



THE CASPIAN BASIN: WHY IT MATTERS IN GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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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.



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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.

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The Caspian Basin: Why It Matters In Great Power Competition

U.S. strategists and policy makers should increase their focus on the South Caucasus and Central Asian States. These countries on both sides of the Caspian Sea, all former Soviet republics that Vladimir Putin claims as Russia's "special sphere of influence," represent strategic opportunities for the United States to gain substantial advantages over Russia and China as America's primary security threats. These opportunities ought to be pursued to secure and protect U.S. interests and effectively compete with the regional powers below the level of armed conflict.

There is a larger strategic perspective to consider in the discussion of why the Caspian Basin should figure prominently into the incoming U.S. administration's South Caucasus and Central Asia policies. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) states:

"...the revisionist powers of China and Russia...are actively competing against the United States and our allies and partners. Although differing in nature and magnitude, these rivals compete across political, economic, and military arenas, and use technology and information to accelerate these contests in order to shift regional balances of power in their favor. These are fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies. China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor. Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders."¹

Thus, "great power competition" (GPC) short of armed conflict has emerged as the central theme explaining the threats and situation in which America finds itself in the current era, with Russia and China as the primary adversaries as "near-peer" competitors and threats. Further, the NSS made clear that the United States is currently engaged in global struggles for influence and dominance against these two international powers. This condition will endure and persist across multiple U.S. presidential administrations.

Specifically, the United States is engaged with friendly states in a cooperative pursuit to advance and protect their own national interests. We are also in competition against Russia and China for influence, leverage, and advantage to advance our own national interests. The strategic effort to expand and strengthen influence, leverage, and advantages against Russia and China can be aggressive and push the boundaries of statecraft yet remain below the threshold of armed conflict.

In competition, the great powers are vying for positional advantages via economic, cultural, and political influence and leverage. Here, there is no "winner" or "loser," per se, in the

traditional sense of the terms. Rather, there is simply “ahead” and “behind” in terms of advantages, influence, and leverage. In the aggregate, the “winner” achieves what becomes strategic, if not positional, advantages over its opponent.² The ideal outcome would be as Sun Tzu described: prevailing over one’s enemy without firing a shot. Indeed, the NSS tells us that success in cooperation and competition will ensure we do not transition to war. Further, the NSS compels us to competitively work to advance our interests: “China, Russia, and other state and non-state actors recognize that the United States often views the world in binary terms, with states being either ‘at peace’ or ‘at war,’ when it is actually an arena of continuous competition.”³

To be “ahead” in the GPC sense, a nation must be present and engaged in the regions. Russia and China have the advantages of geographic proximity and have exploited this advantage. The United States, and the West in general, have a much harder task when it comes to having an effect on the respective regions due to distance. Closing the distance requires a direct commitment to be engaged full-time in the region with robust programs and enduring commitments, rather than episodic and random acts of touching. A practitioner’s lament is “virtual presence is actual absence.” Long-distance relationships do not thrive at the personal, cultural, or governmental levels.

The NSS is informative to the description of competition. “...after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned. China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally. Today, they are fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime. In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.”⁴

When opposing either Russia or China during competition below armed conflict and during state-on-state conflict, the United States can present difficult strategic challenges to both nations by engaging and advancing American interests in the nations bordering their respective flanks and rear. While the strategic purpose of competition is to advance and protect interests without resorting to war, the potential for state-on-state war remains. Actions and engagements undertaken in cooperation and competition are primarily benign and have their own intrinsic value to the parties involved. However, one can rightly point out that U.S. actions in the Caspian Basin must have a view towards, and some derivative consideration for, what happens in the event of war.

Yet there is strategic value in robustly engaging in the nations on Russia’s and China’s periphery: it is a way to keep our powder dry in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. In the event of armed conflict, Russia and China would naturally seek to defend their frontiers while the U.S. campaigns would seek to dominate the respective operating environments by employing military forces to present strategic threats, impose costs, and force operational conundrums. Pressing both nations on their lightly-defended periphery would require access and transit from the South Caucasus and Central Asian States—the Caspian Basin.

