo has persisted. Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to function as *de facto* states under Russian supervision, reinforcing Russia's broader strategy of maintaining influence over Georgia and obstructing its Euro-Atlantic integration (Ibid.).

2014: Russo-Ukrainian War

Unlike the other GUAM member states, Ukraine did not immediately fall victim to Russia's 'near abroad' strategy following its independence. In fact, relations between Kyiv and Moscow remained relatively stable for some time, due to deep cultural, economic, and political ties. Although Russia had the potential to exploit the predominantly Russian-speaking regions of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, it did not do so until much later—when Ukraine began gradually moving closer to the Euro-Atlantic bloc through its partnership with NATO. To better understand the origins of Russia's conflict with Ukraine, it is helpful to view the causes not as isolated or contemporaneous factors, but rather as part of a timeline of Ukraine's worsening relationship with Russia in the context of growing NATO cooperation.

This analysis will therefore draw on the NATO-produced document "NATO-Ukraine Relations" to outline key developments during this period, followed by Kazdobina, Hedenskog, and Umland's report "Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014," and Nigel Walker's report "Conflict in Ukraine: A timeline (2014 - eve of 2022 invasion)," to succinctly demonstrate that what was often described as a 'local uprising' was, in reality, a foreign occupation orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Whereas other GUAM member states advanced their partnerships with NATO through informal, bilateral channels, Ukraine's cooperation with NATO was highly institutional, marked by a series of key agreements and events spanning two decades:

1. *1997 NATO-Ukraine Charter on a Distinctive Partnership*: On July 9, 1997, Ukraine and NATO signed a charter establishing a "distinct partnership" between the two parties. This partnership expanded their areas of cooperation to include military training, civil emergency readiness, and other shared concerns, and also established the NATO-Ukraine Commission to develop their cooperation on a regular basis. As a result, Ukraine became the only GUAM member state to benefit from a NATO institution specifically dedicated to Ukrainian cooperation ("NATO-Ukraine Relations" 2014, 1)

2. *2002 Membership Aspirations*: In May 2002, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma announced that Kyiv aspired to join the Alliance, to which NATO foreign ministers encouraged Ukraine to reform its military for this purpose. An action plan was agreed between NATO and Ukraine that led to the creation of trust funds for military reform (Ibid., 1).

3. *2005 NATO Commitment*: After the so-called "Orange Revolution" of 2004-2005, which resulted in the election of President Viktor Yuschenko following protests against election fraud under the Kuchma government, Ukraine intensified its social and political reforms, further strengthening its dialogue with NATO. Similar to Georgia, Ukraine demonstrated its commitment to the Alliance through participation in NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo (Ibid. 1-2).

4. *2008 Bucharest Summit*: On April 4 2008, NATO leaders declared that they welcomed Ukraine's aspirations of integrating in the Euro-Atlantic bloc, such that both Georgia and Ukraine could become full members of NATO. This, of course, is

understood as the beginning of the end for stable Euro-Atlantic integration, given the intensification of Russia's 'near abroad' campaign (Ibid., 3).

5. *2010 Membership Rollback*: In light of the destabilization and stalemate that emerged from the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, then-President Viktor Yanukovych decided to make Ukraine a so-called "non-bloc status" state, where Kyiv would have a neutral status and would not fully ally itself with the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs respectively. Ukraine would, however, maintain practical cooperation with NATO (Ibid., 3).

However, this shift toward a cautious but cooperative relationship with NATO did not prevent Ukraine from provoking the Russian bear. Between 2013 and 2014, the Euromaidan protests—also known as the Revolution of Dignity—sought to remove Yanukovych's ostensibly "pro-Russian" government, particularly after his refusal to sign a trade agreement with the European Union, opting instead to establish a "strategic partnership" with Moscow (Walker 2023, 6). Despite bans on protests, the oppositionists who marched by the thousands in Kyiv demonstrated that by February 2014, the movement had grown significantly in both size and effectiveness (Ibid., 8). In response, the Kremlin accused the European Union of constructing a "sphere of influence" aimed at reorienting its closest neighbor (Ibid., 9). The Euromaidan protests therefore created an administrative crisis for the Kremlin's ally in Kyiv, if not the imminent rise of a pro-European regime in Ukraine—one that, from Russia's perspective, required disruption.

Thus, the Russo-Ukrainian War began on February 20, 2014, when Russian armed forces advanced into Crimea, violating the Agreement Between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet's Stay on Ukrainian Territory (Kazdobina et al., 10). Between February and April 2014, the Crimean Peninsula—internationally recognized as Ukrainian territory—was gradually seized by pro-Russian separatists who portrayed the self-styled "coup" in Kyiv as an imminent threat to the safety of ethnic Russians living on the peninsula (Ibid., 7). Throughout this process, the Kremlin sought to present the conflict as a local, separatist movement, legitimized by a "pseudo-referendum" held in Crimea on March 16, 2014, claiming to show popular support for union with the Russian Federation (Ibid., 4). In reality, this was a foreign intervention from the outset. In April 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted that Russian special forces had been directly involved, a fact echoed by Sergey Aksyonov, the *de facto* leader of the Russian-installed Crimean administration, who stated that "Putin himself oversaw the peninsula's annexation" (Ibid.) Whereas Russian intervention in Georgia was justified on the grounds of protecting Russian nationals, its intervention in Ukraine was rhetorically framed as a defense of ethnic Russians.

The intervention continued into Ukraine's eastern, ethnic Russian-majority regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. On April 7, 2014, pro-Russian protesters occupied government buildings, calling for a similar referendum on the regions' status (Walker

2023, 14). The Ukrainian government responded with "anti-terrorist" operations, and despite calls from both sides—as well as the U.S. and the EU—to "de-escalate" tensions, fighting continued through May. That month, referendums were held in both regions, resulting in a "landslide victory" for the pro-Russian movement and seemingly legitimizing the separatist governments in Donetsk and Luhansk claims to "self-rule" authority (Ibid., 17).

Despite the intense and devastating fighting, Russian disruption did not derail Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. On the contrary, it accelerated it: on May 25, 2014, pro-European businessman Petro Poroshenko was elected president of Ukraine; in June, the new government signed a "partnership agreement" with the European Union as a step toward membership preparations; and by October, a coalition of pro-European parties won the parliamentary elections (Ibid., 18). At the same time, the pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions began to solidify their rule, ultimately resulting in the declaration of independence of both regions in May 2014 under *de facto* Russian control (Ibid., 15).

Although fighting and ceasefire agreements continued on and off, the conflict—up until the second phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022—remained relatively frozen:

1. *Ceasefires*: In September 2014, pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian armed forces signed a truce known as the Minsk Agreement. However, after renewed fighting caused the collapse of the initial ceasefire, a second Minsk Agreement was signed in February 2015. Aside from occasional border skirmishes, this ceasefire largely held until the full-scale escalation of the war in 2022 (Walker 2023, 18).

2. *Russian Occupation*: Since 2014, Crimea has been formally incorporated into the Russian Federation following the referendum calling for union with Russia. Ukraine thus became the only GUAM case in which Russia officially expanded its territory through its 'near abroad' strategy. Donetsk and Luhansk, by contrast, operated as *de facto* independent republics under Russian influence until 2022 (Fornusek 2025).

3. *Euro-Atlantic Trajectory Intensification*: Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has intensified its pursuit of NATO membership, particularly following the election of President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019 and Ukraine's designation as an "Enhanced Opportunities Partner" by the Alliance. This goal was reaffirmed in Ukraine's National Security Strategy approved that same year, which identified NATO accession as one of its primary objectives (Ibid., 24–25).

2014-2016: Russian Presence in Moldova

Moldova is by far the most "frozen" conflict, in the sense that the stalemate between the Moldovan government, Russia, and the Russian-backed Transnistrian Republic has remained largely unchanged since the 1993 ceasefire. Moldova maintains a special relationship with the Kremlin, shaped by the significant Russian-speaking populations in both Transnistria and Moldova proper, as well as its deep economic and

social ties with Moscow. Moreover, Chişinău's formal neutrality continues to shape Moldova's limited progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration. However, as this discussion will demonstrate, the combination of an entrenched Russian military presence and slow but growing cooperation with NATO has pushed Moldova to become increasingly attentive to the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella.

Due to the deeply frozen nature of the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, there is no singular period of intense fighting after 2008 that concludes in a stalemate, as seen in the other GUAM states. Instead, the period most illustrative of how 'the Russians never leave' falls between 2014 and 2016, when, despite renewed efforts at conflict resolution and repeated calls for Russian troop withdrawal, Moscow further entrenched its position in this eastern frontier of its 'near abroad.' Russian peacekeepers, originally deployed to mediate the conflict, have also served to protect the ethnic Russian minority—estimated to make up roughly one-third of Transnistria's population—alongside the broader Russian-speaking majority and the thousands of Transnistrians holding Russian citizenship (Fischer 2016, 28). According to Transnistrian forces, this request was made to ensure "defence against Romanian fascists," whom they claimed would violate their minority rights as the Moldovan legislature debated the prospect of unification with Romania (Ibid., 39). In this way, the Moldovan case reflects a combination of dynamics seen in the other conflicts.

This analysis will therefore draw on the NATO-produced document "Cooperation with the Republic of Moldova" to outline the growing cooperation between Moldova and the Alliance from the mid-2000s to 2016. However, it will primarily rely on Sabine Fischer's article "Not Frozen!" to examine the early but unsuccessful attempts at conflict resolution, Moldova's EU membership trajectory, and the ongoing obstacle posed by the continued presence of Russian troops.

As such, following Transnistria's declaration of independence in 1991—also known as the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (TMR)—and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the de facto state in 1992, three key developments have shaped attempts to resolve the conflict:

1. *July 1992 Ceasefire*: The heads of state of Moldova and Russia agreed to a ceasefire and established a monitoring regime of trilateral peacekeeping forces. While the ceasefire remains in effect to this day, both the legal status of the TMR and the presence of Russian military forces remain unresolved (Fischer 2016, 28)

2. *Kozak Memorandum*: In 2003, the Kremlin proposed a resolution outside of the existing formal mechanisms. The plan called for a reconstituted Moldovan republic granting the TMR extensive powers and veto rights over Moldova's national security decisions, alongside the long-term presence of Russian peacekeepers. Although initially accepted by then-Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, he ultimately withdrew his support under Western pressure (Ibid.).

3. *5+2 Format*: In 2005, the US and EU joined the GUAM member states with Russia in their observation of the Moldovan-Transistrian conflict as well as monitoring

the Moldova-Ukraine border, which encapsulated the PMR. Overall, the period talks and summits "achieved no movement at all" in resolving the status of any of the parties involved (Ibid.).

Despite the earlier trajectory of this analysis, these developments warrant mention, as they represent the only substantial period of genuine conflict resolution efforts over the following two decades. After 2005, however, what followed was a steady increase in Moldova-NATO cooperation, beginning with Chisinau's first Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2006, which identified key areas of collaboration, including advancing "defence and security-related reforms" ("Cooperation with the Republic of Moldova" 2017, 3). In pursuit of these reforms, Moldova's president requested NATO's support in 2008 through the Defense Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), which provided training and developed a tailor-made program to professionalize the Moldovan military—coincidentally, or perhaps purposefully, as its GUAM counterpart Georgia was simultaneously engulfed in war with Russia (Ibid.). Further, in 2014, NATO's Defense and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) initiative supported additional defense reforms, including the development of a "strategic level document" aimed at aligning Moldova's defense capabilities with NATO standards (Ibid.).

As NATO cooperation deepened, so too did Russia's unwillingness to relent. The Moldovan government and president repeatedly called for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transnistria and proposed creating a trilateral task force to maintain peace or explore alternative solutions (Fischer 2016, 32). Although most of the "5+2 format" meetings convened in 2014, by 2015 the mechanism had been largely discredited due to Russia's violations in its war against Ukraine, according to the OSCE (Ibid., 34). A final attempt at dialogue came in 2016 with the OSCE-chaired Berlin Protocol, though it failed to clarify the legal status of Transnistria or address human rights violations committed by the TMR (Ibid.). Further complicating matters, the Moldovan government formally requested discussions on Russian troop withdrawal at the United Nations in April 2016—without success (Touma 2017). While the Kremlin ignored the UN appeal, it separately agreed to withdraw its forces if the remaining weapons stockpiled by its 14th Army division were "liquidated"—an empty promise, as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict had closed the only viable route for removal through Ukraine (Ibid.)

