

The “New Great Game” Over the Caspian Region: Russia, the USA, and China in the Same Melting Pot

Shamkhal Abilov

Researcher, Azerbaijan

Introduction

The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States of America found its end with the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and Warsaw Pact at the beginning of 1990s. This was considered by Francis Fukuyama, one of the world prominent scholars, as the “End of History” and mainly understood the permanent victory of the “liberal democracy” or the US hegemony over the rest of the world, and end of power politics. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way to the emerging of new independent states, strategically important regions in the map of the Eurasia. Consequently, confrontation of the world great powers took place with entering new political and security issues on the stage of international power politics. One of those regions that have been forgotten by the outside world during Soviet Union was the Caspian region, which was considered as a potential energy sources and strategically pivotal area of the Eurasia that emerged out of the political chaos of 1990s.

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Caspian region has been transformed into the battleground and the power confrontations of the world major leading countries not only because of its geo-strategic position in the map of the Eurasia, but also because of its immense hydrocarbon resources. Concerning the importance of the Caspian region, the former Vice President of the Bush administration, Dick Cheney, emphasized during his speech to oil industrialists in Washington, D.C. in 1998, “I cannot think of a time when we have had region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian”.

The geographical location of the Caspian region and possessing vast amount of oil and gas resources led it to play a significant role in world energy security and drew the attention of the regional and global players in order to increase their stocks in exploitation and transportation of Caspian hydrocarbon. The discovery of big amount of oil and gas in the Caspian led the Western politicians to project the

Caspian region as a “New Middle East”. Therefore, the scope of this research paper is to evaluate the geo-strategic significance of the Caspian region and its role as a crucial link between East and West, as well as examine the geopolitical rivalry over the vast Caspian region hydrocarbons and the transportation routes (pipeline politics) between the three global powers; Russia, the United States, and China. Lately, it will analyze what policies do these big states pursue in order to impose their political influence and ensuring economic benefits.

Theoretical Approach: The Caspian Region and the “New Great Game”

As the geopolitical importance of the Caspian region increased and its hydrocarbon resources became the subject of interests various scholarships were dedicated to the study of the Caspian region history and development of its oil industry, role of the Caspian hydrocarbons in the world energy security, power rivalries over the control of the Caspian region, pipelines politics etc. There are numerous publications in order to find out that what is the Caspian Region as a geographical area and which countries have to be referred into this geo-strategic region. As a new geographical term the Caspian region draws the scholarly attention after the break-up the Soviet Union in the last decade of the twentieth century. In academic level, there is a great debate whether it consists of only the littoral states of the Caspian Sea or as a geopolitical and geo-strategic term it possesses wider region. Geographically, the Caspian region consists of the five littoral states: Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. However, in the geopolitical meaning the term can hardly be used to restrict with the littoral states of the Caspian Sea. There are various opinions referring to the term Caspian region. One of them is, as a geopolitical term, the region consists of wider territory on the border of Europe and Asia, known as a “Eurasian Pearl”, and joins two regions of the former Soviet Union, Caucasus and Central Asia. Other scholars referring to the first opinion apply the term Caspian region to the republics of Central Asian and South Caucasus; also include Pakistan, Afghanistan and even Middle East to this region. Mustafa Aydin, one of the prominent Turkish scholars on the Caspian Studies, in his turn, identifies the Caspian region as follows:

The Caspian Region is centered on that inland body of water that is called a sea because of its size and includes five independent states that surround it: Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Iran. The contemporary usage of the term ‘the Caspian Region’, in a wider geopolitical sense, implies a ‘geopolitics determined by peculiarities of geology, [that is] huge natural resources’, which has led to the formation of ‘a region defined by oil’ and gas. The result is the

emergence of a new strategic region encompassing most of Central Asia, the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia as well as such nearby states as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and even China. Thus the Caspian Region, connecting two distinct areas of the former Soviet Union, the Caucasus and Central Asia...

Following the above mentioned ideas of the various scholars, this research paper is going to deal with the geopolitical importance of the Caspian Sea, which can be also identified as “Greater Caspian Region”, located in the central part of Eurasia (Eurasian Heartland) and connects economically and politically significant regions of world, such as: Middle East, Europe, South and East Asia.

As mentioned before, the geopolitical and geo-economic significance of the Caspian region played a crucial role for drawing the attention of the regional and global powers in order to dominate the region and impose their political will over the Caspian region countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, presence of vast amount of hydrocarbon resources and situating in the center of the Eurasian continent changed the strategic importance of the Caspian region and provided the political and economic competition between global powers, namely; Russia, China, and the USA. This power confrontation reached a new level after the terrorist attack on the US soil, on the 11 September 2001. Ever since that event, United States decided to intensify its military presence in the Caspian region and began a military cooperation with the newly independent Caspian region states. This attempt was considered by Russia as the direct threat to the Russian political and economic interests in its “Near Abroad”. With the intensification of energy, security, and economic interests of the big powers to the Caspian region it transformed to be the core of the “New Great Game”. As Mehdi Parvizi Amineh, prominent scholar on the Caspian Energy, indicates, “with the end of the Soviet control over CEA and the Caspian region natural and human resources, there emerged a New Great Game amongst the many players interested in access to the region’s oil and gas reserves...” Despite the differences in the scope, ideas, and the parties of the New Great Game over the Caspian region, the analogy is made by political analysts between this great power rivalry and the nineteenth century “Great Game” between British and Russian empires over access to India. Regarding this, Lutz Kleveman in his famous book *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*, elucidates:

Now, more than hundred years later, great empires once again position themselves to control the heart of the Eurasian landmass, left in a post-Soviet power vacuum. Today there are different actors and the rules of the new neocolonial game are far more complex than those of a century ago: The United States has taken over the leading role from the British. Along with the ever-present Russians, new regional

powers such as China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have entered the new arena...

According to him, “the greatest differences in today's Great Game are the spoils. While in the Victorian-era struggle, London and St. Petersburg competed over access to the riches of India, the New Great Game focuses on the Caspian energy reserves, principally oil and gas”.

The term “Great Game” is usually attributed to British East India Company intelligence officer Arthur Conolly, but was originally coined by British novelist R. Kipling and mostly describes the power competition between Russia and Great Britain in the nineteenth century over the hegemony of Central Asia. However, there was an argument that the intention of the Great Game was not only Central Asia, it was a gateway to Afghanistan and India, and Britain was aware that if Russia established its control over Central Asia, it would be easy for it to penetrate into its colonial India. Therefore, due to its geo-strategic position and according to the Great Game narratives, Central Asia is an important pivotal area and has been the ground of intense rivalry among the great power for centuries.

