

# NOW IS THE TIME TO INCREASE U.S. SECURITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE CASPIAN

*POLICY BRIEF BY CASPIAN POLICY CENTER*

**JUNE 2022**

# ABOUT US

The Caspian Policy Center (CPC) is an independent, nonprofit research think tank based in Washington D.C. Economic, political, energy, and security issues of the Caspian region constitute the central research focus of the Center.

CPC aims at becoming a primary research and debate platform in the Caspian region with relevant publications, events, projects, and media productions to nurture a comprehensive understanding of the intertwined affairs of the Caspian region.

With an inclusive, scholarly, and innovative approach, the Caspian Policy Center presents a platform where diverse voices from academia, business, and policy world from both the region and the nation's capital interact to produce distinct ideas and insights to the outstanding issues of the Caspian region.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### **Major General (ret.) Michael S. Repass** **Author**

Michael S. Repass is a senior fellow and board member at the Caspian Policy Center. He 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.



### **Lieutenant General (ret.) Darsie D. Rogers** **Author**

Darsie D. Rogers, Jr. is a senior fellow and board member of the Caspian Policy Center. He served in the U.S. Army for over 34 years leading adaptable and high-performing teams in solving challenging problems in uncertain environments. As a Special Forces Soldier, Darsie served in the Pentagon and around the world, rising to the rank of three-star general. Darsie's military service saw combat through the dynamic and ambiguous environments of the Gulf War, Iraqi Freedom/New Dawn and numerous contingency operations. Later he was responsible for leading US Special Operations Forces in the Middle East where he routinely engaged with US Ambassadors, Government Agencies, regional partner nations, and senior foreign government dignitaries and officials to protect regional and US national interests. He culminated his career at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency tasked with countering weapons of mass destruction and improvised threats. Darsie retired from the Army in August of 2020 and joined the University of Maryland faculty as a professor of practice advising the Defense Department, other government agencies, and commercial industry in the development of leading-edge information and influence operations activities in both offensive and defensive initiatives.

## NOW IS THE TIME

The time has arrived for the West to make significant and enduring changes to the security and economic arrangements in the South Caucasus and Central Asian states. Russia is a badly wounded state that has made its political and military actions unacceptable to a large segment of the citizenry and leaders in these regions. Further, Putin has revealed his revisionist and expansionist strategy that directly threatens its neighbors and the international security structure. The West — the United States in partnership with the European Union — can seize the strategic initiative to reorient the regional relationships away from Russian coercion and influence in both the economic and security sectors. Direct engagement and assistance are necessary to substantially increase the national preferences for Western partners in these key sectors.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has turned into a prolonged conflict instead of a rapid coup de main. As a result, it is now a grinding war of attrition with Russian forces destroying all that lies in front of them despite being seriously degraded. The Ukrainian defenses, augmented with modern Western armaments, have proved to be up to the task of defending their homeland by inflicting astounding casualties on the invaders. Some estimates have the Russian forces losing nearly 30,000 killed and another 40-60,000 wounded in action.<sup>7</sup> That is out of a force of around 170,000 troops in the initial invasion — around one-half of the original force has been either killed or wounded.



(Russian tank destroyed in Mariupol. Source: Wikimedia Commons/Ministry of Internal Affairs Ukraine)

## THE NEW SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

Russia has gone all-in on its objectives in Ukraine so it “thinned the lines” at its numerous outposts around the world to move combat power to Ukraine. It repositioned from the initial assault and reconstituted its forces to reinforce its offensive in the east and south. It pulled manpower from military schools in Saint Petersburg and Moscow to restore unit manning at the senior ranks in units whose officers have been killed. Battalion Tactical Groups — Russia’s combat unit of action — have been pulled from Armenia, peacekeeping duty in Karabakh, and the occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Also, it pulled numbers of troops and units out of its outposts in Central Asia. Those forces, used to static occupation-like duty, are not combat ready and will suffer substantial losses in the fight in eastern Ukraine. They will most likely not return to their pre-war locations because they will cease to exist as coherent units, so Russia’s far-flung outposts will see substantially reduced manning well into the future. Equipment losses will take decades to replace.

