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# The Caspian Five and the Arctic Five – Critical similarities

***Abstract***

*The world's attention remains focused on Ukraine, with Crimea portrayed as its hotbed. No wonder, since the peninsula is an absolutely pivotal part of the Black Sea theatre, with implications for the very survival of the Black Sea fleet as regards both Russia and Ukraine. The greater context of this call of 'confrontational nostalgia' blows the dust off the old chapters of history books, full of overt and covert struggles between Atlantic-central Europe (lately aided by the US) and Russophone Europe for influence and strategic depth extension over eastern Europe. However, there are two other vital theatres for these same protagonists, both remaining under-reported and less elaborated. The author brings a contrasting and comparative account of both the Caspian and the Arctic, claiming that both water plateaus are of utmost geopolitical as well as geo-economic (ecology, energy, transport) importance. The Caspian and the Arctic will have a considerable influence on the passions and imperatives of future mega geopolitical strategies – far more than the Black Sea could ever have had.*

***Keywords:*** *geopolitics, natural resources, climate change, global security*

## Between the inner lake and the open sea

The rapid melting of the polar caps has unexpectedly turned distanced and dim economic possibilities into viable geo-economic and geopolitical probabilities, and thus it was also with the unexpected and fast meltdown of Russia's historic empire – the Soviet Union. Once considered as the Russian 'inner lake', the Caspian presented itself as an open/high sea of opportunities literally overnight – not only for the (new, and increased number of) states which border it, but also for a belt of (new and old) neighbouring, and other interested (overseas) states.

The interests of external players range from the symbolic or, rather, the rhetorical to the global geopolitical; from an antagonising political conditionality and constraint to a pragmatic trade-off between (the inflicting pain of) political influence and energy supply gain. Major consumers, such as China, India and the European Union (EU), are additionally driven by their own energy imperatives: to improve energy security (including the reduction of external dependencies) as well as to diversify supplies, modes and forms in the long-run.

On the promise of allegedly vast oil and natural gas resources (most of which are untapped), the Caspian is witnessing a 'new grand game' – the struggle for domination and influence over the region and its resources, as well as the transportation routes.

Notably, the Caspian is a large, landlocked water plateau without any connection to outer water systems. Moreover, three out of the five states that landlock the Caspian are themselves landlocked: (the former Soviet republics of) Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have no direct access to any international waters. That means that pipelines remain the only mode for the transportation and delivery of carbon fuels, thus creating yet another segment for competition as well as a source of regional tension as these three states depend on their neighbours for export routes.

Ultimately, due to both the unresolved legal status of the Caspian Basin, as well as the number of political and territorial disputes within the Caucasus and on the Caspian, numerous new pipeline constructions and expansion projects have been proposed but, so far, have not been operationalised. For the EU, the most important is the Nabucco pipeline which, although not fully guaranteed, serves as the hope of a reduced dependence on Russia.

The following text therefore considers the geopolitical, legal and economic features (including energy security for the final end-user, supplier and transit countries) of the Caspian theatre, as well as the complex interplays and the possible future outlook.

To explain the long-lasting Russian presence on the Caspian and Russia's continuing interest in the region, two factors interplay: geopolitical; and geo-economic.

Ever since Peter the Great, the Russian geopolitical imperative has been to extend its strategic depth. This has, naturally, necessitated ensuring the security of the south-west and southern flanks of the Empire. Such a security imperative has brought about bitter struggles for Russia over the domination of what is a huge theatre: the eastern and central Balkans; the Black Sea; the Caucasus; and the Caspian Basin. Russia has been contested here by the Habsburg empire, by the Ottomans, by Iran (and, after the collapse of the Ottomans, by the Britons) throughout pre-modern and modern times.

Even a cursory glance at the map of western and south-western Russia will be self-explanatory in showing the geo-strategic imperative; the low-lying areas of Russia are unprotectable without dominating the line connecting the mountain chains of the Caucasus, the Carpathians and *Kopet Dag*, along with the Black and Caspian Seas. Historically, the main fight of Russia has been with the Ottomans over this line. When the Ottomans were eliminated from the historic scene, it was Britain on the Indian subcontinent and in Iran as the main contesting party – which, eventually, led to an effective split of the Basin into two spheres of influence: British; and Russian.

