How a Meeting in Hungary Symbolises the Upcoming Multipolarity

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In August 2023, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hosted some important regional actors, including the leaders of Türkiye, Serbia, Qatar, Azerbaijan, and a host of Central Asian nations. This policy outlook looks closely at this gathering, explores the aspirations of the key participating governments, and examines this meeting's impact on the upcoming multipolarity.

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Introduction

Merely forty years ago, the world was divided into two blocs, each led by a superpower, the United States (US) and the Soviet Union. These two alliances were the mirror image of each other, representing two different political economies, lifestyles, and social regimes. However, by 1990, after a contest that lasted four decades, the global capitalist system declared victory and the communist bloc dismantled itself. The euphoria that this landmark represented for the West paved the way for new power grab, unleashing a series of US-based armed interventions. The ideological victory combined with a military and economic domination led to a world order that unleashed the forces of capitalism worldwide. For many, this process has a name: Globalisation.

In the 1970s, neoliberal economics emerged. Through international economic policies, global institutions, and political interventions, this domination began to spread on a global scale. However, after the collapse of the USSR, neoliberalism, the latest version of capitalism, declared its absolute victory. Even Russia began a serious rapprochement with the West. The Chinese economy became the labour depot of the global capitalist order. The Eastern bloc countries rapidly began a process of integration with the western countries.

Today, the global political economic order must deal with some major problems: Russia has been claiming a separate destiny for some time. With the Ukraine war, the Russian leadership has once again been ostracised by the West. On the other hand, an unprecedented wave of migration from the disadvantaged geographies of global inequality is heading towards the capitalist centre countries. Far-right parties and discourses are on the rise against the destruction of national borders, not only by migration, but mainly by the international system. Because of their inefficiency and double standards, important institutions of the international system lost credibility. At the same time, new regional unions, economic and political re-alignments are on the rise.

From the perspective of Brussels or Washington, countries that are in the “grey zone” are problematic. These nations share many of the political and economic ideals advocated by the Western forces but still have issues with some discrepancies and double standards of the system. What’s more, many of these countries play an irrefutable role in the international order for example, in the Ukraine war, countries like Türkiye and Hungary, which maintain relations with both sides, refuse the demonisation process against Russia, preferring to endeavour for peace and be solution-oriented, rather than participate to the anti-Russia gung-ho.

These middle powers are emerging as centres of gravity separate from the great powers, both through their balanced relationship with the great powers and through diplomatic networks among themselves. In August 2023, Hungary hosted some important regional actors, including the leaders of Türkiye, Serbia, Qatar, Azerbaijan, and a host of Central Asian nations. Ostensibly, they all visited the country as part of Hungary’s national day. But several important agreements were also signed during this time.

This policy outlook looks closely at this gathering, explores the aspirations of some of the main participating governments, and examines the meeting’s impact on multipolarity.

Hungary

In the last four decades, Hungary, a former Eastern Bloc country, has witnessed great changes. It has gone through a painful process from communism, to becoming a NATO and EU member. The country, which has just transitioned to a free market economy, was amongst those most affected by the crisis in 2008. On the other hand, Hungary is a country that cannot be ignored in terms of its international position today.

Hungary’s most striking feature is its close relationship with Eastern Europe. The country has considerable influence in the Balkans. It is present as a regional actor in a fragile region. The Balkans have been under the security umbrella of EUFOR and KFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and the status quo post-Dayton has been delicate to say the least. At the same time, Hungary emphasises the integration of the Balkans with Europe as an important pillar of its foreign policy.

In this context, the country’s close relations with non-EU member Serbia are also noteworthy. The two countries had previously cooperated closely on bringing Russian gas to the region under the South Stream project. This project failed. However, the two countries’ relations in this direction have not deteriorated. In fact, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić describes relations as “at the highest level in the past 10 years”. Undoubtedly, the most important agenda topic for the two countries is energy supply. In this context, the leaders of the two countries, who met with the Emir of Qatar last August, stated that steps are being taken to deliver Qatari gas to the region.

With its NATO membership in 1999 and EU membership in 2004, Budapest has set its trajectory towards the West. Although the Orban administration is under severe criticism from Brussels in recent years, Hungary has no intention to leave the EU. Prime Minister Orban defines Hungary’s position as an effort to reform the EU, not to leave it. In this respect, Hungary sees its place in the West. In fact, Western and Christian values are among Orbán’s most frequently used discourses, especially in his statements on the migration problem. He also occasionally expresses controversial comments about Muslins, possibly to satisfy identitarian quarters, that consider their main goal as defending Europe’s “identity” from perceived Islamization and multiculturalism.
Beyond its association with Serbia, Hungary also has better relations with Russia than other European countries. Contrary to the harsh atmosphere in the EU with the war in Ukraine, the Orban administration thinks that relations with Russia should be kept better, and the war in Ukraine should not be escalated. He argues that the sanctions against Russia are not in the interest of the European people. In this context, the Hungarian foreign minister accuses the EU of globalising the Ukrainian war instead of isolating it, adding: "One of the global impacts of the war is that the world seems to be divided into blocks again and this is bad because if there's no communication between countries, in case there's no cooperation between the countries, then you basically give up the hope for peace".

