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The Black Sea, Caspian and Central Asian Regions in Global Processes of Political Development

Sergey S. Zhiltsov 

*Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow,
Russian Federation*

✉ sergej-z71@yandex.ru

Abstract. The common viewpoint, widely shared in the academic literature, is that the role of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions is increasing and contributes to the dynamic development of the countries that are part of them. Indeed, amid global transformations taking place in the world, the position of these regions, as well as individual states, has changed significantly. However, the analysis of this issue is impossible without a profound assessment of the policies of extra-regional actors: their role in determining the development of the area and their influence on political and economic processes in individual states. The extra-regional actors have often shaped the essence of development taking place in the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions along with the nature of intra-regional processes. In the meantime, external actors have consistently integrated the Caspian, Black Sea and Central Asian states into global political processes, logistic and energy projects. As a result, the countries of these zones were given a subordinate role. Although these states developed their own ambitious geopolitical projects and long-term development programs, nevertheless, the results of more than 30 years of development of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions point to their increased dependence not only on extra-regional actors but also on the processes taking place in global politics and economy. The system approach allowed the authors to determine the importance of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions for extra-regional actors, assess their contribution to world politics and global economy, to identify potential directions of their development.

Keywords: Caspian region, Black Sea region, Central Asia, extra-regional actors, political process

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Черноморский, Каспийский и Центрально-Азиатский регионы в глобальных процессах политического развития

С.С. Жильцов 

Дипломатическая академия МИД России, Москва, Российская Федерация

✉ sergej-z71@yandex.ru

Аннотация. В соответствии с общепринятым тезисом, который утвердился в научной литературе, считается, что роль Черноморско-Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов повышается и способствует динамичному развитию стран, которые в них входят. Действительно, под влиянием глобальных трансформаций, происходящих в мире, положение этих регионов, а также отдельных государств, значительно изменилось. Однако рассмотрение данного вопроса невозможно без критической оценки политики внерегиональных акторов: их роли в определении развития регионов и оказываемом влиянии на политические и экономические процессы в отдельных государствах. Хотя именно внерегиональные акторы зачастую определяли характер развития Черноморского, Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов и характер внутрирегиональных процессов. Именно внешние игроки последовательно встраивали каспийские, причерноморские и центральноазиатские государства в глобальные политические процессы, транспортные и энергетические проекты. Соответственно, странам этих регионов отводилась подчиненная роль. Хотя эти государства и разрабатывали собственные амбициозные геополитические проекты и долгосрочные программы развития, тем не менее итоги более чем тридцатилетнего развития Черноморского, Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов указывают на усиление зависимости от внерегиональных акторов и возросшую зависимость от происходящих в мировой политике и экономике процессов. Системный подход позволил исследовать значение Черноморского, Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов для внерегиональных акторов, их вклад в развитие мировой политики и экономики, выявить потенциальные направления их развития.

Ключевые слова: Каспийский регион, Черноморский регион, Центральная Азия, внерегиональные акторы, политический процесс

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Introduction

The formation of the modern outlines of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions began even before the collapse of the USSR in 1989–1990. At that time, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the forces that were focused on the development of their countries within the socialist system left the political scene. Then the Warsaw Pact ceased its activities. As a result, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Black Sea and Caspian regions, as well as Central Asia (until 1993—Central Asia and Kazakhstan), were formed. The configuration of these regions was determined by geographical borders and the gravitation of coastal states to the Black and Caspian Seas. In these regions, despite being part of the socialist bloc for a long time, various foreign policy vectors were almost immediately identified, and political processes developed differently. In the Black Sea region, countries such as Romania and Bulgaria pursued a course towards joining Euro-Atlantic institutions. Turkey attempted to strengthen its influence in the Caspian and Central Asian countries while simultaneously making a bid for a leading role in the Black Sea region. Ukraine and Georgia pursued a policy of distancing themselves from Russia while focusing on developing political contacts with the EU and the US. Two groups of states emerged in the Caspian region, which could be divided into countries that advocated independent development of the region (Russia, Iran) and countries that considered various options for expanding the presence of extra-regional actors (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan). In Central Asia, the dominant approach was that formally all countries advocated establishing regional cooperation. In practice, the foreign policy aspirations of the Central Asian states were aimed at obtaining support from extra-regional actors and involving them in solving their own problems.