The back-and-forth, inconsistency, and the Kremlin's overall buggery eventually led Moldovan President Igor Dodon to question the constitution's neutrality clause, even floating the possibility of joining NATO (Fischer 2016, 32). This, too, proved to be an empty threat, but it nevertheless exposed the true complexity of the status quo.

On one hand, Russia's 'near abroad' strategy had never been more transparent: it was both the mediator and an active party to the conflict. As the European Court of Human Rights affirmed, Russia exercised "extraterritorial jurisdiction" over the TMR through "security guarantees via a military presence, consistent diplomatic and

propaganda backing, political advice and cooperation, and economic and financial support" (Fischer 2016, 30). Crucially, the Kremlin sought to keep the Transnistrian question unresolved—not through formal annexation, as in Crimea, but by preserving the frozen status quo. A definitive resolution would risk unlocking Moldova's Euro-Atlantic integration and pulling it permanently out of Russia's sphere of influence (Ibid., 42).

On the other hand, Chisinau continues to face a dilemma: resolving the conflict and peacefully reintegrating the Transnistrian population would inject a large, pro-Russian electorate into the political system, potentially disrupting its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Yet maintaining such a status quo allows Russia to preserve its foothold in Moldova, block full NATO membership, and maintain leverage over Moldova's domestic and foreign policy (Ibid., 41).

2020: Second Karabakh War

The Azerbaijani case is not only an exception, but also an outlier *vis-a-vis* Russia's position. The Karabakh conflict, which unfolded between 1988 and 1994 and later reignited in a second forty-four-day war in 2020, was and continues to be a conflict between two independent, post-Soviet states: Azerbaijan and Armenia, via Armenian separatist groups in Karabakh—not Russia. Unlike the other conflicts present in the GUAM member states, the Kremlin's role was primarily that of a mediator between the two parties. This began with its leadership in the OSCE Minsk Group, established in 1994 to facilitate peace talks and advance settlement efforts, as well as its mediation of the Bishkek Protocol, the 1994 ceasefire agreement aimed at stabilizing the conflict.

However, the Kremlin also played the role of key instigator, driven by the great power competition in the Caucasus. As the leader of the CSTO, Russia is committed to guaranteeing Armenia's security and thus has a vested interest in supporting Armenia's position—despite those guarantees not formally extending to ethnic Armenians in Karabakh. Russia in fact had a military presence in Armenia at the 102nd military base in Gyumri (Welt and Bowen 2021, 6). Meanwhile, Turkey, as a NATO member and Azerbaijan's key strategic partner, actively supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity as part of its own commitment to expanding its regional influence and, by extension, the Euro-Atlantic bloc. In this context, Russia's 'near abroad' strategy in the Karabakh conflict was not primarily aimed at rolling back the Euro-Atlantic integration of a Eurasian state, but rather at preventing Turkey—and by extension, NATO—from expanding its influence through an Azerbaijani victory. Accordingly, Russia's main objective was not to end the conflict but to secure a settlement that preserved its own foothold in the region.

This dynamic will be further illustrated by examining other developments within the context of the conflict, such as Azerbaijan's partnership with NATO, drawing primarily on the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, "Azerbaijan-NATO Partnership." Following this, the causes and consequences of the 2020 Karabakh War

will be analyzed using Welt and Bowen's report, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. What will become clear is that despite Azerbaijan's independent cooperation with NATO—alongside Turkey's strong role as a strategic partner—the outcome of the Second Karabakh War ultimately succeeded in loosening, though not fully removing, Russia's grip on Azerbaijan.

In brief, NATO-Azerbaijan cooperation from 2008 to 2018 was characterized by three key spheres of development:

First, it is important to note that Azerbaijan's *National Security Concept*, approved in 2007 amid discussions on Georgia and Ukraine's accession, explicitly states that "integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political, security, economic and other institutions constitutes the strategic goal of the Republic of Azerbaijan" ("National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan" 2007, 9). While comparatively less vocal than its GUAM neighbors about Euro-Atlantic integration, Azerbaijan was still among the first PfP members to approve an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2004 ("Azerbaijan-NATO Partnership" 2018, 44). The IPAP played a key role in shaping Azerbaijan's *Military Doctrine*, which defines the objectives and priorities of its armed forces, including the "transition of the armed forces to the NATO structure" (Ibid., 45). In essence, prior to the upheavals of 2008, Azerbaijan aimed to reform its military, integrate into the Euro-Atlantic bloc, and "eliminate instability, conflicts and threats" in cooperation with the Alliance ("Azerbaijan: National Security Concept" 2007, 9).

Second, as the gateway to Caspian petrochemical resources with a geostrategic location, Azerbaijan's energy and transport security were consistently developed through cooperation with the Alliance. Azerbaijan is a major exporter of natural gas, particularly to Europe and the broader West. This is made possible by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline—funded and built in part by a coalition of Euro-Atlantic states, primarily the United States—which connects Baku's oil fields through Georgia and Turkey, ultimately supplying European markets (Silverman 2022). Ensuring the security of this pipeline has been a strategic priority for the Alliance and its European members, especially given its passage through Turkey and its role in providing critical energy resources amid instability in the Middle East. NATO explicitly regards "Azerbaijan [as] an important ally in cooperation on energy security," noting that any disruption to Baku's oil exports could jeopardize essential exports to Brussels, particularly during periods of upheaval in Middle Eastern oil-producing states ("Azerbaijan-NATO Partnership" 2018, 54). In light of this, since March 2008, Azerbaijan has chaired the informal EAPC PAP-T Working Group on the Protection of Energy Infrastructure, aiming to develop "counter-terrorism" measures for petrochemical transport and "improved threat awareness and preparedness" (Ibid.). Similarly, on May 22, 2013, Baku hosted a NATO Partnership Conference titled "Emerging Security Challenges: To enhance energy security in XXI century" (Ibid., 5).

Third, given Azerbaijan's proximity to Iran and the rest of the Middle East, as well as its efforts in counter-terrorism, Baku out-contributed to NATO-led operations.

Namely, Azerbaijan continued to contribute to the NATO-led ISAF operation in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2008, and thereafter in 2015 sent Azerbaijani forces as peacekeepers in NATO's Resolute Support Training, Advice and Assistance Mission (RSM) (Ibid., 52). Indeed, Afghanistan was the theatre where Baku proved its support of NATO security strategy by: (1) making substantial donations to the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund and other assistance "for the amount of millions of US dollars"; (2) mentoring for Afghan experts on mine clearance; and (3) allowing for fast trade transit between Afghanistan and global markets via the previously mentioned Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway that opened in 2017 (Ibid., 52). Thereafter, NATO understood Azerbaijan's geostrategic importance at the crossroads of major theaters of war and trade.

Azerbaijan and Armenia continued negotiations throughout this period with little success, while ongoing hostilities at the "line of contact" along the Karabakh border resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and troops on both sides (Welt and Bowen 2021, 4). In April 2016, the long-standing ceasefire was broken, triggering clashes that claimed 200 lives before Russian mediation secured a new ceasefire agreement (Ibid.). However, there were no illusions about Russia's so-called policy of parity, which was widely seen as a façade for provocation. The Kremlin remained a "major military supplier to both Armenia and Azerbaijan," balancing arms sales to Azerbaijan with discounted weapons for Armenia (Ibid., 6). In the years that followed, as Azerbaijan deepened its ties with the Euro-Atlantic bloc while Armenia grew increasingly dependent on Eurasian security structures, Russia became unwilling to continue selling weapons to Azerbaijan.

Russia's restrictions on arms sales forced Baku to diversify its military suppliers, inadvertently driving Azerbaijan into the arms of Turkey, and therefore the inclusion of a NATO ally in the conflict. From 2016 onward, Azerbaijan increasingly sourced its weapons from Turkey and its other regional ally, Israel. This shift prompted former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to pledge that Turkey would "stand shoulder to shoulder with Azerbaijan against Armenian aggression and occupation until the end of time" (Hedlund 2018). However, this did not preclude negotiations. In fact, from 2018 onward, following a reduction in border clashes, there was renewed interest in a settlement under the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, the U.S., and France. Russia, in particular, emphasized the need for "concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace" (Welt and Bowen 2021, 4).

In July 2020, sudden clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces sparked widespread fears of an all-out war, fueled by provocative rhetoric from both heads of state and escalating competition between Turkey and Russia. On September 27, 2020, large-scale fighting in the Karabakh region erupted into full-scale war. Over the course of forty-four days, Azerbaijan made significant territorial advances, reclaiming the seven surrounding regions as well as parts of Karabakh itself, culminating in the capture of Shusha, a city of deep cultural significance to Azerbaijanis (Welt and Bowen 2021, 10).

By the end of October 2020, thousands of Armenians from Karabakh and the surrounding regions were displaced, fleeing to Armenia, while thousands of Azerbaijanis living near Karabakh were internally displaced (Ibid., 11).

As Azerbaijan secured control over most of the region, analysts attributed its successful offensive to a "qualitative military advantage" and an "extensive military buildup over the last decade," bolstered by superior Turkish drones that devastated Armenia's and the separatists' older Soviet-era weapons and radar systems (Ibid., 9). Azerbaijan's victory underscored Turkey's strong diplomatic and military backing of Baku, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declaring that Turkey would support its sibling state "with all its resources and heart." Additionally, six Turkish F-16 fighters were stationed in Gabala, inside Azerbaijan proper, though they were not confirmed to have participated in combat (Ibid., 12). More broadly, Turkey's involvement signaled its "growing hard-power projection" into Russia's 'near abroad,' particularly as an extension of the Euro-Atlantic bloc (Ibid., 13).

Despite allegations of Russian arms deliveries and logistical support to Armenia during the war, the Kremlin maintained a neutral stance, with spokesperson Dmitry Peskov clarifying that Armenia's protection under the CSTO did "not extend to Karabakh" (Ibid.). Armenia's defeat thus served as a testament to the shortcomings of Russia's security guarantees, especially when contrasted with Turkey's pragmatic military buildup in Azerbaijan. In response, Russia swiftly pivoted to ceasefire negotiations and stabilization efforts, with President Putin emphasizing the need for a "long-term settlement" (Ibid.). If Moscow could not assert its dominance through an Armenian victory, it could at least restore the balance of power by brokering a settlement.

In the absence of US or EU leadership on the matter, Russia managed to strengthen its position during and after the war, making its "monopoly in the region absolute" (Valiyev 2024, 3). Moscow brokered a ceasefire agreement signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on November 9, 2020. The agreement formalized Azerbaijan's territorial gains while allowing Armenia to retain control over a smaller portion of Karabakh proper (Ibid.). Specifically, the November 9 agreement contained nine key points, which included:

1. Ceasefire and end to all fighting.
2. Exchange of prisoners and repatriation of the deceased.
3. Return of seven surrounding regions to Azerbaijani control
4. Deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone.
5. Establishment of a peacekeeping center to monitor the ceasefire.
6. Withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories.
7. Preservation of a land corridor between Armenia and Armenian-controlled Karabakh.
8. Return of internally displaced persons and refugees.

9. Creation of a transport corridor linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenia.

The two most significant developments were the deployment of Russian peacekeepers along the "line of contact" and the establishment of a peacekeeping center. While Azerbaijan achieved territorial gains and met many of its explicit goals, the conflict remained frozen under a new Russian-led status quo. This was due to: (1) the deployment of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to the conflict zone; (2) the establishment of Russian observation posts along the Lachin corridor, which connects Armenia and Karabakh and ensures safe transport; and (3) the creation of a peacekeeping center in Karabakh, jointly staffed by Russian and Turkish forces (Ibid., 15). Thus, while Russia was able to maintain its foothold in other GUAM member states, its 'near abroad' strategy had to cede some control to its regional rival and NATO ally, Turkey.

From 2020 onward, three key developments became clear: (1) the Second Karabakh War was a successful military offensive against an ostensibly Russian-backed party, making Azerbaijan the sole victor among the GUAM member states; (2) the presence of Russian peacekeepers ensured that both the future of negotiations and Azerbaijan's full territorial sovereignty remained under Kremlin control; and (3) Turkey's involvement, coupled with the display of its military superiority, made it clear that the Caucasus was no longer within Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. In essence, Azerbaijan won the battle for its territory, but had not yet won the war for full sovereignty.

