LAND-LOCKED NAVAL DEFENSE DIPLOMACY IN THE CASPIAN SEA

A CASPIAN POLICY CENTER POLICY BRIEF







ABOUT US

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rear Admiral (ret.) Ron MacLaren Project Advisor

Rear Adm. Ron MacLaren served as the group commander, Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group Forward Golf in 2007–2008 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. MacLaren was assigned as the assistant deputy chief of staff for Logistics, Fleet Supply and Ordnance, U.S. Pacific Fleet in October 2009. He was recalled to active duty in March 2010 to serve as director, Joint Contingency Acquisition Support Office (JCASO). JCASO was established by the Department of Defense to orchestrate, synchronize and integrate program management of contingency acquisition across combatant commands, U.S. Government agencies and multi-national operations during pre-conflict operations, contingency operations, and combat operations. He was promoted to the two star rank in October 2013, the highest rank achievable in the Supply Corps for a Reserve Officer. In this position, he led collaborative business development efforts with foreign governments, multi-national forces, government agencies. He spent 5 years conducting business development for the U.S. Government in the countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Latvia, and Lithuania



Major General (ret.) Michael S. Repass Project Advisor

Michael S. Repass is the Chief Executive Officer for Able Global Solutions LLC which he founded in 2013 after retiring from the Army. He graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY in 1980 then served as an infantry officer in multiple junior officer assignments including company commander. He subsequently spent over 30 years as a Special Forces officer. He commanded the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM during two combat tours. Mike later commanded the Army's Special Forces Command, and twice served in Special Operations Command Europe in Stuttgart, Germany first as the Deputy Commander then as the Commanding General. Since 2013, Mike Repass has worked with several international defense companies to assess and develop markets for advanced capabilities placement. He also serves as an Adjunct Faculty member for the Joint Special Operations University and directly supported educational programs to develop strategy and policy options for multiple European and African countries.



Justin Rich Author

Justin Rich is a Research Intern at the Caspian Policy Center. He is a senior in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and is majoring in International Politics with a concentration in International Security. His academic focus has primarily been on post-Soviet politics, law, and foreign policy. Previously, Justin's experience has included working with a non-profit that seeks to educate high school students in international relations and global issues.



Nicole Wolkov Editor

Nicole Wolkov is the Academic and Research Coordinator at the Caspian Policy Center at the Caspian Policy Center. She is an M.A. candidate in European and Eurasian Studies with a specialization in international security policy at The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Nicole graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in International Affairs with a focus in security policy and Russian Language and Literature from The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Her research interests and current portfolio include Russia and China's relationship with the Greater Caspian Region, great power competition in Central Asia, military cooperation, and the intersection of security, technology, and governance.

Overview

The Caspian Sea, a body of water disconnected from the world's oceans, has become the center of growing economic trade and naval militarization. Despite its importance in Eurasian geopolitics, Washington has integrated the region into its foreign policy and national security agendas only in broad terms.¹ It is imperative for the United States to enhance its diplomatic presence in the region with Cabinet and Sub-Cabinet engagement and investment initiatives, yet it would be incomplete without addressing the expanding Caspian navies of the five littoral states.

While it may seem like an insulated body of water, there are larger international implications that affect both regional and U.S. national security. The Caspian provides Russia strategic naval depth and has the potential for minimally restricted illicit trade, both of which can have impacts ranging from security in the Black Sea to illicit international trade networks. Washington should seek a diplomatic approach through defense cooperation to mutually strengthen national security interests of the United States as well as of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on the Caspian Sea.