While the world has been stunned by the Russian losses, we have been revolted by the horrors of its abuse of civilians in Mariupol, Bucha, and elsewhere. Further, Russians have perpetrated the widespread looting of homes, businesses, and stores, and completely destroyed the public infrastructure in the cities and towns their forces occupied. The indiscipline of the Russian troops and their wanton violence towards the innocent has further shocked and angered the international community.

We have thus far witnessed Moscow’s astoundingly poor campaign planning, bad tactical execution, insufficient logistics, profound losses, and egregious violations of basic humanitarian law. Any previous perceptions of Russia’s army as a desirable and benevolent guarantor of security and a reliable military partner in its near abroad have been forever shattered. Their incompetence, abuse of the local populace, and highly destructive campaign have led its pre-February security partners to seriously question the wisdom of aligning with Russia. Clearly, the “Russian way of war” includes massive firepower to destroy all before it and abuse of the local populace to terrorize them into submission or flight as refugees.

Strategically, the long-standing perceptions of Russia’s military superiority and invincibility have been pierced. This will cast doubt on the efficacy of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), since its members might now want to distance themselves from such an international outcast. They are militarily challenged to secure their objectives in Ukraine, and have created a disastrous political environment for themselves internationally. Russia has replaced Iran as the most heavily sanctioned country in the world and become the new international pariah state.<sup>2</sup> What reasonable leader would want to be on Russia’s team?

The international sanctions regimes imposed on Russia have had the knock-on effect of drying up Russian international arms exports. Specifically, much of Russia’s industrial capability in the near future will be committed to rebuilding its military forces, replacing equipment losses, plus restocking its depots with arms and ammunition. As a result, Russia cannot export equipment or repair parts to its client states. This means that the Caspian Basin countries that have invested heavily in Russian equipment are faced with decreasing



equipment readiness and prolonged maintenance problems. It stands to reason that some states could benefit from Western engagement and military equipment sales to replace the unrepairable Russian equipment.

With Russia's substantially diminished regional physical presence, loss of prestige and respect, and precipitous exit from the world stage as an international security partner, there are regional opportunities for the United States and the E.U. member states to engage in more constructive security arrangements throughout the Caspian Basin. Specifically, those nations may be looking for a nontoxic security partner and ways to cast off their old Russian equipment. The pre-war rhetoric and propaganda emanating from Moscow regarding Russian dreams about re-subjugating their neighbors' societies and economies has taken on a new, more ominous meaning. Russia's neighbors are rightly revulsed by their actions, and should seriously question whether the Kremlin is a desirable security partner.

Now is the time for the United States and like-minded partners to seize the strategic opportunity to displace Russia's corrosive and coercive influence the Caspian Basin. The first such opportunity is derived from those who imposed substantial economic sanctions on both Russia and anyone supporting Putin. Western democracies now have a strategic regional opportunity plus a moral obligation and political imperative to assist Russia's neighbors with finding alternatives for Russian imports and non-Russian export markets for their goods and services. This requires a very intense, multinational effort to transition away from the long-standing regional trade relations among Russia's closest neighbors.

