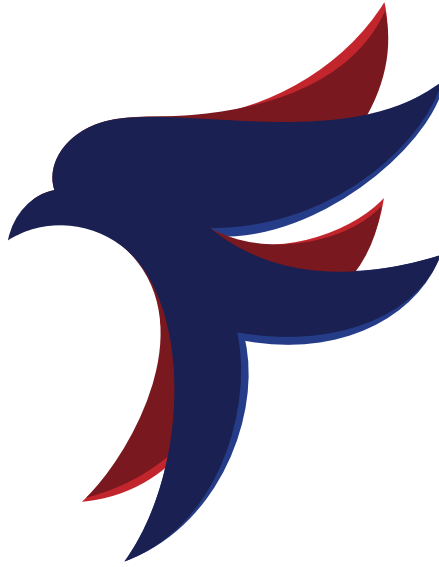




RUSSIA'S SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Nikolas K. Gvosdev





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Author: Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Eurasia Program Leadership

Director: Chris Miller

Deputy Director: Maia Otashvili

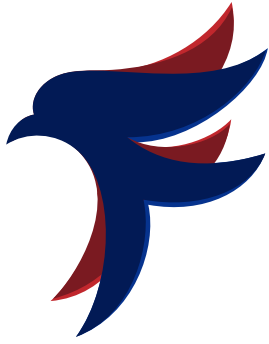
Edited by: Thomas J. Shattuck

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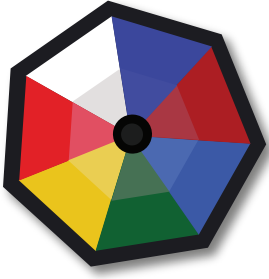
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



NIKOLAS GVOSDEV is a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program. He is Professor of National Security Affairs, holding the Captain Jerome E. Levy Chair in Economic Geography and National Security at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He was formerly the Editor of *The National Interest* magazine and a Senior Fellow at The Nixon Center in Washington, D.C. Gvosdev received his doctorate from St Antony's College, Oxford University, where he studied on a Rhodes Scholarship. A frequent commentator on Russian and Eurasian affairs, his work has appeared in such outlets as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Financial Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Orbis*, and he has appeared as a commentator on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, National Public Radio, and BBC. He is the co-author of *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: The Rise of an Incidental Superpower*, and the co-author of *Russian Foreign Policy: Vectors, Sectors and Interests*.

RUSSIA'S SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian Federation is pursuing an active and wide-ranging strategy to reassert and strengthen its dominant position in the greater Black Sea region, which the Kremlin believes is critical for the restoration of Russia's great power status. Consolidation of the Russian position in this region will establish and enhance the military, political, and economic foundations of Russia's position as a great power. Throughout the "four basins" of this region (Caspian, Black, Eastern Mediterranean, and Persian Gulf), Moscow aims to make itself the indispensable partner for settling conflicts and constructing and maintaining regional security and economic arrangements. The Russian approach has three main prongs. First, the Russia-Republic of Azerbaijan relationship is the new template for how Russia plans to conduct its relations with the countries of the Black Sea, in place of the confrontational approach that has characterized the Russia-Georgia and Russia-Ukraine relationships. Second, the Caspian Convention—successfully concluded after years of deadlock when Russia accepted compromises with its neighbors in return for keeping outside powers out of the process—provides a model for Russian approaches in other parts of the region. Third, Russia seeks to export these approaches to other parts of the greater Black Sea region, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf.

HOMING IN ON THE GREATER BLACK SEA REGION

For the last several years, the Russian Federation has taken steps to secure its position as the arbiter of the greater Black Sea region.¹ By using the Black Sea region, which unites the Balkans and Asia Minor with the Caucasian/Caspian zone (or what is sometimes described as the Mediterranean-Black-Caspian axis), as a springboard, Russia can project power beyond its immediate surroundings—into the Middle East, Southern Europe, and the Mediterranean—and strengthen its reemergence as a great power at the global level. For purposes of this study, the greater Black Sea area is defined as encompassing the Caucasus, especially the importance of the Caspian Sea basin as part of this area; Ukraine and the Balkans; and the northern Middle East, not simply the Republic of Turkey, but also connected countries such as Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Iraq, and Syrian Arab Republic. The author shares the assessment of George Friedman that, in looking at this area of the world, “It is essential to think in terms of a coherent center of gravity of operations. . . . It is increasingly clear that that center is the Black Sea.”² This greater Black Sea zone is what Amur Hajiyevev, director of the Modern Turkey Study Center at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, labels as “the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region with the adjacent zones of Central Asia, the Middle East and the Balkans.”³