2021: Depoliticization of GUAM

By 2021, all of the GUAM member states, to different extents, were scattered by Russia's disruption policy. After more than a decade of "silence" from 2008, the member states—beaten, occupied, or constrained by the Russian security apparatus—came to the understanding that talk of democratization and security integration with the Euro-Atlantic bloc would only be received as a provocation by Russia (Nanavov and Mamishova 2021, 20-21). Independent integration was one thing, but partnership and cooperation was clearly too much for the Kremlin to handle. For this reason, GUAM made a concerted effort to "move away from its political-oriented stance and embrace a more economic agenda" (Nananov and Mamishova 2021, 20).

The new paradigm shift allowed the GUAM member states to return to long-forgotten projects like the GUAM FTA and other initiatives to "facilitate trade and transport in the region" (Ibid.). Aside from state-level cooperation, the member states followed up by establishing the "Business Forum of the GUAM Association of Business Cooperation" to continue integration at a company scale, reflecting further the extent to which the member states wanted to lessen the outward rhetoric of cooperation, whether political, security-driven, or economic (Ibid., 21).

2022-2024: Divergence of GUAM

GUAM, a relic of the 1990s "unipolar moment" and the vision for Euro-Atlantic hegemony across Eurasia, lost both its reputation and continuity. The bloc's collective pursuit of NATO membership was disrupted by Russia's 'near abroad' strategy, yet the individual aspirations of its member states have persisted. Since 2022, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan have taken divergent paths toward Euro-Atlantic integration, each meeting with varying degrees of resistance or openness from the Kremlin. Therefore, the final section on GUAM's devolution will examine not only how these states have pursued different alignment strategies but also how the status quo of their respective conflicts has evolved in recent years.

For some, such as Georgia and Moldova, the status quo has remained relatively unchanged. However, for others—specifically Ukraine and Azerbaijan, the focus of this analysis—their trajectories have starkly diverged. Ukraine has become the exemplar of a neighboring state ravaged by Russia's anti-NATO policy, while Azerbaijan stands as the exception, pursuing a more independent yet cooperative path with NATO. By examining the point of divergence from 2022, two things become clear: Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova (GU(A)M)[13] all succumbed to the same dire future, with Ukraine bearing the brunt, while Azerbaijan not only survived but also disproved the commonly held belief that "the Russians never leave"—and did so without facing Russian reprisal.

Post-2022 Georgia: Russia's Capture from Within

Rather than facing direct invasion from Russia, Georgia has fallen victim to Russian sociopolitical capture through the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, which has consolidated power by dismantling democratic institutions and steering the country away from its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Through judicial reforms, opposition bans, and civil society crackdowns, the GD has aligned Georgia more closely with Russia, ensuring a "self-interested, clan-like group of judges" can "dictate decisions at all levels of the judiciary" (Myers 2024). The party's ban on six major pro-Western opposition groups further erodes democracy, with leaders accused of fabricated "war crimes" to justify repression (Gavin 2024).

Meanwhile, the GD has deprioritized reclaiming Abkhazia and South Ossetia, signaling implicit acceptance of Russian control. Its "foreign agents law," modeled on Russian legislation, cripples pro-democracy NGOs central to Georgia's "post-Soviet democratization and westward shift" (Goedmans 2024). Reflecting this authoritarian turn, a growing minority of Georgians now supports restricting free speech if it guarantees "peace and stability" with Russia (Sauer 2024). Without major political shifts, Georgia's drift from the Euro-Atlantic path will deepen, solidifying Russian influence and weakening prospects for EU and NATO membership.

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[13] The alignment strategies and trajectories of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova ended up being relatively similar. Therefore, when compared to the exception that is Azerbaijan, these three states will be referred to collectively as GU(A)M.

Post-2022 Moldova: Neutrality or NATO?

Since 2022, Moldova has intensified its efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration, with a particular focus on EU membership while maintaining its constitutional neutrality on NATO. In a landmark move, Moldova held a referendum on October 20, 2024, to enshrine EU membership in its constitution, with the "Yes" vote narrowly winning at 50.35% (Tanas 2024). However, the process was marred by allegations of Russian interference, with reports that pro-Russian actors engaged in "vote-buying schemes" to sway the result (Moody 2024).

Although NATO membership remains off the table due to Moldova's neutral status, President Maia Sandu has suggested potential discussions about joining "a larger alliance"—specifically, the NATO alliance (Lynch 2023). Meanwhile, the unresolved Transnistrian conflict continues to destabilize Moldova. The breakaway region of Transnistria (TDR) has faced severe hardship after Russia's Gazprom halted gas supplies on January 1, 2024, causing a humanitarian crisis and forcing the shutdown of cryptocurrency mining, one of the last remaining economic lifelines for the region (Jayanti 2025). In essence, Moldova has chosen a path toward the European Union rather than the NATO alliance, reflecting Chisinau's prioritization of economic security over military defense.

2022: Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The second phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War, beginning in February 2022, with the Russian ground invasion of eastern Ukraine being the prime example of how to ensure a Russian provocation to Euro-Atlantic integration. As of the writing of this study, the Russo-Ukrainian War continues till today, with many facts, figures, and results still obscured by the smoke of the fire or buried under the rubble of the war. For this reason, the analysis of the post-2022 Ukrainian position will only discuss the ostensible causes of the invasion and the events that transpired into 2023. The goal of this section is to demonstrate the complete inverse of the Azerbaijani case, that is, an exemplar of how the "Russians never leave" and instead, returned with a revanchist vengeance.

This analysis will revisit Nigel Walker's report, *Conflict in Ukraine: A Timeline (2014 - Eve of 2022 Invasion)*, and primarily draw from Qaisrani, Qazi, and Abbas's article, "A Geopolitical War in Europe: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Its Implications," to frame the 2022 invasion as a broader proxy war between the Euro-Atlantic bloc and Russia. It will argue that Ukraine's NATO aspirations served as a catalyst for the Kremlin's intensified efforts to consolidate control over its 'near abroad.'

In the months leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, tensions escalated as Ukraine pursued closer ties with NATO despite Russia's

stark warnings. By mid-November 2021, "nearly 100,000 Russian soldiers [were] massed" near Ukraine's borders (Walker 2023, 27), signaling an imminent threat. Russia continued its military buildup, as it "started to deploy its troops with military weapons along its border with Ukraine in November 2021 and kept dispatching its forces to Belarus and Russian-occupied Crimea in the following months" (Qaisrani et al. 2023, 7). Meanwhile, the Kremlin demanded a legally binding guarantee that "Ukraine will never gain NATO membership and NATO will give up any military activity in eastern Europe and Ukraine" (Walker 2023, 28).

In response, the Euro-Atlantic bloc condemned Russian aggression, with the British Foreign Secretary stating, "NATO is a defensive alliance and Ukraine continues to show commendable restraint in the face of Russian provocation and aggression" (Ibid.). Despite diplomatic efforts, President Putin moved forward with his plans, recognizing "the self-proclaimed independence of two Ukraine states: Donetsk and Luhansk" and ordering Russian troops into Ukraine for "'Peacekeeping' work" (Qaisrani et al. 2023, 7). Shortly after, on February 24, 2022, Putin declared a "'Special Military Operation' in the major cities of Ukraine," launching air raids and widespread attacks on Kyiv and other key locations (Ibid.).

The invasion devastated Ukraine's sovereignty, with Russia quickly seizing key territories, including Mariupol, where "after resistance of three months, Mariupol surrendered to Russia" (Qaisrani et al. 2023, 8). The humanitarian toll was severe, with over four million Ukrainians fleeing to Europe by March 2022, marking "the largest Refugee Crisis since World War II" (Ibid.). However, Ukraine's situation shifted as Western nations provided substantial military and humanitarian aid, allowing Ukrainian forces to push back Russian advances. With this support, Ukraine launched a counteroffensive, regaining ground near Kharkiv and other strategic areas (Ibid., 8). Meanwhile, Russia attempted to exploit divisions in NATO and the EU, seeking to "weaken NATO" and gain strategic advantages through political discord (Ibid., 10).

Despite the ongoing conflict, two key lessons can be drawn: (1) Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership, intended as a safeguard against Russian domination, instead served as a catalyst for the Kremlin's occupation of nearly a quarter of its territory and the long-term entrenchment of Russian-backed statelets; (2) Ukraine's full alignment with the Euro-Atlantic bloc ultimately dragged it into a proxy war between NATO and Russia, leaving it in a far more precarious geostrategic position than before 2022. To put it plainly, Ukraine is an example of how to keep Russia in its midst.

2024: Russian Withdrawal from Azerbaijan

Finally, in the shadow of the dark and doomed trajectories of the GU(A)M, Azerbaijan not only remained stable during this period, but came out victorious. After the 2020 Karabakh War, Azerbaijan liberated many of the occupied territories of Karabakh, with one exception: the former territories of the autonomous oblast of Karabakh. Remaining under control of Armenian separatists, the ceasefire allowed for

free travel between Armenia proper and the separatist enclave, as well as the previously mentioned Russian peacekeepers. Therefore, Azerbaijan had one objective: regaining its sovereignty. This objective, although not explicitly planned or stated, would require two means: (1) acquiring the rest of Karabakh, that is, resolving the conflict altogether; and (2) removing the Russian peacekeepers to create an uninterrupted, unencumbered, and unified Azerbaijani republic. In this section, the events between 2023 and 2024 illustrate how Azerbaijan managed to remove Russian peacekeeping troops from its territory.

For the purpose of expedience, this analysis will draw solely from Nazrin Gadimova's article "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the Shadow of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" given its clear expression of how Azerbaijan manipulated a distracted Russia and ascending Turkish and Euro-Atlantic presence in the conflict to rid itself of Russian peacekeepers.

Azerbaijan's ability to force a Russian withdrawal from Karabakh and fully reclaim the region was a result of its methodical, incremental approach—often described as a "salami-slicing" strategy—where it progressively pushed for new concessions and tested Russia's willingness to intervene. The Second Karabakh War restored Azerbaijani control over the territories surrounding Karabakh but left key issues unresolved, such as the continued existence of the unrecognized 'Artsakh' Republic and the presence of Russian peacekeepers (Gadimova 2023, 1). Despite Azerbaijan's decisive military victory, the 2020 ceasefire agreement brokered by Moscow placed Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, limiting Baku's ability to immediately assert full control (Gadimova 2023, 6). However, Azerbaijan began challenging this arrangement soon after, slowly escalating measures that eroded the Russian presence and undermined the authority of the separatist government.

One of the first major moves came with Azerbaijan's efforts to isolate Karabakh from Armenia through control over key transit routes. The Azerbaijani government justified its increasing restrictions on the Lachin corridor—the primary link between Armenia and Karabakh—by arguing that Armenia had already violated the 2020 ceasefire agreement by resisting the implementation of Article 9, which called for the unimpeded movement between Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave (Gadimova 2023, 12). In April 2023, Azerbaijan escalated this pressure by setting up a checkpoint on the Lachin road, directly contravening the ceasefire terms that placed this route under Russian protection (Ibid., 12). This move effectively allowed Azerbaijan to control the flow of goods and people into Karabakh, increasing its leverage over the remaining Armenian population, and further diminishing the role of Russian peacekeepers.

Azerbaijan's next decisive step came in September 2023, when it launched a rapid military operation aimed at dissolving the 'Artsakh' Republic. The offensive lasted only one day but resulted in the deaths of at least 200 people and triggered the mass exodus of nearly the entire Armenian population from Karabakh (Gadimova 2023, 14). Russia, despite being formally responsible for protecting the population under the 2020

ceasefire agreement, remained passive during the operation, significantly damaging its credibility as a security guarantor in the region and as the leader of CSTO (Ibid., 14-15). Following the Azerbaijani assault, Karabakh's Armenian authorities surrendered, agreeing to a ceasefire that stipulated the full disarmament of separatist forces and the dissolution of their self-proclaimed government by January 1, 2024 (Ibid., 14).

