

Caspian–Black Sea Security Challenges and the Regional Security Structures

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The Caspian–Black Sea region is perceived today as an extremely important area on the global geopolitical map, due to the presence of both huge reserves of natural resources and major strategic transport corridors, the control of which will determine the shape of the geostrategic landscape in Eurasia, both in the present and in the future. For these reasons this region has become a focus of attention for geopolitical, politico-military, economic, and other interests of the primary global and regional powers.

From another point of view, however, a major geopolitical feature of the region is a growing security vacuum, which could potentially endanger the security and stability of all of Eurasia.

How can this security vacuum be filled? What political force or structures should be responsible for the future stability and security of the region? Putative wearers of the mantle of responsibility in the Caspian and Black Sea region include Russia and its satellites from the Collective Security Treaty; NATO, along with potential NATO members in the region; and regional countries and regional security structures.

In this essay, I will try to analyze the current security situation in the region, including the major threats and security challenges. I will then offer some speculations about possible alternatives for the future, including regional security structures and crisis management.

Today the internal composition of the region is quite chaotic, and a clear geopolitical structure is absent. The interests of the various regional actors are divergent. For a long time, the region was a sphere of interaction and mutual penetration of various cultures and civilizations, as well as an area of constant conflict between external geopolitical formations. Because of the long-term domination of foreign powers, a consolidated core system of interests on the part of the Black Sea area countries never emerged. The countries of the region did not become considerable geopolitical powers, and usually looked for external patronage or maneuvered between various external powers that competed for domination, seeking to deploy the natural and human resources of the region for their own interests.

By the end of the twentieth century, the regional structure witnessed a great many political and economic changes. Today, when most of the countries in the region face tasks of economic and social modernization, the creation of different cooperative regional systems is a logical alternative, one that corresponds to the interests of the region as a whole. The complementary interaction of different economic models could offer new possibilities that are difficult to realize within the old structures. These re-

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gional cooperation and security systems could potentially become the natural elements of a general pan-European cooperative security architecture for years to come.

A Survey of Regional Actors

To proceed further with the analysis of the security situation in the region, one should start with a consideration of the role and place of the major actors in the region, starting with their interests and priorities.

The actors on the region's geopolitical stage can be conditionally divided into three main groups.

The first group represents the major global powers. They are full-fledged geopolitical actors, and they define their interests and policy in the region independently. These are the United States, Russia, and to a certain degree the European Union, whose interests in the region have been growing considerably. The second group is made up of the regional powers—Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, and other states in the region. Because of economic, political, and other limitations, most of these countries today cannot be recognized as full-fledged independent geopolitical actors, and they have to play a role of geopolitical subjects. Under present circumstances, they will likely decide to coordinate their strategies and counter-strategies with the strategies and priorities of the major global actors.

The third group is composed of international cooperation and security organizations such as NATO, EU, OSCE, CIS, GUUAM, and BSEC. Their interests and actions have direct influence on the power distribution and regional processes.

The dominant players of the first group are the U.S. and Russia. Their influence in the region is determined by a number of economic, political, geographic, social, and cultural factors. In spite of the fact that the GDP of Russia today is smaller than the gross income of the state of New York in the U.S., the Russian influence in the region is still stronger than the American one. The other important peculiarity of the first group of actors in the region is the fact that their interests generally are competitive and often antagonistic. Only the U.S., NATO, and the EU interests are to some extent complementary in some spheres.

The United States

The events of September 11, 2001, and their repercussions in such places as Afghanistan and Iraq, drastically changed the geopolitical situation in the region. As a result, the U.S. emerged as a principal and dominant actor. This actor proclaimed the region to be within the sphere of its vital interests, and is currently attempting to radically change the traditional balance of power in the Caspian and Black Sea basin. In view of the new American national security strategy presented by George W. Bush in September 2002, the U.S. considers the Black Sea and Caspian region as a vitally important not only from the point of view of strategic oil supply and other issues, but also as a bridge-head for further access to potential markets in Pakistan, India, and South-Eastern Asia.

The complexity of the region's economic development problems can be regarded as a factor having a direct impact on the distribution of influence between U.S. and Russia. This situation prompts most countries in the region to engage in a broader dialogue with the U.S. and other Western states.

A number of oil transportation treaties signed in Istanbul severely undermined Russian influence and increased the significance of U.S. (and simultaneously Turkey) in the region. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline has strongly encouraged the process of Turkey's rapprochement with the EU, but the main consequence of the U.S.-Turkish version of the pipeline will be the weakening of the economic and political dependence of regional states on Russian policy, and the removal of any Russian control over the transportation of energy resources in the Caspian and Black Seas. Today, Russia enjoys an almost complete monopoly over the transit of Caspian oil and gas to Europe. Recent long-term contracts with key energy producers of the region will guarantee the continuation of this monopoly for the next fifteen to twenty years.