This diversity of states, each with its own history, customs, and cultures, dictated variations in the way each developed its internal and foreign policies. Simultaneously, it was discovered that the Black Sea-Caspian and Central Asian regions were a part of global political processes that started in the 1990s.

Regional Borders: Theory and Practice

Prior to examining how regions contribute to the global political process, it is important to define them, establish their borders, and identify the standards that different state scholars apply. Originally, the issue of what to include in the territories of Central Asia, the Black Sea, and the Caspian regions was primarily one of application and practicality. This resulted from the actions of extra-regional players, for whom it was crucial to identify the borders of the new regions they were a part of and to specify their attitude toward the newly independent nations since the early 1990s. But at the time, it was impossible to discuss any specific policy of extra-regional “players” toward the Caspian, Black Sea, and Central Asian regions. They formed regional policy in the new circumstances by evaluating the prospects of the Caspian, Black Sea, and Central Asian regions instead of instantly filling the geopolitical void.

The Caspian region was the center of Western activity. Information regarding the existence of substantial hydrocarbon reserves in the newly formed Caspian countries of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan urged it to do so. Specifically, as stated by Pisarev, “the United States actively initiated the implementation of a multifaceted and multi-aspect policy in the Caspian region, thereby forming a new model of international relations for the period following the end of the Cold War.” [Pisarev 1999: 376].

It should be mentioned that the Caspian region’s natural resources dictated its significance for states outside of its borders. Meanwhile, the US and the EU had no interest in the Caspian region’s oil or gas in general. Non-regional states saw hydrocarbon resources as a tool for policy, hoping to leverage this element to further their long-term objectives. The production of oil and gas as well as its potential supply to the external market were of great importance to the Caspian governments. The resolution of numerous problems pertaining to hydrocarbon resources drove the geopolitical advancement of the area. One of the top objectives of US foreign policy was to guarantee steady access to hydrocarbon resources. According to Russian specialists, “energy policy occupies one of the central places in the system of US foreign policy actions, which entailed complications in relations with Russia in the Caucasus and Central Asia” [Zhiznin 2000].

States that were part of them used subjective perceptions of a shared historical development—which they frequently denied—as well as the dynamics of relationships between regional nations and foreign policy players to define their regions. A clear example in this regard is the Caspian region, the interest in which—or rather, the interest in specific Caspian countries—was dictated by the existence of substantial hydrocarbon deposits and the ability to traverse them for transportation purposes. However, the idea of the “Caspian region,” which was widely utilized in the scientific literature and periodical press following the fall of the USSR, was first based more on an intuitive understanding than on a precise definition based on specific traits. The Caspian republics’ divergent approaches to resolving regional issues, including the legal status of the Caspian Sea, the development of hydrocarbon resources, and the direction of their supply, were a major contributing factor to this state of affairs. The US and the EU, as the main extra-regional actors, had a significant impact on the situation; their main goal was to keep the Caspian states from uniting under Russian control. It should be remembered that for the West, in conceptual terms, the Caspian region did not stretch beyond the borders of five states, although additional criteria were presented. Specifically, there were suggestions of integrating the Caspian states’ territories that border the Caspian Sea’s shores into the Caspian area.

Russian scientists, in contrast to their Western counterparts, put out a multitude of theoretical models. The idea of the “Greater Caspian Region,” which encompassed more states than only those that were washed by the Caspian Sea, was one of the “popular” concepts [Markelov 2020]. Several experts thought that the Middle East was part of the Caspian region [Sasley 2004]. The well-known Turkish expert Mustafa Aydin held a similar position [Aydin 2004].

According to Astrakhan researcher V.M. Viktorin [2002], “the Caspian regions acquired additional specificity as part of each of their adjacent states, and special ethnic and religious societies were formed here”.

