

GEOPOLITICAL LANDMARKS OF CENTRAL ASIAN AND CAUCASIAN STATES

THE CASPIAN AND THE CAUCASUS IN RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS: HISTORICAL ASPECTS

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The Caspian-Caucasian region has acquired a special geopolitical importance: in the past ten years no other region has attracted as much attention as the Caucasus because of the transportation lines that connect Europe and Asia and the shortest West-bound route for Caspian oil, the reserves of which are second only to the oil wealth of the Middle East. Its territory can be used as a strategic toehold for influencing its neighbors—Turkey, Iran, the Central Asian countries, and China.¹

This multiethnic region has developed into the epicenter of historic events and processes caused by the clash of local and global interests: Russia, the

United States, some of the West European countries, as well as Iran and Turkey have turned their attention to the Caucasus.

The Caspian, which is described as “the traditional zone of Russia’s national interests,” has become even more important. The Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation adopted in 2000 says: “Russia will insist on a status for the Caspian Sea which will allow the coastal states to cooperate on a mutually advantageous and just basis in using the region’s resources taking due account of the legal interests of all of them.”²

The part that belongs to the Russian Federation is its southernmost border territory used for eco-

¹ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, *Geopolitika Kaspiyskogo regiona*, Moscow, 2003, p. 43.

² See: *Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsii* [http://www.ipmb.ru/1_2.html], 12 December, 2004.

conomic and other contacts with the trans-Caucasus and with certain other countries across the Caspian Sea with its ice-free ports.

Today Russia and Iran border on new independent states on the Caspian shores—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—while Russia’s presence there and in the Caucasus is shrinking

under American pressure and the influence of Turkey, Iran, European states, the APR, and Middle East countries.

For many centuries Russia has been fighting to establish its influence in the Caspian Sea and drive away all other powers wishing to do the same.

Peter the Great’s March

Two hundred and seventy years have passed since Peter the Great marched on the Caucasus (his campaign went down to history as the Caspian, Persian, or Eastern), yet the stormy diplomatic and military events of the time still attract close attention in Russia, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. This interest is aroused by the historic importance of Russia’s foreign policy weight, which is obvious in the region under discussion.

Peter the Great’s march belongs to the history of several countries (Russia, Iran, and Turkey)³ and of the Caucasus. The region between the Black and the Caspian seas played an important role in the international policy of all the large powers: Russia never let its strategic and political importance out of its sight, while Iran and Turkey, in turn, never missed a chance to use the Caucasian factor in anti-Russian policies. Its favorable geographic location allowed the local peoples to maintain close ties with other nations and countries.

The relations between Russia and the Caucasus go far back into the past. Early in the 18th century when Russia became an empire, its first emperor Peter the Great displayed great interest in the Caucasus and the desire to reach the warm southern seas. This coincided with the Ottoman Empire’s military and political expansion to the Caucasus, while part of the Eastern Caucasus still belonged to Persia. Prominent statesman of that time Artemy Volynskiy, who was very familiar with the situation in the Caucasus, urged Peter the Great to fight for the Caspian provinces. The czar demonstrated a lot of wisdom when he said: “We will have to fight for the Caspian coast first in order to keep the Turks away from it.”⁴

Caught in the web of aggressive intentions of their mighty neighbors, the Caucasian feudal rulers had to rely on Russia, Turkey, or Iran to promote their own interests.

It was under Peter the Great that the Russian Empire acquired a vast program of political and economic policies in the Caspian and the Caucasus. Russia’s young yet rapidly developing industry needed raw material sources. The Caucasus could offer silk, cotton, wool, fabrics, wines, spices, jewelry, fruits, etc. Russia’s rulers craved for gold, silver, and other riches, which they hoped to find in the newly conquered lands.