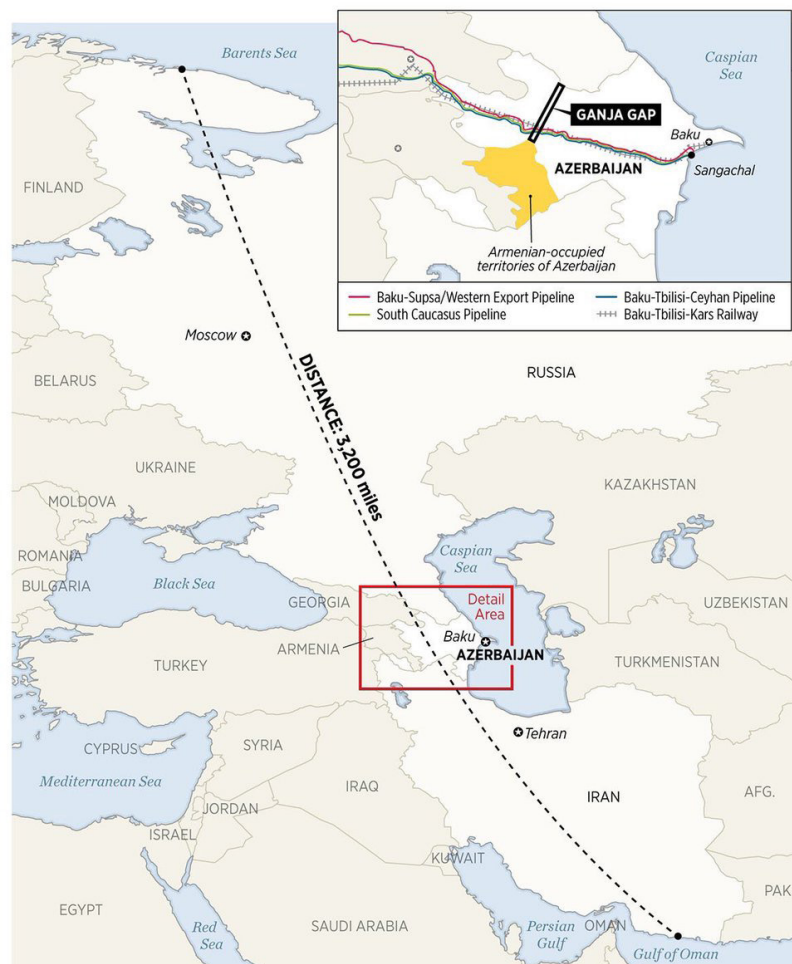


Figure 1: The Ganja Gap<sup>3</sup>

Stability and security are strategic imperatives to ensure the safety of the region. The Georgia-Armenia-Azerbaijan land mass is the only uncontested strategic pathway to the east from Central Europe and Turkey to Central Asia. Luke Coffey of the Heritage Foundation has provided excellent analysis of the geostrategic importance of the so-called “Ganja Gap” in Foreign Policy, stating “There is only one way for vital Asian oil and gas resources to reach Europe without passing through Russia and Iran: through the narrow ‘Ganja Gap.’”<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, it’s the only land mass across which energy and commerce can pass uncontested from either Russia or Iran to from the east to the west. Given this reality, the Europeans seeking alternatives to Russian energy ought to be keenly and urgently interested in an enduring peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and greater stability in the region.

Energy security for both the South Caucasus and Europe is potentially at risk of interdiction as hydrocarbons transit between the Caspian and Black Seas. Russia has already demonstrated it is willing to pursue an aggressive and destructive foreign policy with its invasion of Ukraine for contrived reasons. Russia has already made similar arguments for annexing the northern third of Kazakhstan, and thus annexing its energy-rich region. Once it has finished subduing Ukraine’s eastern quarter, Russia could potentially turn on Kazakhstan to solidify its strategic position in energy markets.

Securing both the Ganja Gap and the Central Asian states will require a concerted effort by both the United States and Europeans to ensure that they replace Russia as the preferred security partner. Concerted and sustained engagements by senior defense and security officials from the west will be necessary to prepare the way forward to a renewed security structure in the region. The strategic objective is to effectively displace Russian influence, starting with the security sector. This enabling activity will lead to deepening and broadening relations beyond security concerns between the states and the west.

Inherent in the west-to-east security engagement is the security of trans-Caspian energy flows and economic activity. This involves improved maritime security regimes and capacities among the trading nations. While directly effecting Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, actors beyond these countries are also directly affected. The Europeans and Black Sea states are directly dependent upon energy flows from Central Asia and have both domestic needs met and transmission income secured from the pipelines. Those who comprise the larger international stake holder pool should share the burdens and be available to broadly partner with the regional security forces for enhanced security programs in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The geostrategic landscape in the South Caucasus and Central Asia has been suddenly and seriously altered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The United States and Europe have a generational opportunity to degrade Russia’s caustic influence in both regions with sustained security engagements aimed at broadly and deeply improving the security capacities within

each of the nations on Russia's borders. In addition to the recommendations embedded above, there are specific policy and program initiatives that can be deployed to push back on Russian influence.