The Caspian Basin is central, literally, to the Great Power Competition geography. Specifically, the South Caucasus and Central Asian States (CAS) are geographically

Russia's and China's "backyards" and present vast and indefensible frontiers. Most geopolitical observers and GPC-centric strategists think in terms of the western European landmass and Atlantic Ocean as the scene of a U.S.-Russia confrontation while the eastern coastal plain and Pacific Ocean are the battlegrounds for any direct American

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Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2009

conflict with China. Both theaters would have a substantial and compelling role in any great power struggle that involves armed conflict between states. In military terms, those force-on-force campaigns will most likely be the main effort and receive the majority of national resources to prosecute the respective campaigns. Meanwhile, other supporting efforts will have a contributing but less significant role with fewer national resources in the overall campaign. Pressing Russia and China on their periphery would be a serious challenge to their sovereignty and strategic depths, and very substantial supporting campaigns to the main efforts.

Gaining basing, access, overflight, and transit privileges would not be easily acquired if this is attempted from a "cold start" during a crisis or after a great-powers conflict begins. Support for U.S. expeditions will take years and decades of enduring engagement and involvement to achieve if an indirect approach to the flanks is to be a viable option in the strategic tool kit. "Getting there," e.g. gaining and retaining positional (geographic) advantage, is among the key strategic reasons the United States should care about and nurture relationships in the region.

Given that the U.S. is experiencing an Executive Branch transition, a review of existing policy for the region is a reasonable step. The current administration's policies are outlined in the White House's "A Strategy to Advance United States Interests in Central Asia, 2019-2025":

1. **Support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian States, individually and as a group.** With consistent United States engagement on economic, energy, security, democracy, and governance issues, the Central Asian states function as a regional bloc of cooperative partners, increasing their ability to maintain individual sovereignty, and make clear choices toward achieving economic independence.
2. **Reduce terrorist threats in Central Asia.** Central Asia does not become a center of extremist ideology or a safe haven for terrorist organizations that can potentially threaten United States interests.
3. **Expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan.** The Central Asian nations become stable, secure, and engaged partners with the United States and continue support for international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.
4. **Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan.** All Central Asian states develop closer ties with Afghanistan across energy, economic, cultural, trade, and security lines that directly contribute to regional stability.
5. **Promote rule of law reform and respect for human rights.** The Central Asian states provide for meaningful citizen input and inclusive political systems, whether through elections or in policy formulation, and follow the rule of law and respect human rights, increasing their stability.
6. **Promote United States investment in and development of Central Asia.** The enabling environment for business in Central Asia is transparent, open, fair, and attractive to United States businesses and supportive of broader development goals.⁵

These policies are entirely consistent with the NSS's competition mandate and leverage the U.S.'s strengths to build meaningful relationships and encourage progress in the future. Further, they are based on long-standing efforts in the region that have served as the basis for engagements and diplomacy and are validated by time, effects, and experience. Success in these areas will be foundational for additional measures needed to pursue and advance American advantages, influence, and leverage in the regions. Further, success in "competition" will lay the groundwork strategic access during future crises or great power armed conflict. However, some enhancing measures ought to be taken to further press on specific levers that would enable U.S. advantages over Russia and China.

The Caspian Policy Center (CPC), based in Washington, D.C., previously published a very useful proposal for the incoming Biden Administration that emphasizes the key focus of America's efforts in the region. Specifically, the United States ought to press directly against its great power near-peer competitors "...especially in the face of Russia declaring the region its 'special sphere of influence,' and China deploying its highly publicized Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)."⁶ In recognition of the fact the region is in both competitor's geographic backyards, it is strategically important that neither nation get a free pass to the region.

Further, the CPC provided six recommendations to the incoming Biden Administration for framing their policy toward the region. These six recommendations are consistent with the great power competition paradigm and leverage all the elements of national power to advance and strengthen United States' interests and objectives in the region. Those recommendations are:

1. **Publicly Recognize the U.S. Role in the Region's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy.** Pushing back against the narrative that the United States is not prominently represented in the region is key to ensuring we have legitimacy when competing against the regional powers.
2. **Work to Balance Great Powers.** As stated in this section's opening sentence, "the Caspian region is geostrategically vital in this new era of great-power competition for two reasons: its vast natural resource wealth and its position astride the crucial arteries of international trade."⁷ Eastern and southern Europe depend on Caspian energy, and are crucial strategic allies in both competition and international conflict. Those "crucial arteries" are also the pathway to gaining advantages in competition and posing strategic dilemmas to Russia and China in both competition and during armed conflict.
3. **Counter Chinese Influence Through Economic Investment.** Presenting the nations in the region economic alternatives to China's economic exploitation and subversion denies China leverage in both competition and any potential armed conflict will enhance both the nations' economies and United States' security interests.
4. **Increase Diplomatic Engagement on All Levels.** Given that the object of competition is to gain advantages, influence, and leverage in competition below armed conflict, robust diplomatic engagement is the essential first step to being effective in the phase. Being "ahead" here means not being "behind" in the event of an escalation to armed conflict.
5. **Stay Alert to Security Threats Emanating from the Region.** Lawlessness, insurgency, and terrorism are all destabilizing phenomenon. Instability on a local level could lead to active armed conflict on a regional or much larger scale. A successful competition strategy requires an effective security component.