Sir Halford Mackinder also introduced the significance of Central Asia in his famous *Heartland* concept. Mackinder's Heartland theory dates back over a century. He first defined his theory with respect to “The Geographical Pivot of History” in 1904 and then articulated in his famous book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919, where the pivotal area of Eurasia introduced as Heartland and considered the most significant area of the world in terms of geo-strategy. The Heartland theory of Mackinder covers much of today's Russia, mainly Siberia, and Central Asia, and later of the Central-East Europe which is presented in the map below.



Mackinder's Pivot Area

By this theory Mackinder was supporting the importance of the control over the vast Eurasian landmass and tried to show the declining naval power of Britain, which has been the dominant power in the open seas for centuries. In this regards, he introduces his famous Heartland concept as following words, “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World”. According to his idea, industrially well-developed land-based powers could control the Eurasian landmass. Concerning Heartland concept of Mackinder, Zbigniew Brzezinski in his famous book *The Grand Chessboard* elucidates:

Geopolitics was also invoked by some leading German political geographers to justify their country's “Drang nach Osten”, notably with Karl Haushofer adapting Mackinder's concept to Germany's strategic needs. Its much-vulgarized echo could also be heard in Adolf Hitler's emphasis on the German people's need for “Lebensraum.

Consequently, I consider Heartland theory of Mackinder overlap the term Caspian region that has been mentioned above. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Caspian region states declared their independence, and due to their geo-strategic position these states reconstitute the modern core of Mackinder's concept and there is still a political rivalry over the Heartland that he introduced a century ago. However, this time great powers are not fighting for the control of the Caspian region due to its geographical position as a gateway to the immense natural resources of Afghanistan and India, but also for the huge hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian region itself. Therefore, in this part it is important to stress briefly the main causes of the political rivalry between the above mentioned three global powers and then analyzes their intentions and perspectives on the Caspian region broadly in the following pages. The essence of this gamble over the Caspian region is twofold:

Economic and Energy Issue: As mentioned before, the Caspian region occupies a central position in the Eurasian landmass and this geographical possession is important because of connecting traditional East/West and North/South trade routes. At the same time this region possesses vast amounts of natural resources, mainly oil and gas, which is considered an alternative to the Middle East energy. While stressing the importance of the Caspian region energy resources, Energy Secretary of the US, Bill Richardson notes, “The Caspian region will hopefully save us from total dependence on Middle East oil”. It possesses a high amount of proven and possible energy resources. Estimation is that proven oil is between 10

and 32 billion barrels with 233 billion barrel possible oil reserves. Coming to the gas, it is estimated in 243-248 trillion cubic feet proven and 293 trillion cubic feet possible gas. Therefore, one of the main reasons that the US, Russia, and China involved to the political rivalry in the Caspian region is due to access the rich energy resources, control oil and gas production and the transportation pipelines that transfer the hydrocarbon resources to the world market.

Political and Security Issue: Nevertheless, access to the rich energy resources is considered the main reason, but it is not only motive that great powers engaged rivalry. All three powers have political and security interests in the Caspian region. The New Great Game has gained a new manner with the US penetration into the Caspian region after the 9/11 events. The US sees the Caspian region as an important area for its geo-strategy as it connected with its position in the Middle East. Russian concerns are the ethnic and territorial disputes in its “New Abroad” and Russian citizens in these countries. China in its turn was worried about the security issue in its Xingjian province, which has the direct territorial link with the Caspian region.

United States in the Caspian Region

Over the last two decades the United States of America has been one of the crucial players of the New Great Game in the Caspian region. With the demise of the Soviet Union the bipolar world system that domination the Cold War era was disappeared and witnessed emerging United States as the only influential global power. By announcing Caspian as a vital strategic interest, US began to play active role in the political and economic affairs of the region. It was pushing itself into the region and takes all efforts to avoid rivalry and prevent formation of any political allies that challenge its position. The US was trying to expand its political relations with the region countries and established bilateral relations with them for protecting security in the region. Meanwhile, it sets a strategy for the involvement to the energy policy of Caspian states. By this, the primary goal of the US was to keep its initiative in the region and create a new sphere of influence in the Eurasian Heartland in order to obtain a broader security system that can maintain its political and economic dominance in the regional and international lever. For implementing its global strategy in the Caspian region it was trying to contain the influence of other world powers to the region and control political and economic affairs over the Eurasian Heartland that overlap with the aforementioned classical geopolitical concept of Mackinder. In this regard, VassilidFouskas and BulentGokay describe the US policy toward the region as follows:

As the only superpower remaining after the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, the United States is inserting itself into the strategic regions of Eurasia and anchoring US geopolitical influence in these areas to prevent all real and potential competitions from challenging its global hegemony. The ultimate goal of US strategy is to establish new spheres of influence and hence achieve a much firmer system of security and control that can eliminate any obstacles that stand in the way of protecting its imperial power. The intensified drive to use US military dominance to fortify and expand Washington’s political and economic power over much of the world has required the reintegration of the post-Soviet space into the US-controlled world economy. The vast oil and natural gas resources of Eurasia are the fuel that is feeding this powerful drive, which may lead to new military operations by the United States and its allies against local opponents as well as major regional powers such as China and Russia.

As indicated before, the Caspian region is perceived as a vital interest and a strategic sector for the US because of two major elements; energy and security. The former is driven from the US policy to diversify its energy sources in order to decrease its dependence from Middle East oil and the former one related to its policy of “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan. Some politicians also view spread of democracy, promote human rights, civil liberties, and free and fair elections in the region as one of the main goal of US in the region. However, “democratization” is a political tool that helps US intervention to political and economic affairs of the weak region states easily in order to preserve its above-mentioned primary interests.

In March 1997, National Security Advisor of Clinton Administration Sandy Berger pointed the region as one of the primary objects of the US foreign policy. Same year, in July, the Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott indicated that “by active engagement in the Caspian region, in energy issues as well as security matters, the USA sent a clear signal to the world that priority would be given to increasing US influence there even over safeguarding the US “partnership” with Russia”.

Proceeding from all of these we can set up policy priority tasks of US toward the Caspian region after the demise of Soviet Union as follows, to access the great energy potential of the region and ensure its control over the transportation routs; to prevent the regional powers, mainly China and Russia, from gaining any kind of economic and geopolitical advantage in the region; to build bilateral and multilateral political and economic relation with the regional countries; to prevent region from becoming a military base for extremist forces and deploy its military forces into the region in order to fight against terrorism and guarantee its security from terrorist threat. The reason why this research first focuses on the US

perspectives and interests toward the Caspian is because for the last two decades the US has been the most active player of the New Great Game in the Caspian region, and Russia and China are in a defense position to set their policy concerning the region as a counter strike against the US policy.

