

An Historical Sketch of the Idea of Caucasian Unity and Common Defense Arrangements

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus witnessed a resurgence of nationalist strivings. Being union republics, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Georgian, Azerbaijan and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) quickly transitioned to independent states with international recognition, whereas violent conflict erupted over the status of various autonomous republics and districts within them. These “ethnic conflicts” in the Caucasus have yet to be satisfactorily resolved down to today. This has caused many observers to think of the Caucasus as a place where nations with wildly different cultures and roots were simply tossed together through time and will never be able to get along. However, corollary to the nationalist ideologies and rhetoric which helped inflame the violence which erupted in the wake of the Soviet failure, the idea of a Caucasian confederation was also put forward by certain politicians. Where did this idea come from and why a confederation? This paper traces the history of the idea of Caucasian unity from antiquity to the present. It is not an exhaustive study but summarizes some of the research I am doing for other projects, which I expect to provide a road map for this topic’s further exploration.

This question contains two main elements: whether the Caucasus can be considered a region in the proper sense of the term, rather than just an artificial construct imposed from outside, and, if so, what kind of possibilities have “Caucasians” themselves imagined for the region’s political organization which might include some kind of politically unified state. Interestingly, the ambiguity surrounding the attempts to define the Caucasus as a region that we notice today in academic and policymaking circles remind us of the patterns found in the ancient and medieval texts, as well as in debates during the time of Russian Revolution (1917).

In the ancient Greek and Roman texts, we can discern three major tendencies in how the ancients viewed the Caucasus: 1) as a coherent region in which resided numerous different nations (kingdoms, tribes, etc.),

2) as two different regions (the northern Caucasus, or mountain itself, and the southern Caucasus, which contained several different provinces), and 3) a geographical space where there lived different nations. It should be mentioned, however, that some of these texts seem to present more than one of these tendencies at the same time, highlighting the incredible difficulty of coming to a concrete answer to the question of how exactly to define the Caucasus. In fact, I would posit that the answer of its definition lies in this very ambiguity. Before evaluating the views of medieval Georgian and Armenian authors, i.e., indigenous perspectives, I will provide some examples of the three major tendencies found in the ancient sources.

From the ancient Greek and Roman authors, as an example of listing the nations separately, Ptolemy (*Geography*, 5) and Pliny (*Natural History*, 6.5-19) refer to the Caucasus mountain chain and list the countries or tribes in and around it separately. Herodotus appears to distinguish between the northern and southern Caucasus because he says, “many and all kinds of nations dwell in the Caucasus,” referring to the range itself (*Histories*, 1.203.1) in one section but lists the Saspis (“Georgians”) and Colchians separately. Interestingly, he notes that the Mares and Colchians shared a commander and the Saspis, Colchians and “Alarodians” were armed the same.¹ Strabo (*Geography*, 11.2.15-19), who was himself originally from Trabzon, called the inhabitants of the range and the Albanians and Iberians all “Caucasians”. He writes:

“This mountain lies above both seas, both the Pontic and the Caspian, and forms a wall across the isthmus that separates the two seas. It marks the boundary, on the south, of Albania and Iberia, and on the north, of the plains of the Sarmatae... Now in general the tribes in the neighborhood of the Caucasus occupy barren and cramped territories, but the tribes of the Alba-

¹ Hecataeus of Miletus says that the Mares were an ethnos near the Mossynaeci (Fragment 192, Digital Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum, available at <https://www.dfg-projekt.org/DFHG/digger.php?what%5B%5D=author%7CHECATAE-US&onoffswitch=on>). The Mossynaeci lived around the Black Sea (Pliny, *Natural History*, 6.4.1)

nians and the Iberians, which occupy nearly all the isthmus above-mentioned, might also be called Caucasian tribes.”