Defense Diplomacy and U.S. Presence

The phrase "defense diplomacy" has been used to refer to military cooperation and arms transfers in order to improve bilateral or multilateral relations.² This cooperation can include officer swaps, joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, or arms transfers that create a diplomatic connection without signing an explicit and binding bilateral military agreement. Due to its non-binding nature, defense diplomacy can be a practical means to establish stronger diplomatic and military relations with other countries and offer an alternative to competing international sources of armaments, training, and support. The United States has lagged in its application of defense diplomacy in Central Asia as demonstrated by a 97.5 percent reduction in military aid between 2010 and 2020. Additionally, the past higher



Map of the Caspian Sea (Source: World Atlas)

levels were focused primarily on land-based defense diplomacy rather than maritime defense development.³ While the United States should increase its overall defense diplomatic activity in the Caspian Region, greater naval cooperation with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan would be mutually beneficial to both U.S. and Caspian interests. However, and for the purposes of this paper, Russia and Iran should not considered to be candidates for military diplomacy.

Previously, the United States has worked with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan through joint military exercises such as the Caspian Guard Initiative, Exercise Steppe Eagle, and Exercise Sea Breeze. While Steppe Eagle is still ongoing, only Kazakhstan is involved on the ground in the army-oriented exercises.⁴ The Caspian Guard Initiative, an early 2000s joint exercise between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and the United States, focused on countering drug smuggling and illicit trade, but these exercises have not taken place in the last decade.⁶ The closest, recurring large-scale regional naval exercise is Sea Breeze-primarily a joint U.S.-Ukrainian maritime exercise that takes place in the Black Sea. Due to the geographically restricted nature of the Caspian Sea, Sea Breeze offers the three states an opportunity to actively engage with non-Caspian Sea navies. Azerbaijan was a participant in the exercises from 2007 until 2013 but has not been a part of the exercises since the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Last year, 32 nations were involved from across the world including two of Azerbaijan's primary military partners, Israel and Turkey. While the possibility for joint collaboration on a regional basis exists, it has not been realized by either the United States or the Caspian countries.

Naval Capabilities

In terms of naval capabilities, the five Caspian states have a mix of conventional combatant ships, patrol ships, and ships with logistical and defensive roles.

Conventional Combatant and Patrol Ships

Three countries—Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan—have at least one frigate under their command. These ships have a wide range of capabilities including anti-ship missiles and the ability to lay naval mines. The Russian frigates Dagestan and Tatarstan are the most powerful ships in the Caspian Sea and have the ability to fire Kalibr SS-N-30A sea-launched cruise missiles, Kh-35E anti-ship missiles capable of sinking ships under 5,000 tons, and anti-submarine torpedoes and missiles.⁷ Iran's flagship for their Northern Fleet, a frigate named the Damavand, crashed into breakwaters in 2018 and is currently under repair. Once back in operation, the ship has anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine capabilities.⁸

The second most powerful ship in the Caspian in terms of firepower is the corvette. Although there are several different corvette classes including Buyan, Tarantul, and Hamzeh, they can be devastating in short-range combat and long-range strikes. These frigates and corvettes not only have anti-ship and surface-to-air capabilities, but they also can lay un-

derwater mines. Last August, Turkmenistan revealed its first joint Turkish-Turkmen-developed Turkmen-class corvette. The Deniz Khan has multi-domain strike capabilities like its Caspian counterparts and will serve as the flag ship of the Turkmen Navy.⁹



Russian Frigate Tatarstan (Source: TASS)

Logistical and Defensive Ships

The last combatant class vessels are those whose application in the Caspian Sea is often not focused on port calls, interdiction, or long-distance strikes. Operated by all five littoral states, the minesweeper's role in providing protection is more within the realm of countering conventional naval forces as opposed to anti-terrorism or counter-smuggling operations. These ships, with varying levels of sophisticated counter-mine systems, are used not only for directly fighting terrorism or other powers, but also they help to ensure territorial waters are clear of threats to maritime freedom of navigation.