Western attention has tended to focus on Russian moves in the Baltic basin and the prevailing assumption remains that Moscow devotes a

good deal of its attention and focus to extending its influence in Central Europe. At the same time, Russian activity in the greater Black Sea region often has flown under the radar. As a result, we tend

*to overweight the importance of the Baltic littoral to Russian policy. Poll U.S. experts and at the top of any risk prediction for 2019 will be the threat of a Russian incursion into the Baltic states—and the importance of continued efforts to reinforce [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s] north-eastern frontier as a result. At the same time, bureaucratic lines drawn both for the State and Defense Departments detach much of Central Asia and assign it, either to be grouped together with India and Pakistan (for State) or with the Arab world and Iran (in the case of the Pentagon). In both cases, much of the Eurasian core is relegated to second-tier status in terms of U.S. attention and priorities.*⁴

In reality, however, as Anna Mikulska and Robert Hamilton from the Foreign Policy Research Institute point out, “There is nothing in Russia’s post-Soviet history pointing to a desire for direct military intervention in the Baltic Sea or its littoral states. Indeed, most of the evidence points to the fact that Russia sees the Baltic region as part of Europe, not as part of the post-Soviet space, and that it therefore plays there under ‘European’

1 See, for instance, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Russia’s Big Gamble for the Black Sea,” *National Interest*, August 11, 2016, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-big-gamble-the-black-sea-17324>.

2 George Friedman, “Ukraine, Iraq and a Black Sea Strategy,” *Stratfor Worldview*, September 2, 2014, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ukraine-iraq-and-black-sea-strategy>. On the concept of this region as the Mediterranean-Black-Caspian axis, see, Majid Sheikhmoammady, D. Marc Kilgour, and Keith W. Hipel, “Modeling the Caspian Sea Negotiations,” *Group Decision and Negotiation* vol. 19, no. 2 (March 2010), p. 151.

3 “Baku-Ankara-Moscow co-op format based on regional interaction,” *Azernews*, October 8, 2019, at <https://www.azernews.az/nation/156981.html>.

4 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Warnings from Eurasia,” *National Interest*, December 27, 2018, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/warnings-eurasia-39927>.



Russia's southern strategy is designed to open up new markets and sources of investment for Russia, as well as to forge new business and financial partnerships that will help mitigate the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy.

rules.”⁵ At the same time, this somewhat artificial separation of the greater Black Sea basin by the U.S. national security community creates a strategic blind spot. As George Friedman concludes:

*A Black Sea strategy is merely a name, but sometimes a name is sufficient to focus strategic thinking. So long as the United States thinks in terms of Ukraine and Syria and Iraq as if they were on different planets, the economy of forces that coherent strategy requires will never be achieved. Thinking in terms of the Black Sea as a pivot of a single diverse and diffuse region can anchor U.S. thinking.*⁶

In other words, it behooves the U.S. national security community to think about this region in the same way as its Russian counterparts, who view the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region “as an access point to southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa” in order to “circumscribe NATO access to the region, protect Russia’s southern flank, and assist its current and potential future client states in the region.”⁷ In addition, Russia’s southern strategy is designed to open up new markets and sources of investment for Russia, as well as to forge new business and financial

partnerships that will help mitigate the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy.⁸ Thus, “Russia’s strategy pursues both a global power objective and a domestic economic objective.”⁹

Finally, a comment on the focus of this report. When the Black Sea region is discussed, the lion’s share of the attention often is directed to the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia and the security ramifications of Russia’s annexation of Crimea.¹⁰ While these are indeed important topics, over-focusing on them—just as the over-focus on the Baltic region in the overall Eurasian context—cloaks and hides important Russian strategic moves in other parts of the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region. This report will try to shift that balance by drawing attention to some of the areas that have received less attention, but are no less important for understanding Russian grand strategy.

5 Anna Mikulska and Robert Hamilton, “Nord Stream 2: Energy Security For Europe Or Prelude To Russian Aggression In The Baltic?,” *Forbes*, September 3, 2019, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thebakersinstitute/2019/09/03/nord-stream-2-energy-security-for-europe-or-prelude-to-russian-aggression-in-the-baltic/#48a782213619>.