## The Caspian water plateau – a unique basin

The Caspian[1] is the world's largest enclosed, or landlocked, body of (salt) water – approximately the size of Germany and the Netherlands combined. Geographical literature refers to this water plateau as a sea, or the world's largest lake, covering an area of 386 400 km² (a total length of 1 200 km from north to south; and a width ranging from a minimum of 196 km to a maximum of 435 km), with a mean depth of about 170 metres (the maximum depth in the south is 1 025 meters). At present, the Caspian water line is some 28 metres below sea level (the median measure in the first decade of the

1 Azerbaijani: *Xəzər dənizi*; Persian: دریای خزر or دریـای مازنـــدران; Russian: Каспийское море; Kazakh: Каспий теңізі; Turkmen: Hazar deňzi.

21st century).[2] The total Caspian coastline measures nearly 7 000 km, shared between the five bordering states.

**Figure 1 – The Caspian Sea**


*Sources: WorldAtlas (n.d.a.), n.p.a*

The very legal status of this unique body of water is still unsolved: sea or lake? International law makes a difference between lakes and seas, so the Caspian should be referred to as a water plateau or the Caspian Basin. Interestingly enough, the Caspian is, indeed, both sea and lake: the northern portions of the Caspian display the characteristics of a freshwater lake (due to the influx of the largest European river – the Volga – as well as the river Ural and other, relatively smaller, river systems from Russia's north); in the southern portions, where the waters are considerably deeper but where there are no major river inflows, the salinity of the water is evident and the Caspian appears as a sea.[3]

2 The Caspian Basin records the gradual and cyclical water level variations that are basically synchronised with the volume discharge of the Volga river system and co-related to the complex North Atlantic oscillations (the amount of North Atlantic depressions that reach the interior of the Eurasian land mass).

3 The median salinity of the Caspian is approximately one-third that of the average applying to oceanic waters.

The geomorphology of the Caspian is unique and many authors have referred to the formation similarities between the Black Sea and the Caspian and Aral Seas, as well as their interconnectivity back to the Pleistocene. Most probably, some 5.5 million years ago, two factors landlocked the Caspian: the tectonic uplift of the Basin; and the dramatic fall in the earth's oceanic levels, which trapped the Caspian on its present shores.

Due to its unique formation and present water composition variations, the Caspian hosts rare biodiversity and many endemic species of flora and fauna (presently, these are threatened by the rising exploration and exploitation of the vast oil and gas reserves).

## The Arctic in comparison

Besides the two polar regions encircling the geographic and magnetic poles of the planet being constituted of permafrost (permanently frozen land), nearly everything else is different between them; morphological; climatic; anthropo-biological; and their political and legal standing. The southern polar region, Antarctica, is governed by a treaty which is fully accepted by the entire international community (including all the neighbouring and interested states), although this has a limited timeline (fifty years). On the contrary, in the north, in the Arctic, the set-up of the special legal framework is still under discussion. The vast perennial ice sheets are melting, due to current levels of global warming – a clear environmental threat, but also an economic opportunity (opening alternative shipping routes as well as access to the large ecological and mineral deposits at hand).

The question arises as to when the absence of a definite legal setting in the Arctic, and the increased focus on the national (geo-economic and geopolitical) interests of the circumpolar states, might trigger border tensions, domestic unrest and open armed conflict and, hence, endanger global security.

Among the Five there are many: two are P5 members, both being (former) superpowers; four are NATO members facing Russia on the other edge, three European and two American; one is in the EU; three are in the G8; and all of them are OSCE members. Is change on the horizon or can the maintenance of the *status quo* in the Arctic and Antarctica preserve the power balance?

This section provides a brief geopolitical overview of the Arctic and Antarctica, including their characteristics and environmental factors.

The Arctic is one of the world's regions most affected by climate change: average temperatures are rising twice as fast as at any other spot on the planet. The perennial ice sheets are melting with unexpected speed, coupled with an ever-shorter winter snow season. With the shrinking snow-cover area (as a result of de-glaciation), less sunlight is being refracted back into the atmosphere – a pattern that further accelerates the rise in temperature (due to increased sun radiation and absorption by a less refractable and more absorptive, dark-coloured ocean). The World Meteorological Organization and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change expect an increase in temperatures of about 6 to 7°C in the course of this century (surely with some microclimatic variances). There is no scientific consensus on the cause/s, but the effects are undisputed – the Arctic (being more vulnerable than any other region on earth) is responding rather fast to climate change. The thinned and holed ozone layer will further accelerate warming in this area.