6. **Support Central Asia's Efforts to Form an International bloc.**⁸ T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") stated in *Twenty-Seven Articles*:

"Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably well than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is."⁹

While the Caspian Basin is obviously more sophisticated than the tribal societies with which Lawrence worked over one-hundred years ago, his point is central: Local solutions are the best solutions. This also reinforces the cooperative element of competition which reduces the necessity for and dependency on outside powers.

Recommendations

The strategic framework for great power competition found in the NSS, the six policy objectives found in the U.S. strategy for Central Asia, and the CPC's recommendations for the incoming Biden Administration are consistent and nested with each other. The following recommendations are offered as various ways to advance and protect U.S. interests in the region. The actions are based on both existing U.S. policy and knowable opportunities in the region.

Diplomatic Measures

- Reinforce our capabilities in regional diplomatic posts. Consider expansion in some countries, such as Azerbaijan.
- Increase U.S. senior-level engagements in the region.
- Seek opportunities to increase commercial cooperation across borders with regional partners by rationalizing border control and customs procedures.
- Seek these countries' public and private engagements and exchanges with Europe, Turkey, and the United States as an alternative to similar events in Russia and China.
- Exploit the opportunities presented by the Blue Dot Network. Where possible, expand elements of the Blue Dot Network as a counterpoise to Chinese economic penetration.

Information Measures

- Understand the information environment by engaging the government, academic, and private sector communications and policy centers.

- Add a greater Caspian Basin section to the Global Engagement Center.
- Partner with regional voices that are advocating for democratic values and anti-corruption efforts.
- Illuminate nefarious and malicious Russian and Chinese actors, actions, and programs (“Name and Shame”) with the objective of eliminating coercive and corrosive actors and elements from regional governments and economies.
- Work with the interagency and whole-of-government players to sanction Russian and Chinese actors engaged in nefarious and malign activities in the greater Caspian region.
- Enhance regional messaging on successful U.S. government and private-sector initiatives and programs as they occur.

Military Measures

- Create regional opportunities for bi-and multi-lateral engagements. Where possible involve U.S. forces.
- Work on cross-border communication and cooperation topics and measures that enhance regional security.
- Develop tabletop exercises that engage regional security leaders to resolve complex security challenges.
- Develop Cooperative Security Locations to assist with logistics and temporary exercise basing.
- Develop Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements with regional partners to harmonize logistic burdens and costs and decrease transportation requirements for the U.S. military during engagements.
- Develop robust Security Cooperation programs that address regional stability and security issues and capabilities.
- Build military institutions that support international law, democratic governments, and cultural norms within the region.

Economic Measures

- Identify post-Covid opportunities for rehabilitation of sectors and industries.
- Increase regional economic development funds for small business investments and loans.
- Engage the U.S. business sector for additional private-sector investment.
- Identify and enhance Blue Dot Network opportunities and effectiveness.

Endnotes

- 1 The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States," December 2017, p25.
- 2 United States Special Operations Command—Competition Series, "Applying SOF in Competition (draft)," author unknown, undated. The author(s) proposed a theory of success in "competition" that poses "...success is enduring with no discernable end state..."(p4). Competition pervades international engagements pervades because "...great power competition is a great game.... There is no winning; there is only ahead or behind..." (p4).
- 3 NSS, p28.
- 4 Ibid, p27
- 5 The White House, "A Strategy to Advance United States Interests in Central Asia, 2019–2025," Nov 2019, pp2–3.
- 6 Caspian Policy Center, "Recommendations for the Biden Administration's Caspian Policy," November 9, 2020.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid. The six recommendations are discussed in detail in the cited article.
- 9 T.E. Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," Arab Bulletin, August 20, 1917.

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