Budapest also seeks to develop positive relations with countries located in West and Central Asia. Hungary, whose ethnic roots are Turkic, is an observer country of the Organisation of Turkic States. Clearly, Hungary aspires to develop an eastward strategy. Good relations with the Turkic states could also provide a future alternative to Russia's hegemony over Central Asia. It should be remembered that Hungary is a member of the EU and Türkiye, the most powerful Turkic country, is a NATO country.

Such multitude of horizons is due Hungary's adherence to the realist school of international relation. This school considers foreign policy as a means of maximizing the interests of nations. In this respect, Hungary sees itself assuming a balancing act between blocs. In this role, it is trying to maximize national benefits by establishing relations with both western and eastern countries.

Balazs Orban, Viktor Orban's political director and member of parliament, notes that a unipolar world led by the US does not work and that the periphery suffers the most in an international politics stuck in blocs, adding that "in such a system the centre not only controls the links across the blocs but also takes on the task of allocating resources ... any disruption in the supply chain of goods is first and most drastically felt in the periphery countries".

In this context, it is important to note that the August 2023 meeting in Hungary was not about merely opening dialogue tracks with other middle powers, it had much more goals, ranging from energy security to diplomatic alignments.

**Serbia**

Compared to the other international players, Serbia's influence on global politics is somewhat limited. However, in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, it was a matter of debate whether tensions with Russia could spill over to Serbia's backyard.

As far as Serbian politics are concerned, the country is seriously oriented towards the West. The EU accession process started in 2009. There is still a long way to go, but the country sees itself within Europe. "Serbia is aware of its place as a European country and have wish to be part of European security and strategic infrastructure", says Dr. Neven Cveticanin, President of Forum for Strategic Studies (FORST) and former MP in the Serbian parliament.

On the other hand, Serbia has traditionally enjoyed good relations with important world actors. Dr. Cveticanin summarises this situation as "[Serbia] has no reason to disturb its traditional relations with other world or regional powers such Russia, USA, China, India, Turkey, Egypt and those from non-alignment movement (e.g., Azerbaijan, Indonesia, etc.), because Serbia is successor of former Yugoslavia and for Serbia is useful to use previous Yugoslav diplomatic ties with different countries, especially those from non-alignment countries. That is not against Serbian process of joining to EU but could go parallel with this process in the manner of multi-vector diplomacy.”

In this context, maintaining multilateral relations with global actors is an important factor for countries like Serbia to maintain stability in their own regions. In a multi-actor region, such as the Balkans, stabilizing powers become even more important. In this context, Dr. Cveticanin says “multipolar world order” could mean for Serbia peaceful coexistence between different civilizations, cultures, religions and states from different parts of the world, especially because Serbia has inside itself specific blend of different religions and cultures.”

In this context, he underlines the importance of Türkiye and Hungary for the Balkans and adds “Serbia views Turkey and Hungary as partners in maintaining regional peace and stability, because at this moment the outbreak of a new conflict in the Balkans is not in the interest of Turkey, Hungary, or Serbia, because a new conflict in the Balkans would worsen the strategic position of these three countries and burden them with refugees and destroy the economy and the possibility of development.”

**Türkiye**

Throughout its 100-year history, the Republic of Türkiye has considered itself part of the Modern Western World. On the other hand, it has been extremely sensitive to maintaining a policy of balance. The country was deliberately kept away from the Second World War. In 1952 Türkiye became a member of NATO. In 1963, an association agreement was signed between Türkiye and the European Economic Community. In this regard, Türkiye has traditionally positioned itself within the western world, both in transatlantic relations and in relations with Europe.

On the other hand, in line with its historical roots, Türkiye has a wide sphere of influence in the Balkans, the Black Sea region, Central Asia and the MENA region.
In the last two years, Türkiye has taken steps to de-escalate two major crises that have shaken the world and to keep the world away from war. One of them was the Israel-Gaza war. As soon as events in Gaza escalated, Türkiye was one of the countries that stepped in. As the conflict grows in intensity every day, Türkiye, along with other leading countries, continues its efforts.