In addition to the polar caps being the main stabilisers and regulators of the plant's climate (across all weather patterns), they also constitute the biggest reserves of fresh water. Through the rapid de-glaciation of Greenland and the Antarctic, and the melting of the Arctic ice sheets, a spill of fresh water is being released which is seriously affecting oceanic volumes (through a rise in sea levels), their temperatures and their density and salinity which, finally, through the oceanic conveyor belt, affects the oceans' circulation system and consequently the climate across the globe. It remains unclear what sort, severity and frequency of consequences this might have for Europe's climate and general weather conditions. The future scenarios range from a substantial warming (coupled with severe droughts and extreme weather conditions), up to a subsequent cooling.

Another consequence affecting the Arctic is the thawing of the permafrost. Through the thawing of the soil, methane that has been trapped for centuries is being released into the atmosphere, which further contributes to the greenhouse gas effect. In addition to the dangerous release of methane, the very defrosting of the permafrost will cause the destruction of buildings and of communications infrastructure, such as roads and airports, as well as deviations in industrial facilities and oil/gas pipelines within the Arctic Circle. Flora and fauna will definitely undergo significant changes. Oceanic and terrestrial species will move further north, some of them already under stress of extinction as their natural habitats of vegetation zones are affected, too.

The Arctic region is experiencing profound change and has to face severe challenges which are felt far beyond its polar parameters. Climate change in polar regions, and the subsequent geopolitical adjustments to meet them, are expected to be among the largest and most rapid of any region on Earth. They will undeniably cause major physical, ecological, socio-economic (including in transportation and distribution channels), socio-economic and political-military shifts which will be focused on, but not limited to, the Arctic theatre.

The Arctic (in contrast to Antarctica and the same as the Caspian) is not subject to any specific international legal provisions. The only exception is the island of Svalbard which has (although imperfect) a clearly-defined, restraining legal framework (which looks a little like the Antarctic Treaty System). The Five circumpolar states of the Arctic have the desire and the legal opportunity (through the UNCLOS-stipulated machinery of the Commission on the Limits of Continental Shelf) to lodge territorial claims over the Arctic. That is something that none of the Five would like to see changed for a new, restraining international instrument whose scope would be negotiated by a large number of states beyond the polar parameter.

Out of the twelve original parties to the Antarctic Treaty, three are among the Arctic Five (Norway, Russia/Soviet Union and the US). Out of the Arctic Five, we can consider only three to be real polar states. Irrespective of the size, might and degree of technological advancement, no country can close a specific polar-knowledge gap within a few decades: it took Denmark, Norway and Russia several centuries to master the ice.

The US portrays itself as a 'fish of the high seas' – a supreme ruler of the world oceans – but it is primarily a 'fish of warm seas'. The US suffers from a territorial discontinuity with Alaska and, after all, Alaska provides a relatively modest share of

the Arctic theatre. The US presence in Antarctica is less substantive and more symbolic – to confirm prestige and observe the activities of the others. Likewise, the main Arctic concern for the US is to deter Russia – for the time being, there is no indication of a bolder Arctic presence. Finally, by not ratifying UNCLOS, the US cannot lodge a claim, but also (equally, if not more importantly) it cannot decide on the claims of others.

Canada, for its part, is neither a typical polar state nor a considerable naval power. Its Arctic border, its second longest, is, thus far, more of a burden than an advantage for the government in Ottawa. Canada is one of the most disproportionate states: a huge territory with a tiny population centred at the far south of the country – in contrast to the exposed, unexplored and literally empty central and northern territories. Long green and blue borders, as well as a lack of substantive Arctic expertise, will keep the US close to Canada in their shared security and geo-economic considerations, but still not without sources of friction.

If the US is a 'fish of warm seas', than Denmark and Norway are 'fish of cold seas' and Russia is a 'polar bear of permafrost'. Russia clearly has a very strong position since it possesses not only the longest Arctic coastline but also holds a long history of presence in the Arctic. Traditionally, the high north has been a constant geopolitical imperative since the times of Peter the Great. A parallel and well-established geo-economic drive is obtaining a new vigour under the Putin and Medvedev administrations. The bold (and sometimes noisy) Russian policy on the Arctic is another signal that the Federation is not going to disappear into the second rank of global politics and economy but will increase its (non-territorial) leverage and geopolitical projections as a major energy supplier of the world throughout the 21st century. It is hard to imagine that any relevant Arctic issue will be resolved (even discussed) without an explicit Russian consent.

