

The Impact of Geopolitics and Balance of Power in the Caspian Sea: Russia and its Return to the Past Policy

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Abstract

After the Soviet Union collapse, the geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region was at the center of competition between coastal, regional and trans-regional powers. In the past two decades, due to the geopolitical realities of the region including (the Caspian sea legal regime, the geopolitical position of the Caspian Sea at the center of the geopolitical scopes of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the affiliations of regional and trans-regional powers in the Caspian, the type of behavioral patterns of the Caspian sea littoral states in political and economic relations with each other and transnational states and finally all types of geopolitics governing the region) this place has played the role of Eurasia's new Heartland. In this connection, the geographical features of each country in the Caspian Sea have a special place for it. Russia is one of those countries which on the one hand, try to expand and maintain its former interests in this region by trying to expand its influence in the newly independent states and control the rise and expansion of American power in the region, on the other. Therefore, the research main question is that what kind of impacts the geopolitical features of the Caspian region have had on Russia's attempt to return to its past imperial policies? In response to this question, the assumption of the research is that Russia has been struggling to remain the most powerful actor in the region through dynamic economy, political, security and environmental components of the Caspian Sea in an effort to remain the most powerful country of the region.

The collapse of Soviet Union and the emergence of four new republics on the periphery of the Caspian Sea on the one hand, and the internationalization of rich hydrocarbon resources on the other, were the main cause for the region to regain its special political, economic and security status. Meanwhile, the gradual presence of some national and

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transnational actors such as large-scale transnational entities, international military institutions and oil companies have increased the political, economic and security complexities of the region and has virtually eliminated regional convergence among five Caspian Sea littoral states namely (Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan). In addition, the inalienability of the Caspian Sea legal regime and the quality of relations between the coastal states with regional and transnational powers due to geopolitics of the region on the one hand and the influence of transnational countries that are reluctant to observe formulation of regional arrangements in this area on the other, has led the Caspian Sea countries to pursue different strategies for achieving their national interests.

Russia is one of these coastal states that is trying to consolidate its influence in the area and in order to confront the influence of great powers in the region, it has made extensive efforts in economic, political, security and environmental dimensions. In this article, two hypotheses have been proposed. The first hypothesis is considered and proved to be the main hypothesis of the research and the second one is rejected as a subsidiary hypothesis. The main hypothesis is that Russia, using the Caspian Sea geopolitical partition, is trying to gain more power in the region to remain the most influential actor. The second hypothesis, which is considered as a sub-hypothesis of the paper is that Russia's efforts to improve its superpower status in the region due to the weakness of its political, economic and communication status, will cost it a lot. Due to some factors, chief among them the geostrategic position, the importance of security, the prevalence of some crises and ethnic differences, the existence of energy reserves and its transit to consumer markets, the region has always been the focus of regional and trans-regional powers. Russia's weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin government western-oriented approach led to a lack of attention to the region which resulted in the vacuum of power. The new conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the geopolitical advantages of the region have led to rivalries among various powers for their presence and influence in the region. Therefore, after Putin came to power, Russia changed its approach toward the region, and now the Caspian Sea is considered to be a geostrategic and geopolitical place in the minds of Russian leaders and the main competition point between Russia and the West, especially the US. In addition to using bilateral relations, these powers seek to benefit from the advantages of multilateral cooperation. Consequently, we are witnessing the activities of many organizations (especially the economic and security ones) with Western and Russian inclinations in the region.

Western powers are trying to increase their presence and influence in the region and take advantage of economic and security benefits. In this regard, NATO is pursuing a “Partnership for Peace” program and “Energy Security Plan” in order to secure its goals. In addition to providing educational, financial and economic assistance and investment programs for transferring energy from East to the West and providing assistance for the resolution of conflicts, the West tries to prevent Russia, China and Iran from having influence in the region. In addition, the littoral States of the Caspian Sea after independence were reluctant to engage with Western powers due to the fear of returning Russian domination and their need for financial and economic assistance.

Meanwhile, the economic infrastructure of these countries, which was a heritage from the Soviet era, was dependent on Russia. Therefore subjects like security issues, ethnic differences and existence of some crises have led these countries to ignore relations and cooperation with Russia. Therefore, Russia monitors the spread of political and security influence of outside powers especially those countries which compete for having access to the region’s energy resources in order to maintain its traditional influence in the region. In this framework, controlling and moderating Russia’s rivals is Moscow’s another goal to stop the West’s attempt to dominate the region. In sum, Russia’s strategy in the Caspian Sea region is an attempt to create a coalition and renewed economic, political, security and strategic integration with independent republics, emerging powers such as China and Iran, as well as active membership in regional organizations of this area in order to restore its lost position. Achievement of this goal, in addition to increasing the competition in the region, causes serious conflicts among relevant actors. Therefore, the adoption of cautious policies is the most important issue that Russia should always pay close attention in order to perform its plans and achieve its goal.

Keywords: Caspian Sea, Geopolitics, National Interests, Return to the Past Policy, Russia.