In addition to anti-naval mine-defensive capabilities, the Caspian is also home to offensive landing craft.¹⁰ These ships are used to carry vehicles, supplies, and military forces across water onto shores. Since shipping capabilities already exist on the Caspian Sea, the need to transfer civilian goods using these ships is highly unlikely. The main practical use of landing craft is in launching amphibious assaults as part of a land invasion and to establish maritime supply lines. Since Russia is cut off from its southern neighbors due to the Caucasus mountains, any operation in the Caspian would be facilitated by such vessels. With defensive and

offensive vessels that have more broad applications, their lack of reasonable rationale for their presence suggests a collective wariness among naval powers in the Caspian.

Implications of Caspian Navies

Russian Naval Strategic Depth

Caspian naval fleets, even if small compared to other naval forces, should cause some concern due to the strategic roles they can play. The first is Russian naval strategic depth and reinforcement of the Black Sea fleet. With the current war between Ukraine and Russia, reinforcements from the Caspian Flotilla can and have historically been diverted to the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea." Unlike the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea is shut off to NATO navies.¹² The Russian presence in the Black Sea to attack Ukrainian port cities and to deter further NATO presence near Crimea demonstrates heightened defenses near the annexed section of Ukraine. In the case that Russia were to reinforce its naval forces in the Black Sea, the Caspian Flotilla would have safe access through Southern Russia to supplement the Black Sea fleet's capabilities. While the minesweepers may be of less use, their two frigates, eight corvettes, and several landing craft could be used to strengthen their sea and land power. Any preemptive attack on the Caspian Flotilla from the Mediterranean or Black Sea would have to go through Russian airspace in the North Caucasus or Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. At either point, the base in Astrakhan is still deep enough in Russian territory that it would require substantial standoff with precision weapons for an effective attack, which is a tall order for any military force.

Even in the case that the ships do not travel from Astrakhan to Sevastopol, the Kalibr SS-N-30A missiles pose a regional threat. In analyzing Russia's use of them in 2015, the emphasis has been solely applied to Russia's capability to strike Syria from outside the Mediterranean. Syrian targets were within the Kalibr's 1,500-kilometer (~930-mile) estimated strike range; however, it is less than the 1,400-kilometer (~870-mile) distance between Astrakhan and Kyiv and Astrakhan and the Black Sea.¹³ In short, Russia can continue to strike Ukrainian targerts from the Caspian Sea using its maritime strike assets. As Russia begins to use its Caspian Flotilla in the war with Ukraine, it is worth noting that the SS-N-30A missiles are potentially nuclear capable and are comparable to the U.S. Tomahawk cruise missile.¹⁴ Regardless of its role in any conflict, the Caspian Flotilla offers the Russian military flexibility in its greater Black Sea/Ukraine and Middle East operations and should not be treated as an isolated fleet focused solely on the Caspian Sea.

Illicit Trade and Smuggling

The Caspian can be an alternate route for Iran and Russia to ship illicit goods between ports in Bandar Anzali in Iran to ports in Russia and Kazakhstan in order to bypass Western sanctions. U.S. naval forces have restricted the flow of sanctioned and illicit goods through the

Persian Gulf, meaning Iran has most likely found another way to move goods and materiel it does not want the sanctioning Western states and Israel to see or interdict. As established in the 2018 Treaty on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, no military presence is allowed in the Caspian Sea other than ships from the five littoral states. This means that Iran can ship from its ports in the North without having the same threat of interdiction and limitations that a ship in the Persian Gulf would face. Iran could use the Caspian to continue trade with China and North Korea, both of which are also targets of U.S. and international sanctions.