### Military

First, the United States can enhance the National Guard's State Partnership Programs (SPP). According to the National Guard Bureau's website, the State Partnership Program is a "cost-effective program administered by the National Guard Bureau (NGB), guided by State Department foreign policy goals, and executed by the state adjutants general in support of combatant commander and U.S. Chief of Mission security cooperation objectives along with Department of Defense policy goals."<sup>5</sup> Further, the National Guard forces are uniquely suited to form military-to-military engagements with the regional partners due to the extensive civilian sector experience found in the ranks of the guardsmen.

National Guard engagements often have the potential for civilian sector knock-on benefits, given the broad expertise of the Guardsmen in the ranks. The Bureau recognizes this unique organic advantage and states on its website: "Through SPP, the National Guard conducts military-to-military engagements in support of defense security goals but also leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres."<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: State Partnerships Across the Caspian Basin<sup>7</sup>

|              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| Armenia      | Kansas      |
| Azerbaijan   | Oklahoma    |
| Georgia      | Georgia     |
| Kazakhstan   | Arizona     |
| Kyrgyzstan   | Montana     |
| Tajikistan   | Virginia    |
| Turkmenistan | Montana*    |
| Uzbekistan   | Mississippi |

Ideally, building enduring relationships through the SPP can provide access, insights, and influence in the nation's security sector. Specifically, the Guardsmen can help build institutional programs to increase a nation's defense capabilities, its responsiveness to national civilian authorities, the roles of security forces in modern era and democratic practices, and the use of force in national security operations. Longer and more frequent deployments to the regions will enable this relationship's derivative benefits to penetrate civil and government sectors.

Drawing from the NGB's web site, SPP engagements can include a range of options such as senior leader engagements, subject-matter expert exchanges, and exercises. Some focus areas that have been used include disaster response and emergency response operations, professional and leader development engagements, counter terrorism, and military medical activities.<sup>8</sup> Inherent in these types of exchanges are medical expertise exchanges, legal and judicial processes, and best practices for military support to civil authorities.

\* As of the time of this publication, Turkmenistan was in the process of restarting the SPP with Montana.





(Georgian officers stand with the senior leadership of the National Guard of the U.S. state of Georgia. Source: Wikimedia Commons/ Georgia State National Guard)

The United States and multiple European nations have extensive expertise in maritime affairs and can share the required manpower and investment burdens with the United States. Areas of potential maritime security cooperation include maritime domain awareness; port harbor, and critical facility security and emergency management; oil infrastructure surveillance and security; disaster preparedness; and counter-smuggling operations.

Military subject matter exchanges and education in western military schools have a lasting and useful impact on relationships that endure beyond the end of the course work. Basic, advanced, and senior-level schooling at national service colleges are prime sources of introducing the West to the culture and military ways of the regional forces. Attendees are able to see first-hand how Western militaries function. The George C. Marshall Center in Garmisch, Germany, offers a distinguished curriculum and has a solid track record of educating both government and military leaders from the respective regions. Further, the Center has retained a wide alumni network for the students that provides a ready-made regional network of similarly-educated government leaders.

Both national and international programs should be expanded by states to facilitate engagement with younger leaders and invest in long-term relationships among different countries. Sponsoring states should periodically offer refresher visits to the institutions to update both the other regional participants and the institutional cadre on regional challenges and opportunities. This would go a long way towards improving the strategic understanding of the local and regional issues where the West can engage to assist.

Military exercise programs have fallen off in recent years. However, there is a history of bi- and multi-lateral military exercises sponsored by both U.S. European Command and Central Command. There is a window of opportunity to re-start the exercise programs and expand them in the years ahead. The purpose of the exercise programs would, potentially, be to build relationships and interoperability among the participants. Further, the programs should wean the South Caucasus and Central Asian states off Russian military equipment, tactics, and practices. Funding for these programs can be acquired via Building Partner Capacity and Military Security Assistance funding under NDAA Sections 1033, 1206-I, and 1207 (training and equipping).<sup>9</sup>

