

The joint-authors of this article (pictured below l-r) Ambassador Tedo Japaridze, former Foreign Minister of Georgia and former Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Relations; Senator Sodyq Safoev, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan; and Ambassador Hafiz Pashayev, Rector of ADA University and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan; have all participated as speakers at previous CAMCA Regional Forums and were featured together in a special Ambassador Roundtable session at the 2018 CAMCA Regional Forum held in Baku, Azerbaijan.



The Value of CAMCA

The Rumsfeld Foundation and Central Asia-Caucasus Institute’s farsighted effort to engage educated and resourceful young people from Central Asia and the Caucasus provided much needed attention and opportunities for this region when their Fellowship Program began over a decade ago. Today, there can be no question of its value to the young professionals themselves, their countries and the larger region, as well as to the strengthening of transatlantic connections in so many meaningful ways.

The CAMCA (Central Asia, Mongolia, the Caucasus and Afghanistan) Regional Forum, the annual conference of the now over 230 Fellowship alumni alongside other interested regional actors and professionals, is a singular event. We are aware of nothing else quite like it in the CAMCA region. The Forum, like the Fellowship Program, has both short and longer-term objectives, all of which add great value to the participants themselves as well as to the broader region.

In the short term, the CAMCA Regional Forum has successfully brought together and engaged some of the region’s most talented young professionals across all sectors – business, government, academia, non-governmental organizations and more – creating a large network of diverse entrepreneurial individuals who share the common experience of the Fellowship Program. The network is vast, touching all 10 of the countries of the CAMCA region. This large and growing network, by itself, justifies the entire program, as it will undoubtedly contribute toward integrating the region both economically and politically through the connectivity of its participants. The common CAMCA “language” created through their shared experience facilitates tasks and agendas with which national authorities can often struggle.

Within this CAMCA Network, there are many smaller groupings of like-minded professionals seeking to promote particular initiatives that create opportunities for the CAMCA countries, jobs for its citizens and contribute to regional stability and cooperation. Lots of small “systems within the system” exist that are both multinational and multidisciplinary, and they have already begun to produce results that leverage region-wide capabilities, while also revealing broader cross-border and cross-regional opportunities.

In the longer term, the platform of the CAMCA Regional Forum will be one of the most important vehicles for nourishing and building up the processes and, eventually, regional institutions that will stimulate, coordinate and accelerate the region’s integration. One can already identify from the Fellowship Program the potential of tomorrow’s regional leaders in business, government and thought leadership. The intellectual energy brought to the surface by the CAMCA Network – so vividly demonstrated at each successive CAMCA Regional Forum – is truly impressive for both its creativity and its power. Each new class of Fellows and each annual CAMCA Regional Forum builds on this intellectual firepower. It is no exaggeration to say that the ideas that will drive our region toward stability, prosperity and sustainability will in no small part derive from these activities.

The CAMCA concept is one of an integral region with more connecting its parts than dividing them. This idea, which seems somehow original to the independent states of the region, actually has deep roots in our common history. CAMCA reminds us of these roots, while it fertilizes them with the inspiration, the ideas and the human capital that will allow them to develop into the depths of our common cultural soil. In this sense, CAMCA is both the idea and its implementation.

The CAMCA concept shines strategically in an absolutely distinctive context during the COVID-19 pandemic and especially for the upcoming post-pandemic period when, from our vast territory, we must define our relevance to the world’s politics and economy. The CAMCA community should initiate and launch a strategic discourse regarding the options that our countries have in store: shall we eventually choose between a crushing bilateralism, becoming in essence satellite states, or create alternative intergovernmental networks, pooling together diplomatic clout, human and scarce capital resources to co-manage what will inevitably be a difficult transition period? Our countries have already taken some timid steps on crisis-management cooperation, but we must maintain this momentum in a world in which things could get a lot worse before they get better.