Energy security has been always one of the important strategic priorities and determined factor for the US National Security Strategy. Therefore, US always follows a policy of diversification of its energy resources for securing its energy supply and decrease dependence from energy exporting countries. In this regard, right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, US began to perceive the Caspian region as one of the primary directions for its global energy demand. However, it is important to mention that main energy consumption of US comes from Canada and Gulf of Mexico. Hereby, the energy policy that US pursuits in the Caspian region is due to the energy security of European Union, the most significant political and economic partner of the US in global politics, and preserve its dominant position in global energy policy. Hence, Jeff Smith note that “Washington understands full well that a Europe beholden to Russia for light and heat is more inclined to follow Moscow’s lead when United States and Russian interests collide”. The EU, as one of the largest energy importer, consumes more than 80% of its oil and 57% gas. Russia and Middle East are the main energy providers of the EU. Statistics show that by 2007 EU was consuming around 30% of its oil and more than 50% of its gas supplies from Russia. Additionally, most of the Eastern European countries fully depend on the Russian gas export for the next two decades Middle East countries and Russia will be main EU energy suppliers. According to the estimation of European Commission:

...By 2030, because of growing energy demand and declining domestic production, Europe will rely on imports for two-thirds of its energy needs. Dependence on imported oil will remain extremely high, reaching 94 percent in 2030. Dependence on imported gas will rise to 84 percent in 2030, and imports of solid fuels are projected to reach 59 percent in 2030.

It is obvious that in the Caspian region is not the largest energy sources and it is not easily accessible. In this sense, US interest in the Caspian region perceived as more political than economic in order to decrease the influence of Russia and Middle East energy producing countries in the energy policy of the EU, made a diversification of its energy sources as a top priority and ensure transportation of the Caspian region energy resources to the European market without passing via Russian and Iranian territory. Concerning this, US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson remarked in 1998 that, “this is about America’s energy security, which depends on diversifying our sources of oil and gas worldwide... We’re trying to move these newly independent countries toward the West... We would like to see

them reliant on Western commercial and political interests rather than going another way”. Generally speaking, the US policy in the Caspian region is part of its global strategy to increase its regional influence and became global superpower in the twenty first century.

The involvement of the large American and western energy companies to the energy sector of the Caspian region began right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of 1990s. In 1993, Chevron signed first agreement with the Kazakhstan for the exploitation of the largest Kazakh oil field, Tengiz, and began to increase its influence to the other energy rich Caspian region countries, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. This was followed with the “Deal of Century” between western oil companies and Azerbaijani government on 20 September 1994 for the exploration of three joint offshore fields; Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli.

However, the exploitation of energy potential was faced with a problem due to the transportation of energy from the land lock Caspian region. Despite collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was still controlling all pipelines that were transporting the region energy resources to the world market. Proceeding from this problem the US began to support alternative pipelines in order to bypass Russia. In this sense, the agreement on construction of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which officially opened in 2005, was a crucial step against the Russian policy in the region. George Bush, the former US president, described the completion over the BTC as a “monumental achievement that opens a new era in the Caspian Basin's development”. This was followed with the construction of 692 km length Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE), also called the South Caucasus Pipeline, which is transporting Azerbaijani gas from 2006 on to the European market.

Additionally, Trans-Caspian oil and gas pipeline was proposed by western companies in order to transport respectively Kazakhstan oil and Turkmenistan gas to Azerbaijan and then to Europe. The US also supports Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gas pipeline as a tool to decrease Chinese and Russian monopoly on transportation route of the Caspian region. Nabucco gas pipeline is another US-backed proposal that considered a continuation of the South Caucasus Pipeline in order to bring the Caspian region natural gas to the European market.

Another primary energy goal of the US in the Caspian region is to exclude Iran from participation in the exploitation and transportation of oil and gas of the region, which is the only member of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) that borders the Caspian region countries. Iran is the commercially most appropriate route for transporting the Caspian region energy to the world market, but while construction the BTC, US rejected to pass it through Iran. “Here the fear was that Iran would turn into a regional power, which could pose a potential military threat to Israel and compete with Turkey”.

The Caspian region has been also crucial for the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) military policy. Therefore, beginning from the 1990s the US was eager to increase its military cooperation with the regional countries within the framework of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program of NATO that instructed to expand political and military cooperation between NATO and the Caspian region countries and "to enable joint operations with NATO peacekeeping and humanitarian missions among other functions". It was intended to build close military relations particularly with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan due to energy agreements with these countries. Respectively, in 1996, NATO claimed that it has an intention to maintain energy deposits and export routes. Later, in 1998, the Caspian region was declared as a part of US military responsibility area.

The terrorist attack on the US soil on 11 September 2001 has been a turning point in the US security policy toward the Caspian region. It increased the importance of the Caspian region in US global strategy not only in economic and energy issue but also for political and security manner. The region drew more attention after September 11 due to its proximity to Afghanistan. Following this Bush administration gave the priority to the counter terrorism rather than economic issue and began the deployment of its troops in the regional countries, which provided a significant bases for military and intelligence operations. Concerning geo-strategic position of the Caspian region in the US war in Afghanistan, Gennady Chufirin writes,

There are few regions of the world that experience such a profound and lasting impact of the September 11 events as the Caspian region. As a result of the US -led anti-terrorist operation in the wake of these events by a military campaign directed against the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda network in neighboring Afghanistan, the Caspian states were deeply influenced by these developments, each of them to a different degree.

After 9/11 Caspian states received considerable military assistance from United States. For only 2002, the military assistance was about \$74 million. Georgia was in the first place among the other Caspian region republics, got \$32 million, followed by Uzbekistan \$12 million and later Kyrgyzstan \$11.6 million. The US also came to the decision to withdraw the Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act that was banning US aid to the Azerbaijan after collapse of the Soviet Union. On their part, the Caspian region countries ensured the access of the US transport and military aircrafts to their airspace. The US received a privilege in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for settlement of the US and NATO military air bases in Khanabad and Manas airports respectively. Establishment of the air bases in these countries was to maintain US air strikes against the regime and terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are playing a significant role for US and NATO military forces in “war against terrorism” in Afghanistan. These countries have supplied the fuel need of US Central Command. The US and its NATO allies did not pay taxes for fuel that was consumed for the military use from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. According to the spokeswoman of Defense Logistics Agency: “fuel is exempt from local duties and taxes due to Turkmenistan's and Azerbaijan's participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace program”, which was signed with Azerbaijan and four Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in 1994.

Consequently, the Caspian region has been the chessboard for the great powers after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and terrorist attack to Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001 that altered geopolitical importance of the region and allowed the US to establish its presence in the southern rim of the Russia. The US possesses a considerable economic, political, and military presence in the region and is not eager to allow any great power to provide a threat to its interests.