Regarding the Armenian and Georgian authors, based on the texts I have evaluated so far, there seems to be a clear difference of perspective between the two, with the Armenians showing less of a regional perspective and the Georgian author strongly emphasizing it. The Armenian geographer Ananias of Shirak (7th century) places the North Caucasian peoples in Sarmatia and lists Colchis, Iberia, Albania and Armenia separately (Ananias, 1992, pp. 55-76, 110-119; Vacca, 2020, p. 43). The 8th-century Armenian historians pay little attention to the North Caucasus and list Armenia, Iberia and Albania separately while yet placing them together (Ghewond, 2006, pp. 1-47). In contrast, a regional identity for the northern and southern Caucasus is highlighted in the first book of the Georgian Chronicles (“The Lives of the Georgian Kings”) Whether the author was reporting actual legends believed at the time or was using the metaphor of familial ancestral ties for political purposes (Sanadze, 2017, pp. 207, 209, 214-217, 222-224), the text still gives the reader considerable insight into the nature of political and defense relationships between the Caucasian nations in the eleventh century.

I will not repeat what must be by now to everyone a familiar story about how the eight nations of the Caucasus shared a common patriarchal ancestor—Targamos. Rather, I will point out that the story describes the relationship between the brothers and their descendants as fluctuating between being highly interconnected (“living in peace and love with each other”) and united against external threats, both in battle and in the construction of defense works, to lapsing into fratricidal war. In one episode, North Caucasians helped the first two Georgian kings establish their rule but their descendants later started raiding during the time of the third king. This highlights the ongoing tension between collaboration and mutual support interspersed with “fraternal” warring and feuding. In the story, the nature of intra-Caucasian political relationships also appears to fluctuate between defensive alliances or confederation to possible federation (“living in peace and love with each other” but one brother being king over the others, i.e., more centralization than in a pure confederation).

Returning to the observations of outsiders, we find the same three tendencies as in the Classical texts in the Islamicate sources. For example, the 14th-century Hamdallah Mustawfi al-Qazwini, in chapters ten and sixteen of his *Nuzhat al-qulūb* (Pleasure of the hearts), lists the countries of the Caucasus separately, although he does connect Georgia and Abkhazia,

saying they border on Armenia and Arran (Albania) and also mentions the “so many different peoples” of the Lezghian mountains. The 12th-century Muhammad al-Idrisi also seems to list the Caucasian nations separately, saying that the inhabitants of the mountain spoke mutually unintelligible languages, in his *Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq* (The book of pleasant journeys into far-away lands). In *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-al-Mamālik* (Book of Countries and Kingdoms), however, the 10th-century author Ibn Hawqal lists Armenia, Albania and Azerbaijan as separate countries at the same time as referring to them as a single country and the North Caucasians separately. Al-Istakhri (10th century) explicitly states in *Kitāb al-masalik wa-al-mamalik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) that “we will start with the countries of Armenia, Arran and Azerbaijan, considering them a single oblast (region or district).” Maybe the 10th-century al-Masudi is the Strabo of the Islamicate sources. Like the other authors, he points out the great diversity of kingdoms, nations and languages in the Caucasus “mountain” but he also includes the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia at least as far as Tiflis (Tbilisi) in a distinct section titled “The Caucasus.”

Once the Russian imperial conquest of the Caucasus began, we see reflections of a regional mindset in several attempts to coordinate military action against the common threat from the north although there does not appear to have been any talk of political unification. In the late 18th century, Sheikh Mansur tried to unite the North Caucasians against Russia. According to the historian Potto (Potto, 1887, p.142), “One of Sheikh Mansur’s passionate and enduring goals was to unite all the mountain peoples into one. And all the strength of Russian weaponry was directed towards preventing this.” Then, in 1812, the Georgian prince Alexander Batonishvili was joined by at least a thousand Daghestanis when he fought the Russians in Kakheti. After their defeat by the superior Russian forces, Batonishvili went to Khevsureti, where he successfully rallied the local mountain Georgians and North Caucasians (Kabardians, Daghestanis and Vainakh) to his liberation effort. But these efforts were to no avail. Relying on intercepted intelligence, the Russian generals made a mad dash into Khevsureti to stop this rebellion before it could begin (Berzhe, 1873, vol. 5, nos. 88, 97, 552). In the 1820s another rebellion broke out in the North Caucasus, which is associated with the Chechen Bej-Bulat Tajmiev (Tajmi Bibolt) but included the coordination and involvement of other North Caucasians too (Anchabadze, 2009; Baddeley, 1908, pp. 94, 99, 107, 112-113, 123, 148-149; Tovsultanov and Galimova, 2016, pp. 109-113; Fedorov, 1991, pp. 410-411; Xozhaev 1998).