Beyond escaping sanctions, the region has documented routes for the smuggling of nuclear materials. Reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that two of the most critical sections of smuggling routes were through Turkmen ports and from Russia to Iran.¹⁵ The ability to detect nuclear signatures from boats and ships on the Caspian Sea is needed to guarantee that Iran and non-state actors do not gain access to nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. As the Caspian Sea littoral states continue to increase their number of patrol craft, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are crucial in severing the routes between Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan. Going back to 1999, the Caspian Sea has been used to transport WMD components between Russia and Iran, so partners in the region are on the front lines of limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other WMDs.¹⁶



Members of the Kazakhstani Navy (Source: Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan)

Anti-Terrorism and Anti-Piracy

While the terrorist threats from the Islamic State and Chechen separatists might concern the littoral states, the presence of frigates, corvettes, minesweepers, and landing craft reflect a different anticipated threat. Anti-terror and anti-piracy concerns are often seen in narrow channels such as the Strait of Hormuz in the Middle East or Malaccan Straits in Asia, but the shipping industry in and out of the Caspian must go through the Volga-Don River and canal system. Minesweepers are more useful in preventing restrictions to freedom of navigation in the Caspian than for preventing terrorism. Lastly, the anti-ship missiles that are fitted on the frigates and corvettes are ill-suited for the situation and much less effective than smaller weapons systems that could be used to prevent piracy and terror threats.

Although Iran has increased trade opportunities due to the ban on external naval presence, strong Russian and Iranian navies have the capability to restrict trade opportunities from Turkmenbashi and Aktau to Baku. Azerbaijan's growing role as the gateway to European markets is offering Central Asia another market that would reduce Chinese and Russian dominance in the region. The trade of both goods and hydrocarbons from Central Asian markets to Azerbaijan can travel via Turkey to Southern Europe or via Georgia across the Black Sea to Romania.¹⁷ The Black Sea-Caspian Sea International Transport Corridor (BSCS) has established a route for Turkmenistan to export to Romania and beyond. Kazakhstan currently operates a port in Batumi, Georgia, on the Black Sea, demonstrating its intention to send more hydrocarbons through the Azerbaijani ports of Baku and Alat. With a larger flow of trade across the Caspian from east to west, threats of piracy could arise along those sea routes.

Given that the nations cite anti-terrorism and defense of economic interests as the primary reasons given for Caspian navies, it appears that piracy or terrorism could have two potential implications. The first is Russian and Iranian complacency in the face of insecure trade routes across the Caspian that reduces the reliance on trade across their land borders. Overland rail transport through Russia and Iran is one of the primary modes of transportation for Central Asia to trade with foreign markets.¹⁸ Threats of piracy could make Central Asian exporters less likely to invest as much in maritime trade and focus on overland trade through Russia and Iran.

The second implication is that Russia and Iran could use attacks on trade routes to further develop an uneven balance of naval power in the Caspian Sea. While the 2018 agreement sought to limit the proliferation of Caspian navies "within reason," an attack on commercial or military vessels would grant a justification to further expand naval capabilities.¹⁹ The "anti-terrorism" explanation by the nations is due to the hydrocarbon resources in the Caspian Sea, so protecting shipping lines would give more tangible merit to the proliferation of naval power.

Distinction between Navies and Coast Guards

The one final implication of the Caspian Navies is their designation as "navies" rather than "coast guards." The Azerbaijani State Border Service still exists, but the distinction between border security and the Navy of Azerbaijan says more about forward presence than anti-terror or anti-smuggling operations. In addition to naming differences, Turkmenistan has established a national holiday for its Navy in October separate from its existing national holiday for its Armed Forces in January and Border Guards in May. Created in 2011, previous speeches from then-President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on the holiday have focused on the need to secure Turkmenistan's maritime borders while remaining an independent and neutral state.²⁰ While seemingly pedantic, the distinction between coast or border guards and navies does form a different message in the realm of power projection and mission. Three landlocked countries on a seemingly insulated body of water made the decision to form navies instead of coast guards.

Recommendations

With the potential for U.S. defense diplomacy in the Caspian Sea in mind, there are four recommendations for U.S. foreign policy and national security:

Restricting Illicit Trade and Protecting Sovereignty

Restricting the movement of sanctioned goods, WMD components, drugs, and human beings should be at the forefront of U.S.-Caspian defense diplomacy. The United States, in conjunction with the governments of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, should coordinate what is needed and what can be purchased or given. While the United States can offer certain technologies or materiel it will give without consultation, the littoral countries will have a better understanding of what is needed to accomplish the goals to limit illicit trade and protect national sovereignty.