Russia: The Traditional Regional Power

The Caspian region is the traditional zone of Russian national political and economic interests and it has been one of the crucial players of the Caspian region throughout history. Comparison to other players of the New Great Game, Russia has the longest history of involvement in the region. Countries of the Caspian region, southern rim of the Russia, has been always an integral part for it nearly two centuries, since the above mentioned Great Game of nineteenth century between Imperial Russia and Great Britain until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian region became a crucial element in Russian geopolitical strategy and it was trying not to lose its political and economic influence and reinforce control over its lost areas. In order to regain the absolute control over former Soviet Empire peripheries, Russian “Near Abroad”, Russia has claimed the Caspian region as one of its foreign policy priorities and the zone of vital Russian interests and began to establish its hegemony over the region. The political attitude of Russia toward the Caspian region in the early 1990s was expressed in national newspaper *Segodnya* (Today) as follows, “Not just oil officials and diplomats, but cultures and geopolitical orientations are clashing there. The status quo there will not be maintained for long. The only question is who will change it and to whose benefit. Only one solution can satisfy Russia—predominance on the Caspian”. This statement is considered as the “Russian

Monroe Doctrine” that shows Russian political perception toward the Caspian. In this regards, former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov expressed his concern towards the increasing the US interests over the region and asked Washington to remember that “Moscow views the region as the United States view Latin America: a backyard where no strangers are allowed”.

On 14 September 1995 the former president of Russia Boris Yeltsin made an official decree where achievements of Russian interests in the Caspian region were separated into the following tasks. Russia has to bring its foreign policy priorities and interests concerning to the Caspian region into order and get over the contradictory character of Russian regional policy; increase cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States and developed pro-Russian integration programs; identify the policy and perspectives of other great powers in the Caspian region; guarantee its security in the context of spreading terrorism and drug trafficking in the region; and control the transportation routes of hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian region. But, in the 1990s Russian government was not able to realize its interests toward the Caspian region due to lack of economic and political tools. Only at the end of 1990s, when Vladimir Putin took the presidential post from Yeltsin, Russia began stable long-term policy in the region.

After Putin came to power, there was a dramatic change in the Russian foreign policy. On 21 April 2000, he authorized a special meeting of the Russia Security Council, where the key government ministers and businessmen represented. The intention of the meeting was to reestablish credibility of Russian policy toward the Caspian region. Consequently, Putin proclaimed the region as a zone of vital interest and specified increment of other powers in the region; constructing western backed oil and gas transmission route, like Baku-Tibilisi-Ceyhan pipeline; and increasing western involvement in the security issues of the region as a threat to Russian regional hegemony and economic interests and urged Russian companies to involve more competition. Following this, Russian government began active support of the international expansion of major Russian companies. One of the successful step was considered the initiative to create the Caspian Oil Company, which include three major energy companies, such as: YUKOS, LUKoil and Gazprom. At the consequence of the political transformation under Putin administration, Russia began to follow more stable and influential foreign policy in the Caspian region.

However, there are number of reasons that why Russia wanted to keep the Caspian region under its control. It has historical and cultural link with most of the regional countries and shares direct border with them. Additionally, existence of Slavic minorities in those countries makes the region important area for Russia in terms of

protection of its citizens. But, as mentioned before the primary concern of the Russia in the region are shaped by two distinct perspectives: geopolitical and security issue cover the power politics of the great powers over the region and transnational threats and terrorism; and energy issue which focuses on to ensure the flow of the Caspian region hydrocarbons through Russia to the European market. In the context of energy, Russian ambition in the region is to buy hydrocarbon resources, mainly gas, from the Caspian region - energy producing countries in the form of long term gas supply arrangements and guarantee of the flow of the Caspian energy through the Russian oil and gas pipelines. It was aware that as long as it retained its monopoly over the energy distribution network, it would be easy to purchase the energy from the region countries less than market price and make a benefit while selling it to the European market in high price.

Additionally, Russia was eager to block the access of the European countries to the Caspian region energy resources. Therefore, Russia signed a long-term contract with the main energy producer of the region, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in May 2007, and with Azerbaijan on 29 June 2009, during the first visit of Russian president Dmitry Medvedev to Azerbaijan. On the other hand, in order to preserve its monopolization position over the transportation routes Russian government is looking for a new transportation infrastructure aimed to prevent construction of western backed pipelines, such as Nabucco and Trans-Caspian gas and oil pipelines, for bypassing Russia. It is obvious for the Russian government that if above-mentioned pipelines will come to existence it decreases the Russian control over the region and gives a chance to the energy producing countries of the Caspian to sell directly their production to the European market. Accordingly, Russia signed a trilateral agreement with the government of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in 2007 for building a new pipeline, which will be alternative to Trans-Caspian one. Russia also launched two other proposals, the Blue Stream II and South Stream, which are in direct competition to the Nabucco project. The former one planned to supply gas to the Balkans and later one intended to run under the Black Sea from Russia to Bulgaria in order to transport Russian gas to Europe.

Another Russian effort for preserving its existence position in the Caspian region energy exports was formalizing a gas cartel called the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) in 2008. It consists of sixteen members including the Caspian region countries Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. As it is indicated “formation of such a cartel would consolidate Russia’s dominance as a gas exporter, allow Russia an even larger degree of control over European energy supply, and would likely help Russia to manage and limit future Iranian competition on the European market”.

Another energy interest of Russia is investing in the Caspian region countries' nuclear sector. Concerning this, in February 2002, Russia provided a new project to the Kazakhstan government for enrichment a nuclear power plant in Balkhash, which is situated 400 km north of Almaty. Later, in July 2006, two governments signed an agreement for beginning three other uranium-mining projects for not only domestic use, but also for export. This was followed with signing similar agreement between Russia and Uzbekistan for the development Uzbekistan's uranium deposits. By this, Russia was trying to ensure its ambitions in the Caspian region. The logic was that if the production of uranium increases for the domestic use of those countries, the consumption of energy, particularly oil and gas will decrease, which provides more chance for Russia to get oil and gas easily and transport to the world market. On the other hand, this investment will help to develop Russian nuclear sector while importing cheap uranium from regional countries and keep them to have such an agreement with other regional powers, like, China, India, and Iran, which is considered as a threat to Russian national interest.

Coming to security concern, the fragmentation off the Soviet Union forced Russia to reevaluate its security politics in the Caspian region, which was a melting pot of such complex political, ethnic, and religious disputes and was providing a potential risk for the Russian position in the region. The security interests of Russia in the region considered to build an exclusive zone over the former Soviet countries in order to reestablish its great power status in international arena.