With the Armenian population gone and no remaining armed resistance, Azerbaijan moved to finalize its control by pressuring Russia to withdraw its peacekeeping forces entirely. Baku's ability to force Moscow's hand was aided by Russia's own shifting priorities—its ongoing front Ukraine had stretched its military thin, making the South Caucasus a lesser priority (Ibid., 7). In April 2024, Russia formally announced the withdrawal of its peacekeeping contingent from Karabakh, marking the final step in Azerbaijan's incremental strategy to dismantle all remaining obstacles to its full control (Ibid., 15). Alongside this withdrawal, Russia also agreed to remove its border guards from Zvartnots Airport and Armenia's border with Azerbaijan, signaling the broader rollback of Moscow's influence in the region (Ibid., 15).

Azerbaijan's reclamation of Karabakh was not the result of a single event but rather a carefully orchestrated series of actions: Step 1, isolating Karabakh through the Lachin checkpoint; Step 2, launching a swift military operation to dissolve the separatist government; and then Step 3, pushing for Russia's full withdrawal, thereby ensuring that no external force would stand in the way of its complete consolidation of the region.

It is important to note, however, that Azerbaijan had nearly a decade to study the challenges faced by other GUAM states—starting with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War—as they contended with Russia's 'near abroad' policy aimed at destabilizing GUAM members amid their efforts of Euro-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, the events of 2024 in Karabakh were the first time "Russian peacekeepers left out of their own volition, not kicked out, from a conflict they were sent to monitor" (Valiyev 2024).

Conclusion

In sum, this section outlined the deterioration of GUAM's cooperation and objectives, as well as the individual conflicts faced by its member states. What was initially envisioned as a framework for regional collaboration and eventual Euro-Atlantic integration instead devolved into nearly three decades of unfulfilled promises, declarations that were seemingly never put into practice, and annual summits where leaders merely reiterated the same principles without meaningful progress.

It is little surprise, then, that the literature on Eastern European and Eurasian multilateralism rarely mentions GUAM: it had been subsumed by the weight and power of the increasingly antagonistic, and ever-expanding Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs. However, despite often being labeled as 'defunct,' GUAM still served one function: it was a tool, indeed a testing ground, by which Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova jointly launched their path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. In this sense, the

trajectory of GUAM reflects that of its member states in their integration efforts with the EU and NATO—ultimately, one of limited success.

Likewise, through the GUAM comparative framework, the Kremlin's forefold attempt at keeping its foothold in its neighborhood has been illuminated. After nearly a decade, GUAM has effectively split into two distinct trajectories: GU(A)M, the states that most advanced their Euro-Atlantic alignment, but were victim to Russian entrenchment as a result; and Azerbaijan, the exception that maintained a strong Euro-Atlantic cooperation, but was able to resolve its conflict while removing Russian presence. So, beyond their respective conflicts and alignments, what made GU(A)M the rule and Azerbaijan the exception? The following two chapters will explore the factors that contributed to this divergence.

Chapter 5: Comparative Analysis of GU(A)M

After examining the trajectories of GUAM member states chronologically, it is now essential to analyze them qualitatively. If Azerbaijan is truly an 'exception' to the GU(A)M rule, this distinction must be justified and clarified through comparative analysis. As such, this section will apply the three factors—Azerbaijan's positive relations with the Kremlin, economic independence, and foreign security guarantees—to Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, respectively. By assessing whether these factors are present in the other three cases, this analysis will substantiate Azerbaijan's exceptionality. While numerous other factors, such as geostrategic location and natural resources, have influenced Russia's entrenchment in the GUAM states—particularly in Azerbaijan, given Baku's vast oil reserves—the three factors outlined here are the most decisive in enabling Azerbaijan to maintain its strategic independence.

First, it is essential to define the three key factors and explain why they are necessary for maintaining strategic independence:

1. Regime Relations

Does the head of state or leadership maintain a positive or amicable relationship with the Kremlin, particularly with President Vladimir Putin? While full alignment with Russia often results in dependency, maintaining a functional and pragmatic relationship

with Moscow can help avoid direct antagonism. This dynamic is shaped by public statements or policies that either criticize or praise Russia, as well as regime types that the Kremlin perceives as favorable or hostile. Evidence of this can be found in interviews, speeches, or official statements made by either regime.

The concept of "state personhood" is especially relevant in authoritarian governance, wherein "intentional action and humanlike feelings and relations, including trust" shapes the sovereign's foreign policy (Ku and Mitzen 2022, 800). Or, during periods of conflict, can contribute to "probability of war or peace between two nations" (Kelman 1970, 4). Vladimir Putin exemplifies this mindset, as demonstrated in a 2018 interview with Andrei Kondrashov. When asked: "What is impossible for you to forgive?," Putin coldly responded, "Betrayal" ("2018 Video Resurfaces" 2023). This remark can be understood as a reference to the Euro-Atlantic's failure to uphold its alleged promise not to expand NATO east of Germany in 1991, as well as the perceived defection of Moscow's neighbors toward NATO.

2. Economic Independence

A state's level of economic independence from other great powers, particularly the European Union, plays a significant role in shaping its strategic trajectory. This includes foreign assistance, financial support, or trade relationships that make the state's markets and economic stability reliant on the EU. While economic dependence does not directly dictate a state's decisions, it influences its sovereignty in two key ways.

First, economic dependence often paves the way for security dependence. States pursuing EU membership typically align their national security doctrines with the Euro-Atlantic bloc, as seen with Georgia and Ukraine seeking EU and NATO membership simultaneously. Second, from the Kremlin's perspective, economic integration into EU markets inevitably leads to security integration, posing a threat to Russia's 'near abroad.' This concern was exemplified by the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which preceded the outbreak of the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian War.

3. Security Guarantees

The state's receipt of security guarantees or formal alliance agreements with other powers is a key factor in its protection from potential Russian aggression. These security arrangements can compel an allied state, or a consortium of allies, to intervene directly or indirectly in the event of a conflict, escalating tensions into a confrontation between the allies and the Kremlin.

Russia's 'near abroad' policy aims to prevent its neighbors from receiving such protection from the Euro-Atlantic bloc. This is driven by two main concerns: (1) if its neighbors join NATO, under the infamous Article 5, "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all," which would trigger a collective defense response and force NATO into a confrontation with Russia ("Collective defence and Article 5" 2023); and (2) NATO membership requires integrating the state's territory into NATO's military structure, leading to the stationing of NATO troops and weaponry along what could be Russia's

borders—one of the justifications Russia provided for its 2022 "special military operation" in eastern Ukraine.

The three factors directly correspond with the traditional three levels of IR: leadership relations align with the individual level, economic independence to the state level, and security guarantees to the systemic level. Together, they provide comprehensive assurances of strategic independence crossing diverse alliances, regions, and systems of governance. However, the GUAM members states of today and of pre-2008 look far different, and therefore require time-sensitive analysis. Given that all GUAM members have been impacted by Russia's "near abroad" policy between 2008 and 2024, this comparative analysis will focus on the broader timeframe in which their respective conflicts or Russian interventions occurred.

Georgia

Factor 1: Leadership Relations

If there were one post-Soviet regime that Putin had the most contempt for it would certainly be Saakashvili's Georgia. The effective leader of the 2003 Rose Revolution dedicated himself to "systematically dismantling inherited post-Soviet institutions" in exchange for a state apparatus that is more "recognizably democratic and European" (Driscoll and Maliniak 2019, 3). In opting out of the Eurasian system, Saakashvili sought to adopt a so-called "Western," or Euro-Atlantic, package. This included a "mix of security, economic, and right-related" reforms, with both the means and ends aimed at securing membership in NATO and the EU (Ibid., 7). It should, therefore, be no surprise that Saakashvili's swift and severe pivot toward the Euro-Atlantic bloc made him one of Putin's primary targets.

Saakashvili's relationship with Putin was marked by both personal and ideological disdain, particularly in the context of the Russo-Georgian War. Most notably, amid the fighting, Putin not only told then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy that he would hang Saakashvili "by the testicles," but later remarked in a televised question-and-answer session that he hoped to see Saakashvili "hanged by one of his body parts" ("Putin makes crude outburst" 2008). This characteristically strongman rhetoric stemmed from Putin's deep aversion to diplomatic inconsistency, or, in his words, "betrayal."

For instance, during a pre-war meeting with Saakashvili, Putin urged him not to resolve the issues of "Tskhinvali and Abkhazia by force," to which Saakashvili agreed, stating he would "never do this" ("Putin on Saakashvili" 2020). However, he later contradicted this promise during his infamous 2008 rally speech, declaring that the occupied regions would be taken back "whatever the cost" (McDermott and Morozov 2008, 246).

Saakashvili, for his part, had an equally strong distaste for Putin's regime. In a 2007 interview, he criticized Russia for having a "problem with the freedom of press," a

"problem with democracy and security," and a government in which "officials regularly take bribes and are totally corrupt" ("Saakashvili Angry over Putin's" 2007).

Factor 2: Economic Dependence

Georgia's pro-European policies continued beyond 2008, making relations with the EU essential to its survival—for better or worse. Although Saakashvili left office after serving two consecutive terms and was barred from reelection in 2013, his legacy paved the way for EU integration through the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA) of 2014. The agreement did not just link Georgia to European markets but also bound it to European policy itself. The AA effectively made Georgia dependent not on European markets, but European policy itself, due to: integration, such that Georgia must "establish gradually and converge its economic, tax and financial regulations to EU regulations"; and reformation, for which Article 280 dictates Georgia will "carry out the principles of good governance in the tax area, such as transparency, exchange of information and fair tax competition" (Chagelishvili-Agladze et. al. 2014, 40). In essence, Georgia's path to "economic reform" and "good governance" served as a mechanism to Europeanize Tbilisi's regime in the image of Brussels' Eurocratic structure.

As a result, the EU became the largest "provider of financial assistance" to Georgia, aiming, in the words of Brussels, to "support Georgia's development and alignment with EU acquis and standards"—in other words, to shape Georgia's policies and governance in line with the Euro-Atlantic bloc. By 2024, the EU had also become Georgia's "largest trade partner, largest investor," making a significant portion of the country's economy dependent on Europe ("The EU and Georgia" 2024, 1). Georgia became both monetarily and structurally reliant on the European economy.

Factor 3: Security Guarantees

Georgia was not part of any formal alliance structures within this period of conflict, which is evidently why Russia was so capable of attacking Georgia. Membership into NATO would have averted such a response, but the accession process was too late. Despite cheerleading Europeanization in the Caucasus, the Georgian government also could not secure defense guarantees from Brussels during its war with Russia.

Moreover, President Saakashvili believed that the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest was a "strategic mistake," for not readily providing Georgia a MAP and instead tabling the issue for December, thereby not giving the process enough time until a foreseeable Russian retaliation.

According to Saakashvili, NATO's sluggish push for Georgian accession "amounted to telling Russia: do something before December, otherwise in December Georgia may get MAP" ("Saakashvili's Account of Events" 2008).

Ukraine

Factor 1: Leadership Relations

The Ukrainian case is unique in two ways: (1) the Kremlin had to face relations with two different regime types and leaders, one ostensibly pro-Russian and the other, pro-European; and (2) unlike the other GUAM member states, Ukraine presents the only case in which the head of state actively requested that Russia directly intervene in the conflict in order to topple the incoming regime.

The controversies over whether President Viktor Yanukovych was pro-Russian or merely "neutral" can be easily dispelled by the patronal language he used when speaking about Vladimir Putin. After the Maidan protests ousted his government, corruption charges and threats to his life forced him to flee to Rostov-on-Don in Russia. In exile, he stated at a press conference that "Russia should, and is obliged, to act"—that is, to intervene in what he saw as a "bandit coup"—particularly because he understood "the character of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin" (Watkins 2014). For Yanukovych, Putin was the guarantor of his regime, making it all the more shocking to him that Putin remained "restrained and keeping silent" (Ibid.).

Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul took note of this sudden fraternal break, pointing out that Yanukovych was "in Rostov-on-Don and not in Moscow and that he has had a phone call with President Putin and not met" (Ibid.). From an outsider's perspective, there were clear "signs that [Yanukovych] is not in good standing with his current host"—in other words, he had been put into diplomatic "isolation" by Putin (Ibid.).

