

## THE BLACK AND CASPIAN SEA REGION AS A FIELD OF “THE GREAT GAME”

### (Political and Geographical Realities of the Post-Soviet Period)

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes various aspects of the political dynamics of the Black and Caspian Sea region (BCSR) representing the central part of the vast belt of instability (The Great Limitrophe) stretched along the borders of Russia, which considerably expanded after the collapse of the USSR. The morphological structure of the political space and the specifics of the geostrategic game within each of the three subregional sites of the BCSR – Black Sea, Caucasian, and Caspian – are analyzed. The conclusion is made that the degree of military strategic influence of the US and the North Atlantic Alliance, and, on the other hand, the level of geoeconomic presence of the European Union and China directly correlate with the “distance” of these global actors to each specific subregion of the BCSR. As a result, the Black Sea region represented by the countries of the former socialist camp and the newly formed post-Soviet states located between Russia and Europe has largely shifted to the area of systemic dominance of the collective West in recent decades. The specifics of the geopolitical landscape of the other two territorial elements of the BCSR are primarily determined by the leading regional states. For the Caucasus such states are Russia, Turkey and Iran; for the Caspian subregion such states are Russia and Iran. Meanwhile, the disagreements existing between the regional powers expand the space for political maneuver for the “ordinary” states in the BCSR and allow external actors to expand their presence, who together determine the extremely complex and contradictory geopolitical dynamics of the entire region. Given the limited systemic potential of regional leaders unable to take any of the territorial areas of the BCSR under their systemic control, all of them will remain the arena of a complex geopolitical struggle for the longest-term perspective.

**Keywords:** Black and Caspian Sea region, Black Sea site, Caucasian site, Caspian site, Great Limitrophe, World System, conflict potential, regional powers, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, extraregional players, “Great Game”.

### INTRODUCTION

Late 20th century was the period of the collapse of the USSR and the rapid dismantling of the entire socialism system. Drastic transformation of the world order has gradually changed the set of the key “players” on the global political scene. However, the rules of behavior, plan of actions of the participants of the great geopolitical “Game”, as well as their stakes in this “Game” have not changed. All its participants continue to define strategic goals in accordance with their interests, for which they build specific tactics, search for the resources required for the implementation of their own political course, work out possible moves of the opponent and take response actions. Given that the field of such a political game is the most significant part of the sociogeographic oecumene to some extent,

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areas of increased rivalry (and hence conflict) are identified within it. One of such geostrategically significant regions of the world is the vast zone stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia along the two large water bodies (Black and Azov Sea and Caspian), which defines the key specifics of this “venue” – the Black and Caspian Sea region (BCSR) (*Degoyev* 2003).

With the disappearance of the Soviet empire, the geopolitical landscape of the area of the world space revealed along the outer rim of the shrunk Russian state (the present-day Russian Federation), which the famous British geopolitician J. Fairgrieve analyzed and defined as “*crachzone*” as early as in the early 20th century. He described this space as a network of small, politically weak and economically dependent “buffer” states situated between continental Eurasia (Heartland) and coastal countries stretched from Finland to the Balkans, and heading further east through Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan (*Fairgrieve* 1915). Later, many researchers also detected this gigantic latitudinal arc of instability. Using the old geopolitical term, it can be said that the historical outline of the Great Limitrophe was revealed in the given area of the world (*two Russian researchers, V.L. Tsymburskiy and S.V. Khatuntsev, brought this term back to the modern geopolitical discourse (Tsymbursky 1993; Tsymbursky 2007; Khatuntsev 1994)*), which is a space in which the shift of power fields in the late 20th century led to the emergence of so-called “soft clusters”: territories that had been under total political control and for the most part also under the jurisdiction of Moscow for a long time, and found themselves “no one’s” after the collapse of the USSR.

In a matter of years, new players began to fill this political vacuum who, depending on the degree of compatibility of their interests in various areas, built complex power compositions/hierarchies that involved the whole range of interactions from cooperation and strategic partnership to tough confrontation and military showdown. At the same time, it turned out that dismantling of the once Soviet and then Russian influence in this area of the world was not complete. Its residual presence varied significantly in its concentration from one post-Soviet country to another but always required its consideration. It also turned out that the “liberation” from Moscow on its own did not guarantee the *growth of the real sovereignty of newly emerged states*, as their distinctly provincial status in the World System excluded their geopolitical autarchy (*Dugin* 2000). This is what predetermined the active penetration of extra-regional actors into such areas.