The Caspian region was also playing a buffer role against the potential threat from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Therefore, Russia was giving great effort to build up political influence over the region while trying to build high level military cooperation with regional countries within the framework of Russian led military organizations, such as: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

With 9/11 events, the security issue of Russia entered in a new level while the military infiltration of the US to the region, which perceived as a direct threat to the Caspian region security of Russia. Russia accepted and cooperated with the US military presence in the Caspian region as long as both states share single interest, eradication of the Taliban and combating terrorism. Even Russia showed an intention to open its air space for non-military flight of the US. Political analysts emphasized several factors that why Russia was in cooperation with the US in its war on terrorism. First, Russia perceived that the war in Afghanistan ensures the block of the Caspian region from the terrorist threat of Middle East. Second, with the war in Afghanistan Russia caught a chance to send a positive message to the

West that they face the same threat, which gives legitimacy to its war in the Northern Caucasus. Additionally, Russia was intended to get the sympathies of the Islamic world while directing their sentiments toward the US. In this regard, while supporting the Iraq war in 2003 Russian ultranationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy clearly stated that, “Russia would benefit from it, as US would be weakened and while feeling hated for the US, the world community would look toward Russia for help”.

But lately the security concern of Russia increased with the length of the US military presence in the region. Western backed “colored revolutions” in the southern rim of the Russia was the pick of the Russian concerns. Therefore, it intended to counter the interests of the US in all meanings. While Russia was positioning itself in the region it began active military cooperation with the regional countries by the above mentioned security organizations and announced the establishment of 11.000 strong Rapid Reaction Force in order confront any challenges against the sovereignty of the members of those organizations.

In this perspective, Russia signed various military agreements with region countries in order to deploy its troops in their territories and lease their military bases. Around 14.000 Russian soldiers are stationed in the territory of former Soviet Republics, such as Armenia, Belarus, Georgia (mainly in Abkhazia and Ossetia), Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. The 201st Motorized Rifle Division of Russia in Tajikistan is the largest Russian military base outside Russian territory. On the other hand, it also began to influence the region countries to withdraw the US military bases from their territories. In this regards, Russia outlined a package of aid to Kyrgyzstan and began to increase its military presence in the Caspian region. Concerning this matter, Jim Nichol, a specialist in Russian and Eurasian Affairs, emphasizes:

During a February 3, 2009, meeting in Moscow with Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced that the U.S. Manas airbase would be closed. Bakiyev claimed that US compensation for use of the base had been inadequate and that the Kyrgyz public wanted the base to be closed... At the meeting, Medvedev had offered a \$1.7 billion loan to Kyrgyzstan for building a dam and hydroelectric power station and a \$300 million loan and a \$150 million grant for budget stabilization. Russia also agreed to cancel a \$180 million debt owed by Kyrgyzstan in exchange for some properties. Many observers suggested that the assistance was a quid pro quo for Kyrgyzstan’s agreement to close the base...

At the consequence of this meeting, the cancellation of the status of forced agreement (SOFA) between the US and Kyrgyzstan for using Manas airbase approved by the Kyrgyz legislature and following day the bill was signed by the President of Kyrgyzstan. “The SOFA between the United States and Kyrgyzstan calls for the airbase to be vacated within 180 days upon notification that the agreement is cancelled”. By this the main aim of Russia was to secure its presence in its backyard, and prevent American activities in the region in the context of “spread of democracy”. The Russian military intervention into Georgia in August 2008 was a crucial step in this perspective and led to significant changes in the Russian geopolitical balance and existence rules of the game in the region. By the Russian-Georgian war Russia made it clear that it is capable of to draw a line against the Western will if it possesses a threat for the Russian regional interests. Another side effect of the Georgian war was that it created uncertainty for the countries of the region, which was relying on the US support in order to prevent the Russian influence.

Russian Initiated Regional Organizations to Contain American “Hegemony”

As mentioned above, the primary ambition of Russia in the region is to preserve its regional power status and impose its political and economic wills. In this regard, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, beside bilateral military and economic cooperation with the region countries Russia also intended to create new regional and international forums in order to keep its “Near Abroad” in sphere of influence. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are two of them that we are going to find out what are the essential objectives of Russia through these institutions and how it is useful for its regional policy.

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), “New Warsaw Pact”

Collective Security Treaty Organization originally formed on the bases of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) that signed between Armenia, Russia, and several Central Asian countries in 1992. A decade later, in April 2003, the member states of CST signed a charter to instruct a Collective Security Treaty Organization with a permanent secretariat for budget coordination and military planning. The Organization consist of seven member states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The main aim of Organization is expressed in Article III of CSTO's Charter as, “the purposes of the Organization are

to strengthen peace and international and regional security and stability and to ensure the collective defense of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member States, in the attainment of which the member States shall give priority to political measures”. According to the secretary general of CSTO, Nikolay Bordyuzha, the aim of the Organization is “to resolve military, local and border conflicts, as well as to prevent ... terror acts of armed groups and to stop drug trafficking.... In addition, they will be used to fulfill special tasks such as protection of pipelines”.

From 2005, Russia was putting great effort to push the Organization through more militarized instruction. During the meeting of Collective Security Council of CSTO on 22-24 June 2005 the member states adopted a decision for instructing a military component. The decision was made to develop an integrated air defense system and rapid deployment forces. The commission for military-economic cooperation of the Organization was instructed, which aimed to build a closer collaboration between military industries of member states. The reason for this reform within the CSTO was the intention to create a joint military structure for the Organization in order to protect its member states from internal and external threats. Following this, the member states of CSTO agreed for the establishment of an air-assault Collective Operational Reaction Force (CORF) in 2009. Nikolay Bordyuzha, the secretary general of CSTO, claimed in early 2010 that there are two rapid reaction forces of the Organization. The first one is composed of more than 20.000 special operation troops, which aimed to protect “Eurasian borders and undertaking international mission”, while the other one, which consists of 4.000 troops focused on defending Central Asia from the terrorist threat from Afghanistan and protect energy resources. Despite above mentioned purposes of the Organization, many political analysts viewed the militarization of CSTO as a direct step against US, which is clearly expressed in a new Military Doctrine that released by Russian government in 2009, where NATO and the US were implied as main external threat for Russia. According to the Military Doctrine of the main external threats of war were listed as below:

- The goal of NATO to arrogate to itself the assumption of global functions in violation of international law, and to expand the military infrastructure of NATO nations to Russia’s borders including through expansion of the bloc
- Attempts to destabilize the situation in individual states and regions and the undermining of strategic stability
- The deployment of military contingents of foreign states (and blocs) on territories neighboring Russia and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters

- The establishment and deployment of strategic missile defense systems that undermine global stability and violate the balance of forces in the nuclear field, as well as the militarization of outer space and the deployment of strategic non-nuclear systems precision weapons
- Territorial claims against Russia and its allies and interference in their internal affairs
- The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, missiles and missile technology, increasing the number of states possessing nuclear weapons
- The violation by a state of international agreements, and failure to ratify and implement previously signed international treaties on arms limitation and reduction
- The use of military force in the territories of states bordering Russia in violation of the UN Charter and other norms of international law
- The escalation of armed conflicts on territories neighboring Russia and allied nations.