It was popular to think about creating a Caspian community of some kind. They generally inferred that the Caspian territories were a part of broader historical processes by drawing on their shared past. According to Kazakhstan’s President N. Nazarbayev, “the Caspian looks like a separate geopolitical region capable of uniting into some kind of community, attracting global geoeconomic, ecological, and bioeconomic interests. The shared stance of all bordering nations about the cooperative usage of the water column helps with this as well. As a result, the Caspian region is portrayed as a tactical outpost that plays a significant role in the geopolitical landscape of Central Eurasia” [Nazarbayev 2003].

But the pragmatic policies of the West, which saw the Caspian primarily as a source of hydrocarbon resources, shattered most hopes of a single community emerging and of shared viewpoints on the most important issues. Furthermore, the division and isolation of the Caspian republics piqued the interest of Western powers. In contrast to this position, the unity of the “Caspian Five” was constantly emphasized at summits of the leaders of the Caspian states.¹

A system of concentric circles and belts, with the Caspian, its potential and issues, possibilities, and challenges, at its core, is one way that some Russian scientists proposed to conceptualize the “Caspian region” [Voitolovsky, Kosolapov 1999]. This method divides the five coastal states of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan into the “core” of the Caspian basin. In terms of utilizing the Caspian’s potential and opportunities as well as the inevitable nature of taking on its challenges, these states are inextricably “linked” to it. The “belt” of nations which took part in the construction of oil and gas pipelines and transport routes, or would do so in the future, constituted the second component of the theoretical framework that delineated the Caspian region. These included the Russian Federation’s Ingushetia, Ossetia, Chechnya, Stavropol, and the Krasnodar Krai, as well as Georgia. The third “belt” consisted of governments that did not fit into the other two groups and were drifting geographically toward the Caspian Sea. These states were also connected to the sea through infrastructural projects and the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources. Turkey, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, Bulgaria, Greece, Armenia, and Uzbekistan are among these states.

One major flaw in this categorization of the region was that it lacked specific criteria. However, these theoretical ideas proved to be well-liked by Russian scientists. Thus, according to geopolitical analyst A.V. Grozin of the Institute of CIS Countries, the Caspian region comprises a massive area at the meeting point of Europe and Asia. Traditionally, five Caspian states are included. Furthermore, the large regions of Central Asia, Transcaucasia, and

¹ Speech by the President of Russia at the Sixth Caspian Summit. June 29, 2022. Retrieved June 13, 2024, from <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68779>

the North Caucasus constitute the “near-Caspian” countries [Grozin 2000]. A similar assessment was given by other Russian scientists Malysheva [2002], who included Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Turkey in the Caspian region in addition to the five Caspian states.² Astrakhan’s V.S. Roman observed that “the Caspian region is usually considered to include the Caspian Sea itself, Western Kazakhstan, virtually all of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Northern Iran, and, naturally, the southern part of the Russian Federation (Volgograd, Astrakhan, the Rostov region, the Stavropol Krai, the republics of Kalmykia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya)” [Roman 2002]. The Caspian area, in turn, is a notion that, in a narrow sense, can be defined as the Caspian Sea basin and the territories near to it, according to Iranologist E.V. Dunaeva. A broader interpretation is “a region lying on the border of Europe and Asia, along the North-South line that historically developed during the Cold War, a corridor along which the demarcation of two civilizations passes: Christian and Muslim” [Dunaeva 1999]. Iranian internationalist H. Ghaffarzadeh identifies “The Caspian Economic Hinterland,” defining it as “administrative units facing the sea”.³

There were significant issues with the definition of the “Caspian region” in relation to energy resources. The volumes of hydrocarbon deposits were not well understood, and pipeline projects were difficult to implement. As a consequence, these elements could hardly be regarded as constant characteristics of the Caspian region. “A number of structural and territorial features define the Caspian region: unique natural conditions; large, yet underutilized, mineral reserves, agricultural, food, and recreational potential; high industrial concentration in some areas, which has an irreversible negative impact on the environment; unstable socioeconomic conditions in the context of escalating ethnic and religious conflicts, marked by a high likelihood of internal armed conflict; and the existence of numerous unresolved issues that resulted from the establishment of state borders rather than administrative ones. All this taken together has seriously disrupted previously existing economic ties and industrial transport infrastructure and affected many other problems...” [Voitolovsky, Kosolapov 1999].