Russia needed the Caspian regions for military-political reasons as well: its southeastern borders were too vulnerable, therefore the empire had to protect itself with a stretch of the Caspian coast.⁵ These considerations shifted Russia’s expansion from the West to the East: the Baltic region, Poland, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East. Its Caucasian plans were favorably accepted in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Daghestan, and elsewhere. The local peoples welcomed Russia’s increasing presence: they wanted Russia’s help in their struggle against Iranian and Turkish expansion.

³ See: V.P. Lystsov, *Persidskiy pokhod Petra I. 1722-1723*, Moscow, 1951, p. 87.

⁴ S.M. Soloviev, *Istoria Rossii s drevneyshikh vremen*, in 15 books, Moscow, 1963, Book IX, Vols. 17-18, Ch. 1, p. 372.

⁵ See: *Russkiy vestnik*, Vol. 68, 1867, p. 557.

After defeating Sweden and signing the Peace of Nystad in 1721, Peter the Great began preparing for the march on the Caucasus in earnest. The political context in the region and the Middle East was favorable. Artemy Volynskiy, the governor of Astrakhan, urged the emperor to start the march in 1722. Peter the Great decided to move in the summer so as to prevent Turkish interference and to join the Caucasian Caspian coast to Russia. On 15 May, 1722 the czar set off for Astrakhan to start his land and sea march, which took eighteen months to complete. This was how Russia's pressure in the Caucasus began.

On 18 July, 1722 Admiral Count Apraksin led the fleet from Astrakhan to the Caspian Sea. Three days before that Peter the Great issued a manifesto in the local languages to be dispatched to Tarki, Derbent, Shemakha, and Baku, in which he said that two subjects of the shah—Daud-bek and Surkhay Khan—had rebelled, captured Shemakha, and robbed Russian merchants, inflicting heavy losses on Russia and humiliating it as a great power.⁶

After two days at sea, Peter the Great and his navy arrived at the mouth of the Terek River, he ordered to move further on, to the mouth of the Sulak River. On 27 July, the army landed on the Agrakhanskiy Peninsula and started building a fortified camp. The land troops moving across the Astrakhan steppes went in the same direction. After crossing the Sulak, Peter entered Daghestan. Some of the Daghestani feudal lords, the Andereevskiy ruler among them, tried to resist. The Kostekovskiy and Aksai rulers and the Shamkhal of Tarki, however, hastened to assure Russia of their loyalty, while Shamkhal Adil-Girey demonstrated his benevolence. On 6 August, Peter the Great was welcomed with honor not far from Aksai: the Shamkhal of Tarki presented the Russian emperor with 1,600 bulls harnessed to carts, 150 bulls to be eaten by the Russian troops, as well as three Persian horses and a saddle inlaid with gold. Adil-Girey declared that while in the past he had been a loyal servant of the Russian czar, from that time on he would serve him "with more zeal" and offered his troops.

On 12 August, the Russian vanguard troops approached Tarki where the Shamkhal greeted them with bread and salt Russian-style. Peter camped five miles away from the town. The next day he paid a visit to the Shamkhal in his capital and walked in the nearby mountains accompanied by three platoons of dragoons. The Russian emperor visited an ancient tower and other monuments. The honors and the Shamkhal's loyalty produced a good impression on Peter.

Informed about Peter the Great's arrival in Daghestan, the Georgian and Armenian rulers also prepared to greet the czar. Georgian czar Vakhtang with his 40-thousand-strong army moved to Gāncā to wait for the Russian troops expected in Shirvan. There the two armies had to pool forces to beat off the Iranian and Turkish oppressors.

On 16 August, Peter moved the army from Tarki to Derbent, which turned out to be the key to the 1722 campaign. The troops entered the dominions of Sultan Makhmud of Utamysh. A reconnaissance Cossack group was attacked; after that the village of Utamysh with 500 houses was completely destroyed; 26 people were taken prisoner and put to death. After easily scattering the sultan's troops, Peter moved to the south. Akhmed Khan, the Utsmiy of Kaytag, and the rulers of Buinaksk assured the Russian czar of their loyalty. On 23 August, Russian land troops entered Derbent without striking a blow; the local people enthusiastically greeted the czar. A week later, on 30 August, the troops reached the Rubas River and founded a fortress with a potential garrison of 600. This was the southernmost point to which Peter the Great personally led his army.