In 1832, the young Georgian patriots were well aware of their regional context when they conspired to drive the Russians out by murdering many of their key administrators and officers at a ball. Part of their calculations included the fact that the Russian forces were currently struggling with the Murid resistance in Daghestan (Jones, 1987, p. 72; Lang, 1957, 280-281). These Georgians too hoped for a coordinated regional resistance—although they did nothing to actually organize it (Jones, 1987, p. 72). As Aleqsandre Orbeliani wrote, “The plot was supposed to unfold in such a way that the entire Caucasus from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, all the mountain and lowland people, all of us were to unite and create a unified upheaval” (Gozalishvili, 1935, p. 86). There were also some failed efforts to unite between the North Caucasians resisting the Russian forces in the Caucasian Wars, which ended with the defeat of Imam Shamil in 1859 and the culmination of the genocidal war against the Circasians in 1864.

By this time, young men from cooperative families in the Caucasus were already beginning to obtain educations in Russia, and the question of regional versus national identity emerged under a new guise as early as 1861 in the Georgian students’ discussions about whether to form a regional mutual aid society (*zemljachestvo*) or separate national ones with close ties between them. The majority followed the idea of Ilia Chavchavadze, who argued for the second option (Nikoladze, 1927, p. 34). A proponent of the idea of a regional *zemljachestvo*, Niko Nikoladze, appears to have been devoted to a regional vision since he was found in Europe just over a decade later, editing the journal *drosha* (flag), which declared as its ultimate goal the creation of a “free federation of all the Caucasian peoples” (erobis tvit martveloba, 1873). The Georgians in Switzerland in 1871-1872 were also eager to create a Caucasian federation (Dzhabadari, Aug. 1907, pp. 269-289). And at a congress of Caucasians (mostly Georgians but a Daghestani and Armenian too) in Zurich in 1874, the majority of the delegates favored the project of a Caucasian federation. However, the split between those who wanted to fight for a particularly Caucasian future and those who wanted to join the emerging all-Russian revolutionary movement now appeared (Dzhabadari, Sept. 1907; Suny, 1994, p. 137)

This split between those favoring a regional solution and those who wanted to merge with the all-Russian revolutionary movement continued through the First World War and the short period between the demise of the Russian Empire and rise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). At first, however, the line of division was fairly blurry, and it appears the goal of creating a Caucasian confederation was actively discussed among Georgian and other Caucasian groups through the turn of the century. According to national-

ists writing at *qartuli gazeti* (Georgian gazette) in 1916, the revolutionary movement in the Caucasus was always interested in a Caucasian federation, with the exception of the Social Democrats who had wanted a unitary Russian republic from the beginning. This seems to contradict the observation of Stephen Jones that the Georgian Marxists had been interested in federalism until pressure from the Russian Social Democratic Party cured them of this “sin” in 1903 (Jones, 2005, pp. 109-117). Further research will surely sort out the details.

Based on my research so far (including reference to the secondary literature), the 1880s saw continued interest in the idea of a Caucasian federation, confederation or defensive alliance against Russia alongside the increasing consideration of populist and Marxist ideas (Suny, 1994, p. 132). An interesting point about the 1880s is that Oliver Wardrop mentioned in 1887, after a stay in Tiflis (Tbilisi) that if Russia were to enter into a war against the British then the descendants of Targamos, with a history of helping each other against outside enemies, would probably “form a defensive alliance for the protection of common interests” (Wardrop, 1887, p. 166-168). Wardrop was undoubtedly informed by local patriots.