Unlike Russian scientists, who included significant territories in the Caspian region, often located at a considerable distance from the Caspian Sea, Western researchers relied on indications that were objectively present but not entirely well defined. One of the first places in this approach were energy resources, which occupied a leading place in the policies of Western states.

The “Black Sea region” was defined differently than the “Caspian region,” suggesting a shift in perception. In political terms, practically all countries of the Black Sea region were distinguished by the unfinished nature of the process of establishing democratic principles. This affected not just Bulgaria and Romania but also the post-Soviet states, which started forming new political systems following

² In 1997, Turkey declared itself a Caspian state.

³ Ghaffarzadeh, H. Speech at the international seminar of independent experts “Sustainable development and regional security of the Caspian Sea and its river deltas”, May 27–30, 2003, Astrakhan.

the fall of the USSR. In terms of geopolitics, the Black Sea region stood for a steady arrangement of several states' interests. The disparity in foreign policy priorities was predetermined by Turkey's focus on dominance in the region, Bulgaria and Romania's aspirations towards Euro-Atlantic integration, and the uncertain political developments in Georgia and Ukraine. Differences in the economic capacity of the Black Sea nations had an influence, which led to the creation of development leaders (Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine), medium-sized states (Romania and Bulgaria), as well as a country with small economic opportunities (Georgia). As a result, the core of the region based on the countries washed by the Black Sea did not take shape. Furthermore, with the fall of the socialist camp and the USSR, outside forces have exerted their influence on the Black Sea states, imposing their own foreign policy agendas. The Black Sea countries were given a secondary role in the energy and transportation initiatives developed by Western countries.

Energy played a major role in the region's growth and how it was positioned in contemporary political processes. The Black Sea region was originally thought to be an extension of the energy and transport routes that started in the Caspian region due to its geographical position. Because of its integration with the interests of Western governments, the energy issue consequently had a significant influence on the region's standing in international politics. In addition, Western nations actively supported initiatives meant to secure energy flows from Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Black Sea, so securing their geopolitical reconciliation with Europe. The US, EU, and Turkey backed the establishment of east-west transport and energy networks, which constituted this ambitious undertaking. The United States began pursuing similar projects in the 1990s of the previous century, proposing to create new energy flows that were thought to provide a geopolitical framework for the large areas of Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Black Sea regions [Zhiltsov, Zonn 2009].

In general, the Black Sea region was made up of a patchwork of the political objectives of the Black Sea states, to which extra-regional players were continuously added. The area was no longer seen as a geopolitical peripheral of Europe with the fall of the USSR. It started to be seen as a potential area, a "geopolitical bridge" that would link Europe to the Caspian and Central Asia. Furthermore, in terms of trading routes and economic ties, the Black Sea and the Caspian regions were traditionally deeply intertwined, forming a unified entity. The European integration association arrived on the Black Sea coast with the 2004 and 2007 EU and NATO memberships, bringing with them the challenge of carrying out long-term political and economic projects.

In broad geographical terms, if we consider the countries that are members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and are not connected to the Black Sea, the region is a place where various geopolitical factors converge. It is the point of intersection for the transportation, energy, and economic interests of both extra-regional and regional states.

In addition to the six states that historically have access to the Black Sea—Bulgaria, Georgia, Russia, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine—Moldova can also

be included in the region, having gained access to the sea by building a port in Giurgiulesti. It is located 134 km from the Black Sea on the left bank of the Prut and Danube rivers in the village of Giurgiulesti. If we add Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova to these countries, we get the “Greater Black Sea Region.” The term “Greater Black Sea Region” is often used, which “unites countries that have common interests, primarily in the sphere of economy and security, linked by common historical and cultural traditions. Geographically, it unites the countries of South-Eastern Europe—the Balkans and the Caucasus, as well as the coastal states of the Northern and Southern Black Sea regions” [Shmelev, Guseinov, Yazkova 2006, 30–31]. In the materials prepared at the time of the announcement of the EU initiative for the Black Sea region (2007), the region included Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

The concept of “Central Asia” appeared in 1993. Before that time, this region included four Central Asian states and Kazakhstan. The Central Asian states sought to view themselves as a geopolitical unit [Garbuzarova 2022]. However, the unity of the region was conditional. Moreover, in Central Asia in the 1990s, disintegration processes intensified, primarily due to unresolved water and energy problems and the homogeneity of the economies of the Central Asian states. An obstacle to achieving regional cooperation (attempts at integration projects were unrealized) were the political ambitions of the leaders of the Central Asian states, who sought political dominance. In addition, all the Central Asian countries with similar approaches to political governance had different histories, traditions, and mentalities.

