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**GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF IRAN IN THE REGIONAL AND
BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS OVER THE CASPIAN SEA**

Abstract

The dissolution of the Soviet Union significantly altered the legal system that governed the area around the Caspian Sea. When the Soviet Union was still standing, it claimed sovereignty over the entire Caspian Sea, and its legal framework for the region was heavily influenced by Soviet-era regulations. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, disputes and disagreements arose among the newly independent states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Iran over the Caspian Sea's jurisdiction.

The legal status and resources of the Caspian Sea were heavily influenced by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all emerged as independent states, and this resulted in competition for the sea and its resources. Conflicts and tensions have arisen between the littoral states of the Caspian Sea because of the absence of an agreed legal framework for exploiting its resources. The situation has become even more complicated because of the Caspian Sea's rising significance in international energy markets.

For decades, the five countries bordering the Caspian Sea have argued over who has the rightful authority to determine the sea's legal status. Several treaties and declarations have dealt with this problem over the years, and in 2018 the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed. While many of the lingering questions and concerns about the sea's legal status have been addressed by this convention, others remain. In order to address the concerns of external actors and the international community as a whole, it is crucial that the countries bordering the Caspian Sea continue to work together to ensure the sustainable management and conservation of the sea's resources.

Russia's stance on the Caspian Sea's legal status reflects a wide range of competing interests and concerns. Russia has been a vocal supporter of the idea that the Caspian Sea should be recognised as a shared resource, but the country has been hesitant to fully adopt the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. Russia's energy interests in the region are at the heart of its apprehension about the possibility of conflict over the Caspian Sea's resources, but Russia has also sought to strike a balance between these interests and its desire to maintain stability and cooperation in the region.

Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan all rely heavily on the Caspian Sea. The sea has been an important factor in the political, economic, and cultural growth of these nations because it connects them to the rest of the world. These nations have invested in ports and pipelines to facilitate the export of their natural resources to buyers in Europe and Asia. Future growth and innovation in these nations will be largely influenced by the Caspian Sea.

Iran's presence in the Caspian Basin is crucial to the balance of power in the region and the world. The Caspian Basin is a strategically and economically significant region, and Iran's presence there has serious consequences for the safety and stability of the entire region. The countries of the Caspian Basin will need to cooperate in order to fully realise the Caspian Basin's potential as a driver of economic growth and development, despite the region's many difficulties.

Despite the status of the Caspian Sea determined by the agreements, during the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the Russian side actively uses the sea as a military foothold against Ukraine. And the Caspian countries, including Iran, do not intervene in this violation.

Iran enjoys historical opportunities due to its unique geopolitical location. Its shores on the Caspian Sea provided it with great political benefits and important occasions for its foreign policy to maneuver with the international community after its ideological and expansionist tendencies, especially in the West, almost destroyed its hard-line political regime. Iran has sought to maximize its benefits from the Caspian Sea, but it has been hit by a grinding international conflict, this collision had a great benefit on Iranian foreign policy, which regained its realism and natural flexibility after it was imprisoned by the closed-mindedness of the mullah's clerics. Therefore, it can be said that Iran has temporarily succeeded in escaping from the crush and converting material losses into strategic benefits through negotiations. The above work allows us to formulate the following results:

1. There are more than 250 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves in the Caspian Basin region, and this is in addition to other minerals and wealth. This is the equivalent of 16 percent of the world's oil reserves. Which places it at the forefront of the world's most significant and prosperous regions. At the same time, this makes it one of the most enticing regions in which a war could break out.

2. The issue of the Caspian Sea's legal status became central to regional politics in the final decade of the twentieth century as a result of shifting geopolitical power dynamics. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Communist doctrine no longer dictated the situation surrounding the Caspian Sea, forcing everyone involved to start over and find a new legal framework based on the fundamental question: Is the Caspian a closed sea

or a limited lake? It was not possible to apply international water law to the Sea Caspian, so a group of factors emerged that tried to push the process of setting major milestones to define the legal framework for the Caspian Sea forward. However, there is a problem that complicated this process represented in the absence of similar cases that can be measured.

3. There was not much distance between the pressure of Western visions of interests, whether European or American, and the interference of super majors oil and gas companies; it took the countries bordering the Caspian Sea over a quarter of a century to reach an agreement on the division of the huge benefits in the region.

4. The positions of the states during the Caspian Sea negotiations can be summarized as follows.

Russia's position: shared waters, a divided bottom: sovereign rights over the oil fields on the basis of the agreement.