In general, the aim of Russia for the militarization of CSTO was to create a new military organization similar to former Warsaw Pact and to transfer it to effective security institution in order to counter the outside influence, mainly the US, and to keep the region countries away from military mechanism of NATO, which is played active role in the Caspian region after 9/11 terrorist event. To put it simple, as emphasized in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept announced on 17 July 2008, "[Russia] will promote in every possible way the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a key instrument to maintain stability and ensure security in the CIS area... as well as on ensuring capability of the CSTO Member States to take prompt and effective joint actions, and on transforming the CSTO into a central institution ensuring security in its area of responsibility".

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Sino-Russian Rapprochement

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization emerged as "Shanghai Five" of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan in 1996 in order to solve a series of border disputes among the member states after the dissolution of Soviet Union. With the joining of Uzbekistan in 2001, it was transformed to Shanghai Cooperation Organization and began annual summit meeting of head of states and governments. The main aims of the SCO are preservation security and stability in the region, fighting against terrorism and organized crimes, extremism, separatism, and illegal drug trafficking and weapons trade.

On 26 April 1996, during the first summit meeting of the Organization in Shanghai, the member states signed a “Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions” with the aim to create a military guarantee along the borders of member states. This was followed with the signing a “Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions” during the second leadership meeting on 25 April 1997. The purpose of this agreement was the restriction of conventional military settlement and military activities within demilitarized zone along common borders. Like CSTO, the strengthening of the US and its NATO allies' position in the region after the US declared “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan, Russia began to push SCO into regional security affairs and military structure in order to balance US position. In this respect, during the Russian initiated SCO summits in Petersburg and Moscow in 2002 and 2003, the member states adopted the charter and the basic legal documents of the Organization, and established the Secretariat of SCO and a Regional Anti-Terrorist Center (RATC). The headquarters of these institutions were respectively in Beijing and Bishkek. In August 2007 SCO launched its large-scale military exercise, which called “Peace Mission 2007” and involved almost 6,500 and 80 Aircraft. The 2,000 of that troop consist of from Russian and 1,600 from Chinese soldiers.

In comparison to CSTO, the SCO represents two great regional and international powers, Russia and China, both share some common and separated political and economic interests in the region. As a short-term perspective, China is interested of the establishment of a single economic space within SCO. However, Russia concerned that such a short term perspective will result economic hegemony of China in the Organization and led influx of cheap Chinese manufactured products, which will transfer the regional countries to be dependent on China. The main exports of Russia to China basically consist of raw materials; on the other hand, China mainly exports manufactured items to Russia and regional countries. Another concern of Russia is the settlement of the Chinese population in the Russian depopulated territories in the Far East. Additionally, there are controversies between these states over the regional energy transportation routes and the energy policy of China in the Caspian region logically increases Russian anxiety. Therefore, Russia perceived economic integration as a long term priority of SCO and mainly interested in short term goals, such as political and security cooperation on the fighting against terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

However, when it comes to question of the US position in the region, despite above-mentioned disagreements, Russia and China began not only improve the strategic relations between each other, but also try to involve the region states. As Thomas S. Wilkins stresses, “this partnership is primarily founded upon a number of mutual interests not shared values”. As mentioned before, the campaign against

international terrorism led the US military expansion to the Caspian region and deployment its troops in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and using air space of other regional states. Therefore, none of them, neither Russia nor China was willing to see the US and its NATO allies in their backyards and overshadow their national political and economic interests. Both countries share common interest to limit the US influence to the region as much as possible. In this respect, former head of the International Military Cooperation Directorate at the Russian Ministry of Defense Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov indicates, “Under conditions of NATO expansion, there is a real threat to national security of Russia. Hence, I am convinced that only SCO could become a real counterweight to expansion on the part of the North Atlantic Alliance. In the future, what the SCO needs to do is to admit Iran, India and Pakistan as its members”.

The Organization gained reputation in the West with the Kazakhstan Declaration of SCO on 5 July 2005, when the member states called the US to set a timetable for withdrawing its military forces from the bases of the member states of SCO. The Declaration emphasized:

We are supporting and shall continue to support the efforts by the international coalition, conducting anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. Today we are noticing the positive dynamics of stabilizing internal political situation in Afghanistan. A number of the SCO member states provided their ground infrastructure for temporary stationing of military contingents of some states, members of the coalition, as well as their territory and air space for military transit in the interest of the anti-terrorist operation. Considering the completion of the active military stage of anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization consider it necessary, that respective members of the anti-terrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use of the above-mentioned objects of infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states.

Political analysts estimated that this event would encourage Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to expel the US military bases from the territories. General Richard Myers, who became Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff claimed that by this act Russia and China are “trying to bully” their smaller neighbors into weakening security ties with Washington”. The US analysts Ariel Cohen and John J. Tkacik evaluated this act as “the anti-American axis has already begun to work”.

The increasing geopolitical and geo-strategic cooperation between these two states is not only an aspect of SCO against the US. Cooperation in energy sector is another sphere of influence that Russia and China are trying to balance US led

large energy projects toward the Caspian region. Security of exploitation and transportation of energy resources is an important issue on which Chinese and Russian economic interests converge within the SCO. Respectively, there was a proposal to transfer SCO into energy club as “gas OPEC”, which for first time was officially declared by the former Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Shanghai summit in 2006. The idea behind this event of Russia was to keep the US out and China inside energy gamble in order to preserve its dominant position on energy policy of the Caspian region countries. Generally speaking, all these initiations made by Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union are to regain its former global power position. Around two hundred years Russia has been a dominant power in the Caspian region and possesses deep political, historical, and cultural link with the region countries. And it is obvious that it is not so easy to gain a dominant position in the Russian sphere of influence without calculating Russian interests in the region. However, coming to the Russia policy and Russian-led regional and international institutions, it raises a question that how effective are they. But if look at two decades back to history, there is a precise development on Russian political and economic leverage in regional and global affairs and Russia is not going to leave its sphere of influence.