Several days later, all the lands around Derbent recognized the rule of the Russian czar. He informed the Senate that "Russia was standing firmly in these lands." The loyalty of Naib of Derbent Imam Kuli and the peaceful surrender of the city were rewarded with the rank of Major General and a salary from the Russian coffers.⁷ It was in Derbent that Peter received the feudal rulers of Daghestan and other Caucasian regions. All of them, as well as the ordinary people of Baku, Shemakha, Salian, Resht, Tiflis, and Erevan, wanted to become Russian subjects.

⁶ See: *Russko-daghestanskie otnosheniya XVII-pervoy chetverti XVIII veka*, Makhachkala, 1958, p. 244.

⁷ See: S.M. Soloviev, op. cit., p. 369.

Czar of Kartli Vakhtang VI went to Gäncä. In his letter to Peter the Great he informed the Russian czar that he had come to join the Armenian and Azeri troops stationed there. The Gäncä and Karabakh volunteer detachments made up of Azeris and Armenians, together with Georgians, were ready for a march to join the Russian troops and move further on against the Turkish and Iranian conquerors.

For several reasons Peter had to cut short his Caucasian expedition: the Caspian army was underfed and needed more fodder; and there was the threat of another war with Sweden, which greatly troubled the Russians. On 29 August, the military council in Derbent decided to cut the march short; part of the army had to go back to Russia. Garrisons were left behind in the newly acquired dominions. On 7 September, Peter set off for Astrakhan; a garrison was stationed in Tarki, while a fortress called the Holy Cross was built up on the Sulak River on royal orders. It was commanded by Colonel Soymonov.

The Caspian March of 1722 earned Russia the Agrakhanskiy Peninsula, the mouths of the rivers Sulak and Agrakhani (where the Holy Cross fortress was built) and the Caspian coast of Daghestan with Derbent. These achievements and joining Baku and the Caspian coast of Azerbaijan to Russia greatly strengthened the positions of those who favored closer relations with Russia in the Northern Caucasus. The Kabardins, for example, not only welcomed Russia's success in the Caspian region, but also helped it as much as they could. Two princes, Elmurza of Cherkassk (the younger brother of Alexander Bekovich) and Aslanbek Kelemetov brought their detachments to the Russian camp as soon as the Russians had landed in Daghestan. They fought together with Peter. A fortress, which the Kabardins petitioned for through Artemy Volynskiy, was built on royal orders on the Sulak River in Daghestan.

The very fact that Russian troops entered the Northern Caucasus greatly affected relations with the Vaynakhs. In the fall, just before he was ready to leave the Caucasus, Peter the Great visited the area now occupied by Chechnia and Ingushetia, where he inspected the silk-making factory of Safar Vassiliev (who received the land on which the factory stood back in 1718 from the Russian czar). Peter also went to the villages of the Grebenskie Cossacks and to the Bragun warm waters.

The march added vigor to the liberation struggle of the trans-Caucasian peoples against the Turkish and Persian oppressors. A popular uprising under the outstanding Armenian military leader David-bek flared up in Karabakh and Siunike, while the liberation movement itself merged with the rising movement for unification with Russia in the 18th century.⁸ Vakhtang VI played a prominent role in pooling the forces of the trans-Caucasian nations. Russia, in turn, did not abandon its plans in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Turkey watched Russia with mounting concern; to arouse anti-Russian sentiments among the mountain people, it tried to bribe or intimidate them. Religion was its most powerful tool for setting the Muslims and Christians against each other. On their way to the Caspian shores, its troops moved toward the Daghestani border. The Crimean khans and Turkish sultans wanted to conquer Shirvan, Daghestan, and Kabarda. In his instructions to Russian resident Nekliuev, Peter the Great firmly stated that Russia's interests "will not allow any other power, no matter which, to establish itself in the Caspian."