In the early 1890s, Georgian youth formed the Georgian Liberty League, with members of varying ideological tendencies. The main goal of the league was Georgian national liberation but obtained through the other Caucasian nations also cooperating to drive out Russia and the creation of a Caucasian federation (Bendianishvili, 1980, 154-155, 163; Giorgadze, 1929, pp. 99-103; Lang, 1962, p. 125; Jones, 2005, p. 56, Shvelidze, 1993, 108).² In 1894, a Georgian also petitioned the Ottoman Sultan to allow for the publication of a journal promoting a Caucasian liberation movement (Bendianishvili, 1980, p. 162; Giorgadze, 1929, pp. 99-100). Although the tsarist government rapidly suppressed this league, the 1890s saw the rise of a new current among the Georgian intelligentsia—committed Marxists. The Caucasian Marxists formally joined the Russian Socialist Democratic Party in 1903 with the demand for regional autonomy within a centralized Russian state (Jones, 2005, pp. 104-117; Suny, 1980, 163-164).

By this time, concerned about the growing division in the Georgian revolutionary movement, Archil Jorjadze had already proposed the Basis for Common Action Theory, which presented points of compromise on which the Marxists and the rest of the intelligentsia could work together for the good of the Georgian na-

² See also: “mixeil xeltuflishvili,” National Parliamentary Library of Georgia (NPLG), accessed 17 January 2022, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/bios/ka/00017176/>; “anṭon gelazarishvili,” NPLG, accessed 17 January 2022, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/bios/ka/00015034/>; “iakob fancxava,” NPLG, accessed 17 January 2022, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/bios/ka/00001687/>.

tion and society. However, the Marxists completely had rejected his proposal, which also received criticism from more conservative elements (Jones, pp. 17, 66-71; Shvelidze, 1993, pp. 15-18, 28-31, 37-41, 47-49). Jorjadze then co-founded the journal *saqartvelo* (Georgia) in 1903 at the press of the anarchists in Paris (Shvelidze, 1993, pp. 105-109). This situation is a good illustration of how the division in the Georgian political scene mirrored the European one, with the socialist movement ultimately splitting into Marxist “centralists” and Bakunist “decentralists” (anarcho-federalists). The Georgian revolutionary intelligentsia was perfectly aware of this fact, and that is why at the 1904 congress in Geneva, which established the Georgian Socialist-Federalist Revolutionary Party, a resolution was passed which explicitly stated that the congress was worried that the revolutionary movement could lead to the establishment of a centralized Russian republic and that it rejected Marxist-centralism, siding with the Bakunist-decentralists instead (Shvelidze). The Georgian Social Democrats only came to the congress to announce their refusal to cooperate and walk out, with the exception of one who stayed, likely Vladimir Darchiashvili, who went on to found the national autonomist faction of the Social Democratic Party (Shvelidze, 1993, pp. 127, 144, 146).

The Armenian revolutionary movement was also divided between centralists and decentralists, a fact reflected clearly in the names and structures of its two major parties: the social democratic Hunchak Revolutionary Party, which insisted on a centralized hierarchy and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, Dashnaktsutiun), which had a more horizontal structure (Berberian, 2019, pp. 125-127, 134, 136, 142; Libaridian, 1983, pp. 187, 190; Ter Minassian, 1980, 9-10). Although some North Caucasians were interested in the populist-Marxist current in the Russian revolutionary tradition, the North Caucasians were generally interested in a regional union for the Caucasus. As stated in the memorandum submitted to the Peace Conference in Paris by the delegation of the Mountain Republic, “All the Caucasians who met abroad [SS: during tsarist times] united on the ground of community of aspirations aiming at an independent Caucasus, politically united, based on the principles of a confederation of all the nations which compose it, without any distinction of origin and creed.” (Bammate, 1919, p. 13).

The split between the centralists and decentralists in the Caucasus is continued during the Russian Revolution of 1905-1907, when we also find the emergence of a federalist (decentralist) movement among the Eastern Transcaucasian Muslims (Azerbaijanis) alongside the growth of Social Democracy. At this time, all of the local political currents, including liberals, were also thinking in terms of region. We see this from the testimony of the Ingush political figure, Vassan-Girej

Dzhabagiev, who wrote in 1905 that “the demand for regional autonomy was on every lip” (Dzhabagiev, 1905). Unfortunately, as Dzhabagiev warned in 1906, those demanding regional autonomy (with the exception of Georgian nationalists) had not given sufficient thought to the questions of national identity and decentralization (Dzhabagiev, 1906). Thus, despite the best efforts of the revolutionary parties to coordinate across national differences, the period still witnessed tragic events which made future cooperation more difficult.