China: A Rising Global Power

The engagement of China to the Great Game over the Caspian region began immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. The main interest of the China was in the eastern part of the Caspian region, namely Central Asia, where it has a direct border relationship with some of them. Therefore, it was one of the first countries that recognized the independence of the Central Asian countries and established diplomatic relationship with them in January 1992.

In order to preserve its political and security interests in the region, China began to conduct an intensive negotiations and signed various bilateral and multilateral agreements on arms control, settlement of border disputes, religious extremism, fighting against international terrorism and ethnic separatism, illegal immigrations, drug trafficking, and other forms of contract that threaten security of the region. China considers the Caspian region as a vital zone for its economic interests, sources of the cheap raw materials, and big market for its productions. For that reason, as soon as China entered to the Great Game it has established a tread mission in every countries of the region and began to involve to the Caspian energy policy with the gradual development of oil and gas sector in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to the article published in New York

Times, “Chinese officials see Central Asia as a critical frontier for their nation’s energy security, trade expansion, ethnic stability and military defense. State enterprises have reached deep into the region with energy pipelines, railroads and highways...”. In this respect, Liu Yazhou, General of the People's Liberation Army considered Central Asia as “the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens”.

However, the involvement of China in the Caspian region was not only for the energy resources, but also to ensure security of its western border. Thus, this part of research paper will focus on the two primary factors of Chinese policy in the Caspian region: the security of energy supplies for rapidly growing economy of China and suppress the separatist movement in its Xinjiang province that threaten its security, which has a ethnic relationship with Central Asian countries. The process of industrialization of China made energy security as one of the priority in China's Caspian region strategic question. At the consequence of the increasing dependence from the external energy supplies, China became a net importer of the oil. Between 1985 and 1995, the oil demand of China increased from 1.7 to 3.4 million barrels per day (bpd). By 2005 this proportion reached 6.8 million bpd and 2.45 million bpd (around 40 percent of Chinese oil needs) of that demand was imported. The volume of the crude oil import increased more than 50% in 2009 and exceeded domestic production. With surpassing Japan in 2004, China became the second largest importer of petroleum after the US. The demand for the petroleum import was increasing due to the rapid economic growth. The report from Paris-based International Energy Agency by surpassing the US in August 2010, China became the first energy consumer of the world. According to this report, “China consumed 2.252 billion tons of oil equivalents in 2009—about 4% more than the United States, which consumed 2.170 billion tons of oil equivalents”.

The growing energy needs of China increased its interest toward the Caspian region energy affairs, mainly the eastern part of the Caspian region. As a world number one energy consumer, China imports more than two-thirds of its oil from the Middle East. Chinese policy makers are aware that the vulnerable Middle East energy resources are not reliable due to military conflicts, terrorism, and other sources of instability, which may cause abrupt cutting of energy export of China from the region. Around 80 percent of Chinese imports from the Middle East pass through Malacca Strait, which is under the threat of the US naval forces. China is afraid that in case of any conflict it would be easy for the US to impose a naval blockade on Malacca Strait for disrupting Chinese energy supplies. Therefore, due to above mentioned factors, China is trying to diversify its energy imports and reduce its dependence from the Middle East. The Caspian region, which possesses rich oil and gas reserves, seems to play an important role in this respect. “A stake in

oil and gas fields in Kazakhstan, Iran, and potentially Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and the Caspian is extremely valuable to the Chinese government, which has put much effort into realizing this”. In this regard, Chinese leadership are pushing strongly to involve the Caspian region energy affairs and develop land based secured energy pipelines.

China began its full energy policy toward the Caspian region in the late 1990s. In 1997, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a deal with the Kazakhstan government for buying 60% in AktobeMunayGas. Following this, by 1998, two governments signed an agreement for the exploration of Western Kazakhstan oil field. In 2002, CNPC acquired 50% in Salejan field in Kazakhstan. CNPC acquired 35% of oil and gas field of North Buzachi in August 2003 and obtained the 65% of that field two month later from Chevron. In 2004, another Chinese corporation Sinopec bought American First International Oil Company (FIOC) and acquired its user licenses in small fields like Mezhdurechensk, Sagiz, Begaidar, Sazankurak, Federov. One of the Chinese successes in Kazakhstan was signing a contract with the Kazakhstan for taking over the PetroKazakhstan (Petrokaz), an international petroleum company that registered in Canada. In November 2007, KazMunayGaz, Kazakhstan National Oil and Gas Company signed an export deal with CNPC for exporting 5 bcm of gas to China, annually. In November 2009, CNPC and KazMunayGas together bought 100% of MangistauMunaiGas shares. In order to transport Kazakhstan oil Chinese government invested billion of dollars since 2004 in order to build pipeline that will link Kazakhstan with the western part of China, Xinjiang. The Kazakhstan-Chinese oil pipeline Atasu-Alashankou was opened in December 2005. After the construction of this pipeline China began a negotiation with other Central Asian countries for the additional pipelines and suggested “Atasu-Alashankou pipeline will only be the first among many Central Asia-China pipelines”. Following this, in 2006, China claimed its interest for the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Kazakhstan parallel to Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline. For linking China to the Caspian fields of Kazakhstan, in August 2007, CNPC signed a contract with KazMunaiGaz for extending the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline 700 km westward. With construction of the Kenkiyak-Kumkol section the main energy transportation infrastructure between two countries Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline was put into operation in July 2009 with the capacity of 20 million tonnes per year.

Energy cooperation between China and Turkmenistan also began at the last decade of the twentieth century. In 1992, CNPC and Mitsubishi came with a proposal for exporting Turkmenistan gas to China. With joining of Exxon in 1995, these companies agreed for a feasibility study and completed it in 1996. Two years later, in April 2006, two governments signed a contract in order to deliver 30 bcm of gas

from Turkmenistan to China from 2009 to 2039. Next year, China signed a production sharing agreement with Turkmenistan for development and extraction of natural gas in the Bagtiyarlik field of eastern Turkmenistan. In 2009, China provided around \$4 billion loan to the Turkmenistan government in order to develop country's South Yolotan gas fields. Accordingly, Turkmenistan promised to increase the amount of exported natural gas 10 bcm, additionally to an annual 30 bcm that came to agreement before.

China signed a contract with the Turkmenistan for completion of Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline during the visit of Turkmenistan President Sapirmurad Niyazov to China in April 2006. In December 2009, CNPC completed the longest natural gas pipeline, 7,000 km, across Central Asia to Turkmenistan. China's largest oil and gas producer and supplier, CNPC, financed the pipeline. This pipeline creates a chance for China to pick up an additional gas from other gas producing countries of Central Asia. The Turkmenistan-China pipeline consists of two pipelines, the first one opened in December 2009 is 1,833 km that begins from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang province of China, passing through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. From there on, it connects to the domestic pipeline network of China that travels 7,000 km.

