

## **Russia's Imperial Expansion and Geopolitical Change in the Global Situation of the Caspian Sea (1550-1800 A.D.)**

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### **Abstract**

For a long time, the Caspian Sea played a significant role in commercial relations between Muslims and the people who lived in the flatlands in south Russia as well as Eastern Europeans. The history of these commercial relations can be traced back to ancient times. Some Greek and ancient Iranian sources had references to these relations. Nevertheless, there are numerous evidence that point to the existence of a prosperous trans-Caspian trade in the early and medieval Islamic period. The volume of this trade experienced its zenith during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries of which a good part belonged to the Iranian people. These people were living in the lands around the Caspian Sea from Darband (modern Дербент) in the west to Mianqishlagh peninsula (near modern Aqtau) in the east. People of Daylam, Rouyân, Tabarestân, Gorgân in southern Iranian shores owned a considerable share of this trade. This situation, although changeable and limited, continued to be controlled by Muslims until the advent of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was a crucial time in the history of the Caspian Sea trade when the situation began to change in favor of Russia.

This study aims to trace a historical change in the global situation of the Caspian Sea during recent centuries. Its central question is that, how, and under what conditions the Caspian Sea changed to become a strategic field for Tsarist Russia's Asian policy. To explain the change we made use of Wallerstein's Modern World-System theory. Actually, this study attempts to trace a gradual but continuous change in the situation of the Caspian Sea during 1550 and 1800, which covers the Phase I to III in Wallerstein's socio-historical explanative theory. Regarding the methodological considerations, it is a historical study with arguments based on an analytical survey of historical evidence within a conceptual framework that is inspired and manipulated by the Modern World-System theory. To advance the study, we tried to make use of available material. Besides a bunch of Persian and Arabic sources which includes both archival documents and books, there

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are several Russian contemporary sources, which we used to base our historical explanation on first-hand material. In addition, many recent studies have been employed with a critical approach.

Our concluding remarks could be organized and explained within two distinct historical periods; prior to the mid-16<sup>th</sup>, the Caspian Sea was host to a traditional marine trade within which the Iranian tradesmen played a significant role. The volume of this marine trade was not considered in comparison with that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. Its nature was local and the most part of it transferred through two lines: south coasts, that included scattered points in Gilân (Daylam), Mazandarân (Tabaristân) and Gorgân (Astarabâd) with the small ports of western and northern coasts from Lankarân (modern Lenkoran) to Baku, Darband, Samandar (near modern Makhachkala) and Itil and, in a later time Sarây (near modern Astrakhan). This line passed through the southern and western coastal regions of the Caspian Sea and led to the mouth of the Volga (Itil) river. The second line bridged the eastern trade of China and India through Transoxiana and Mianghishlaq peninsula with Russia and Eastern Europe. Studies by Noonan and Kovalev based on newly discovered hordes of Islamic coins in western Russia show us that there had been a prosperous trade between eastern lands of the Caspian Sea through Russia and northern parts of Eastern Europe. This phase of Caspian trade experienced considerable growth during the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and was developed by Muslim people who lived in the adjacent region.

The second period began in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century during which the geopolitical situation of the Caspian Sea experienced a gradual change. Russia's conquest of Astrakhan (1558 A.D.) under Ivan IV proved to be a turning point in this process. This process was fulfilled by the strategic policies of Peter I and Catherin II in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under Peter the Great, Russia experienced her crucial phase of westernized modernization and this development affected Russia's approach toward Asia and the Caspian Sea. In the last decade of his life, Peter I tried to manipulate a strategy toward this encircled Sea and its adjacent region. At the top of his motives was Asian commerce whose importance was increasing constantly in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Russian-Iranian trade through the Caspian Sea experienced an apogee in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the situation changes drastically following the collapse of the Safavid state in 1722. This catastrophic event convinced Peter to launch his famous Persian expedition as the second turning point in our historical survey. Moreover, Peter, I supported a modern and scientific plan to map and navigate the Caspian Sea. Peter's successors, especially Catherin II and her mighty prime minister, i.e.

Gregory Potemkin, followed this plan more seriously. During 1770-1773, S. G. Gmelin traveled to the Iranian coasts of the Caspian Sea to advance a scientific-espionage program. His three-volume travelogue includes a wealth of information about the Caspian Sea and its Iranian shores. Finally, Mark Voinovitch's diplomatic mission and his failed attempts to establish a trading factory in Ashuradeh (actually a castle) was the third turning point in the history of Caspian trade and Russian-Iranian relations. This is a meaningful end for our study, which means that in the advent of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia was in a situation to use military power to protect her domination over the Caspian Sea.

Hence, according to our explanation, the gradual formation of tsarist Russia's Caspian strategy was in line with a gradual change in the global situation of this Euro-Asian government as a rising empire. This changing situation had consequential results for Iran and its commercial relations with Russia. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia took the upper hand in Caspian trade, and Iran lacked a naval power to ward off this strategic change. In fact, Iran's historical contribution to Caspian trade continued under Russia's dominance and her continuous attempt to pass from a peripheral zone to the core. Hence, the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been a crucial period in the history of Iranian presence in the Caspian Sea and its adjacent region as well as their contribution to its economic life.

**Keywords:** Colonial Expansion, Iran, Marine Trade, Modern World-System, The Caspian Sea, Tsarist Russia, Wallerstein.