Norway, a small state with a large pool of historical knowledge and advanced technologies, is a loner in the political environment: a nation between the EU and the Russian Federation; and a key northern flank NATO member. It takes a friendly, but firm position in international relations and Arctic matters. Its close proximity, coupled with the unresolved Arctic territorial disputes and lucrative economic prospects of joint ventures, will keep Russia and Norway out of an open confrontational course.

Canada's neighbour Greenland connects the EU with the Arctic. The world's largest island and its tiny population will be confronted with environmental, economic and political challenges in forthcoming decades. Greenland's road-map is towards gradual but decisive independence, less home-grown but more induced from Denmark. However, at the moment, Greenland is still highly dependent on Danish subsidies, including diplomatic ones. It is still the Danish signature that retains the biggest NATO Arctic base on Greenland soil.

## The inner circle – similarities

The so-called 'inner circle' of the Caspian Basin consists of the five states which border it – namely: Russia; Iran; Azerbaijan; Kazakhstan; and Turkmenistan – sharing the common coastline.

However, the Arctic and the Caspian, as much as they are geographically distant as well as different by their distinctive geomorphologies and hydrologies, also have several critical similarities.

Both theatres are grand bodies of water surrounded by five states (meaning that both are water surrounded by landmass; whereas Antarctica represents a landmass surrounded by water). Both have huge and largely unexplored natural resources and a marine ecology. Both the Arctic and the Caspian have numerous territorial disputes and are of absolute geopolitical importance for their respective bordering states and well beyond. Finally, both theatres also have an unresolved legal status – drifting between an external quest for the creation of a special international regime and the existing system of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Ergo, in both theatres, the dynamic of the border states displays the following characteristics:

1. dismissive: eroding the efforts of the international community or external interested parties towards the creation of an Antarctica-like treaty (by keeping the UNCLOS reference)
2. assertive: maximising the shares of the spoils of partition – extending the Exclusive Economic Zone and continental shelf so as to divide most, if not the entire, body of water only among the five
3. reconciliatory: preventing any direct confrontation among the border states over the spoils – resolving the claims without arbitration of other parties (preferably the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf).

However, one of the most important differentiating elements between the two theatres is the composition of the border states. We can consider the constellation of the Arctic Five as symmetric – each of the Five has open sea access (since the Arctic itself has a wide connection with the oceanic systems of the Atlantic and the Pacific). In contrast, the Caspian Five are of asymmetric constellation. The Caspian Five could be roughly divided into two: the old/traditional two (Russia and Iran); and the three newcomers (Azerbaijan; Kazakhstan; and Turkmenistan). This division corresponds also with the following characteristic: only Iran and Russia have open sea access, since the other three countries are as landlocked as is the Caspian itself.

Like no other country, Persia proper is uniquely situated by connecting the Euro-Mediterranean and the middle east and north Africa with the central, south and east Asian landmass. Additionally, it solely bridges the two key Euro-Asian energy plateaus: the Gulf; and the Caspian Sea. This gives Iran an absolutely pivotal geopolitical and geo-economic position as regards the wider region – an opportunity but also a potential exposure. It is no wonder that Teheran needs Moscow for the survival of its own regime, since the impressive US physical presence in the Gulf represents a double threat to Iran – both geopolitically and geo-economically.

## Conclusion

Clearly, no instrument comparable to the Antarctic Treaty System will be established in the Arctic, even if there are several advocates demanding it. Each and every one of the Arctic Five will continue to keep any external party far away from substantive participation in polar matters. However, it is not a guarantee of frictionless relations

between the Five: the North Pole was the most militarised region of the world at the peak of the Cold War (and still holds a huge military arsenal); while, at the same time, the South Pole was (and still is) the only de-militarised continent on the planet.

Equally, a sudden change in the current legal regime in Antarctica is very unlikely.

The Arctic and Caspian regions will try to preserve their *de facto* regimes – i.e. without major external interferences, and as long as their fragile equilibrium remains. Further on, the South Pole is far from the prime centres of world gravity: the US; the EU; Russia; and Japan – all four are situated well in the northern hemisphere, close to the Arctic and some connected by pipelines with Caspian.

The Polar Regions, although inhabitable, with harsh and hostile weather conditions, and distant from any prominent centre of human activity, will certainly have a major influence on climatic and environmental, socio-economic, political-military and overall security matters throughout the 21st century. Therefore, they require a close consideration, as well as careful and constant observation.