

Light and Shadow of Being the Land of in between

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Nations caught between the major powers—specifically, nations whose political and diplomatic trajectories are restricted as they find themselves caught between Europe, the United States, Russia, China, and other major powers—have developed a diplomacy of balance based on their domestic circumstances and political orientation while they have simultaneously suffered disadvantages as a result of leaning in a particular direction. For example, pursuing friendly relations with Europe and the United States means being punished by Russia. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the Russia-Ukraine War, which began in 2014 and became an all-out war in 2022, are notable examples of this in which support of domestic secessionists and other methods were used. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and disturbances erupted in eastern Ukraine, many in Europe called for reflection and introspection based on the notion that the troubles there resulted from Europe pressurizing Ukraine to select between the West and the East. Moreover, it is clear from these trends that nations caught between major powers have limited freedom to behave as sovereign nations.

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the ensuing war triggered a sudden change in Ukraine's global position. Ukraine's message that the war was being fought to protect democracy resonated with the democratic nations of the world; that is, with many of the world's most advanced nations. Thereafter, Ukraine found itself engulfed in centripetal forces that placed it at the center of the world's attention. These facts demonstrate that despite a nation being caught between major powers, it can become the central focus of world attention through the use of messaging and concepts. Another example would be Oceania possibly making itself the focus of world attention via appeals to help solve environmental problems.

However, these types of messages from nations caught between major powers have been proven to be unstable owing to following factors that serve as obstructions to such messaging. First, problems arise when an issue is prolonged. It is extremely difficult to maintain the impact of messaging over the long term. In particular, the longer an issue persists, the more influence the following two factors begin to have on the situation. Second, in some cases maintaining a message becomes a burden. For example, the countries that support Ukraine experience a burden on their own economic policies and they find that the lifestyles of their general populations have come under pressure as energy and food prices rise because of sanctions placed on Russia. Consequently, the general populations of the countries that support Ukraine rally against that support, and, if there is a populist power intent on capturing the hearts and minds of the public, the public's attitude toward support of Ukraine may turn negative. Third, the cases in which messages are contradictory to the original message become more influential. For example, Russia's information war against the United States and the countries of Europe is generally believed to have failed. However, initially it was considered as being effective among the Russian public and in some parts of the Global South, such as Africa. Russian messages such as "the food and energy crises are due to the US and European sanctions against Russia" and "Russia is fighting a war it doesn't want to fight that was instigated by the United States and Europe, and so the Russia-Ukraine War is a European and American proxy war" were accepted as convincing arguments. Russia managed to increase the prices of energy and food through its use of energy and food as weapons in the Russia-Ukraine War. The effect was even more evident in many of the poorer countries worldwide. Thus, as time passed the information war acquired momentum. Gradually, the Russian messaging began to have a wider influence among the people of Europe and the US who support Ukraine as well as in populist administrations and political parties in those countries. With further passage of time, increasing food and energy prices largely owing to the Russia-Ukraine War will create increasing pressure on the lifestyles of the general public, and

this increasing burden will lead people to believe ever more strongly that it is more important to protect their way of life than to support democracy. Specifically, this third factor combined with the second factor reduces the influence of the original message. As this situation persists over the long term, it may lead to ever increasing opposition.

Thus, it is clear that nations caught between major powers cannot easily capture the attention of the world, as there is a strong tendency for them to be overwhelmed by pressure placed on them by the major nations of the world. The “power” wielded by the major nations includes economic and military power, influence, and geopolitical positioning.

The reality of “the politics of being the land of in between” is most evident in the recent situations in the three countries of South Caucasus: Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Although the three are in close proximity to one another geographically, they have completely different diplomatic orientations. Thus, they present a case of fascinating contrasts.

Azerbaijan is a producer of natural resources with its natural gas and oil. Although this provides it economic advantage, it has a hardline system of authority and has developed an exceptionally balanced diplomacy through which it maintains fairly good relations with the US and Europe as well as Russia. It is able to maintain this diplomatic balance owing to its resources.

Armenia is a small landlocked country that is surrounded by “enemies” along 80% of its borders, as it is almost completely encircled by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Although it would like to have friendly relations with Europe and the United States, it was strongly supported by Russia during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War ended in ceasefire in 1994, it has two Russian military bases within its borders, and it is completely dependent on Russia as it is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), for its energy imports and ability to maintain its nuclear power generation. Consequently, it would be unrealistic for Armenia to distance itself from Russia.

Finally, Georgia has a pro-Western stance and has had a difficult relationship with Russia. Although it has no resources, it has a coast along the Black Sea, and as the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia means that goods cannot be transported via Armenia, all of the infrastructure linking Azerbaijan and Turkey—including oil and natural gas pipelines—passes through Georgia. As Georgia supports its neighbors through imports and exports via the Black Sea, it is considered the “hub nation” of the Caucasus. Therefore, it enjoys a far more globally advantageous position than Armenia. Nevertheless, its relationship with Russia is fraught with problems. Of these, a significant problem is that Russia interfered in the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are now backed by Russia. In the 2008 Russo-Georgian diplomatic crisis, Russia intervened in the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia, an unrecognized state, for the stated reason to protect its own citizens. Russia then recognized the statehood of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which further promoted the Russification of the two regions and became a cause of continuing difficulties for Georgia.

The “politics of being the land of in between” as observed in the South Caucasus region entered a new phase once the Russia-Ukraine War began.