China also conducts various energy deals with Uzbekistan. During the visit of Hu Jintao to Uzbekistan in 2004, the CNPC signed an agreement for oil and gas cooperation with Uzbekistan National Holding Company, Uzbekneftegaz. Two years later, the sides signed additional two contracts in order to develop and explore energy deposits in 5 onshore blocks of the Aral Sea, together with other companies, such as: Lukoil from Russia, Petronas from Malaysia, and South Korea's National Oil Corporation. On 30 June 2008, the construction of the first phase gas pipeline (third stage of the Turkmenistan-China Pipeline) that valued more than 2 billion dollars began from Uzbekistan to China. AsiaTransGas, a joint venture between Uzbekistan and China, was also founded in order to design, construct and operate the pipeline construction. According to the oil and gas agreement between these two countries that signed before, Chinese energy companies began to refine oil and gas in Uzbekistan energy fields, where they possess preferential access to wells while drilling is complete. According to Ablat Khodzhaev, a senior researcher in the Academy of Science of Uzbekistan, "these projects will give China direct access to oil and gas deposits in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, in addition to Azerbaijan and Iran, and will fulfill these countries' willingness to sell their energy directly to China regardless of Russia".

The energy cooperation of China with Iran also plays a crucial role in China's energy policy toward the Caspian region due to the geographical location of Iran,

which has a direct border with both the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Because of that fact, between 2005 and 2010 Chinese energy companies signed several agreements with Iran that valued approximately \$120 billion. Cooperation with Iran viewed as strategic ally for countering the US supported Arab countries in order to preserve its energy interests in Persian Gulf. China is also interested in to construct pipelines, railways, and roads, which will link China directly to Iran and allow it to import oil and gas resources of Iran via secured transportation infrastructure in case of any conflict in Persian Gulf.

However, secured energy supply is not the only concern of China in the Caspian region. The security of its western flank is one of the primary factors that pushed China into Central Asia after gaining independence of regional countries with the collapse of Soviet Union. China concerned about Stability in the region due to sharing 3,300 km long borders with three Caspian region countries; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The uprising of Uyghur Turks in its western border, which was aimed to create an independent Eastern Turkestan in Xinjiang province of China and spread of radical movements under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan increased China's security concerns. China scared that existence of the Uyghur minorities in these countries may push them to help the secessionist movement. Concerning this Lena Jonson indicates that, “the presence of Uighur minorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan creates a link between Xinjiang and these states and further to Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime is considered the main source of instability in the wider region”. Thus, the main goal of China in the region is the stabilize the unrest in Xinjiang region, where approximately 60 percent of population are Muslim Uyghurs that share ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic link with the region countries, and provide security in its border against the external threats.

Proceeding from this concerns China has turned toward a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which we talked about previous chapter, as a main instrument to ensure its security and impose its interests in the region. According to Christina Lin, China's objective in SCO is to meet three main goals: “(1) pacifying the restive Xinjiang province, home to significant Muslim-Uyghur separatist forces, (2) diversifying energy sources from the Persian Gulf and hedging against any maritime embargoes, and (3) projecting Chinese hegemony across Eurasia”. Regarding to the China's security interests in SCO, Gennady Chufirin in his tern elucidates that, “Participation in the forum enhanced China’s role in regional security affairs considerably, paving the way for a strengthening of its military and security cooperation with the regional states on a multilateral and also a bilateral basis”.

Another security issue that concerns China is the growing influence of the US in the eastern part of the Caspian region after 9/11 terrorist attack and sees it as a direct threat to its national security and economic interests in the region. Therefore it uses all possible ways to contain spread of US influence in Central Asia. However, like Russia, due the presence of terrorist organization next to its border China gave its support to “the US war against terrorism”. Because, China concern that these organization may help Uyghur's separatist movement and train them to attack Chinese assets in Xinjiang. Moreover, China uses the US war in Afghanistan as a pretext to justify its war on Uyghur Turks as Russia did it in Chechnya.

Conclusion

Coming to concluding remark, the scope of this research is to show the significance of the Caspian region and to analyze confrontation of the above-mentioned three global powers in this region. The Caspian region has been a significant focal point for the political interests of China, Russia, and the United States of America due to its geo-economic and geo-strategic value after the dissolution of the Soviet Block in 1990. But it is important to mention that the importance of this region goes back into the history and various empires had been given a great effort to keep this region in their hands throughout history. The strategic and political significance of the region finds its logical frame in Mackinder's famous Heartland theory. Beginning from nineteenth century the region has been a battleground between Russia and Great Britain in order to be a dominant power in this region. Various scholars marked this event as a “Great Game”, which has been resulted with the domination of Eurasian Heartland by Russia nearly two hundred years ago. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the twentieth century and decrease of the Russian influence, new global powers involved into a political rivalry over this region in order to have an access to the rich raw materials and impose their political wills over the weak regional countries. Therefore, the analogy has been drawn between the nineteenth century “Great Game” and today's rivalry between US, Russia, and China, and pointed this power confrontation as a “New Great Game”. Therefore, the aim of this research paper was analyzing what political gamble has been played by these three powers and shows how influential are them in order to preserve their national interests. The US, as a leading global power and China play a crucial role in the political and economic affairs of the region countries. However, it should be mentioned that despite the growing commercial and political presence of these two powers, Russia is still a major regional power and has a prominent impact not only in economic and political issue but also in cultural perspective and consider this region as its sphere of influence and a buffer

zone against threats to its security and is going to keep this region by using all possible ways.

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Summary

The “New Great Game” Over the Caspian Region: Russia, the USA, and China in the Same Melting Pot

Shamkhal Abilov

Researcher

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Caspian region has been transformed into the battleground and the power confrontations of the world major leading countries not only because of its geo-strategic position in the map of the Eurasia, but also because of its immense hydrocarbon resources. The geographical location of the Caspian region and possessing vast amount of oil and gas resources led it to play a significant role in world energy security and drew the attention of the regional and global players in order to increase their stocks in exploitation and transportation of Caspian hydrocarbon. The discovery of big amount of oil and gas in the Caspian led the Western politicians to project the Caspian region as a “New Middle East”. Therefore, the scope of this research paper is to evaluate the geo-strategic significance of the Caspian region and its role as a crucial link between East and West, as well as examine the geopolitical rivalry over the vast Caspian region hydrocarbons and the transportation routes (pipeline politics) between the three global powers; Russia, the United States, and China. Lately, it will analyze what policies do these big states pursue in order to impose their political influence and ensuring economic benefits.

Key words:The “New Great Game”, Caspian region, the USA, Russia, China, Energy, and Security.