Extra-regional players have exerted a strong effect over Central Asia. Central Asian states are now more closely aligned with the interests of extra-regional governments due to the utilization of multilateral methods of engagement and infrastructure projects spearheaded by the West and China [Kechagias 2023].

Modern Stage

Discussions about the role of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions have continued in recent years. A common statement, which was reflected in a significant number of scientific works by Russian and foreign scholars, is the thesis about the increase in their role in world politics, economics, and energy. It is difficult to disagree with this. However, a set of issues related to determining the degree of influence of extra-regional actors on the development of these regions remained and is still relevant without consideration. Their involvement in international infrastructure, energy, and geopolitical projects, as a rule, receives positive assessments. At the same time, such participation increases dependence on the policies of external players, who have precisely defined the place and importance of regions and individual states in their policies. Accordingly, theoretical assessments and practical approaches to the implementation of policies by extra-regional actors are aimed at preventing

political consolidation within the regions and expanding their intra-regional economic interaction.

This is clearly seen in the example of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions. Thus, over the past thirty years, political and economic ties between the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian states within these regions have not developed significantly, while with extra-regional players they have strengthened and reached a new level. The political development of the Caspian region was cemented by the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea (2018), which secured the priority of the “Caspian Five” in solving key problems. However, the document did not affect the economic ties of the Caspian states with extra-regional actors, and even more so, the emergence and implementation of various infrastructure projects. At the same time, most of them were initiated from the outside and do not have a consolidating effect on the development of the countries of the region. The course of turning the Caspian region into a raw materials appendage was initiated by Western countries after the collapse of the USSR and subsequently received practical reinforcement. To implement this task, pipeline projects for the supply of hydrocarbon resources were developed. The most significant energy projects in the Caspian region were the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Southern Gas Corridor, which will provide access to Caspian hydrocarbon resources from Azerbaijan to the European market.

The Black Sea region, which has firmly established itself as a transit zone for energy resources and a “bridge” in the deployment of transport corridors, is observing a similar situation. As a result, the Black Sea area has proven to be a vital conduit for Caspian hydrocarbon resources. The region is of interest to extra-regional entities as a “bridge” between the Caspian region and Europe; the construction of many pipeline projects has not altered this function.

In terms of international politics and economy, Central Asia aimed to become more autonomous. However, the goals of extra-regional players were at odds with the concepts of fostering regional cooperation and creating a shared regional agenda, which were debated but never put into practice in the 1990s. In order to include Central Asian governments in the scope of their geopolitical interests and to use their territory as an essential component of transportation routes, China, the United States, the EU, India, Turkey, and other countries promoted their political agenda. The finding in one of the studies on Central Asia that “intense internal growth sources can mitigate vulnerability to external factors” is not coincidental. The lack of access to the sea, reliance on natural resources and underdeveloped financial sector, inconsistent water and energy sector, and climate change are the four main structural issues that the countries in the region must solve [Vinokurov 2022: 10].

Domestic political events had an immense impact on the development of the Central Asian republics. The states in this region persisted in following the conventional paths of development, depending on customs that presumed the existence of authoritarian power, vested in the president, rather than democratic principles, which were officially endorsed by everyone [Zhiltsov 2016].

The focus of this journal issue is the political evolution and global political significance of the Black Sea, Caspian, and Central Asian regions. Scholars from a variety of Russian and international educational and scientific institutions provided theoretical and empirical materials on a broad range of current issues.

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About the author:

Sergey S. Zhiltsov — Doctor of Political Science, Professor, Head of the Department of Political Science and Political Philosophy, Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (e-mail: sergej-z71@yandex.ru) (ORCID 0000-0002-4898-2627)