The “Black Sea – Caucasus – Caspian” area fully corresponds to such limitrophic areas. Under the conceptually new historical conditions that arose immediately after the collapse of the bipolar system, it turned from the purely geographical (more specifically, from the political and geographical) reality into a *geopolitical* reality – a special segment of the world geopolitical space. With the loss of the “Soviet residence permit”, the BCSR did not become a kind of *territoria nulis* (“geopolitical desert”) at all (*Pereslegin* 2006), but on the contrary significantly

improved its geostrategic status, because it turned out that the area that was once monopolistically controlled by the “Kremlin Empire” had a much more significant amount of hydrocarbon raw materials than it had been known in the Soviet period. Besides, in the rapidly changing composition of the modern global focus of economic activity, the transit and transport importance of the BCSR, as one of the regions linking the APR area with the European Union, has also significantly grown. In the geopolitical aspect alone, the importance of the BCSR was “raised” at least twice in the early 21st century: after the South Ossetian crisis of 2008 and the events in Ukraine in 2014-2016 (integration of Crimea in the Russian Federation and the emergence of two People’s Republics of Donbass).

Let’s imagine the morphological structure of the analyzed region in the broadest strokes. According to one of the well-known representatives of political geography R. Hartshorne, “when studying the earth surface as a human habitat, *it is quite fair to highlight the boundaries of politically isolated territories* (highlighted by the authors). Political power arranged as a system of independent, sovereign states, each having its own specific features, has a decisive influence on people’s lifestyle and the way they use natural resources.” (*Hartshorne 1957*)

Proceeding from this thought, let’s ask a question: which states and their associations are included in this vast area of the world? Two approaches can be used to answer this question.

Firstly, the south-western periphery of the former Soviet Union should be considered as a set of three separate subregions: the Black Sea and the Caspian, confined to the respective water basins, and the Caucasus subregion situated between them.

Secondly, the approach of broad interpretation of the geographical “site” that directly adjoins Russia’s borders in the south-west can be used, i.e. the above subregions can be somehow united into one common “site”. In this case, the defining “frame” will be the entire vast area stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia.

### **Approach I**

It can be conditionally called mechanistic (or additive). It assumes successive consideration of the three given geographical subregions as “venue” sites.

#### ***1. The Black Sea Site***

If the political and geographic approach is taken as a basis, i.e. it is about entities under international law in this area of the world, the Black Sea basin includes Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova.

The Black Sea status of Moldova requires some comments. It is to be recalled that in the mid-1990s, Ukraine agreed to hand over 400 m of its territory with access to the Danube to Moldova, where the latter had the opportunity to build the

port (Giurgiulesti), thus de facto obtaining access to the Black Sea, in exchange for a site along which the Odessa-Reni road is situated (*Grinevetskiy, Zhiltsov and Zonn 2007*).

Besides, due to historical circumstances, as well as due to long-established (though not always peaceful) intercountry interactions, Greece should also be included in this region.

However, if the aspect of practical politics is taken into consideration instead of purely legal reasoning, the number of “local” actors can be significantly expanded. In fact, there is an independent state formation on the territory of Moldova, the multiethnic Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR). Two other similar quasi-state entities that emerged in the south-east of Ukraine (the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics), with an increasingly obvious prospect of turning into unrecognized but steadily existing states, have access to the Sea of Azov (through the territory of one of them). Finally, a significant section of the Black Sea coast belongs to Abkhazia, another quasi-state in the recent past and formally (in the West) still “attributed” to Georgia.

## ***II. The Caucasian Site***

On the technical part, it should include Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. But even here the morphological composition of the subregion should be expanded through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) – a quasi-state that has existed outside the legal field of Azerbaijan for a quarter of a century now and de facto forms a whole economic, trade and sociocultural entity with Armenia.

But that is not all. For example, according to A.G. Dugin, the Caucasus goes beyond the listed countries, and it should include the Caucasian ethnocultural belt (tail) that extends beyond the CIS and consists of: (a) northwestern provinces (ostans) of Iran (Southern Azerbaijan, or Atrapatakan) inhabited by Azerbaijanians, (b) the northeastern segment of the Turkey’s territory in the form of a historic Lazistan populated by Lazas, which is faced to Megrelia and Guria, but mainly to Adjara that was once islamized by the Turks (c) the eastern regions of Turkey, once largely inhabited by Armenians and Kurds, and now only by Kurds (*Dugin, n. d*).

With such a broad approach, even inclusion of the southern part of the historical Talysh-stan, the lands of which expand to the territory of modern Iran, in the Caucasian subregion looks logical (*Areshv 2013*). Taking this into account, as well as the already noted Caucasian geographical “marking” of Western and Eastern Azerbaijan, as well as Ardebil, a number of researchers include this country in the number of Caucasian states (*Beridze, Ismayilov and Papava 2004*). Thus, it becomes possible to speak of no longer the Caucasus in a strict sense, but of the “Greate Caucasus region.”