Putin's esteem for Yanukovych could thus be categorized as negative or, at best, negative-neutral. In a March 2014 interview discussing Russia's intervention in Crimea, Putin repeatedly emphasized that Yanukovych was the "legitimate" president of Ukraine. However, he also made it clear that while "[he is] not saying this was good or bad, just stating the fact," Yanukovych had ultimately "handed over power," conceding to opposition demands and agreeing to their administered elections—effectively betraying Putin's interests in Ukraine ("Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions" 2014).

Putin's regard for Yanukovych as an individual was equally cold-blooded. He bluntly stated that his Ukrainian counterpart "[had] no political future, and [he had] told him so," making it clear that Yanukovych was of no further use to the Kremlin. Putin further justified Russia's protection of him on "purely humanitarian grounds," cynically remarking that "death is the easiest way for getting rid of a legitimate president" (Ibid.).

Yanukovych's pro-European replacement, Petro Poroshenko, was no better in Putin's eyes. In fact, he openly advocated for stronger Western sanctions on Russia in a 2014 Washington Post article. First, Poroshenko blamed Russia for downing the now-infamous Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, asserting that "people everywhere finally began to understand what is at stake in Ukraine." Second, he accused Moscow of

directly fueling the war, stating that "Russia's behavior [had] only worsened," as Ukraine fought against "Moscow-backed separatists." Lastly, he characterized Putin's regime as "playing a dangerously irresponsible game" that could spiral into a full-blown separatist war (Poroshenko 2014). It stands to reason, then, that the leader of what Putin saw as a "bandit coup" became a *persona non grata*—especially as he lambasted Putin's regime in a major international publication. This represented a complete reversal from Ukraine's previously submissive and diplomatic parlance toward Russia.

Factor 2: Economic Dependence

Ukraine's growing dependence on Western markets amid its war with Russia was, in fact, part of the Kremlin's justification for intervention. Even before the conflict erupted in August, the Ukrainian Rada was in the process of voting on the country's Association Agreement (AA) with the EU—a deal that President Yanukovych ultimately refused to sign for "reasons of national security," namely, fear of Russian reprisal (Kononczuk 2013).

The Ukrainian people overwhelmingly supported the AA, as evidenced by the Maidan protests, which not only rejected Yanukovych's decision but also set Ukraine on a more aggressive, zealous path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, Ukraine's economic dependence on the West was not an immediate reality at the time but rather a *perceived* threat—one that challenged the Kremlin's vision of a Eurasian bloc system and, in turn, increasing its willingness to intervene.

Yanukovych's hysterical rhetoric about a Eurocratic "bandit coup" capturing the government was certainly overblown, but it was rooted in real concerns about how Ukraine's Association Agreement (AA) with the EU would disrupt Kyiv's already fragile economic neutrality. The AA reaffirmed "cooperation with Ukraine in the fields of security, notably with regard to conflict prevention, crisis management" effectively making it an association of equal security and economic interests (Soroka 2022, 129). Moreover, many experts predicted that the agreement would worsen "Ukraine's economic and social situation" while offering no clear pathway to EU membership or even candidate status (Ibid., 130). This combination—open economic markets, and security integration without membership guarantees—placed Ukraine in a veritable Faustian bargain, caught between two competing blocs without the full protections or benefits of either.

Under the new regime, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) was officially ratified on July 11, 2017, validating many of the Eurasian bloc's economic concerns about Ukraine's shift westward. Until 2014, Ukraine's economy had been heavily dependent on trade with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), particularly its "market for high value-added Ukrainian goods" (Soroka 2022, 135). However, following the agreement's implementation, Ukraine's Europeanization led to a "sharp decline in trade with Russia" and a broader loss of "significant volumes of trade with the CIS countries" (Ibid., 135–139). Kyiv's government suddenly became beholden

to European economic policy, making EU standards national ones, and with an economy that could not keep up with Brussel's, forcing Kyiv's economy into "unequal conditions with the EU" (Ibid., 147-149).

Factor 3: Security Guarantees

Ukraine, like Georgia, was unsuccessful in its bid to join NATO and therefore does not receive security guarantees from the Euro-Atlantic bloc or any other power. While the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) outlined security cooperation and conflict management with the EU, it explicitly did not "contain an obligation for the Union or its Member States to provide collective security guarantees or other military aid or assistance to Ukraine" (Soroka 2022, 129). As a result, Kyiv lacked—and continues to lack—any formal security guarantees, leaving it vulnerable to Russian aggression, as demonstrated by the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Moldova

Factor 1: Leadership Relations

The Moldovan case follows an opposite trajectory to Ukraine, shifting from a pro-European regime to one that is ostensibly pro-Russian. Between 2014 and 2016, President Nicolae Timofti openly advocated for Moldova's European integration while positioning himself against the Kremlin. At a meeting of Southeast European states, Timofti declared that Moldova is "a European country and [their] people have European aspirations," emphasizing that his government preferred being "in the European family than in any other political conjunction"—a statement made just a year after Chişinău signed the Moldova-EU Association Agreement in July 2014 ("President Timofti" 2015). This push for Europeanization was accompanied by a strong denunciation of Russia, with Timofti warning that Moldova's "biggest danger was the 'Novorossiya plan' to rebuild the USSR," which, in his view, threatened to "wipe off the face of the earth" those who opposed it—namely, his own government (Rusica 2015). According to Timofti, Vladimir Putin "tried to treat [him] from a position of superiority" clearly because he did not acquiesce to the Kremlin's policies ("President Timofti" 2015).

The 2016 Moldovan elections, which brought pro-Russian President Igor Dodon to power, demonstrated that Putin would only support Moldova and engage in conflict mediation if the country aligned itself with the Eurasian bloc. In contrast to Timofti's staunch pro-European stance, Dodon expressed skepticism about Moldova's European future, stating in an interview that he did not believe "his country would ever become a member of the European Union" and that "Moldova is not ready itself" (Filatova and Rescheto 2018). Instead, he emphasized the necessity of balanced foreign policy, arguing that "Moldova can survive only if it has good relations with the West and the East" (Ibid.). On a personal level, Dodon maintained that he had "very good relations" with Vladimir Putin and suggested that Moldova's ability to advance conflict mediation with Russia depended on Putin's continued leadership (Ibid.). In turn, during a bilateral

meeting in 2019, Putin praised Dodon's policy of "stabilization"—a veiled reference to rolling back Moldova's European accession efforts—and remarked that every meeting with Dodon ended "always with a good result" ("Meeting with President of Moldova" 2019).

Factor 2: Economic Dependence

Moldova's economics is deeply strained, given that it is one of the poorest states in Europe, and simultaneously trading with the EU and Russia respectively. In 2014, trade with Russia was essential particularly in energy and petrochemicals. However, after the conclusion of the AA, trade with Russia reduced sharply, from 60% to only 14% by the end of 2014 (Parmentier 2023). The EU became the country's "main trading partner and investor," but this did not preclude Chisinau's dependence on remittances from Russia, which accounted for nearly 15% of the GDP (Ibid.) Brussels tried to reduce the dependence on Russian markets by: (1) expanding Moldovans access to migrant labor, with the "600,000 Moldovans [who] work abroad" moving to the Eurozone ("Moldovan President: We Prefer EU Orbit to Russia" 2015); and (2) disbursing Macro-Financial Aid (MFA) packages amounting to more than 100 million Euros by 2015 (Madatali and Jansen 2022, 11), thereby making this poor, agricultural state dependent on European bailouts.

The Kremlin immediately retaliated by imposing a trade embargo on Moldovan goods, particularly agricultural and wine products, devastating the country's exports, which had long depended on Eurasian markets. A state that had oscillated between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian alignments for three decades suddenly swung fully to the former, with "54.5 percent of all Moldovan trade" directed toward the EU and half a million Moldovans traveling freely to the bloc in 2014 ("Moldovan President: We Prefer EU Orbit to Russia" 2015).

Dodon was highly critical of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement (AA), arguing that opening Moldova's market to European goods would harm domestic manufacturing. More importantly, he viewed "those parts of the document pertaining to defense and military issues" as "vague," stressing that "Moldova is a neutral country that shouldn't be part of any bloc, including NATO" (Filatova and Rescheto 2018). In this sense, Dodon aligned with Putin's perspective that economic integration inevitably leads to security entanglements, warning that the AA would allow the Euro-Atlantic bloc to use Moldova "for military purposes" (Ibid).

Factor 3: Security Guarantees

Moldova is the only GUAM member whose constitution explicitly enshrines neutrality. Article 11 of the Moldovan Constitution "proclaims its permanent neutrality" and states that the country "does not accept the presence of any foreign military troops on its territory" ("Constitution of the Republic of Moldova" 1994). Such permanent neutrality legally bars Moldova from joining any collective security or alliance structure,

such as NATO. Although calls for amending Article 11 have gained traction amid Russia's threats following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova did not—nor does it currently—receive any formal security guarantees from other powers.

Conclusion

This section identifies the key factors contributing to GU(A)M's strategic vulnerability rather than its independence. The three factors analyzed not only span the three levels of IR analysis but also clarify the political (Factor 1), economic (Factor 2), and security (Factor 3) implications ensuring that the "Russians never leave." In summary, the findings of this comparative analysis are as follows:

1. *Leadership Relations*: GU(A)M regimes were all either antagonistic or ambivalent toward Putin during the heightened conflict or intervention. Even during times of regime transition and realignment, such as in Georgia, the Kremlin viewed the leaderships as appendages of the Euro-Atlantic bloc, serving its interests, or simply representing an anti-Russian and so-called 'Nazistic' doctrine as in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, the GU(A)M leadership had *neither* positive interpersonal relationships with Putin *nor* presented a favorable regime type practically to the Kremlin.

2. *Economic Independence*: All GU(A)M states exhibited some degree of economic dependence, particularly on the EU, which in turn influenced their security considerations. A key aspect of this dependence was the Association Agreements (AAs) with the EU. These agreements were either signed—quickly becoming targets of Russian disruption—or were in the process of ratification, leading to deteriorating relations with Moscow. These states were not economically independent at the time, nor are they today.

3. *Security Guarantees*: None of the GU(A)M states received security guarantees from other powers, despite Georgia and Ukraine actively seeking NATO membership. In fact, the prospect of NATO expansion was precisely the threat Russia perceived within its sphere of influence, making it a key driver of disruption. Moldova, however, stands as an exception due to its constitutionally mandated permanent neutrality. As a result, GU(A)M states lack formal foreign security guarantees.

Chapter 6: Azerbaijan as the Exception

Azerbaijan's exceptional ability to not only survive but also fully restore its national sovereignty in the midst of two warring alliances is often attributed—by scholars like Anar Valiyev of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy—to "75 percent luck and 25 percent skill" (Valiyev 2024). However, as this final chapter will demonstrate, that assessment is not fully accurate. While Azerbaijan benefited from political stability, geostrategic positioning, and vast natural resources, its success was equally driven by a regime skilled in diplomatic maneuvering. Unlike GU(A)M, which lacked the capacity to

secure and sustain the three essential factors for strategic independence, Azerbaijan not only maintained them but also crafted a uniquely sophisticated foreign policy.

Therefore, this chapter will evaluate whether Azerbaijan truly possesses the three factors for 'strategic independence.' Since the overarching hypothesis attributes Azerbaijan's exceptionalism to its foreign policy of 'pragmatic non-alignment'—and to the three factors that stem from this policy—this section offers a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of Baku's alignment strategy. This analysis will be primarily informed by interviews with Azerbaijani and regional experts, whose deep and often underappreciated insights shed new light on the significance of this South Caucasian state. As such, the analysis reflects the experts' diverse and converging viewpoints rather than my own interpretations.

Pragmatic Non-Alignment

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is as liminal as its identity—neither fully East nor West—deliberately and strategically undefined to avoid reprisals from either sphere of influence. However, Baku's non-aligned stance is far from passive; rather, it is a calculated approach that leverages Azerbaijan's petrochemical industry, trade routes, and relative stability to maximize its geopolitical position—what can be termed 'pragmatic non-alignment'. This strategy is fundamentally anchored in the following principle: "any bilateral relationship should not allow for the intervention of a third party"—meaning that Azerbaijan will not allow itself to be pulled apart by competing partners, even if they are in conflict (Mammadov 2024).

