CASPIAN SECURITY AT THE CROSSROADS: IN THE CROSS HAIRS?

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CPC CASPIAN POLICY CENTER

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Given the rapid onset of the global Coronavirus pandemic, the Caspian Region is geographically centered on difficult problem sets which will directly affect them. These nations are at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, as well as of Russia and Iran plus South Asia. The authoritarian governments in the north, east, and south (Russia, China, and Iran respectively) value stability and security above all and will commit all the resources and manpower they can muster to counter the destabilizing effects of the pandemic. Regardless, the endemic problems outside the Caspian Region's periphery will take root inside the region as a result of normal human movement between nations. In some of the Caspian nations, acute and widespread viral illness will present a serious threat to domestic and regional security if not properly treated, managed, and resourced.

A potential scenario for the impact of the COVID-19 infection of the Caspian Basin may unfold slowly at first but could exponentially escalate into a social disaster and security challenge for the governments. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides potential avenues for viral transmission from which the epidemic will expand outward into urban centers and then the hinterlands. Close-knit social structures will contribute to the infection's rapid spread, and inadequate medical infrastructure will be quickly overwhelmed by the demand for treatment. As an example, the virus expanded by 30% daily in the early stages of the disease's spread in Hubei Province, China.[1] No sector of society will be spared, but the least fortunate in terms of wealth and privilege will be hardest hit. Closed borders and enforced local and regional quarantines will bring domestic hardship to those who are least able to live without tending to agricultural tasks and working and being paid on a regular basis. Security forces will be required to maintain order but may be insufficient for helping medical authorities due to the potential scope and scale of the problem.

Let's look at the security situation in the region's autocratic neighbors before diving into the security of the Caspian Region proper.

China

China had widespread illness in late 2019 but took strong and severe security measures in early 2020 to isolate and contain the virus. It required the combined capacities of the entire security forces to lock down and enforce the mandatory quarantine in homes, to administer testing, and to prevent the movement of citizens outside the cordon. Social and domestic order was maintained in the whole despite some local demonstrations and noncompliant behavior.

[1] Donna Rachel Edmunds, *Israeli Nobel Laureate: Coronavirus Spread Is Slowing*, Jerusalem Post online, March 20, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.jpost.com/HEALTH-SCIENCE/Israeli-nobel-laureate-Coronavirus-spread-is-slowing-621145

While China's responses might be a useful model for its neighbors to the west, none of those states possess the capacity or resources to manage the problem as China has done. They simply do not have the fiscal resources, industrial capacity, widespread medical expertise, or large security forces to mobilize broadly and respond comprehensively.

Ironically, COVID-19s appearance in the Central Asian states could provide a useful pretext for China to provide its neighbors with massive assistance to avert medical disasters on its borders. Should this occur, it ought not be viewed through an altruistic lens because all Chinese gifts come with conditions very favorable to Beijing. In this case, it would be terms which would further enhance the centrality of Chinese economic and cultural entanglement in domestic affairs in the Central Asian states. It would also further China's quest to be the region's hegemon. That assistance could well result in the further loss of influence of the United States and Europe.

Despite their enforced isolation, some contaminated individuals have slipped out of China's borders before they were obviously symptomatic and have contaminated their neighbors in other nations. None of China's neighbors have the capacity in their border guards or armed forces to secure their common border with China, to screen, and to test all the Chinese workers moving across borders. In some cases, such as their 2,600-mile border with Russia, vast border regions are uncontrolled and uncontrollable, which will lead to some degree of cross-border contamination.

Russia

Currently, the international community is skeptical about Russia's low number of infected citizens. Even domestically, "…many Russians believe the total is far higher, and some are drawing comparisons to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster when the Soviet government was slow to admit the scale of the problem."[2] There has been suspicion in Russia and internationally about the country's relatively low number of confirmed cases — the numbers jumped from 182 cases on March 25 to 840 on March 26, with only three confirmed COVID-19 fatalities. Putin had insisted the situation was "under control," but he elevated his warnings on March 24 to include directing non-essential workers to stay home for a week.[3]

Russia reacted late to the virus and will struggle to flatten the disease's contamination curve. As recently as mid-March, football stadiums were packed with spectators, and Moscow still had not imposed restrictions on movements and social gatherings. Regular Orthodox mass is still celebrated, including continuing to kiss church icons without concern for spreading the disease.

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[2] Anton Troianovski, *Not Just A Virus: Coronavirus Is A Test For Putin's Security State*, New York Times online, March 19, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/world/europe/coronavirus-russia-putin.html March 25, 2020.

[3] Dave Lawter, *Putin Postpones Constitutional Referendum Due to Coronavirus*, Axios online March 25, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.axios.com/putin-constitution-referendum-russia-coronavirus-63c32744-7ebf-4886-a6eb-4c52439c3131.html , March 25, 2020.

Further, the Russian health-care system has been underfunded for many years, public health services are in poor shape, and individual health from lifestyle choices is the worst in Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Russia just as its government and economy become less stable due to the global oil glut and dramatic drop in prices. The dual stressors of depressed oil revenue and the drop in the value of the ruble are driving Russia into serious economic recession. The recession, plus increased demands for public health to stem the impact of the virus, will have an uncertain but destabilizing effect on Russian domestic security. Putin's decades-old deal with the population—fewer freedoms for domestic stability—will be at risk if the virus ravages the Russian people.