### *III. The Caspian Site*

The geographic approach focuses on the identification of only five states in this subregion of the BCSR that are entities under international law: Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Azerbaijan. However, given the large size of at least three of these states (Russia, Kazakhstan and Iran), many experts note the inconsistency of attributing *all* the territories of these countries to the Caspian subregion. Each of them has its own provinces, which have direct access to the Caspian Sea. For Russia, they are Dagestan, Kalmykia and the Astrakhan region; for Kazakhstan, it is its entire western part, including the main “oil province” of the country (Mengistau region); for Iran, it is almost the entire territory located north of the Elburz mountain range (Ardebil, as well as Mazandaran, Golestan, Northern Khorasan, partly Semnan). The term of the *full* deployment of the entire territory of the country to the Caspian can only be used with reference to Azerbaijan. However, the socioeconomic life of Turkmenistan is also largely tied to the Caspian and what is happening on it (and next to it).

#### **Approach II**

It can be called extensively integrative. Supporters of this approach (including the authors of this article) put emphasis on the inability of a clear definition of the natural borders of the “Black Sea”, the “Caucasus” and the “Caspian basin”, taken separately, because there is a well-known overlap and mutual intersection of all three subregions.

At the same time, some of the BCSR states are part of two of them, and Russia is an important structural component of all three. At the same time, the close interest of the Russian state has historically been fixed on the Caucasus, as it was noticed by R.A. Fadeyev back in the 19th century: “A state that rests on the Black and Caspian Seas cannot be indifferent to the events unfolding on the Caucasian isthmus, which commands these seas in the full sense of the word” (*Fadeyev* 2003). Georgia, which has been known from the earliest times as the “middle” state of the Caucasus, and Turkey both have a status similar to Russia’s. Both these states do not directly belong to the Caspian region, but are so deeply involved in the affairs of “hydrocarbon” diplomacy in the Caspian and are so tightly tied to Azerbaijan in a geoeconomic sense, that it is impossible to exclude them from the Caspian “landscape”. Finally, there is Iran in two capacities: basically as a Caspian state, but partly (through the Araks River, towards Karabakh and Azerbaijan) as the Caucasus as well.

As such, it can be talked about *a single Black Sea-Caucasian-Caspian region* in a broad sense. This is the truest at the moment, since modern geoeconomic and geopolitical processes, as already mentioned, tightly “pull” these adjacent subregional “sites” together into a single space of a large geopolitical “Game”. For this reason, the current concept of the *Organization of Black Sea Economic*

*Cooperation* (BSEC) (*Zhiltsov, Zonn and Ushkov* 2003), supplemented by the concept of the “Caspian Five”, or more precisely by three of its members – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, – is the *common geographic framework* that unites a large number of states between the Balkans and Central Asia. At the same time, the BCSR lacks an international political structure that brings together all states of this region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which unites China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which includes only the countries of the Islamic belt from Turkey to Afghanistan, are some of the international (regional) organizations present at this “site” (aside from the BCSR). These organizations, being the broadest in their competence and overlapping each other, “cover” the entire territory of the BCSR.

The analysis of international economic unions in the region reveals a more or less distinct split of the BCSR space into two segments. One of them is formed by the states that belong to the Eurasian Economic Union – EEU (of which Russia, Kazakhstan and Armenia are directly related to the BCSR). Another segment is formed by the southeastern edge of the European Union (Bulgaria and Romania) and the social and economic projection that it casts into the region, which found its institutional embodiment in the “Eastern Partnership” program, which united Ukraine, Moldova and the three leading Caucasian states. As such, only Armenia is the territory of intersection of these two economic fields, and it clearly prefers its participation in the EEU.

However, the military-strategic alliances – NATO (of the regional states, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania are its members), and the CSTO (Russia, Armenia and Kazakhstan) – differentiate the region’s space even stronger, defining the main specifics of its geopolitical landscape. It must be noted that, just as in the case of international economic organizations, NATO and the CSTO have their own “support” mini-structures and “satellite organizations” within the region, consisting of: (a) pro-NATO-minded, and (b) Russia-oriented weak, mini- and quasi-states of the BCSR. Georgia, Ukraine, and in part Azerbaijan and Moldova, which are members of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM, currently “play” for NATO. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the PMR, the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and the LPR (Luhansk People’s Republic), and in fact even Nagorny Karabakh, as a society completely tied to a strategically pro-Russian Armenia, take the side of Russia and the CSTO.