6 Friedman, op. cit.

7 Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia’s Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies Security Insights 35 (July 2019), at https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/mcdocs/security_insights_35_-_dmitry_gorenburg_-_russias_naval_strategy-_july_2019.pdf?mc_cid=61789c7376&mc_eid=90b7183378.

8 Alexander Karavaev, “Anti-Russian sanctions let to surge of interest in North-South project,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, June 14, 2019, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Alexander-Karavaev-Anti-Russian-sanctions-let-to-surge-of-interest-in-North-South-project.html>.

9 Marc Pierini, “Russia’s Energy Politics and Its Relevance for the European Union,” IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2019 (Barcelona: Institut Europeu de la Mediterranea, 2019), p. 301, at https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2019/Russia_Energy_Politics_EU_Marc_Pierini_Medyearbook2019.pdf.

10 For instance, the EU’s priorities concentrate on the Balkans and those countries that lie between Russia and the EU. Similarly, the NATO focus tends to emphasize support for the western Black Sea countries and the impacts of Russian moves vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine. See, for example, “EU Diplomat Nominee Says Balkans, Ukraine Top Foreign-Policy Priorities,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 7, 2019, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/30204442.html>; Ariel Cohen, “NATO Should Stand Up Black Sea Command Before It’s Too Late,” *Huffpost*, July 6, 2016, at <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nato-should-stand-up-black-sea-command-before-it-s-too-late>; or Stephen Blank, “Memo to NATO: Wake Up Before Putin Turns the Black Sea into a Russian Lake,” *Atlantic Council*, June 28, 2016, at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/memo-to-nato-wake-up-before-putin-turns-the-black-sea-into-a-russian-lake/>.

RETURN TO THE SOUTH

The historical “godfather” of the current Russian Black Sea strategy is the illustrious Prince Gregory Potemkin, a close associate of Empress Catherine the Great, who was a firm believer that “Russia’s destiny lay to its south and advocated accordingly for expansion into the Balkans, Caucasus, and the northern Middle East.”¹¹ For the last three centuries, this vector in Russian foreign policy has ebbed and flowed.

During the Cold War, the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region, no less than Central Europe, was defined by a rigid “Iron Curtain” that separated the Soviet zone from the southern tier of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well as the barriers of pro-American states in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, and limited Moscow’s freedom of action. In the waning days of the Soviet Union, and continuing into the first term of the Boris Yeltsin administration, Moscow did not have a *sui generis* approach to the Black Sea region. Instead, given Mikhail Gorbachev’s emphasis on constructing the “common European home” and the influence of the “Atlanticists” around Yeltsin, the focus was on developing a partnership with the United States and entering Western-led institutions—the assumption being that Russian interests and equities in this part of the world would be respected as a post-Soviet Russia took its place as part of the “board of directors” of the Euro-Atlantic world.¹² For its part, an internal U.S. State Department memo developed in September 1993 assumed that, by 2005, Russia itself would be a full-fledged member of NATO; if those predictions had held, then the entire

Black Sea basin would have been encompassed under the framework of the Alliance.¹³ From the Russian perspective, however, Moscow would be one of the key decisionmakers, having not only a voice, but also a veto, and even expected that the West would want Russia to play the role of the metropolitan power across the Eurasian space.

Even while pursuing integration with the West, Russia adopted a strategy of denial/compellence for the region. This meant that other countries in the region should be denied access to Western institutions of which Russia was also not a member while denying further expansion of the influence of those institutions to set the agenda for the greater Black Sea region. At the same time, the states of the area had to be compelled to accept the predominance of Russia in the region. Moscow, and certainly not Istanbul, Brussels, or Washington, would set the political, economic, and security agenda for the Caspian, Caucasus, and the Balkans.

When it became clearer, after the initial euphoria at the collapse of the USSR evaporated, that Russia would both remain outside the principal Western institutions—while its neighbors (and former Soviet republics) might end up more integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, the calculus changed. Left unchecked, an expansion of Western (and to a lesser extent Middle Eastern) influence into the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region could only result in Russia’s marginalization and a direct threat to the maintenance of the Russian position in Eurasia, as well as pose a threat to vital geo-

11 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Basin,” *War on the Rocks*, August 2, 2018, at <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/russias-strategy-in-the-black-sea-basin/>.