In the case of GU(A)M, Baku observed how their bilateral relations—particularly with the Euro-Atlantic bloc—were undermined by the Russian state seeking to disrupt ties between Brussels and its post-Soviet partners. Azerbaijan, in contrast, actively upheld its principle of non-interference in bilateral affairs, even among its closest allies—Israel and Turkey. For instance, during the 2011 Gaza flotilla crisis, when Turkey-Israel relations were at a diplomatic low point, Azerbaijan refused to allow tensions between the two to affect its own relationships with either party (Ibid.).

Alongside non-interference, the policy of pragmatic non-alignment consists of three key principles: hedging, non-alignment, and statecraft. These three principles, in turn, have enabled Azerbaijan to maintain a crucial position between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs—not as a target of domination, but as a bridge for cooperation.

Hedging

Azerbaijan's hedging strategy is a dual-edged sword—a policy of simultaneous engagement with and balancing against both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs. This tandem act seeks to cultivate a "friendly relationship" with both blocs (Wu 2017, 198). According to Wu's theory, Azerbaijan's "strategic triangle" with the two blocs can be characterized as a "romantic triangle," where both Brussels and the Kremlin attempt to

court Baku, often at the expense of each other's influence, yet to the benefit of Azerbaijan's growing regional importance (Ibid., 198).

Therefore, for Azerbaijan, this triangle is as much a game of gaining power as it is for either of the blocs. Following Russia's reactivation of its 'near abroad' campaign and subsequent disruption of Georgia in 2008, Azerbaijan made its objective abundantly clear: "Baku will not be a tool for a geopolitical game, nor against its neighbours" (Chiragov 2024).

1. *The National Interest*

The primary motivation for Azerbaijan, according to most of the experts interviewed, is its 'national interest'. In line with the realist school, Azerbaijan's 'national interest' is the maximization of power to ensure its survival in a divided and turbulent region. Azerbaijan's national interest is defined by "reaching accommodations with NATO and Russia, identifying points of commonality that don't cross redlines," not from a position of weakness, but as a matter of strategic choice (Krnjevic 2024).

To reiterate, this policy contrasts with Azerbaijan's original approach of Euro-Atlantic integration during the 1990s and early to mid-2000s, when it joined GUAM in hopes of securing autonomy from Russia through closer ties with the West. However, starting after 2008, Azerbaijan's foreign policy apparatus began repositioning the state as a 'delta of dialogue'—a balanced alignment between the two blocs that presents the country as neutral yet open to free enterprise. Farhad Mammadov of the Center for Studies of the South Caucasus emphasized that this does not mean Azerbaijan seeks to serve as a "bridge" or a "frontline" in the great power competition (Mammadov 2024). Rather, for Azerbaijan, it is "better to be a Switzerland"—a reliable neutral actor at the fault line of two major alliances. For both NATO and Russia, maintaining Azerbaijan as a "delta of dialogue" is important to maintain some conversation amid conflict. For instance, it allows President Putin to engage with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky—an exponent of the Euro-Atlantic bloc—via Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, due to Aliyev's relationships with both leaders (Ibid.). By doing so, Azerbaijan increases its value among the blocs, thereby securing its strategic position and overall security.

2. *Euro-Atlantic Skepticism*

The policy of non-alignment was also driven, in part, by credible doubt—if not outright mistrust—toward the Euro-Atlantic bloc's promises. Despite Baku's initial "Euro-Atlantic enthusiasm," reflected in its PfP membership and cooperation during the rise of GUAM, Azerbaijani leadership gradually realized that deeper Euro-Atlantic integration did not align with its national interest. Even after 2003, when Azerbaijan actively contributed to NATO missions in Iraq, or after the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline in 2006, which connected Caspian oil to Western markets, Azerbaijan "never really received anything in return," particularly given U.S. President George W. Bush's policy of disengagement from the Caucasus (Valiyev 2024).

Despite this, the Azerbaijani policy establishment continued to formally designate Euro-Atlantic integration as a "foreign policy priority," as outlined in the National Security Concept of Azerbaijan (Huseynov 2024). However, following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, Azerbaijan "understood it was wrong in ignoring Russian interests" in favor of Euro-Atlantic priorities (Chiragov 2024). While Euro-Atlantic integration remained a priority on paper, NATO members and the West "unanimously supported the territorial integrity of GUAM" but not "Azerbaijan in Karabakh," deepening Baku's skepticism toward Western commitments (Chiragov 2024).

3. Eurasian Skepticism

Azerbaijan was equally apathetic toward the Eurasian bloc, such that after the Second Karabakh War, it had "not taken any tangible steps toward the Eurasian bloc or its institutions" according to Vasif Huseynov of the Center of Analysis of International Relations of Azerbaijan (Huseynov 2024). The supposed Eurasian skepticism was based upon two considerations: (1) despite rolling back Euro-Atlantic integration, Baku sought to "preserve neutrality as much as possible" as to not concern Brussels; and (2) Azerbaijan viewed Eurasian institutions, particularly the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as a "failure", especially with a sanction-ridden Russia at its helm (Ibid.). In this sense, hedging was more of a reactive measure than a proactive strategy—Azerbaijan would pivot to one bloc until the other signaled mistrust, prompting a recalibration.

Non-Alignment

After a decade of full Euro-Atlantic alignment, Azerbaijan officially joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011. While NAM was widely regarded as a "dead organization," Azerbaijan played a key role in reviving it by injecting substantial funding and resources, quickly positioning Baku as a leading member (Mammadov 2024). Formal non-alignment not only helped Azerbaijan avoid reprisals from both the EU and Russia for perceived alliance shifts but also served ulterior strategic objectives: according to a minister in Aliyev's cabinet who proposed joining NAM, membership allowed Baku to "reach out to member countries to vote in favor of Azerbaijan in the UNGA over the Karabakh issue" (Ibid.); and (2) Azerbaijan's formal commitment to neutrality helped mitigate anti-Azerbaijani media narratives in the West, reducing external pressure on Baku (Huseynov 2024).

Moreover, Azerbaijan's NAM membership was a part of what can be referred to as 'multilateral instrumentalization,' wherein Baku joined several multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Organization of Turkic States to become more "valuable" and "visible" to the international community and other great powers (Valiyev 2024). Thus, Azerbaijan wanted to be in as many organizations as possible to act as a security insurance, whereby members would come to the defense of Baku under foreign threats (Valiyev 2024). In a sense, Azerbaijan

wanted to become "some kind of Singapore or Oman" in Eurasia (Ibid.). However, President Ilham Aliyev viewed little intrinsic value in multilateralism other than its "symbolic" and "security" and rhetorical advantages. For Baku, multilateral engagement primarily created entanglements that could bolster Azerbaijan's security and provide platforms for advancing Azerbaijani narratives on the global stage (Ibid.).

Azerbaijan's reluctance to fully align with any single bloc stems from a fundamental belief that it "does not see itself as having any friends" beyond its formal allies, as noted by Damjan Krnjević of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (Krnjević 2024). This underlying skepticism reinforces Baku's commitment to pragmatic non-alignment, ensuring that Azerbaijan remains strategically flexible while safeguarding its sovereignty.

Statecraft

However, what truly sets Azerbaijan apart is its mastery of statecraft—an area in which it excels par excellence. Unlike the Central Asian states and certainly the GU(A)M countries, Azerbaijan's level of statecraft is practiced "more supremely [in Baku] than in any other region of Eurasia" (Krnjević 2024).While statecraft is an inherently ambiguous concept, it can be understood as the interpersonal and intergovernmental tact exercised by leadership during bilateral negotiations. In this regard, President Ilham Aliyev has been "teaching a masterclass" in diplomacy, particularly in the complex and often volatile post-Soviet geopolitical landscape (Ibid.). Aliyev was not only "at the right side" of his father, Heydar Aliyev, throughout his decade-long presidency, learning how to "preside over a security state," but he is also "a student of negotiations and human nature", as characterized by Anar Valiyev (Valiyev 2024).

Armed with these three principles, Azerbaijan's foreign policy was well-positioned to counter Russia's 'near abroad' campaign effectively. The principles of pragmatic non-alignment, particularly practiced in Azerbaijani statecraft, played a direct role in securing the three key factors of strategic independence. The following sections will thus examine Azerbaijan's successes in maintaining these three factors, demonstrating how its alliance strategies debunked the "Russians never leave" myth.

Factor 1: Leadership Relations

President Aliyev's so-called "masterclass in statecraft" has undeniably served Baku well, particularly in fostering a nuanced understanding of the Kremlin and President Vladimir Putin. While the GU(A)M states not only became increasingly wary of engagement with Russia but also adopted openly hostile stances toward their former occupier, Azerbaijan remained resolute in its commitment to diplomatic flexibility—engaging with all regional actors irrespective of size, power, or historical grievances. From Azerbaijan's perspective, navigating its relationship with Russia is a three-part act: maintaining stable and functional ties with the Kremlin to avoid unnecessary confrontations, fostering a working personal relationship with Putin to

ensure direct and effective diplomacy, and consistently presenting Azerbaijan as a reliable and pragmatic actor, capable of balancing interests without compromising its sovereignty.

Regime Relations

Whereas some of the GU(A)M countries continued to see Russia's an existential threat that needed to be dealt with by their supposed "friend"—the Euro-Atlantic bloc, especially NATO—Azerbaijan recognized Russia as its neighbor whose hostile intent could be mitigated (Krnjevic 2024). In line with the principle of non-interference, Azerbaijan did so by working with Russia directly rather than looking to NATO or other alliances for deterrence. Specifically, it used a combination diplomatic persuasion and fulfilling Russia's neighborly expectations:

1. *Diplomatic Persuasion*

During the Second Karabakh War, according to Fuad Chiragov of the Center of Analysis of International Relations, Azerbaijan tried to persuade the Kremlin that its war with the Armenian separatists was a means of liberating its lands, such that it would not "harm Russian relations in the region" (Chiragov 2024). Instead of blaming Russia for supporting or funding the Armenian separatist forces directly, nor employing rhetorical retaliation by stating Baku would join NATO as with the case of the other GU(A)M states like Georgia, it simply made clear that liberation did not mean "geopolitical competition" (Ibid.). Baku's leadership further presented any supposed Russian intervention as worsening Moscow's reputation among Azerbaijanis worldwide, especially given Azerbaijani economic migration into Russia as well as the large Azerbaijani diaspora residing within the broader post-Soviet sphere.

In this sense, Azerbaijan could be regarded as the "anti-Ukraine" or the "anti-Georgia", in that the Aliyev regime acknowledges Russia's concerns as genuine and recognizes that it exists in a turbulent neighborhood as a "keystone" state (Krnjevic 2024). Georgia and Ukraine, by contrast, operated under the belief that they could survive without Russia—and indeed, they could, given their economic and security dependence on the EU and NATO—but what they failed to understand was that they could not afford to "ignore" Russia (Ibid.). During the "unipolar moment," the embrace of Euro-Atlanticism in Eurasia coincided with Russia's decline into a Western backwater, fueling a sense of estrangement and grievance among the Russian leadership. As Moscow pursued its 'near abroad' expansion, it did so with the memory of its neighbors' attempts to sideline it.

Azerbaijan, however, took a different approach: it harbors no "illusions" about Russia nor any "cause for response," and as a result, does not allow relations to deteriorate (Ibid.). For instance, according to Anar Valiyev, since 2008, Azerbaijan has purchased nearly $5 billion worth of Russian military weaponry—not for their strategic superiority, but rather as "lip service" to the Kremlin, signaling that Azerbaijan is not anti-Russian, especially when compared to GU(A)M (Valiyev 2024).

With these considerations in mind, and based on insights from the experts interviewed, Azerbaijan maintains "neutral-friendly"—if not fully "friendly"—relations with Russia, albeit with some pretensions. The "neutral-friendly" classification is the more widely accepted view, as most Azerbaijanis believe that Russia cannot be fully trusted, given nearly two centuries of domination over Azerbaijani territory. Therefore, "pretending" to like Russia and avoiding provocation is a top priority, particularly in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the vulnerability of the Bay of Baku (Valiyev 2024).