As such, the US has made major efforts over the last 20-25 years to take the region under its control, taking advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the range of its influence and having proclaimed the BCSR the area of its strategic interests in 1997. It failed to ensure full geopolitical “overlay” of the CSR, but the number of support points of the US military presence in the region have increased significantly.



At the same time, the success of the region exploration differed significantly among three of its sites. The best results were achieved in the Black Sea region. While the geopolitical presence of the US in this subregion of the BCSR by the mid-1980s was ensured only by NATO's Turkey, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the North Atlantic alliance (2004), the pro-Western orange revolutions of the mid-2000s (Georgia and Ukraine) and, finally, the establishment of a distinctly pro-Western political regime in Kyiv in 2014 all drastically changed the geostrategic landscape of this territory.

The geopolitical dynamics of the Caucasian subregion, within which the pro-NATO Georgian course turned out to be largely compensated by the "adjournment" of two provinces from it, which turned into military bridgeheads of Russia in Transcaucasia after 2008, strongly supplemented its military potential that had previously been localized in Armenia only. Moreover, the density of allied Russian-Armenian relations, with their obvious mutual benefit, is primarily determined by the vital interests of Armenia, for which such relations are a reliable guarantee against the possibility of a large military conflict with its "Turkic" neighborhood. This circumstance predetermines the stability of Russia's power presence in the center of the Caucasus subregion of the BCSR.

If the contiguity of Iran and the weighted course of Azerbaijan are taken into consideration, the geopolitical projection of the US on the Caucasus site is sufficiently blurred and fragmented. Besides, this fragmentation is further exacerbated by the relations between Washington and Turkey that have severely perturbed over recent years. Disagreements that essentially weakened the allied potential of the two countries include the Kurdish issue, as well as the US attitude to the modern political regime of Turkey and personally to its leader Erdogan. Moreover, the greater successes the US will show in the implementation of the "Kurdish project", trying to get a new loyal ally within the Front East, the more deteriorated will be relations with the old ally. This calls into question the possibility of systemically strengthening the US position even if a "tame" Kurdish state (or states) appears in this macroregion of the world.

The geopolitical landscape within the Caspian border of the BCSR remains equally complex and controversial; the position of its two leading states, Russia and Iran, plays an important role in its political dynamics. Their political interaction is complex, but the position of Moscow and Tehran on the issue of presence of external players in the Caspian (and primarily the US) completely matches, and their reluctance to see outsiders in the subregion cannot be ignored by the other Caspian countries. Besides, each of them has its own serious reasons not to support the Euro-Atlantic course in full measure.

As such, the BCSR is currently an extremely heterogeneous segment of the world's geospace that forms no single political and territorial system, which would

be built around one “core” state capable of acting as an “organizer” of this space and at the same time an authoritative arbiter in intraregional disputes for all of its members. At the same time, the BCSR does not belong to any other larger political space as a subunit.

The reason is obvious – an extreme diversity of the Black Sea-Caucasus-Caspian area, which represents the most complex mosaic of the most diverse nations in ethnonational context, hence the extreme linguistic and confessional diversity of the region. It represents a junction of the areas of all world religions in cultural and civilizational terms. The countries and peoples of the BCSR belong to various civilizational/subcivilizational “slabs” (this is especially true for the Black Sea, or even wider, Black Sea-Balkan site), within which it is not just about large civilizational areas such as the Russian/Orthodox, West European, Turkic or Persian, but also about the Armenian and Georgian “microcivilizations” or about the special sociocultural world of the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus.

One of the consequences of this diversity is an extremely high concentration of new (of late Soviet and post-Soviet genesis) and old conflicts in the BCSR, as well as their widest causal diversity (intra- and interconfessional, interethnic, secession, civil and interstate territorial). The very multiplicity of tension/confrontation lines defines the multicomposite nature of the most acute conflicts, which might have found the most vivid and tragic illustration in the Syrian war, the theater of which is spatially linked to the BCSR.

It is obvious that in the region with such an oversaturated latent and open conflict potential (at least in the field of interstate disputes and mutual claims), the most rational approach would be to create a system of regional security, i.e. a set of agreements that covers the field of high politics and based on institutionalized interstate economic cooperation. In a situation where the region is not completely controlled by any one big power, such a politico-economic “umbrella” could be a compromise that is beneficial to all “local” states.

