THE CASPIAN REGION, A GEOPOLITICAL PROBLEM FOR THE GLOBAL ENERGY SECURITY

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Abstract: Because of its geopolitical position in the center of Eurasia, the Caspian region has an important significance for the international relations from the political, economical and security perspective. The control of this region formed the basis for the domination of the Eurasian landmass. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War there appeared important changes in the configuration of Eurasian geopolitics, this reality making the Caspian region an area of influence by neighboring and also distant countries. The Caspian region became a zone of rivalry for foreign powers with interest in developing energy resources in the newly independent post-Soviet countries. There are analysts who even consider the geopolitical rivalry in the Caspian region as a "neo-Cold War" or "Great Game" between the United States, Russia and China.

The aim of this paper is investigating and studying the geopolitical dimensions of the situation of the Caspian Region in terms of influence, energy potential, rivalry, in the context of global energy security. The methodology of this research is descriptive-analytical and it attempts to offer a geopolitical answer to the question of how can be solved the global energy security issue with reference to the Caspian Region.

Keywords: energy security, resources, geopolitics, democratisation, trade.

The Caspian Region is a zone subject to political, diplomatic and economic complex games, having a controversial specific, combining geographical, economic, political, ethnic and religious elements, which underpin many tensions, even conflicts, but also negotiations and alliances. The core of the "Caspian game" lies both in controlling production of oil and natural gas and in controlling the routes (mainly terrestrial and submarine pipelines) that transport these resources.
energy resources to worldwide markets. Due to it’s geographical location in the center of Eurasia, the Caspian region is of great importance in international relations and is today one of the most important geo-strategic areas of the globe.

Until the collapse of the USSR, the Caspian Sea has been the exclusive domain of two neighboring states- Iran and the USSR (it has been divided between Moscow and Tehran through the treaties from 1921 and 1940). After 1991, the situation has changed very much, and the leap from two to five riparian states (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Azerbaijan) has led to the multiplication of interests and legal claims over the sea and its resources, especially the reserves of oil and natural gas.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the changes in the configuration of Eurasian geopolitics have made from the Caspian Region a zone of influence to neighboring but also distant countries, that arouses even more interest for the geopolitical global and regional actors, for the superstate structures (in this case the EU) and for the transnational businesses. The Caspian Sea region has become an area of rivalry for foreign powers with interest in energy resources development in post-Soviet countries. There are analysts who even consider the geopolitical rivalry in this area as a new Cold War.

The purpose of the paper is therefore to identify the actors with the most influence in the region, who hold supremacy and rivalry in this area, to analyze the impact which the result of the energy games in the Caspian Region can have on the international political and economic relations.

The Caspian Region is considered to be the most important area in terms of energy resources after the Persian Gulf. The Caspian basin also has the third oil field in the world after the Persian Gulf and Siberia, being considered the last of the world's vast energy reservoir. Such large reserves lead to the desire to control, and the alliances and strategic games appeared very soon. The growing geopolitical and geoeconomic interest and also the competition of the great powers in exercising control and domination of the region, highlight the diversity of objective and subjective factors meant to highlight the issues, contradictions, competitions and the full of
color and diversified space. The Caspian basin can be an additional source of fuel and energy in the case when the oil extracted from the Persian Gulf is insufficient or becomes inaccessible because of a possible expanded conflict in the Middle East. The Western countries do not want to be vulnerable anymore by the dependence on Middle East oil. The Persian Gulf, which concentrates 70% of the world's oil reserves, remains an area crossed by terrorist attacks and anti-American sentiments. The inability of political and military control of the region generated an important growth of the price of the oil barrel. In these circumstances, to relieve the pressure by the need of oil on one hand, and on the other hand by the monopoly of a single major source of oil, the Western countries found in the Caspian countries the saving solution. In this context, the US have very clear purposes: to assure a massive presence of US oil companies in the ex-Soviet space around the Caspian Sea and gradually eliminate the Russian influence in the region. Currently, the Caspian Sea lies at the crossing energy interests of USA, Europe and more recently China, and this battle for supremacy in the competition overlaps with the competition between the riparian states at this sea - Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Iran.