2. *Expectations*

Another key concept in understanding this relationship is the notion of "expectations"—specifically, what the Kremlin demands from its neighbors. These expectations can be categorized into two levels: "minimum expectations", which require states to avoid joining antagonistic alliances like NATO and to ensure their territory is not used against Russia; and "maximum expectations", which involve full alignment with Russia, including membership in Eurasian institutions such as the EAEU and CSTO (Chiragov 2024; Krnjević 2024). In this regard, Azerbaijan fulfills Russia's minimum expectations by refraining from pursuing NATO membership while simultaneously keeping its distance from the failing Eurasian alliance system. So, whereas the GU(A)M states fail to meet any of Russia's great power criteria for good neighborliness, Azerbaijan at least does the bare minimum.

However, in reality, Azerbaijan went beyond merely fulfilling Russia's minimum expectations. In February 2022, just two days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Baku signed the "Declaration on Allied Interaction" with Moscow. While this agreement did not commit Azerbaijan to a formal alliance, it institutionalized a level of understanding and expectation-setting that the other GU(A)M states failed to achieve. The declaration outlined three key principles: interactions would be based upon the "mutual respect for independence, state sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the state borders"; both states could pursue an "independent foreign policy aimed at protecting their national interests"; and the two parties would "develop bilateral military-political cooperation that meets national interests and is not directed against third countries" ("Declaration on Allied Interaction" 2022). Thus, while the GU(A)M states failed at finding accommodations and common understanding with Russia, Azerbaijan not only did it but got it signed on paper.

Head of State Relations

This principle of persuasion and courtship also applies to the personal relationship of the two heads of state, particularly Putin's regard for Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Truly, in comparison to Putin's disdain for most of the GU(A)M

states' leaders, even to the tutelage of Ukraine's Yanukovych, Aliyev leadership stands out as uniquely favorable to Putin.

1. *Favorability of Aliyev*

Putin generally favors Aliyev's regime due to the way he administers both his state and foreign policy apparatus, particularly in contrast to what he perceives as the overly "weak" and "erratic" GU(A)M states. One principle that often determines Putin's favor toward a neighboring regime is "predictability." As Huseynov and others note, "so long as Aliyev is in power there will be no change to the foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia." This stability is largely due to the Azerbaijani Constitution, which grants the president near-full directorial powers over the country's foreign policy. Given Aliyev's lengthy tenure, he provided Putin with a "sense of predictability and consistency" that no other GU(A)M state could offer (Mammadov 2024). Despite Aliyev being "hard to negotiate with," once an agreement is reached, the other party "can be assured the promise will be taken forever" (Mammadov 2024). Considering Putin's well-documented aversion to betrayal and sudden anti-Russian turnarounds under the Saakashvilli and Poroshenko administrations, Aliyev's Azerbaijan presents itself as a reliable neighbor—one that must be treated accordingly.

2. *Putin's Personality and History*

There is also an often-overlooked factor when analyzing the Putin regime: Putin's personality and even his childhood experiences, which may shape the way he conducts foreign policy. Beyond the speculation that he likens himself to Peter the Great or remains a KGB officer at heart, Putin is, first and foremost, a strongman. He measures his own worth—and the worth of other heads of state—through the projection of strength. According to Valiyev, Putin's psychological preference is the "macho style," meaning he "despises weakness." For this reason, he respects leaders such as Ilham Aliyev, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, and Viktor Orbán of Hungary, whom he sees as strong enough not only to maintain cordial relations with Russia but also to meet with him face-to-face despite his diplomatic isolation and alienation (Valiyev 2024). Thus, despite both Putin and Aliyev being assertive statesmen, after meetings, they can always "find an accommodation," walking away with the understanding that the other will uphold their promises (Krnjevic 2024).

Then, of course, there are deeper psychological and personal factors that, while inferred, undoubtedly influence Putin's favoritism toward Aliyev. Chief among them is Putin's "immense respect for Heydar Aliyev," Ilham Aliyev's father, who, before becoming the third president of Azerbaijan, was a prominent and well-regarded figure within the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Given that Putin himself was a KGB colonel, he deeply understands and relates to the political milieu that shaped the Aliyevs. This shared background fosters a certain level of mutual understanding and respect, as noted by some of the experts interviewed (Valiyev 2024; Chiragov 2024).

A more obscure yet significant factor is Putin's personal admiration for the Azerbaijani nation, which many trace back to his childhood. According to Chiragov,

Putin befriended a group of Azerbaijani students during his early years, and some of these friendships have endured to this day, subtly shaping his "attitude" toward Azerbaijan (Chiragov 2024). One particularly notable figure is Ilham Rahimov, a former classmate of Putin's in St. Petersburg. Their friendship has spanned over forty years, with Rahimov becoming a major Russian business and real estate mogul, as well as a key partner at the "*Kievskaya Ploshchad*" real estate group ("Russia's largest independent oil-processing plant" 2019). Alongside Rahimov, other Russian-Azerbaijani oligarchs like Telman Ismailov and God Nisanov hold influential positions within Putin's financial network. Their economic prominence and personal ties to the Russian leader reinforce Azerbaijan's strategic importance, making it a state that, for Putin, is worth protecting.

3. *Karabakh and Other Cases*

Aliyev's likeability, Putin's admiration for the Aliyev regime, and his broader affinity for Azerbaijan undoubtedly influenced Russia's restrained response to Baku's liberation of Karabakh. A frequently cited example is that, in contrast to Putin, much of Russia's security apparatus and the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs "does not like Azerbaijan," instead favoring Armenia as a more loyal and Christian ally in the South Caucasus (Chiragov 2024). This internal division played out during the Second Karabakh War, when members of Russia's security establishment reportedly urged Putin to intervene militarily and "punish" Azerbaijan. Some experts even suggest that Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Minister of Defense, or Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council, sought Putin's approval to launch a missile strike on Baku (Chiragov 2024; Valiyev 2024). This extreme scenario, however, did not materialize, likely due in part to Putin's unwillingness to take action against a state that is both strategically significant and personally important to him. It is important to note that such accounts remain unverified and are largely based on popular but unqualified rumors. Moreover, according to Valiyev, after 2018, such political disagreements between Putin and his security establishment would be highly improbable, as there is now "no distinction between Putin and the foreign policy apparatus" (Valiyev 2024).

In fact, some experts, such as Valiyev, suggest that the Second Karabakh War was an "agreed war" between Russia and Azerbaijan—meaning that its outcomes were pre-determined to prevent a total Azerbaijani victory and instead ensure a continued Russian presence in the region through the deployment of peacekeepers (Valiyev 2024). However, like other speculations surrounding Moscow's calculations during the war, this claim cannot be readily verified.

Putin's relationship with Aliyev further enabled Baku to pursue initiatives that other GU(A)M states could never undertake. One such project is the so-called "South-West Transport Corridor," a multimodal transit route linking India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Poland, providing an alternative trade network that completely bypasses Russia's transport routes (Shahbazov 2017). Although such a project would ostensibly undermine Russia's economic leverage in the region, Aliyev

successfully demonstrated that: (1) the initiative was entirely Baku's own, rather than one foisted on it by the Euro-Atlantic bloc; and (2) it would not directly harm Russia's interests (Mammadov 2024).

A very recent example that tests the strength of their personal relationship is the Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 crash on December 25, 2024, when a plane flying from Grozny, Russia, was proven to have been shot down by Russian "air defense" and was forced to make an emergency landing in Kazakhstan, resulting in the deaths of thirty-eight people ("Aviation experts say" 2024). Following a lackluster Russian investigation and an apparent attempt to conceal Moscow's involvement, President Aliyev issued an unexpectedly harsh and demanding response. He accused Russia of trying to "hush up" the crash and referred to the Kremlin's investigation as "delirious," making three demands: "First, the Russian side must apologize to Azerbaijan. Second, it must admit its guilt. Third, punish the guilty, bring them to criminal responsibility and pay compensation to the Azerbaijani state, the injured passengers, and crew members" ("Azerbaijan's president says crashed jetliner" 2024).

According to the Kremlin, Putin responded to these demands not by admitting responsibility, but with this solemn statement: Putin "apologized for the tragic incident that occurred in Russian airspace and once again expressed his deep and sincere condolences to the families of the victims and wished a speedy recovery to the injured" (Faulconbridge et al., 2024). While accepting responsibility was off the table for a leader trying to save face, apologizing for the attack is certainly remarkable. Moreover, Putin's reserved response to Aliyev's aggressive, if not targeted, insult toward the Kremlin is even more surprising. Had such condemnation come from leaders like Saakashvili, Zelensky, or Moldova's Sandu, it would have been immediately met with aggression by Putin. This, along with the other factors described, highlights the "friendly" understanding and agreement that the Russian and Azerbaijan leadership share.

Factor 2: Economic Independence

Azerbaijan's policy of 'partnership, but not integration' with the Euro-Atlantic extends to the European Union. Unlike Georgia and Ukraine, especially after 2022, which received support from the EU for membership applications, according to Aliyev, the union does not "wait for us" nor is "expecting" Azerbaijan to pursue membership (Chiragov 2024). Therefore, the basis of not zealously pursuing Europeanization is not to "humiliate ourselves" according to Chiragov. By humiliation, this refers to concerns that economic dependence on the European Union would: (1) negatively affect Azerbaijan's national sovereignty; (2) attach Azerbaijan to a bloc that it is skeptical of; and (3) disrupt the immense value the EU has for Baku as a partner but not an overlord.

National Sovereignty

Just as Azerbaijan's main motivation is the national interest, its main pursuit is maintaining its "national sovereignty." For this reason, it understands that joining any

economic union would lead to dependency, as with the European Union, where it would become a veritable "client state" (Shiriyev 2024). Moreover, Azerbaijan refuses to join the EU because it does not want to "surrender significant decision-making power" in order to enter an integration process that is "highly unlikely to result in membership" (Krnjevic 2024). Taken bluntly, it sees economic membership or even Associative Agreements as "foolish" in the long-run, given the fruitless developments made by Ukraine and Georgia (Ibid.). Compounding this skepticism is Azerbaijan's more distant geographic and socio-cultural position from Brussels, leaving it with little leverage or evidence to prove its "Europeanness" in the traditional EU accession framework (Ibid.).

As Krnjevic puts it, Europeans often describe accession as a process of "negotiation," when in reality, it is a "hard-stop process of rigid requirements that must be fulfilled before entering the Union" (Ibid.). The Copenhagen Criteria, which form the foundation of EU accession, demand extensive social and economic restructuring—changes that, at the end of the day, would require Azerbaijan to give up increasing levels of its sovereignty well before it even reaches the so-called "finish line," and with no guarantee of eventual membership. For Baku, this equation is simple: the cost is too high, the reward too uncertain (Ibid.). As a result, since 1999, Azerbaijan has maintained a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU. This framework allows the EU to remain a "key reform partner in Azerbaijan," facilitating access to European markets and supporting development initiatives—without placing Baku under the binding obligations of formal integration ("Factsheet: EU and Azerbaijan" 2023).

Euroscepticism

At the core of Azerbaijan's skepticism toward integration lies a broader critique of the European Union itself, which, according to several experts interviewed, is widely perceived in Baku as a "club of white, European Christian states" that is fundamentally uninterested in admitting a Muslim-majority country (Chiragov 2024; Valiyev 2024; Shiriyev 2024). Azerbaijan, rather than looking to Georgia or Ukraine as models for Europeanization, draws on the experience of its "larger, close, Muslim-majority brother," Turkey (Shiriyev 2024). Turkey's bid for EU membership, formally launched in 1987, has long been stalled. While the official reasons often cite democratic shortcomings or human rights concerns, many in Baku—and Ankara—believe that Turkey's majority-Muslim population of over 40 million people would fundamentally shift the internal dynamics of the EU, and that this demographic reality has contributed to its exclusion.

Despite decades of reform intended to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria, Turkey has since pivoted, much like Azerbaijan, toward a policy of sustained partnership rather than futile pursuit of membership (Shiriyev 2024). As for Georgia and Ukraine, Azerbaijani officials and experts argue that both countries "made a mistake by abandoning neutrality" in exchange for what they see as subordination to "complete

Brussels rule" (Chiragov 2024). The lesson Baku draws from these cases is clear: pursuing European integration without guaranteed inclusion is not only humiliating, but risks compromising sovereignty for uncertain returns.