Another major crisis that is still ongoing is the war in Ukraine. On one hand, Türkiye is a member of NATO and remains loyal to the alliance, but on the other hand, it is trying to keep its relations with Russia at a high level. It has a calming tone towards the war compared to many NATO allies. It does not seem to be in full agreement with the West on sanctions, and its economic relations with Russia continue. In the context of the Ukraine war, Türkiye has tried to mediate on more than one occasion. The heads of US and Russian intelligence met in Ankara for the first time during the war. Before that, also for the first time, the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Russia held a trilateral meeting in Antalya. It would be too naive to say that these talks will bring peace in the near term. This is undoubtedly a matter of the will of the two warring parties and the United States. On the other hand, in practical terms, these relations are also producing positive results.

One of them is the prisoner swap agreement between Ukraine and Russia. The deal was mutually beneficial and took place in Türkiye. Another important example is the grain corridor. Thanks to the agreement brokered by Türkiye, the world's most in need countries were not deprived of the region's grain between July 2022 and July 2023. Türkiye’s efforts to return to the agreement, which is currently suspended, continue.

In this regard, Ryan Bohl says to Natasha Turak from CNBC, regarding Ankara’s and Riyadh’s relations with both sides, “It still serves both NATO’s and Russia’s purposes for the two countries to have working relations between them”. In other words, Türkiye’s capacity to build dialogue is important, not only on humanitarian issues like the grain corridor, but it also means a gateway to negotiations that is in the interest of both sides of the war.

Türkiye’s international influence and roles are not limited to these issues. It has deep-rooted relations with states in the Balkans, Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. For example, Dr. Cveticanin summarises Türkiye’s role in stabilising the Balkans, another sensitive region of the world; “Serbia recognises Türkiye as potentially the most successful peace broker in the Balkans because Türkiye already acts as a peace broker in Ukraine and has balanced relations with all the most important world powers (USA, Russia, EU, China, etc.).” In this context, it is worth remembering that Türkiye has also taken the initiative regarding the rising tensions in Kosovo-Serbia border.

**Qatar**

Although Qatar is a small Gulf country in terms of area and population, it is one of the most important countries in the Middle East, especially with its natural energy resources and active diplomacy. Unlike most other countries in the region, Qatar has been able to maintain its relations with Iran. In 2017, it was even subjected to an embargo by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, the main accusation was Qatar’s closeness to Iran. The embarguing countries also wanted to end military cooperation with Türkiye. However, with the embargo behind them, regional countries, even Saudi Arabia and UAE, are signalling normalisation with Iran.

This crisis was not Qatar’s first problem with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Three decades ago, Qatar was a state under Saudi Arabia’s tutelage. But when their LNG industry boomed in unexpected ways, it made them more inde-
In addition to its relations with Iran, Qatar is a country that places speaking to the Western world and maintaining good relations at the top of its agenda. Intellectual and diplomatic institutions, such as the Doha Forum, Al Jazeera as a media force speaking to the world, and the hosting of sports and cultural events such as the 2022 World Cup are important examples of Qatar’s will to do so. Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui observed that Qatar’s soft power strength lay in its close relations with state and non-state actors and the strength of its media institutions, especially Al Jazeera, which were key to overcoming the crisis in 2017.

Qatar’s foreign policy is not just about maintaining the regional status quo. Professor Mehran Kamrava says Qatar is important in the “post-American world”. In this regard, this small but influential country has also played the role of a mediator on crucial global crisis issues. In Afghanistan, it has mediated the Taliban regime’s relations with the West. More importantly, it has been one of the biggest supporters of the nuclear deal between Iran and the United States and has made efforts to bring it back to the table. Qatar also continues its efforts to soften relations between the US and Iran.

Qatar came to the fore again with the Israel-Gaza war trying to mediate thanks to its relations with Hamas and Iran. In the past, the US preferred to communicate with Hezbollah through Qatar.

Qatar also has an interesting position in the China-US rivalry. The Gulf country, which already has good relations with the US, has also improved its economic relations with China in recent years. In fact, Chinese military technology was first seen in Qatar. Qatar says that these developments do not harm its relations with the US.

Traditional definitions of power are measured regarding a country’s size, military strength, or potential for cultural influence. But Qatar is succeeding in becoming an international actor in a way that transcends these definitions. Dr. Kamrava lists the factors behind this success as “focused vision of the country’s foreign policy objectives and its desired international position and profile among the ruling elite, equally streamlined and agile decision-making processes, immense financial resources at the hands of the state, and the state’s autonomy in the international arena to pursue foreign policy objectives.” Noting that Qatar is more successful than many similar small countries, Dr. Kamrava emphasizes the importance of the Qatari leadership’s political vision and agency.