The RSDLP and its allies strongly opposed the empire’s decentralization along national lines. In *chveni kvali* (our furrow), one of the journals associated with Vladimir Darchiashvili, who is introduced above, we find strong evidence that the disagreement between centralists (essentially pro-Russians) and decentralists (territorial-autonomists or independentists) was at the core of the political debate in the Caucasus. Here, the author writes that the “subject of our dispute and debate” is that the centralists rejected autonomy for the Caucasus and expected the nations to be satisfied with a common regional self-government, i.e., local administrative self-government, while the autonomists wanted a “defined political self-government.” (ra aris, 1908). Despite this difference, Stalin himself insisted on regional autonomy in *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) for the Caucasus because he considered it to be a “crystallized unit.”

The start of the First World War witnessed once again an effort by patriots of different national origin to unite for the liberation of their common homeland and create an independent regional federation. Two of the key players in this effort were the Georgian Leo Kereselidze and a Chechen who went by the name “Murad Gazavat” (Bakradze, 2020, p. 62; Baqradze, 2010, p. 47; Kuromiya and Mamoulia, 2016, pp. 75-77; Zürrer, 1978, pp. 31-33). Although their efforts met with no direct success, it was not long before the Russian Empire’s autocratic regime spontaneously collapsed and the Caucasians were suddenly presented with the possibility of redefining their relationships with Russia and each other in a fleeting moment of perfect freedom.

Once the February Revolution took place and the tsarist government collapsed, the Caucasian political and intellectual leaders remained divided as to how to define the constitutional relationship between the different nationalities and the region to each other, and to the Russian center. Federalists and nationalists, who had a mix of socialist and capitalist ideas, argued for national-territorial autonomy though they were divided on whether there should also be a Caucasian autonomy. The Socialist Federalist Party, for example, wanted a regional federation within the larger Russian Federation, while the Georgian National Dem-

ocrats, Union of Allied Mountaineers and the Azerbaijani Musavat Party preferred to leave out the regional level while cultivating extra close ties between the different nations in the Caucasus specifically. The reason for this was not the rejection of a sense of regional identity corollary to the national one but because direct ties to the federal center meant more freedom in self-government than if competencies were divided between the federal and national levels and an intermediary regional level (*saqartvelos avtonomia*, 1917). So, this was the most decentralized solution possible barring the declaration of full independence. By contrast, the Kadets and Marxists were centralists. In the middle but leaning more towards centralism were the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Dashnaktsutiun. Even though both had a federalist program before the revolution and continued to do so after February 1917, they became more centralistic as the year went by due to factors including apparent Russian chauvinism and concerns about preserving order.

After the October coup, it became impossible to continue relying on Russia's central government for leadership, so the leading forces in the Caucasus decided to declare autonomy in the form of the Terek-Daghestani Provisional Government (Ter-Dag), which was comprised of the Terek Cossack autonomy and the Mountain Autonomy, and the Transcaucasian Commissariat. Then, in the spring of 1918, pressure coming from decisions made by the Bolshevik government in combination with the threats, demands and proposals of the Central Powers essentially forced the Mountain government and the Transcaucasian Seim (a representative body) to declare independence from Russia. Although the newly minted Mountain Republic intended to join the Transcaucasians in the new Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) and the TDFR government gave assurances that this would be possible, the Transcaucasian Federation broke up a month later when the independence of the Georgian Democratic Republic was declared followed by similar declarations from the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments.

Thus, the theoretical question of whether the Caucasian nations ought to remain tightly bound to each other in a regional autonomy inside a unitary Russian state, create a regional federation within a Russian federation; form separate national-territorial autonomies tied directly to a Russian federal center with limited powers or break off from Russia entirely in the form of an independent regional federation was answered in practice with an extreme decentralist solution, the founding of four independent republics. But the Caucasians would not enjoy their newfound freedom for long. Centralists in Russia, and their sympathizers in the Caucasus would fight to bring them back under their control. Thus, the Caucasus found

itself caught in the war between the General Anton Denikin's Volunteer Army, which was open about its goal of restoring Russia "united and indivisible" and the Soviet forces who set up a vertical system of rule where power was factually concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party while at the same time giving the Soviet state the formal structure of a federation.