Trade and Investment

Although Baku may hold reservations toward full integration with the European Union, it does not preclude the obvious and pragmatic reality that "the EU is Azerbaijan's main trading partner, accounting for around 48.5% of Azerbaijan's total trade" ("EU trade relations with Azerbaijan" 2024). In fact, the European market stands as Azerbaijan's largest export destination, and in 2024, was also its "third-biggest import market," with EU countries receiving "64% of Azerbaijan's exports," particularly in petrochemicals (Ibid.). In this way, even if the EU cannot formally shape or dictate Azerbaijan's domestic or foreign policy to the extent it does in Georgia or Ukraine, it still plays an essential and influential role in Baku's economy.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Brussels needs Baku more than vice versa, particularly in light of the EU's urgent search for alternative energy sources amid the Russo-Ukrainian War. Azerbaijan has emerged as the "indispensable" state to the EU's energy security, trade networks, and eastward connectivity interests stretching into Central Asia and beyond. According to Krnjevic, severing ties with Baku would constitute "geopolitical malpractice" on Brussels' part (Krnjevic 2024). In addition to the EU's current reliance on Azerbaijani petrochemicals, Brussels is also increasingly attuned to Azerbaijan's untapped renewable energy potential, which positions the country as a "long-term strategic energy partner" in the EU's green transition and diversification strategy (Ibid.). Thus, while Azerbaijan may refrain from formal integration, its strategic value to Europe remains undeniable.

According to Valiyev, an apt analogy for the EU-Azerbaijan relationship is the U.S.-Saudi Arabia dynamic. Specifically, Azerbaijan seeks to be to the EU what Saudi Arabia is to the United States, summarized by this informal but telling sentiment: "I give you oil and gas, and I don't want to change my system—so don't mess with me" (Valiyev 2024). The key difference, however, lies in intent. The U.S. does not aim to fundamentally reform the Saudi regime, while the EU's broader project of eastward Europeanization explicitly aims to reshape the political and economic systems of its neighbors, including Azerbaijan (Ibid.). This distinction only reinforces the point that Azerbaijan's relationship with the EU is not one of subordination or dependence, but rather one of strategic connectivity—mutually beneficial, yet firmly bound by Baku's insistence on sovereignty and regime stability.

Factor 3: Security Guarantees

The final factor of the tripartite hypothesis is perhaps the most critical and unique within the context of GUAM: Azerbaijan is the only member state with formal security guarantees from a foreign power. Unlike Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, which

have sought but failed to secure external security assurances, Azerbaijan enjoys the unwavering support of its brother nation and strategic ally, Turkey. This alliance is not merely symbolic—it is formalized through defense agreements and reinforced by Turkey's demonstrated willingness to intervene on Baku's behalf.

Shusha Declaration

The Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance was formally solidified through the Shusha Declaration, officially titled the "Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey." Signed on June 15, 2021, in the newly liberated city of Shusha, the agreement was endorsed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This declaration elevated bilateral ties to the level of formal alliance, reinforcing Ankara's role as Baku's primary security guarantor.

1. *Military Intervention*:

The Shusha Declaration first establishes that Azerbaijan and Turkey have a mutual security arrangement that could lead to military intervention under specific conditions:

"If, in the opinion of one of the parties, there is a threat to its independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders or security or aggression from a third state or states, then the parties will hold joint consultations and, in order to eliminate this threat or aggression, will take an appropriate initiative in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, will provide the necessary assistance to each other in accordance with the UN Charter." ("Shusha Declaration" 2021).

This clause implies that if both Turkey and Azerbaijan perceive an external threat, military intervention by the other party becomes a possibility.

2. *Military Cooperation:*

Similarly, the declaration also supports the coordination and cooperation of the Azerbaijan and Turkey's militaries:

"The parties will promote the exchange of personnel of the armed forces, conduct joint exercises, increase the combat effectiveness of the armies of the two countries, close cooperation in the management of weapons using modern technologies, ensuring for this purpose the coordination of authorized structures and organizations." ("Shusha Declaration" 2021)

This provision institutionalized joint training programs, military drills, and strategic coordination between Baku and Ankara, reinforcing Azerbaijan's military capabilities and aligning its defense strategy with Turkey's.

Turkish Patronage System

Turkey's role in Azerbaijan's security and strategic alignment extends beyond military support—it also serves as a bridge for Azerbaijan's discreet integration into the

Euro-Atlantic bloc. According to Valiyev, Turkey is the avenue through which Azerbaijan is "moving toward the Euro-Atlantic bloc" while maintaining plausible deniability to avoid provoking a Russian response. Azerbaijan's approach is deliberately subtle yet strategic. For example, instead of explicitly stating that it is adopting NATO military standards, Baku frames its modernization efforts as "modeling off of Turkish military standards"—which, in reality, are derived from NATO's standards (Valiyev 2024). This linguistic maneuver enables Azerbaijan to enhance interoperability with NATO forces while appeasing Moscow. Ankara's deepening military-technical collaboration with Western defense firms, its participation in NATO missions, and its expanding footprint in European security initiatives—such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)—all contribute to Azerbaijan's long-term Westernization by proxy. Thus, Turkey serves as Azerbaijan's *modus operandi* for Euro-Atlantic integration.

At the same time, Turkey serves as a third pillar in the Azerbaijan-Russia relationship, without which Azerbaijan would be in a "much weaker state" because Turkey acts as "our protector," according to Valiyev (Valiyev 2024). Russia lacks the willingness to "fight the Turks," both due to its economic struggles and ongoing war effort in Ukraine, and because Turkey's role does not necessarily threaten Russia's core interests (Valiyev 2024). For example, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), formerly known as the Turkic Council, supports coordination among Eurasia's Turkic states, with Turkey and Azerbaijan leading many of its initiatives. On a more pragmatic level, however, it can be seen as an alternative bloc to counterbalance the members' Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Ibid.). Russia's growing concessions to Turkey and its declining regional influence exemplify what Valiyev terms their "competitive competition"—that is, if either side weakens, they would prefer their primary competitor to gain the advantage rather than an outright adversary (Valiyev 2024; Chiragov 2024).

Miscellaneous Factors

Although the three factors provide a conclusive and comprehensive understanding of Azerbaijan's skillful attainment of "strategic independence," one must still consider the "75 percent luck"—that is, other less tangible yet contributing factors. Various elements such as culture, geography, or domestic politics may have influenced the current state of affairs, but two factors frequently emerge in analyses of Azerbaijan's post-2023 geopolitical position: its geostrategic importance and the ongoing Russian-Ukraine War

History and Territory

What must be stated at the outset is that, for the Kremlin, Azerbaijan was never considered part of the historic "Russo-sphere," unlike Ukraine—or even Moldova—and therefore was never seen as one of Moscow's primary territorial claims (Valiyev 2024). This is, of course, based on the assumption that Russia's 'near abroad' campaign is a project of imperial revival, rather than a targeted strategy to destabilize neighbors

pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration. For this reason, Valiyev argues, the Kremlin did not seek to fully disrupt or establish a long-term foothold in Azerbaijan's territory, as other states "pulled at the heartstrings" of Russian irredentism in a way that Azerbaijan simply did not (Ibid.).

Then there are the more pragmatic and geostrategic considerations, given Azerbaijan's important location in the South Caucasus and along the Caspian Sea. First and foremost is Azerbaijan's large petrochemical industry and Russia's "huge oil interests" in Baku (Ibid.). If Russia were to, for instance, pursue a full-scale invasion of Azerbaijan as it did in Ukraine, or formally integrate Karabakh into the Russian Federation as it had done in Abkhazia, this would immediately provoke a response from Baku, such as the cessation of Russian maritime movement rights in Azerbaijan's Caspian waters or an injunction on petrochemical sales to Russia. Likewise, in the event of a possible confrontation with Russia to the extent of the Russo-Ukrainian War or even the Russo-Georgian War, there would be large security concerns for the northern Caucasus. Destabilizing Baku would ultimately ripple through Dagestan and Chechnya, which lie on its borders, at the expense of the Kremlin's centralized control (Ibid.). Thus, the Caucasus mountains and the Caspian waters provide two pillars to Azerbaijan's territorial security that the Kremlin could not risk destabilizing.

Russo-Ukrainian War

Azerbaijan was also dealt a lucky hand to remove Russian forces because they were distracted with their ongoing war in Ukraine. For Russia, its main objective was to stay in Karabakh "for as long as possible" to keep both Armenia and Azerbaijan dependent on Russian mediation and peacekeeping (Valiyev 2024). However, given Russia's material and casualty losses on the battlefront in Ukraine, it had to reinforce its installations using forces from other parts of the 'near abroad,' including the Karabakh peacekeepers. Amid the sudden developments in April 2024, some reports suggested that Russia's hasty move indicated that its military personnel in Karabakh would be redeployed to "redirect resources and bolster its positions on the Ukrainian front in anticipation of the expected summer offensive," as stated by Ukrainian military expert Mikhail Zhirokhov ("Russia mobilizes 'Karabakh' forces for Ukrainian frontline" 2024). Although such direct links were never proven, it stands to reason that a state such as Russia, spending immense budgetary and manpower resources, could not operate "two fronts" simultaneously (Valiyev 2024). Unlike the GU(A)M states, which were either engaged in full-scale wars with Russia—such as Georgia and Ukraine—or overseeing Russian-backed territories while Russia strengthened its military presence, as seen with Moldova from 2014 to 2016, Azerbaijan faced a situation where Russia was both weakened and distracted.

Following Azerbaijan's military success in the 2020 war, and with Turkey emerging as a key regional powerbroker, some analysts argue that this shift convinced Russia to withdraw from Karabakh and leave it under the control of its new competitive

partners (Chiragov 2024; Valiyev 2024). In this context, just as the Second Karabakh War was viewed as an "agreed war" between Azerbaijan and Russia, the 2024 counter-terror operation that dismantled Armenian separatist forces and led to the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers can also be seen as a "deal" made by Azerbaijan, leveraging its "increased influence" (Valiyev 2024).

Conclusion

This study has examined a three-decade-long conflict between two rival alliance structures—the Euro-Atlantic bloc and the Eurasian bloc—through the lens of four liminal states caught in between: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Although these states formed an organization to support their integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, they were gradually and increasingly disrupted by Russia, the leading force of the Eurasian bloc. Along the way, the Kremlin either waged, provoked, or sustained wars that resulted in frozen conflicts—conflicts that not only burdened these states but also effectively barred them from advancing toward Euro-Atlantic membership. After 2008, however, Azerbaijan broke the so-called "Russians never leave" myth, becoming the only exceptional case to successfully remove Russia's military and political foothold.

Having compared the strategic independence of all four countries using the three factors outlined in this study, it is evident that Azerbaijan remains unique among the GUAM states. The chart below compares the factors analyzed in previous sections—leadership relations, economic independence, and security guarantees—with (−) indicating that the state lacks or is negatively positioned toward the given factor, and (+) indicating that the state possesses and positively maintains the given factor:

GUAM Multifactorial Comparison				
Factors:	**Georgia**	**Ukraine**	**Azerbaijan**	**Moldova**
Leadership Relations	-	-	+	-
Economic Independence	-	-	+	-
Security Guarantees	-	-	+	-

The chart clearly demonstrates that Azerbaijan fulfills all three factors posed in the hypothesis: it maintains positive relations with the Russian regime; its economy is not dependent on any alliance structure—especially the EU—neither in terms of policy alignment nor monetary reliance; and it enjoys formal security guarantees from its regional ally, Turkey. In contrast, the other GUAM states—Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova—do not meet these criteria. Taken together, these factors not only render Azerbaijan exceptional in comparison to its fellow member states, but also underscore the conditions that contributed to its success in removing Russian presence from its territory. Furthermore, Azerbaijan achieved this while preserving strong cooperative ties with both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs, navigating the geopolitical divide with strategic finesse.

The three factors analyzed thus offer compelling components of Azerbaijan's pragmatic non-alignment strategy and, by extension, its strategic independence. However, this study does not determine whether all three factors are jointly necessary, individually necessary, or wholly sufficient to explain this strategic independence. In other words, it remains unclear whether these three factors alone fully account for the outcome. What this study does suggest, however, is that these factors provide plausible explanations for Azerbaijani exceptionalism. This acknowledgment reflects the complex and volatile reality faced by small states caught between great powers and alliance structures—states that cannot simply maneuver their way out of geopolitical fault lines.

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