Iran

Iran is suffering bitterly, and it will continue to get worse with 27,017 cases and 2,077 deaths as of March 25.[4] As in Russia, many international observers believe these numbers underrepresent what is actually happening there. As with other nations, Iran has traced its contamination back to its ties with China:

> *"Iranian health officials trace the country's coronavirus outbreak to Qom, a city of a million people. According to the Wall Street Journal, 'China Railway Engineering Corp. is building a $2.7 billion high-speed rail line through Qom. Chinese technicians have been helping refurbish a nuclear-power plant nearby.' Iranian medical professionals suspect either Chinese workers in Qom or an Iranian businessman who travelled to China from Qom caused the spread of the coronavirus in Qom."* [5]

Despite the obvious crisis confronting them, there have been few of the stronger remediation measures taken in Iran that were enacted in China or even Russia. There are no meaningful population control measures other than prohibiting travel between cities during the recent Novruz new-year holiday season. Universities and schools were shut down, as well as mosques and religious sites, but parks remain open and people are still working in affected zones. Health Ministry recommendations for more strict control measures to abate the virus have not yet been enacted.

In summary, the three authoritarian governments outside the Caspian Region have reacted to the Coronavirus in their own ways, but all have been late-to-need. China drew upon its financial wealth, large medical capacity, and vast security forces to ensure the virus was contained and the population controlled. Russia started very late but is catching up by using strict measures similar to those the Chinese employed. Iran has been slow to respond decisively and appears unwilling to implement the harsh measures that would ameliorate a much larger spread of COVID-19. While China and, to a lesser extent,

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[4] Coronavirus: Iran Bans Internal Travel to Avert 'Second Wave,' BBC News online, 25 March 2020. Accessed at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52039298

[5] Helen Raleigh, *Iran and Italy Are Paying A Heavy Price For Close Ties With China*, The Federalist online, March 17, 2020. Accessed at: https://thefederalist.com/2020/03/17/iran-and-italy-are-paying-a-hefty-price-for-close-ties-with-communist-china/

Russia have the resources and national organization to effectively manage the virus's impact on its citizens, Iran does not have the means to do so adequately.

The Caspian Region governments have had ample warning—about three weeks of unambiguous indications and warning—and have seen the contagion's impact on their neighbors, especially in China and Iran. They have seen a range of measures that work and have learned from others' mistakes. The issue for the security sector is this: What is the best use of the security forces with their limited means and capacities in this situation?

In terms of what to do, the nations have limited means available that will determine how well and how extensively they can execute their plans of action. The security forces will most likely be faced with four very difficult tasks: secure the borders and internal cordons against contaminated migration; secure government institutions; provide humanitarian assistance to the nation; and provide direct support to the medical community in its fight against the epidemic. Most of the Central Asian states can do one, or maybe two, of these tasks sufficiently well. However, the execution of those tasks will be constrained by the lack of funding, materiel resources, and organic expertise to perform well. The end result will be that the governments will have to choose what they want their security forces to accomplish with their limited resources and manpower, and where they must accept risks.

The immediate problem is to stop the virus's spread across borders and into the major urban areas. Border control seems to have been achieved for the most part but has created the collateral problem of inhibiting legitimate trade and essential commerce. However, border control will be substantially less effective unless it includes screening, testing, and quarantine capabilities. Internal control of population movements will require cordons, and security forces will be able to assist domestic authorities in executing this task on the scale that may be needed. However, military forces are not particularly well-trained or prepared for the domestic operations needed to establish, enforce, and maintain large cordons and quarantine sites.

Some governments will be concerned about security of various government institutions and will deploy forces to secure those entities. Essential government functions must also be secured from vandalism and lawlessness. Also, critical infrastructure such as communications, hospitals, equipment and supply depots, food distribution centers, power generation, and others may need security to prevent interruption of service delivery.

Military forces could be used to provide humanitarian assistance to the populace via a multitude of essential tasks. Water and food distribution to remote or isolated areas rises to the top of the list. Wide area surveys and assessments of the pandemic could be executed once trained by or under the supervision of public health professionals. Logistical support, such as transportation and distribution assistance, could be immensely helpful when the borders are closed and transportation is inhibited.

Military medical services are trained, equipped, and prepared for treating trauma as opposed to managing highly contagious respiratory diseases. In this regard, the conscript-based military forces will be of limited usefulness in the treatment of the affected populations. Rather, they would be more useful in logistical and direct support roles to hospitals and clinics. Military medical practitioners might be able to help with screening, testing, and practical support on a broad scale. They could also assist with medical evacuation and possibly establish field hospitals, if those exist in the inventory.

Some security opportunism may occur whereby states use the crisis to influence or decrease perceived opposition threats to the government as part of the increased security, population, and resource-control measures. Specifically, some populations such as the Uyghurs in Tajikistan could see increased pressure from the Tajik security forces or even from the Chinese forces patrolling inside Tajikistan from their small base in Gorno-Badakhshan.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is hitting the Central Asian states at the very time global oil prices are depressed and limit the funds available for response options and employment. Cash-strapped nations will not be able to buy new capabilities and medical supplies in the volume needed to counter a prolonged outbreak of the virus. Existing stocks will have to suffice in the near term, and international aid, when available, will have to augment where possible.

The Caspian Region nations will be challenged to comprehensively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as it spreads into its populations. It will require the assistance of the military forces but will also require judicious employment against critical needs and informed acceptance of risks on what can and cannot be achieved with military forces.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael S. Repass is the Chief Executive Officer for Able Global Solutions LLC which he founded in 2013 after retiring from the Army. AGS focuses on international business development to match emerging technology, proven products, and capabilities with potential clients. AGS also examines trends and environments for strategic perspectives.

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 at every level in Special Forces from captain to major general. Mike earned a Master's Degree in Strategic Studies from the US Army War College. 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. He retired from military service in 2013.

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.



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