Aware of the danger awaiting them at the hands of the White or Red imperialists, the Caucasian republics made a few unsuccessful attempts to discuss the possibility of forming a united front ranging from a defensive alliance to a federation. These discussions were held at two regional conferences and at the Versailles Peace Conference in Paris. Although steps were taken towards resolving contentious territorial and legal status issues at the conference in April 1920, the Red Army's entry into the North Caucasus in early 1920, Azerbaijan in April 1920, Armenia in December 1920 and Georgia in February 1921 prevented the Caucasian leaders from following through to the end on their promising progress.

Despite the Bolshevik Social Democrats' traditional dislike of federalism, the effect of regional and federalist thinking on the Caucasian Bolsheviks' minds is impossible to ignore. This impact is reflected in the structure of the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. It bears reminding that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Russian Socialist Federalist Soviet Republic were also both federal structures in principle, and Stalin was responsible for preserving this formal structure, which had originally been encouraged by Lenin. Ultimately, however, with the adoption of the Stalin constitution of 1936, the TSFSR was dissolved and replaced with the separate union republics. The Mountain ASSR had disappeared by 1924.

Nevertheless, the idea of a united Caucasus did not die out with the arrival of Communist power. The years 1921 to 1924 witnessed several furtive and failed attempts to coordinate a regional rebellion, and one of the main themes in the political life of the Caucasian émigré community was the attempt to unite so that together, with the help of outside powers, they could drive the Soviets back out of their shared lost homeland and, reclaiming it, create an independent and united Caucasian state. Alongside the extremely adversarial geopolitical conditions, the bitter division within the community itself was a contributing factor to the failure of this romantic project. Tellingly, however, the political community was not split along national or religious lines so much as ideological. Generally speaking, those who had been centralists (Mensheviks, White collaborators, Baku Musavatists) clustered around the journal *Prométhée : organe de Défense Nationale des Peuples du Caucase*,

de l'Ukraine et du Turkestan (Prometheus: Organ for the National Defence of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Ukraine and Turkestan), while the decentralists (federalists and nationalists from the North Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan) rallied behind the journal *and Kavkaz (Le Caucase): Organ nezavisimoj natsionalnoj mysli (Kavkaz [Le Caucase]: Organ of independent national thought)*. By the end of the Second World War, however, all hopes were lost as the generation of political émigrés involved in the founding of the independent republics in 1918 gradually faded away. Yet the idea remained alive for quite some time, as we can see with the publication of the journal *United Caucasus: Organ of North Caucasian national thought* as late as 1964.

In conclusion, this paper indicates that the idea of Caucasian unity that was briefly resurrected during the chaos surrounding the dissolution of the USSR has a solid basis in the intellectual history of the region, particularly in the traditions of political and revolutionary thought that stemmed from the European liberal and socialist currents of political thought in the nineteenth century but also in the medieval Georgian conception of regional unity that is revealed in the Georgian Chronicles. Even when the idea of Cau-

casian unity or interconnection was not articulated on paper, over the centuries it has still been expressed intuitively in repeated episodes of spontaneous efforts to unite in defense of a common enemy. Some of these efforts have been recorded not only in the legends of the Georgian Chronicles but also in the modern era. Although this paper is simply a summary of work which I am presenting in more detail in a forthcoming book chapter and my dissertation, which I hope to expand into a book, I hope that this survey has provided sufficient information to convince the reader that the idea of Caucasian unity has indigenous roots and considerable longevity. Moreover, as this paper highlights, one of the most interesting features of the Caucasian concept of regional unity is its tendency to emphasize unity while still jealously guarding the right to the internal sovereignty of each of the unique Caucasian nations, usually through promoting the formation of some kind of defensive alliance, confederation or federation. Considering the flexibility that such structures can provide, perhaps the Caucasus holds the keys to squaring the circle between the two opposing principles of states' rights to preserve their territorial integrity and nations' rights to sovereignty over their own destinies.

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