At present it is difficult to answer the question who belongs to the Caspian Sea. The group of the five countries from Caspian Region is trying to establish the legal status of the Caspian Sea for over 20 years. Following the fourth summit of Caspian Sea countries in September, 2014 the leaders of Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have agreed to prohibit the military presence of third countries into the region, but have not yet understood the status of the Caspian Sea. Russia and Iran have been the countries that insisted most that in the final declaration from Astrakhan to be included the point according to which the military presence in the Caspian Sea to belong exclusively to riparian states Armed Forces. Russia has achieved its purpose, namely to keep apart the United States, which lately have increased their military presence in Central Asia. But it has not been reached a consensus on the status of the Caspian Sea because of Iran’s position. Tehran whishes that the riparian states to jointly exploit the sea's resources or to divide it into five equal economic zones, one for each country. In Astrakhan it has been however agreed, that each country should have control over a wide zone of 25 nautical miles, respectively an area statehood of 15 nautical miles, followed by a
zone of exclusive rights to exploit resources on a width of 10 nautical miles. The water delimitation beyond those areas will be further negotiated.

The main and most influential actors in the Caspian region currently are: Russia, Iran, USA, China and the EU. Each of these states pursues its own interest in this region, interest that is sometimes in competition or even in conflict with the interests of the other countries.

Russia maintains strong geostrategic interests in the area, which is a part of its historical sphere of influence. Russia's goals are to: safeguard the Russian territory from destabilizing factors potentially stemming from this region, protect its national population in the region, win more control over the production and transport of energy and to limit the influence of other powers in the region, as the US and China. Currently Russia has the supremacy in the Caspian Region. Russia's policy is very well defined, including in the energetic area. Anyway it is very clear the use of energy resources as a political weapon, being obvious that Russia has not only exercise control over energy sources (oil and gas) but also on transportation routes and mainly on markets. Russia also plays its chances in the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus. Chechnya is from this point of view the key point of the Russian oil pipelines, and a point of intersection of routes for natural gas coming from Russia and Central Asia. Oil reserves in Chechnya and Ingushetia are estimated at 60 million tonnes, enough to support Russian oil production for several years. It is important to note that all five riparian countries maintain naval forces on the sea, of which Russia has the strongest military presence of all.

Regarding Iran, this is an important state in the region, with a special geopolitical potential, given the cultural, linguistic, strategic, historical and energy aspects. It can get hegemony in the Caspian Region if its foreign policy acts to find spheres of influence upon the countries in the region. It holds a geopolitical weight and influence in the region potentially even higher than Russia, however on a longer term. Its geopolitical potential include important aspects measured over the other riparian countries under the cultural (with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), the economic (with the same three states) language (with Azerbaijan) and religious (with Azerbaijan) aspects.
As for the USA, the energy security is the central component of its national security. It’s engagement in the region is leaded by strategic and political objectives. The United States, driven by the need to reduce the energy dependence of Middle East and diversification of the resources, have oriented to the Caspian area. As the area was part of the Russian sphere of interest, the American involvement was economic, conducted by major oil companies. The US campaign to combat terrorism was a way to make their presence felt more time in Central and South Asia, thereby ensuring the control of energy corridors from the Caspian basin.

It’s involvement in the Caspian region dates back in the early 1990s, when it became interested in finding new sources of non-OPEC oil and the US realized it could reduce Russian and Iranian influence if it supported pipelines bypassing those countries (an example in this way is the US government's support for the BTC pipeline). The EU has been supported in getting Caspian gas for the Southern Gas Corridor.

In 2011, the US announced the ‘New Silk Road’ initiative, which some hope will promote a better regional economic and transit cooperation between South and Central Asia and this way to improve the stability in the region. However, some commentators are skeptical at the New Silk Road initiative, stating it is a re-packaging of existing projects.