However, there is no such a regulatory mechanism in the form of an international organization on the issues of integrated security at the moment: either at the BCSR scale or in its subregions. Moreover, the BCSR still lacks any substantive *security discourse*, similar to the one that has formed in the Balkans (the “Stability Pact” signed in Sarajevo in 1999 is one of its outcomes). It seems that even if such a package of regional security measures was developed, it still could not be implemented in the modern realities of the BCSR.

It is obvious that in the conditions of the post-bipolar world, a deeper, “archetypal” conflictual nature inherent in this given limitrophic area began to unveil through the external (“superficial”) conflictual nature of the region. The Caucasus subregion is especially vulnerable in this regard (not excluding its Russian segment) – the territory where the Russian geopolitical subcontinent (according



to S.B. Pereslegin) and the Russian (Orthodox, according to S. Huntington) civilizational “slab” converge with the vast and diverse Islamic world represented not only by Turkey, a nuclear state of the Turkic belt and the Shiite Iran (the Persian subcivilizational “slab”), but also with the Kurdish world that entered the stage of its active “stategenesis.” However, now the quasi-state radicalized society of the DAISH adjoins the Caucasian site of the BCSR, which is closely connected with the Wahhabi monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula and casting a perceptible projection on many Muslim societies of the subregion, including the Russian North Caucasus.

This maximum socioethnocultural and confessional Caucasian site determines its extremely high conflictual nature to a large extent. The spatial factor also plays its role. While the western and northern Black Sea region, a part of the Great Limitrophe, directly adjacent to the European Union and NATO, almost completely entered the area of their systemic domination in the post-Soviet period, the US failed to take the Caucasian subregion territorially rendered to the east under its political control. The same factor (distance) did not allow to ensure any significant socioeconomic presence of the European Union in the Caucasus, which fully applies to China.

Obviously, the leading geopolitical and socioeconomic actors of the modern world are too remote from the Caucasus subregion of the BCSR to firmly integrate all of its states into the area of their systemic domination and structure their political course and economy in accordance with their own interests. In this situation, the largest local players (Russia, Turkey, Iran) come to the fore, compensating a lack of their own systemic power with their territorial inclusiveness. However, a strategic consensus of these actors would be necessary for efficient control and regulation of the sociopolitical and economic dynamics of the Caucasus subregion. Meanwhile, their interests and goals are often too different to develop a common course, which leaves small countries with the possibility of a more or less wide maneuver, while external players always have chances to continue playing at this site. Moreover, they are compelled to take into consideration the specifics of their “place of development” when developing their own course and implementing their goals. Violations of this principle are possible, but normally only on short time intervals. The fate of the “orange” political regime in Georgia is indicative in this regard. The spatial contiguity of Russia and the remoteness of Europe, let alone the United States, all determine the strong presence of the Russia’s field of force, regardless of the fields of the Georgian state or society life. The attempt to disregard this reality in a rigid form ended pitifully for the regime of M. Saakashvili. The political team that came to replace him had no affection for Russia, but was nevertheless forced to take a much more balanced (i.e. pragmatic) position in a relationship with it.

It is obvious that only the emergence of an integral force in the subregion capable of taking it under its full control could stop this complex diverse rivalry.

But none of the three leading states of the Caucasus BCSR site will be able for such a breakthrough increase in the foreseeable future (well, with a greater probability in a more remote future it won't either). This means that there is every reason to believe that the BCSR will remain a field of increased geostrategic and geoeconomic activity for the longest term, an arena for the presence of many local and external forces whose complex composition/hierarchy will remain in constant dynamics.

## CONCLUSIONS

As such, the analysis of the post-Soviet geopolitical dynamics of various BCSR parts reveals a direct correlation between the level of military-strategic and geoeconomic influence of the US, the EU and China in them, as well as the "distance" of these global actors from each specific BCSR subregion. Its western site (the Black Sea area) represented by the countries of the former socialist camp and the newly formed post-Soviet states has largely shifted to the area of systemic domination of the Euro-Atlantic civilization over the last 15-20 years.

Specifics of the geopolitical landscape of the other two BCSR subregions are primarily determined by the leading regional states. For the Caucasus area, they are Russia, Turkey and Iran; for the Caspian subregion, they are Russia and Iran. However, the disagreements that exist between the regional leaders allow the global players to increase their presence in the BCSR, while at the same time preserving the possibility of political maneuver for the small and medium-sized countries of the region.

At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the limited systemic potential of regional leaders will not allow any of them to take any territorial area of the BCSR under their full control either in the near future or in the long term. As a result, the complex-structured nature of the regional political system, its contradictory dynamics and the continuous shifts in the local geopolitical landscape can all be considered stable specifics of this area of the World System.

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