From another perspective, one of the results of the Iraq campaign was that in assuring access to Iraqi oil, the U.S. in many respects lost interest in the Baku-Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline, which by comparison to the ease of transporting Iraqi oil is too expensive and vulnerable. Of the alternative oil transportation routes going through the Caspian-Black Sea region, the Odessa-Brody-Gdansk pipeline is probably the most feasible and economically profitable. It is highly possible that the third wave of NATO expansion will be towards the southeast, in the direction of Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

The U.S. has certain regional advantages as compared with Russia, owing to its stronger economic influence on the political situation in the South Caucasus. Economic interests also explain the position and the active role taken by Washington in the negotiations on the Karabakh conflict settlement. Washington has directly linked almost all economic projects in the region and in Armenia to the successful settlement of this conflict.

One of the most important issues for this part of Eurasia is the strengthening of the U.S. military presence in the region, from Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf to Uzbekistan and Georgia. U.S. military presence has already become an essential factor for maintaining regional stability, security, and nonproliferation, and it dovetails with the interests of those regional countries that do not have their own great power ambitions. Without doubt, however, is the fact that one of the long-term U.S. goals is a massive and systematic squeezing out of Russia from the region, decreasing its political, economic, and military influence.

An important part of U.S. geopolitical strategy in the region is the continuation of the policy of integrating the post-communist countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures. After the accession of three Central European countries (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) to NATO, and the invitation of seven other Eastern and South-Eastern Europe countries to join the Alliance, the attention focused on countries in the Black Sea region is growing.

So if in the recent past Russia and some local players were the main geopolitical actors in the region, today the U.S. and its allies are emerging as a dominant geopolitical force. This fact has changed drastically the entire balance of forces and interests in the region.

Russia

Today, Russia is working on consolidating its influence on world policy, becoming increasingly active in international affairs. From the time of Peter the Great, Russia has considered access to the “warm seas,” and the Caspian–Black Sea region in particular, as the most important factor in its national security equation. This priority led to numerous wars and frequent interference in the internal affairs of countries in the region. Today the situation has changed greatly, because the new post-Soviet states are attempting to consolidate their independence and sovereignty and seek to remain beyond Russian control.

The new U.S. role in the region—and especially the active U.S. policy in its relations with Georgia and Uzbekistan—contributes to a large extent to the weakening of Russian influence. Since Russia’s attempts to create the CIS collective security system on the basis of the Tashkent Pact (CST) have proven unsuccessful, Moscow is trying to intensify the military and political elements of CST and create a Common Economic Space, developing these and other new instruments to control countries in the Caspian–Black Sea region.

At the same time, Russia is taking active steps to extend control over the energy resources of Central Asia and create new levers of influence on the Ukrainian economy and policy, pushing it towards closer integration with Russia. Deeply disturbed by its loss of influence in the Eastern European and Baltic states, with American soldiers in the Caucasus and American political and economic expansion underway in Central Asia, Moscow is desperately trying to prevent Ukraine from breaking free from its sphere of influence. Russia uses rapprochement with the West to neutralize U.S. influence in the region; it understands perfectly well the United States’ policy in the region, but it does not have sufficient economical or political instruments to resist it.

In this situation, Russia makes persistent efforts to install a new combination—consisting of the key post-Soviet states Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—under Russia’s domination (the so-called Common Economic Space, or CES). This alignment, however, is considered in Moscow to extend as far as customary and monetary union, and would in fact mean the end of sovereignty for these states. But we will return to this issue later.

Looking at this issue, Russia cannot bear full responsibility for the welfare of the region on the whole. The settlement of regional problems requires the creation of the social, political, and economic conditions for the dynamic and stable development of countries in the region, not only military and political involvement or diplomatic actions. Though total Russian hegemony in the region today is unlikely to emerge, it is necessary for regional states to make every effort to protect their own national interests.

The key priorities of Russia in the Caucasus area are maintaining political, economic, and military predominance in the region; subordinating the foreign policy of Caucasian countries to Russian interests; and preventing third countries from intensifying their role in this region (first of all Turkey, the U.S., and other Western countries).

In general, Russia is not interested in the creation of any more or less powerful regional cooperation and security substructure, particularly one that would be independent from Russian influence. At the same time, Russia remains interested in removing threats connected with the spill-over of local conflicts and uncontrolled organized crime.

Regional Actors

This group includes countries for which regional interests represent the most important—and often predominant—elements of their policy. What is principally important for the second group is that these countries' interests and national priorities generally do not contradict each other. They are strongly interested in maintaining regional stability and security, sustainable development, and the secure functioning of transport corridors—irrespective of the geopolitical games played by the global actors. It is in this area that there are considerable possibilities to coordinate their own national interests and priorities in ways that are advantageous for all states in the region. Thus, new forms of cooperation and alternative modalities of regional stability and security structures should be elaborated in this manner. Though, as has been mentioned, this process is a difficult one, there is a hope that it will ultimately prove successful.