As for the European Union, the geopolitics of it’s energy security is being seen through the dependence on Russia. In the context of the conflict with Ukraine, Russia still holds a relative control on the European energy markets, basically having captive several countries and making Europe dependent on its gas exports. It is discussed the desire and the need for Europe to break the energetic monopoly of Russia and to reduce the dependence on Russian gas, so that it may exist a unified reaction regarding the security for the Russian attacks, supporting in this purpose projects such as Nabucco (which aims at diversification the European Union's energy supply by building a pipeline from the Caspian region which would not pass through Russia). There are highlighted the divergences between the EU countries caused by each country having it’s own interests. It is subject to a detailed analysis the EU’s energy policy, which is gradually advancing towards the area of Community concern. Special attention was paid "EU’s energy strategy".
China has been for a long time energy self-sufficient, but as its economy has grown, it has grown also its demand for energy. In 1993 China became a net oil importer and in 2006, it became a net gas importer. In less than two decades, China became the world's largest energy consumer and by 2012 it imported 57% of its oil and, if it continues so, by 2020 it will rely on imports for 66% of its oil supply. China’s government became increasingly worried about the energy security and undertook many strategies. It encourages a larger oil and gas exploration and production, energy conservation, and also the promotion of renewable energies. Internationally it is focused on securing energy supply connections and transportation routes.

An important part of China's oil and LNG imports from the Middle East and Africa pass through the Strait of Malacca, which is under the US Navy control. Therefore, China fear that the US could stop oil and LNG shipments if of a conflict occurs between China and a US ally in the Pacific. Thereby, the Strait of Malacca is a strategic weakness for China. To cope with the ‘Malacca dilemma’, China is improved its naval capabilities, has focused on constructing overland pipelines, and has also increased its involvement in the Caspian region.

To better understand the dynamics of relations in this area it is necessary to look at some geographic and historical aspects. The Caspian region contains significant oil and gas reserves and is one of the world's oldest production areas. Over time, this sea has been known under about 70 names, this being an argument to support the fact that it has always been an important element in the geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic equations of the world. Since the 70s of the last century oil crisis have been triggered, demonstrating the economic vulnerability of the industrialized countries and their dependence on supply sources. For this reason, the access to energy areas and transport routes becomes the principal concern of several states.

The Caspian region is perhaps best described as a mosaic of people, across a complex, sometimes inaccessible geography and there is no easy way to export energy from this area. Geographically, the Caspian Sea is located at the border between Europe and Asia, having the Caucasus Mountains to the west. The most important energy-producing countries are landlocked, so they have to rely on the cooperation of the neighbor countries in order to assure the transport their energy to the market.
In the Caucasus there are multiple outbreaks of simultaneous conflicts, sometimes being them interdependent, and tensions in the area have implications not only on the stability of the area, but they concern and threatens the security of the West as well. The Caspian region seems to provide an important part of energy resources for future economic development and as long as this region remains unsecure, it will remain a certain concern about the access and the transport of it’s oil and gas. Many potential pipeline routes pass through unstable regions, as Afghanistan and parts of the Caucasus or Turkey, or through Iran- an unreliable and undesirable partner because of political reasons. Thus, without a diversified network of reliable access routes, the prospects for moving the oil from the ground to international markets are uncertain.

The news of higher gas prices and the threat that the Russian gas tap will be closed make us worry at the beginning of each winter. Real or a little dramatized, the threat of a energy crisis exist and the issue of a direct or indirect access to areas of the world where oil and natural gas reserves are still plentiful occupies a prominent place on the agenda of governments of all countries of the world. With gas crises of 2006 caused by Russia, led the European Union and national states to identify alternative sources of energy security, focusing on Caspian area.

In conclusion we can say that the Caspian region is not only an unexploited hydrocarbon reserve, but also a chessboard with many players. Taking into account that there is a deficit in the global energy market, it can be anticipated that the Caspian’s future production may contribute to the diversification of oil and gas supplies and to the global energy security, foreign investors and transnational companies being more active in the area. The West counts on helping to ensure that a conflict in the region does not impede the flow of oil and that a hostile country does not have monopoly over oil or regional pipelines, these being the most important interests in the area.

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