U.S. security agencies and departments can also be incorporated under NDAA Section 1022, DoD Intelligence Support to U.S. Law Enforcement Agencies to counter terrorism, transnational organized crime, terrorism, and cyber threats. This would bring in the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); Customs and Border Protection (CBP); Homeland Security Investigations (HSI); Federal Bureau of Investigation Legal Attache' (FBI LEGAT); Department of Treasury Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC); Department of State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL); the Department of Justice International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP); and the U.S. Coast Guard. Each department and agency can build indigenous capabilities to create law enforcement proficiencies that conform with modern Western practices and support international law enforcement interoperability.<sup>10</sup>

Police and security service exchange should seek to enhance police intelligence capabilities in accordance with democratic practices, information sharing, and joint operational targeting with military and international agencies. Additionally, these programs should seek to strengthen interdiction and investigations ending with successful prosecutions. The major objectives of these programs would be disrupting transnational threats such as WMD, drugs, weapons, criminal trafficking, and insurgent networks. The intended effect is to build international capacity, cooperation, and partnerships at both the domestic and regional law-enforcement levels.<sup>11</sup>

A collateral benefit would be to build a network of joint trusted and vetted Sensitive Investigative Units. The SIU personnel would undergo a polygraph examination and become a vetted program. Their capabilities would be paramilitary in nature in selected partner countries to counter threats and collect intelligence. Units must be manned by carefully selected and cleared police investigators.<sup>12</sup>

Border security programs would be developed to build vetted border control units with paramilitary skills, training, and equipment that will enable them to operate in both border control checkpoints and remote regions. Border agents and facilities should employ license-plate readers to assist with vehicle geolocation and track vehicular history as well as passenger targeting and passenger threat profiling. Canine enhancement programs would enable the use of military-trained dogs to detect explosives and narcotics in cargo at ports of entry. Across all borders with Russia, technology needs to be emplaced to enhance capabilities to inspect all cargo, and border guard and customs personnel trained to interdict threats at border checkpoints, highways, airports, seaports, and in mail or parcels.<sup>13</sup>



(The border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Source: Wikimedia Commons/BRFBlake)

In the maritime domain, the United States should help its partners build a Coast Guard capability to control harbors and territorial limits of the maritime domain. Indigenous vessels can be used to conduct boarding, search, and seizure of contraband cargo in the Caspian and Black Seas. There have been episodic engagements between the United States and the Caspian states in the past, but these programs need to become a program of record to ensure continuity and assured funding to build capacity over a period of years.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, Russia has proved to be an expansionist power willing to change borders by the force of arms and with vast destructive power. The time is now for the U.S. government to build interagency teams to engage the Caspian Basin countries with alternative security programs to wean them off reliance on Russia for regional security. The United States and the West have a rare opportunity to engage the nations and offer them a more relevant and interconnected future that does not include Russia's coercive and corrosive influence. Americans should lead the efforts to build security arrangements to stabilize the South Caucasus and Central Asian States.



## ENDNOTES

---

1. Andrew Roth and Pjotr Stauer, “‘I Look at My Government Differently’: Losses in Ukraine Test Russians’ Faith.” *The Guardian*. May 17, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/17/i-look-at-my-government-differently-losses-in-ukraine-test-russians-faith>.
2. Julia Shapero, “Russia Surpasses Iran to Become the World’s Most Sanctioned Country,” *Axios*, March 8, 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/08/russia-most-sanctioned-country>.
3. Map: Luke Coffey, “One Year After the Second Karabakh War, the U.S. Needs to Increase Engagement in the South Caucasus,” *The Heritage Foundation*, October 1, 2021. <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/one-year-after-the-second-karabakh-war-the-us-needs-increase-engagement-the-south>.
4. Luke Coffey and Efgan Nifti, “Why the West Needs Azerbaijan,” *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/28/why-the-west-needs-azerbaijan/>.
5. “State Partnership Program.” Accessed April 16, 2022. <https://www.nationalguard.mil/leadership/joint-staff/j-5/international-affairs-division/state-partnership-program/>.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. NDAA sections and suggestions for security programs to be deployed into the Caspian Basin region were the suggestions of Nick Brooke, a retired DEA agent with extensive experience in the regions plus multiple career assignments with the U.S. Department of Defense. Mr Brooke provided input via email on April 28, 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. Brooke.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

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

CPC



CASPIAN  
POLICY  
CENTER