The very real Turkish threat forced the Russian emperor to take certain diplomatic steps and plan a military campaign for 1723. The Russian Caspian flotilla in Astrakhan, the Russian naval Caspian base, was strengthened. The fortresses of the Holy Cross and Derbent in Daghestan were fortified to protect Russian territorial acquisitions there. (Derbent received two infantry battalions and 20 canons.) In 1723, a naval force under General M. Matiushkin occupied Baku, a measure to which the emperor attached great importance.⁹

England and France, likewise, were apprehensive of Russia's conquests in the Caucasus. They were actively encouraging Turkey to declare war on Russia. In the summer of 1723, the Ottoman troops launched

⁸ See: *Istoria Azerbajjana*, Vol. 1, Baku, 1958, p. 293.

⁹ See: *Ibid.*, p. 304.

their trans-Caucasian campaign; they first attacked Eastern Georgia, the most independent and anti-Turkish part of the region. Vakhtang VI had to return to Kartli; the Turks captured Tbilisi; Vakhtang was forced to emigrate to Russia.

From Georgia, the Turks moved on to Karabakh to be met with strong resistance from the Azeris and Armenians. Turkey mainly wanted to prevent Russia from striking root in the trans-Caucasus. After failing in Karabakh, the Turks stationed in Erzurum moved to Eastern Armenia.

Georgians, Azeris, Armenians and Daghestanis put up stiff resistance to the Ottoman invasion of the Caucasus accompanied by unheard-of cruelty. The local people had the support of Russia and its troops stationed in the region. Turkey tried in vain to scare Russia with a threat of a war to force it to abandon its Caucasian dominions.

The St. Petersburg Treaty

In September 1723, Russia and Persia signed a treaty in Petersburg on the suggestion of the Shah of Iran who was scared by the Turkish invasion of the Caucasus. Under the treaty, the shah acknowledged Russia's acquisitions along the Caspian coast of the Caucasus.¹⁰ In this way Shah Takhmasp admitted that several territories (including the cities of Derbent, Baku, Gilian, Mazandaran, Astrabad, and other mainly silk-producing centers) "belonged to Russia for all times."

Russia, in turn, never abandoned its trans-Caucasian plans. This was clearly stated in a letter Peter the Great addressed to the supporters of pro-Russian orientation in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan: "I shall never abandon a cause once I have started it." In response to Czar Vakhtang's repeated requests for help Peter wrote: "When we capture Baku and strengthen our positions along the Caspian coast we shall send our troops to help him in the numbers needed. We must first entrench ourselves on the Caspian coast—without that we shall accomplish nothing."¹¹

The treaty with Persia undermined Turkey's plans to invade the Caucasus—this was very important to Russia. The document, which formalized the military union between the two states, was an answer to the Ottoman invasion of Persia which started in the summer of 1723. The Caucasus, an area where the interests of three powers clashed, remained the main bone of contention between Russia and Turkey. Russia, which was fighting in the Caucasus against its rivals supported by strong West European powers (primarily England and France), was in a much more favorable position. It relied on its own might and was supported by most of the local people. The Turkish sultans managed, from time to time, to exploit the Muslim factor. In the spring of 1723, the Erzurum pasha invaded Georgia and destroyed Kartli and Kakheti.

After capturing Tbilisi, the Turkish army moved on to Gāncā, Shemakha, and Baku. The people of the Azerbaijanian cities, together with Armenians, moved against the invaders arms in hand.