**Azerbaijan**

The first years of the post-Soviet era were difficult for Azerbaijan. Armenian separatists in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and tensions with Armenia escalated into a war. At the same time, the country’s administration was unstable. However, with Heydar Aliyev’s stabilization of the government and the country’s use of energy exports as an important power, Azerbaijan has, over the years, moved ahead of its rivals in the Caucasus, Georgia, and Armenia. Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan has made significant economic and military progress.

In 1994, the agreement opening the country’s oil to foreign companies was signed between the Western Oil Consortium and Azerbaijan’s national oil company SOCAR.
agreement was considered a milestone in the history of Azerbaijan and the liberalization of its economy and was called the "contract of the century"—the agreement’s negotiations dated back to 1990. Since then, Azerbaijan has taken important steps both in the construction of new energy lines and in increasing its capacity to extract natural resources. Today, the country has become one of the world's important energy suppliers.

One of the most important topics discussed during President Aliyev's visit to Hungary was Azerbaijani gas deals. Serbian leader Vucic, who was also in Hungary at the same time, stated that they are continuing negotiations with Azerbaijan on gas purchases. Following the sanctions imposed on Russia after the Ukraine war, Azerbaijani gas has become more attractive to Europe. Azerbaijan is already one of Europe's major gas suppliers.

On the other hand, even though Azerbaijan is developing its relations with Europe, especially in the energy field, and is seen as an alternative to Russia, it has been careful not to spoil its relations with either the Western bloc or Russia, even during the Ukraine war. This step is in line with Baku’s policy since independence. Azerbaijan, whose relations with Russia are particularly decisive in the context of regional realities, has also continuously improved its relations with the EU and the US.

In this context, it entered relations with Western companies, as mentioned above and continued its diplomatic rapprochement with the West. It increased its energy supply to Europe over the years and became a full member of the Council of Europe in 2001. It also hosted various European artistic, cultural, and sporting events.

Like the other countries discussed in this policy outlook, Azerbaijan is a candidate for a dialogue-building role between different poles in international politics. In this regard, it can be recalled that it hosted talks between senior military officials from NATO and Russia in 2018-19. Moreover, Azerbaijan was a member of the UN Security Council in 2012-13. During this period, for the first time in the council’s history, it took initiatives at a high level to increase dialogue between the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. In this context, Esmira Jafarova notes that Azerbaijan, as a middle power, is pursuing the right policy in terms of world peace.

**Conclusion**

UN secretary general Antonio Guterres stated that "The post-Cold War period is over, and we are moving towards a new global order and a multipolar world". In this context, it is possible to say that new powers and collaborations are rising against the unipolar world hegemony. For example, BRICS has made a lot of noise in this context. There has even been talk of a new currency as an alternative to the dollar. However, this possibility seems quite distant at the moment. In addition, the conflicts among these countries are a major problem. Another fact that cannot be ignored is that there is still a huge imbalance of power between the countries of the world. The US and China have half of the world's defence expenditure and the total GDP of the 33 countries that follow them.

It should also be emphasised that the Western World has the power to set moral standards and has an ideological superiority. Moreover, there is still no significant challenge to the dominant global political economic order. After the defeat of socialism, the global capitalist system has yet to face a new opponent. This opposition does not necessarily have to have a rigid ideological framework like socialism.

However, this limit should be noted in the discussions on a multipolar world order. This policy outlook looked at five very different countries, whose main common feature is to provide a practical example of how a multipolar world emerges. These countries are not rigidly aligned with blocs. They prefer to maintain balanced relations with countries like the US, China, and Russia. This orientation provides transitivity between blocs and preserves a sense of independence.

In addition to the positive examples mentioned above, it is also important to remember the negative possibilities. For example, in 2015, when Hungary closed its borders against the influx of refugees, a major humanitarian crisis emerged. Prime Minister Orban’s remarks, especially in this context, are building a sharp wall between the West and the East, especially with the Muslim world.

Swiss and Mazarr describe the most common characteristic of the Middle Powers as "an allergy to being recruited into a new bipolar stand-off between great powers". This marker was the common characteristic of the countries that met in Hungary last August. Such an allergy also underpins their place in the international system and future trajectory. Rather than merely occupying an inter-polar position, they constitute their unique centre of gravity.

At first glance, Hungary's hosting of the event may seem like a routine 'Independence Day' celebration. However, the calibre of the participating leaders, with their important diplomatic webs, offer an important clue as to how world politics is shaped these days.

In this respect, many experts believe the meeting in Hungary embody the upcoming multipolar world order. However, the dominant powers, especially the US, have not yet been able to adopt a proper strategy in harmony with this new situation, proving that Washington’s foreign policy is increasingly characterised by its limits, blind-spots, bad habits, and inability to envision a multipolar future.