- Kazakhstan's position: The Caspian is not a sea and not a lake: the exercise of all sovereign rights over the territorial waters, including the seabed.
- The position of Azerbaijan: the Caspian Lake is limited: the application of the principle of division around the administrative regions, which was approved by the Soviet Ministry of Petroleum Industry in 1970 AD) The position of Turkmenistan: constant change: defining the following areas: the regional from 12 to 15 nautical miles, the economic zone is 35 nautical miles, and the rest are shared waters.
- While Iran's positions are limited to: joint sovereignty, the Caspian is a closed sea, the exercise of sovereign rights for each country in coastal areas of up to 20 nautical miles, absolute sovereignty over the waters, the bottom and the air in this region of the adjacent territorial sea, or that the five riparian countries have the same rights To carry out exploration and protection of the ocean, a joint operation in the middle or heart of the Caspian Sea, that is, from 40 nautical miles from the shores of the riparian states.
- Iran is a major player in this region, and its importance may increase in the future as it enjoys qualitative advantages, the most important of which are the enormous wealth and its geographical location, which makes it the best and least expensive passage for Caspian oil and gas to the rest of the world, especially as it has equipped itself well with facilities for the oil industry on the south coast of the Sea, It has the largest pipelines network in the Middle East, and it can be easily extended to any neighbouring country.
- At the Aktau conference, Tehran abandoned what it used to call its historical rights in the Caspian compelled, just as it abandoned its insistence that the Caspian is a lake and not a sea. So as not to hinder the policies and plans of its Russian ally, which wagered on the success

of the Aktau conference and its exit as a dominant power, thus strengthen the influence of its president, Vladimir Putin, internally and externally. The importance of the agreement is not due to its direct results, which are almost not economically noticeable now, it is almost a legalization of a fait accompli, but the importance of the event lies in the fact that the legalization of the current situation and the liquidation of the focus of tension have transformed the situation from a point of contention to a point of convergence and conglomeration of its five countries. The Iranians are betting on the role that the common economic benefits of major countries may play in preventing any military attack on them, and the Iranians believe that the most important goals of the main players in this region (Russia, America, European Union countries, China) is to control the routes and pipelines of oil and gas exports, and thus In spite of the disagreement between Tehran, the West and even Saudi Arabia over the Iranian nuclear program, any tension in this region will affect all of these countries that border Iran, such as Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, especially on gas pipelines to Europe.

Iran faces numerous challenges, including a lacklustre economy, domestic political upheaval, the aftermath of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the country's seemingly endless and wasteful adventures in countries like Syria and Iraq. For the time being, the stability that Tehran has enjoyed in the South Caucasus for three decades must be preserved at any costs. On September 27, 2020, military engagements broke out along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, sparking a full-scale conventional war that lasted for 45 days.

Iran is a major loser in this battle for three main reasons:

First, Azeris make up Iran's second largest ethnic group. During the unrest, ethnic Azeris voiced their support for Baku through social media and street protests. The Iranian government suppressed several of these pro-Azerbaijani demonstrations despite its efforts to look neutral during the crisis. The Azeri minority in northern Iran is always lobbying for more freedom and independence. Although this has not yet manifested as a widespread call for independence, it has caused concern among certain members of Iran's ruling elite.

-Second, Iran will need to realign its northern border with Azerbaijan, which will require an investment of time, resources, and possibly even troops. This may mean that Iran pays less attention to other regions, such as the Gulf or Syria. Since 1994, Armenia has occupied territory along the border between Azerbaijan and Iran. Baku has regained control of the border with Azerbaijan, establishing a new security dynamic between the two countries. Many in Tehran are also likely to be on edge due to the fact that 2,000 Russian peacekeepers are stationed within 100

km of the country's border. In spite of improved ties in recent years, Russia and Iran have historically been regional rivals. More Iranian military forces have been moved to the country's northern border. Finally, Azerbaijan has worked hard to keep amicable relations with Iran since its autonomous area of Nakhchivan, which is sandwiched between Iran, Armenia, and Turkey, is supplied through Iranian airspace and territory. Nakhchivan's natural gas supply came from Iran, which Azerbaijan relied on for both transit rights and energy. Armenia has opened a corridor through its territory to make it easier for Azerbaijan to ship commodities directly to Nakhchivan as part of the recent peace arrangement. Nakhchivan also has a fresh energy source thanks to an announcement made by Turkey earlier this year. Baku should expect a shift in the bilateral relationship's dynamics in its advantage because of Iran's declining importance.