The Istanbul Treaty

The struggle over the Caspian dominions was aggravated as the Turkish army moved forward. Russia's interests were endangered, yet the country, which had just finished waging a war with Sweden, could not enter another war. It needed peace with Turkey. Under English and French pressure, however, the peace talks dragged on for a long time, until on 2 June, 1724 they ended in a treaty signed in Istanbul (Constantinople). Russia kept the Caspian provinces in Daghestan and Azerbaijan, while Turkey received all the other lands in Daghestan and Azerbaijan, as well as Georgia and Armenia.

¹⁰ See: R.M. Magomedov, *Rossia i Daghestan*, Makhachkala, 1987, p. 58; *Istoria Azerbajana*, Vol. 1, p. 302.

¹¹ *Istoria Azerbajana*, Vol. 1, p. 302.

The very fact that the coastal areas were joined to Russia intensified the movement for joining Russia in all other parts of the Caucasus. The pro-Russian orientation among the local people became even stronger.

To a certain extent the Istanbul Treaty was Russia's diplomatic success. At the same time, its position in the Caspian area remained precarious as long as Turkey controlled certain trans-Caucasian territories (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in particular, minus coastal strips). While the diplomats continued talking, Turkey was moving its troops further into Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Turkish domination of Eastern Georgia caused great strife among the local people, who never surrendered to it without a fight.

The military-political situation in the region was greatly affected by the presence of Russian troops in Derbent, Baku, and Salian and of its fleet in the Caspian Sea. Aware of this, and having experienced the staunchness of the local people (Azeris, Armenians, Georgians, Daghestanis, and others), the Turkish invaders eased their pressure and slowed down their onslaught. In their struggle against the Ottoman Empire the Caucasian peoples stood together; their mutual assistance made them stronger. The peoples of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Daghestan, etc. pinned their hopes of liberation from the Turkish and Persian oppressors on Russia; they expressed this hope in numerous letters they sent to the Russian authorities. During Peter the Great's Caspian campaign, Georgians and Armenians came to settle on the Caspian shores.¹²

The Imeretian Kingdom was also seeking relations with Russia. In 1724, Czar Alexander V sent a letter to Captain Georgy Dadiani, who was on Russian service, with a request to ask the royal court to establish Russia's protectorate over his country in order to help him drive the Turks from Georgia.

This did not stop Turkey, which continued its aggressive policies: its army was conquering Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijanian towns and villages. The Turks treated the local people cruelly, many of them were taken prisoner, villages were burned down. Resistance was strong everywhere, the Turks paid for Tebriz with a heavy toll of human lives; in December 1725, they captured Ardebil. The regime of the Turkish sultans in the trans-Caucasus was cruel, the taxes and dues were heavy. The Christians were treated with particular cruelty and were persecuted and humiliated. The popular masses of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Southern Daghestan hated the aggressors; an anti-Turkish movement engulfed the region.

All the Daghestani rulers, Surkhay-Khan of Kazikumukh in particular, wanted closer ties with Russia; the rulers of Tabasaran Rustam-bek-qadi and Maisum Magomed were Russian subjects. In 1727, on a suggestion by the Utsmiy of Kaytag, the Avar khan came to the camp at the Holy Cross fortress to take an oath of allegiance to Russia. The Andi people became Russian subjects in 1731. By that time Russia controlled a large part of Daghestan.

Russia was sealing its influence in the Caucasus and the Caspian area by building the Holy Cross fortress, fortifying Derbent, Baku, and Resht, and by establishing its protectorate over Kabarda. It controlled the maritime trade routes and the key ports, increased its influence in Daghestan and Kabarda, kept the Crimean Tartars away from the Caspian, and stood opposed to Turkish expansion toward its dominions along the seacoast.

At the same time, the Ottoman rule over the lands that used to be the Persian sphere of control and the Ottoman Empire's advance toward the Caspian threatened Russia's interests. It had to take diplomatic and military measures to strengthen its positions in the threatened territories; in particular, more troops and ammunition were sent to Derbent and Baku.