U.S. defense diplomacy should focus on giving the countries the means to protect their sovereignty and ensure the security of the Caspian Sea without a NATO presence. It is not in the best interest of the United States and its Caspian regional allies to spur Russian expansion of its Caspian naval power from newly built or transferred frigates and corvettes in reaction to increased U.S. and NATO influence.

As a result, the United States should seek to outfit existing ships with more advanced technology instead of attempting to send U.S.-donated or -purchased ships through the Volga-Don River system. This could include offensive and defensive weapons, fire control, and navigation systems, or drones, all of which would make the existing navies more effective without increasing the number of ships in the Caspian Sea. In the case that Western ships were to be bought, the best method would be to have them assembled in the region.

Caspian Sea Area of Responsibility Designation

In terms of U.S. Department of Defense coverage, the Caspian Sea is juxtaposed on the periphery between the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and Central Command (CENT-COM). Both Azerbaijan and Russia are in EUCOM whereas Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran are all on the edge of CENTCOM. The separation of the Caspian littoral states makes it difficult to coordinate defense diplomacy and joint military exercises among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Since the region should be treated more as a single unit, U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command need to create a joint working group to coordinate the efforts on both sides of the Caspian Sea. This could also encourage U.S. sponsorship of the Caspian nations in future Sea Breeze exercises.

To improve U.S. engagements in the Caspian, USEUCOM and USCENTCOM should meet regularly and plan joint military exercises with Eurasia as a connected region. The Caspian is important to both the European Command, due to its proximity to and history with Russia, and to the Central Command, due to the drug trade used to fund terrorism that flows from Afghanistan and then around and across the Caspian. In addition, the Caspian region as a whole has been the focus of increased Chinese influence, meaning that the Caspian Sea is of importance to the strategic goals of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) as well. As an intersection between three Combatant Commands, the Caspian Sea should be an example of why further communication between geographical combatant commands is crucial to the missions of each.

Achieving Naval Core Capabilities



U.S. Combatant Commands (Source: Justin Rich/Caspian Policy Center)

Collaboration between the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), U.S. Navy (USN), U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), and the navies of the individual countries would be consistent with several of the U.S. Naval Doctrine's Core Capabilities. Foreign Officer Exchanges and joint training achieve Sea Control, Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR), and Maritime Security. The USCG would be the most helpful in interdiction training, since that is its primary role in homeland defense and limiting smuggling into the United States. The USN, USCG, and USMC can be helpful in HA/DR that demonstrates militaries' usefulness outside of power projection and interdiction. Through this, military power can be about preparedness for both interdiction and humanitarian needs while improving our relations with Caspian Sea littoral states.

Joint Military Exercises

With last year's Exercise Sea Breeze in the Black Sea being the largest it has ever been with 32 nations participating, the United States should seek to involve Azerbaijan more in future multinational exercises. Because the Black Sea holds an economic importance to the BSCS trade corridor, all three states should have a larger vested interest in the Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea. The difficulty with partnering with Kazakhstan is its steadfast opposition to UN resolutions condemning the Russian annexation of Ukraine's Crimea. However, the Kazakhstanis can partner with a nation in Exercise Sea Breeze that will not be averse to its participation. Since external militaries are not allowed into the Caspian Sea, exercising with large multinational maritime forces would allow them to focus on freedom of navigation, anti-smuggling, and amphibious warfare operations.

Additionally, U.S. Central Command should look into reviving the Caspian Guard Initiative that has not been a part of U.S. military foreign policy since it fizzled out shortly after creation in 2003. Since the focus is on the drug trade, CENTCOM should lead the exercises, since they involve the Afghan drug trade.

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1015 15th ST NW, SUITE 380 WASHINGTON, DC 20005 202.864.6958 INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG CASPIANPOLICY.ORG



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