

Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

# Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/euras](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/euras)

## Turkmenistan and military buildup in the caspian region: A small state in the post-unipolar era

Dmitry Shlapentokh\*

Department of History, IUSB, PO Box 7111, South Bend, IN 46634-7111, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 5 February 2013

Accepted 23 March 2013

### ABSTRACT

Caspian Sea had been actually a Soviet internal lake. Iran was too weak to be a competitor/rival for the USSR. The collapse of the USSR had transformed Caspian Sea into the sea surrounded by several states and each of them vie for the Caspian Sea's natural resources. Caspian Sea became also important as the route for delivery of oil/gas. All of this led to considerable tensions among the states in the area and naval buildup. Even Turkmenistan, desert republic, started to build the navy and contribute to the rise of tension in Caspian Sea. All of this indicated the increasing global instability which followed the end of Cold War and the end of the USA unipolarity.

Copyright © 2013, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

With many places in the world where the potential for major military conflict is evident, the Caspian Sea usually falls below the radar. Yet it is one of the places where tensions run high and there is a clear potential for military conflict with great implications for global security. The collapse of the USSR, increasing competition for oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, the potential influence of this gas and oil in global demand for these essential commodities, and finally, the Caspian role as a delivery route for Turkmenistan/Azerbaijan gas to European markets have led to an increasing arms race in the region. Observers usually pay attention to the bigger players in the region, such as Russia and Iran, due to the residual mentality of the Cold

War and early postwar era. During the Cold War, the USA and USSR defined the basic configurations of global affairs, albeit even at that time the picture was not so simple. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the USA was the only shaper of global policies. By about the end of the Bush era, the US economic and geopolitical decline, both relative and absolute, had become evident. Still, no clear alternative center of power has yet emerged. Even if we assume China will be the paramount center in the future, it will take time to become the undisputable global leader. Until then, several centers of power will exist, and parts of the world will be in a state of permanent anarchy, a “gray area” with quite unstable sociopolitical conditions. The area around the Caspian Sea area is one of these.

The end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR also led to global fragmentations. In the past, Pax Sovietica and Pax Americana cemented relations between the powers in their spheres of influence. The collapse of Pax Sovietica and the beginning of the disintegration of Pax Americana led to new areas of intense tensions that could lead to military conflicts with potentially global implications. The Caspian Sea region is one of these. In the recent past, the region was basically controlled by the Russian empire/USSR, with Iran/Persia

\* Tel.: +1 574 520 4349; fax: +1 574 520 4538.

E-mail address: [dshlapen@iusb.edu](mailto:dshlapen@iusb.edu).

Peer-review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University



Production and hosting by Elsevier

playing second fiddle. U.S. inability to exercise absolute control over this part of the world led to increasing tensions between the countries in the area, all vying for a piece of the oil/gas pie. For some of these countries, the Caspian Sea became an important location for pipelines to deliver gas to European markets. The volatility of the area, the unpredictability of its geopolitical configurations, and the new role of small states can be seen in Turkmenistan's position.

Turkmenistan, one of the most backward republics of the former USSR, has long been covered by desert. The notion of a navy would be associated mainly with the "ship of the desert" – the camel. Yet the collapse of the USSR and competition for oil and gas reserves led Ashkhabad to build naval forces. In this buildup, Turkmenistan was informed by the activities of other states in the Caspian Sea area.

## 1. Russian buildup

Russia as the tsarist empire and then the USSR has been present on Caspian shores for centuries, but has not until recently seen the sea as having naval importance. Until the collapse of the USSR, it was actually an internal Russian sea. Iran, which shares the shoreline, was too weak to create problems; in fact, Teheran was feared tsarist Russia and later the USSR. Not only did the collapse of the USSR lead to the emergence of several states with their own claims over the Caspian Sea, but it became an essential route for delivery of Central Asian/Azerbaijan gas to Europe, a project Moscow tried to prevent by all means. Awareness of the rich gas and oil deposits on the bottom of the sea has whetted Moscow's appetite. By 2000, according to Russian observers, Moscow also had become concerned over threats to its predominance in the Caspian region, primarily due to increased US presence.<sup>1</sup> It was not surprising that the Caspian navy suddenly emerged as a great priority for Moscow. Indeed, potential conflicts there are seen as more likely than in any other areas the Russian navy operates. Russia had a four blue water (ocean) Navy fleet to operate in world oceans, but none of these were modernized as quickly as the Caspian fleet.<sup>2</sup> Admiral Vladimir Vysotskii, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian navy, stated that the Caspian fleet would receive 16 new battleships by 2020.<sup>3</sup> Some observers assumed that this fleet received better ships than any other Russian ocean fleets.<sup>4</sup> This interest in the Caspian Sea indicates that Russia's top brass regard armed conflict there as much more likely than in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, despite 2005 and 2012 joint Russian navy maneuvers with China. Some members of the Russian elite believe war in the Caspian Sea could have global implications. Aleksandr Kniazev, Senior Fellow of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science, pointed out that he "does not exaggerate when he states that the beginning of hostilities in Caspian Sea would mean the beginning of world