International Organizations

The third group consists of organizations of international cooperation and security. These organizations are naturally interested in the region because of its huge economic and resource potential, as well as its strategic importance for security and stability of all of Eurasia.

NATO is the most important member of the third group. The events of September 11 initiated the process of the creation of new systems of cooperation between great powers on the basis of the campaign against global terrorism. The new configuration of the international relations system has altered the prospects for the future world order.

Most of the post-Soviet countries of the region today express their desire to become NATO members. In this manner, they are attempting to consolidate their democratic reforms, as well as find their own place in the new European security architecture. NATO in return is interested in extending its orbit of security and stability to the East, and in the resolution of regional conflicts. The new NATO strategy presupposes a wide sphere of activity beyond its traditional areas of responsibility. This is especially the case concerning the countries of Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe.

Security Challenges and Regional Security Structures

Over the course of centuries, the Caspian–Black Sea region became one of the main arenas for the clash of global interests. The tendencies currently intensifying in the North Caucasus are similar to those that manifested themselves in the Balkans and caused vast and destructive conflicts. Regional conflicts in many respects determine the logic of development of relations between other countries that include the Caucasus region in the sphere of their strategic interests. On the local level, these conflicts prevent the creation of close relations between Caucasian countries, hinder their full-scale participation in international institutions, and pose considerable difficulties for the development of political and economic infrastructures.

Russia plays a central role in several regional conflicts taking place in the Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia). Russian policy in the region has a dual character and is subordinated to the strategic goals of the Russian political elite: the consolidation of influence, and the installation and maintenance of control over this strategically important area. The tactics used by Russia have been felt in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea, etc. At first, following the usual model, Russia stimulates a conflict, uses it for its own purposes, and then plays the role of a peacemaker. Hitherto Moscow has practically annexed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, continued the colonial war in Chechnya, violated the withdrawal deadline in Moldova (without OSCE objections), blocked the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and increased pressure on Georgia and Ukraine to resubmit to control within its orbit.

Many of the problems of overcoming most regional conflicts and threats, along with the implementation of regional economic development projects, can be solved by creation of new comprehensive security structures that could establish a basis for cooperation in this field that is in the interests of all countries in the region. Under existing conditions, the creation of regional security structures by the countries of the Caspian–Black Sea region (including NATO and EU members) could considerably reduce the above-mentioned negative tendencies and promote the acceleration of economic and social development in the region, as well as its smooth integration within European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Contemporary economic and political realities demand the establishment of new structures for ensuring stability and security in the Caspian–Black Sea region, structures that are very important for the stable development of the entire Eurasian area. NATO and the EU cannot ensure the fulfillment of all regional goals, because many countries in the region in the near future will be beyond their direct responsibility. The level of symmetrical and asymmetrical threats in the region is quite high, and numerous regional conflicts and territorial arguments still remain unresolved.

What is of primary importance is that regional security structures could play a crucial role in counterbalancing the current Russian efforts to bring all post-Soviet states together under a new economic and (eventually) political union dominated by Russia. From this point of view, the already-mentioned decision of Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan to create a Common Economic Space (CES), having powerful common su-

pranational structures—participation in which is obligatory for all member states—is very threatening and dangerous.

The weighted decision-making power within the CES will be proportional to the economic potential of the state. In other words, Russia will possess an eighty-percent share of the voting power in this organization, and will therefore enjoy control over all key decisions. This situation will lead to full Russian domination in the CES, and will effectively limit the sovereignty of other member states.

Let me remind you the famous words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the leading experts on the problems of Central and Eastern Europe. He said that, without Ukraine, Russia ceased to be an empire; with Ukraine absorbed and subordinated, Russia automatically will become an empire once again.

We should remember that one of the major strategic mistakes of the West after the end of Cold War was the loss of Belarus. In early 1990s, Belarus did have a democratic government and desperately tried to align itself with Europe, but was rejected by Europe and West as a whole. At present, the West enjoys a ‘special relationship’ with President Lukachenko and his entourage. Today this situation is being repeated—this time in the case of Ukraine. In spite of all the official rhetoric about a special neighborhood, the EU is in fact building a new Iron Curtain on the borders of Ukraine, this time from the Western side.

Ukraine has been repeatedly refused even the status of an associate member of the EU, and concomitantly the WEU. The long-term consequences of such inconsistent Western policy could be very serious in the case of Ukraine. In effect, the West is effectively pushing Ukraine into the embrace of Moscow. I am not sure that this is in the best interests of the West, and Western Europe in particular. Regional networks might give countries in the Caspian–Black Sea region an enhanced security status that will enable them to avoid being pulled into the orbit of a great power such as Russia.

The creation of regional security sub-systems could serve as an effective counter-balance to the strategy currently pursued by Moscow, ensure the progressive integration of regional countries into Euro-Atlantic frameworks, and guarantee the stability and security of the region for years to come.