Russia was fighting for the Caspian and for new territories because its ruling classes needed them. The Caspian territories were entrusted to Prince Vassili Dolgorukov, who was the military, as well as civilian ruler at one and the same time. In some cities Russian administrative structures were created, in others, old rulers (naibs and sultans) remained in power. The Russian government wanted to turn the area into a source of raw materials for the Russian manufacturing industry.

¹² See: P.G. Butkov, *Materialy dlia novoy istorii Kavkaza s 1722 po 1803 g.*, Part I, St. Petersburg, 1869, p. 44.

Javad, Salian, Shabran, Mushkur and others, which fell into Russian possession, were attractive politically and economically. Academician P. Butkov described the newly acquired lands and towns in the following way: "These lands were rich in grain, cattle, mulberry tree orchards, tobacco, and vineyards."¹³ Even before the Caspian campaign, Peter the Great repeatedly pointed out to the Astrakhan governor that the natural riches of the Eastern Caucasus should be carefully investigated. Later the emperor issued decrees about developing the natural wealth of this area, and encouraged all measures designed to develop sericulture and cotton growing, increase oil production, and organize fishing in rivers and the sea. Specialists in gold, silver, copper, iron and other ores came to Daghestan and Azerbaijan from Russia to study the local deposits.

Despite the colonial designs of the imperial government, the very fact of joining Russia was an important event in the history of the local peoples. The Caspian area acquired immense possibilities for its social and economic development, while the Azeris, Armenians, Georgians, and Daghestanis gained the hope of finally liberating themselves from the Turkish sultans and Persian shahs. For several reasons this hope remained unfulfilled during Peter the Great's Caspian campaign. At that time, the Russian Empire was undoubtedly hoping to reach the Indian Ocean shores, which meant that it planned to conquer not only the Caucasus and Central Asia, but also to spread its influence to Mesopotamia, Iran, and Western Asia, restore Christian Orthodox rule in the Balkans and Constantinople, and reach the Mediterranean.

The Military-Political Results of the Caspian Campaign

Peter the Great's march made the southeastern lands of his empire safer; it added vigor to the liberation movements of the trans-Caucasian peoples and saved Daghestan from the danger of being conquered by Turkey; it created an economic upsurge along the sea coast and raised the cultural level of those who lived there. The ties between the Caucasian peoples and Russia became stronger.

Objectively, Russia's strategic interests and its struggle against the Persian and Turkish influence in the region coincided with the aims of the liberation struggle of the peoples of Daghestan and other Caucasian regions, and helped them draw closer to Russia.

Russia was very much concerned with the task of preserving and strengthening its economic and military-political presence in the Northern Caucasus. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin has pointed out: "We should not forget that the Northern Caucasus is one of the key strategic regions of Russia." Today, many aims of Russia's Caspian and Caucasian policies are associated with Daghestan. Moscow is guided by the country's interests when it concentrates on the following issues: first, military and political security, which Russia associates with settling all conflicts in the Caucasus. The Russian Federation regards the militarization of other Caspian states and the military-political presence of third countries in the region as a threat to its own security. Second, ecological safety, which Russia is concerned about more than its neighbors: the part of the sea on its shores plays an important role in reproducing bioresources. Transportation and energy routes are another issue: they are used to promote Russia's foreign economic interests, that is, to deliver Caspian energy fuels to Europe, China, the APR countries, etc.

Being aware of Russia's historical responsibility for the future of the nations that used to be part of the Russian Empire, the Russian leaders should pursue a policy that meets the interests of Russia and the local peoples. Certain powers want Russia to be perpetually bogged down in never-ending conflicts on its territory in order to instill the idea among the local people of detaching themselves from the Russian Federation.

¹³ Ibid., p. 56.

Any attempts to drive a wedge of dissent between the Caucasian nations and countries and between the Caucasus and Russia will inevitably heap disaster on all our heads.

Russia must bear responsibility for the continued unity of its peoples and for the territorial integrity of its republics and other territories.