war in which all Central Eurasia would be involved."<sup>5</sup> Despite its own dire predictions about the implications of conflict in the Caspian Sea, Moscow noted that it could engage in war with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan as it already has with Georgia if its interests were ignored.<sup>6</sup> Here, of course, Moscow pointed to the Trans-Caspian gas line, which is to send Turkmenistan gas to Europe bypassing Russia. Moscow has tried to prevent this development by all means possible, for it would undermine the monopoly over gas supply to Europe and deprive Moscow of crucial revenue and geopolitical clout. Moscow made clear that it would engage in war with Caspian states if they made any moves that could endanger its interest. Moscow sent these messages not just by military buildup but also by maneuvers in the area, the most recent in September 2012.<sup>7</sup> While not excluding conflict with rival Caspian states such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Russia also encouraged their potential conflicts with Iran and would not object if Iran engaged in naval maneuvers in the Caspian Sea with their implicit threat to Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The tension with Azerbaijan and Baku's response

Not only Russia creates a problem for Turkmenistan and implicitly threatens it with naval buildup. Azerbaijan's relationship with Turkmenistan is far from smooth, and cooperation to deliver gas to the West via Ukraine or other routes could easily be transformed into open hostility. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan have tensions over control of the disputed oil fields in the Caspian Sea. These fields were discovered in 1989, or perhaps even 1959.<sup>9</sup> Azerbaijan actually controls them, but Turkmenistan does not recognize Azerbaijan's claims, and disputes began immediately after the collapse of the USSR. At the beginning of the post-Soviet era, Moscow still held authority as major arbitrator in the area, at least in the eyes of some post-Soviet leaders. Consequently, Turkmenistan president Sparmurat Niazov visited Moscow and asked Yeltsin for mediation. This mediation was apparently not too successful, and in 1997 tensions between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan became really high. Moscow clearly tilted toward Azerbaijan, and on 4 July Baku and Moscow signed an agreement to develop the disputed oil field.<sup>10</sup>

Predictably, Turkmenistan turned to Western companies. The tension grew to the point where Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan broke diplomatic relations,<sup>11</sup> and Niazov noted that the tension could well lead to war. In his view,

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Konovalov, "Sovsem ne mirnoe Kaspiiskoe more," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 13 April 2012.

<sup>6</sup> "Voina na Kaspii mozhet stat' real'nost'iu," *Akton Biznes*, 22 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> "V. Mukhin: Kaspiiskoe vodianoie peremir'ie: V sporakh po povodu prinadlezhnosti ugle vodorodnykh mestorozhdenii na more poka pobezhdaet sil'nyi," *Central Asia.ru*, 3 September 2012.

<sup>8</sup> A. Fatulla, "Transkaspiiskii gazoprovod mozhet stat' real'nost'iu," *Zerkala.az*, 28 April 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Feruza Dzhan, "'Sedar' vs. 'Kiaput': Kakoi sud rassudit Azerbaidzhan s Turkmenistanom?" *Fergana.News*, 3 July 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "S. Shakariants: Kaspii kak vozmozhnyi novyi front regional'noi konfrontatsii," *Central Asia.ru*, 21 June 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Karpenko, "Strasti vokrug Kaspii: Tikhoe i spokoinoe more stanovitsia predmetom razdora," *Geopolitika* 35 (4521), 5 September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "Sopernichestvo za Kaspii," *Arevelk Center*, 14 April 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Rossiia gotovitsia k voine s Iranom ili za Iran," *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 14 June 2012.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1127260>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1127260>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)