First, as Azerbaijan defeated Armenia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 (which preceded the Russia-Ukraine War), of the approximately 20% of Azerbaijani land previously occupied by Armenian residents, all of the buffer zone and approximately 40% of Nagorno-Karabakh were recaptured by Azerbaijan. The background of these events was that Turkey provided complete support to Azerbaijan and Russia did not intervene. Moreover, the ceasefire mediated by Russia provided preferential treatment to Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan obtained benefits for fishermen in the Russia-Ukraine War. With the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War many countries in Europe halted energy exports from Russia, and some of those countries entered into new contracts with Azerbaijan for the import of natural gas from that country. Relationships with countries that export energy are significantly affected by the energy security of countries that import energy, and thus Azerbaijan managed a relatively stable means to navigate its relationship with Europe, and consequently, it improved economically. Moreover, Russia secured major

economic advantages through its parallel import bypass routes. In addition, Azerbaijan has implemented a complicated system for Russian immigrants to enter the country and does not recognize immigration via overland routes in particular, which means that Azerbaijan is nearly completely free of the influence of Russian immigrants. This is a major difference from Armenia and Georgia. Finally, in September 2023 Azerbaijan implemented an “anti-terrorist strategy” in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia announced that it would not intervene. After a single day the “administrative body” of Nagorno-Karabakh was toppled. With the declaration that the “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh” would be dissolved on January 1, 2024 (an attempt to annul this declaration was made on December 22, 2023), Azerbaijan recovered all disputed lands (this was the Third Nagorno-Karabakh War). Azerbaijan enjoyed complete Russian support on this occasion as well. In December 2022, Azerbaijan closed the Lachin corridor, which was an important supply route for Armenian residents, and cut off food supplies to enemy soldiers. Despite these actions, Russian peacekeeping troops did nothing as part of their “anti-terrorism strategy”; and subsequently when skirmishes erupted, it was reported that they provided support to the Azerbaijani strategy in the background. It is clear from these events that Azerbaijan, despite being caught between major powers, took full advantage of its status as a resource-rich country in its diplomacy of balance, which has afforded it considerable success in recent years.

However, Armenia remained most disadvantaged by the events of recent years. Armenia grew increasingly distrustful and dissatisfied with Russia, which did nothing during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, during multiple subsequent skirmishes, or during the Azerbaijani “anti-terrorism strategy” that ended in a single day in September 2023 (the Third Nagorno-Karabakh War). It is noteworthy that around 2023 Armenia hinted at distancing itself from Russia, withdrawing from the CSTO, and strengthening its relationship with the Europe and the United States. In 2023, CSTO joint military exercises were canceled, however, joint military exercises were held with the United States in Armenia and military cooperation with France was strengthened. The strengthening of military ties with India was another notable development. However, Armenia will be in the very serious situation if it would withdraw from CSTO actually. It is clear that after withdrawal from CSTO, Armenia would not be able to promptly join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or similar organizations, and there is the danger that such a move would make Russia an enemy. In addition, Russia controls the Armenian energy infrastructure, therefore, if Armenia were to distance itself from Russia, its energy security would be in extreme danger. In particular, the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, which supplies approximately half of the nation’s electric power, could not be continually operated without Russia. Moreover, although Georgia is in the same situation in this regard, both Armenia and Georgia have benefited from the “special wartime demands” resulting from the Russia-Ukraine War. First, the influx of Russian immigrants (“Relocanti.” For further information about “relocanti,” see “The new Russian immigrants known as ‘relocanti’: Focus on the case of South Caucasus,” in *Journal of International Affairs* (FY2023), published in March 2024) has reinvigorated the economy as those with knowledge of IT, finances, and the like are further developing the Armenian IT industry and other industries. Further, Armenia has enjoyed economic merits as one of Russia’s parallel import bypass routes, and extremely good economic conditions have been maintained since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. This is another case in which being the land of in between is significantly impacted by the circumstances in its surrounding countries.

Finally, as is the case with Armenia, Georgia also enjoys the benefits of “special wartime demand” resulting from the Russian attack of Ukraine. For many years Russia did not have direct flights to Georgia, however, after the commencement of the war it increased the number of direct flights to that country, which led to notable increases in the number of people moving between the two countries. Moreover, Georgia applied for EU membership in 2022 but was passed over (eligibility acquired on December 15, 2023), although Ukraine and Moldova promptly became eligible for EU membership. Consequently, the “Georgian Dream” ruling party began to spread

anti-EU propaganda, and Georgian politics became increasingly complex. The directionality of Georgia's diplomacy—whether it will be friendly with Europe and the United States or become closer to Russia—is an issue that experts agree will depend upon the outcome of the 2024 general election. Its status as a country caught in the middle may also be significantly affected by the outcome of this election.

The above is an analysis of recent developments in countries caught in the middle of major powers using cases related to the Russia-Ukraine War and the case of the three South Caucasus countries. The above analysis makes it abundantly clear that countries being the land of in between caught in the middle are significantly influenced by the major powers, are subject to various major restrictions, and find it difficult to ensure their freedom unless they have considerable economic power, such as resources. This study identified that, although messaging in support of democracy that the entire population should be in support of may have a certain effectiveness, such messaging also has limitations.

Moreover, the politics of being the land of in between are significantly influenced by trivial matters. Year 2024 is an election year, and thus major changes may occur in many regions. Moving forward, close attention should be paid to the circumstances within countries caught in the middle as well as in their surrounding areas.

(This is an English translation of a commentary written by HIROSE Yoko, Academic Governor, GFJ / Professor, Keio University, which initially appeared on the JFIR website on March 17, 2024.)