12 Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Transatlantic Putin,” *Moscow Times*, March 3, 2003, archived at <http://www.russialist.org/archives/7086a.php##2>.

13 “Strategy for NATO’s Expansion and Transformation,” memorandum for the Secretary of State, September 7, 1993, archived at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4390816-Document-02-Strategy-for-NATO-s-Expansion-and>.



Black Sea and Caspian Sea regional map (Adobe Stock)

economic and geopolitical interests.¹⁴ Instead of relying on a mandate from the West to set the affairs of the “near abroad” (the claim by Russia of political interest and influence in states adjacent to it that were once part of the Soviet Union¹⁵), Russia would have to assert its prerogatives.

Russian capabilities, however, could not match Moscow’s aspirations. The denial/compellence approach had some successes, notably in the fomenting and maintenance of frozen conflicts (especially in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, and later in Ukraine), where Russia could frustrate the ambitions of other Black Sea states to enter Western institutions. But there were significant failures as well. Russia could not keep Balkan countries from joining both the European Union and NATO, nor could it forestall NATO activity in the former Yugoslavia. With backing from the United States, Turkey was able to compete with Russia for influence in the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region, and Moscow received a major setback when it failed to secure the transit of all Caucasus/Caspian energy exports via Russian territory.¹⁶

In particular, the Kremlin discovered the limits of threatening to use military force as a tool of compellence in the region.¹⁷ By the turn of the millennium, there was a growing recognition in the Russian national security establishment that

US and Turkish influence has increased greatly and that these countries now threaten Russian interests in the Caspian.

Some of the littoral states not only want Western technology and investments but also a Western presence as a counterbalance to any potential Russian interference.¹⁸

This meant that Russia had to change its approach to the region, in particular, to decreasing actions which incentivized other states to seek outside involvement, especially that of the United States. This required a shift from a maximalist approach epitomized by the complete denial/total compellence strategy in favor of assessing critical transactions and key red lines that Russia would have to enforce. In particular, Russian foreign policy thinkers called for reconceptualizing Russian interests in this region and assigning greater priority to the greater Black Sea area in Russian foreign policy.¹⁹

Boris Yeltsin’s government had not made the Caspian-to-Mediterranean axis region a priority, and had relied on a combination of hope (that Western states would admit Russia as one of the directors of the Euro-Atlantic world) and bluster (acting as if post-Soviet Russia still wielded the might and power of the departed Soviet superpower) to secure Moscow’s interests. Thus, as French diplomat Boris Toucas noted, “Although Russia maintained the perception that . . . the Black Sea area . . . belonged to its natural sphere of influence, it lacked the political, economic, and military power to fully impose its will.”²⁰

14 See, for instance, Timothy L. Thomas, “Russian National Interests and the Caspian Sea,” *Perceptions* vol. IV, no. 4 (December 1999/February 2000), archived at <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/agency/fmso-caspian.htm>.

15 William Safire, “On Language: The Near Abroad,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1994, section 6, p. 16, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/22/magazine/on-language-the-near-abroad.html>.

16 Robert O. Freedman, “Putin and the Middle East,” *Demokratizatsiya* 10 (2002), 519.

17 See, for instance, Douglas W. Blum, “The Russian-Georgian Crisis and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan,” *PONARS Policy Memo* 252 (October 2002), at http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pm_0252.pdf.

18 Thomas, op. cit.

19 See, the discussion, for instance, as covered in Andrey Grozin and Karina Gevorgyan, “Caspian Global Solitaire and Russian Interests: ‘Black Gold’ of Caspian Region Divided Up without any Rules, According to Principle of ‘Whoever is Brave Takes it All,’” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Sodruzhestvo NG Supplement), May 5, 1998.

20 Boris Toucas, “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region: A Brief History,” *CSIS Commentary*, February 2, 2017, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/geostrategic-importance-black-sea-region-brief-history>.

In assessing the results of the Yeltsin administration's efforts, American analyst Timothy L. Thomas came to this conclusion about Russia's position in the greater Black Sea region:

*Its prestige is already at an all-time low in the region. What it needs is enlightened diplomacy and some far-sighted politicians who can visualize the region 25 years in the future and construct policy today to meet that vision.*²¹

During the course of his tenure as Russia's paramount leader, Vladimir Putin has shown a willingness to reconceptualize Russian foreign policy beyond the Atlanticist paradigm that defined the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin years, and in particular to think about Russia along a North-South axis (Arctic to Black and Caspian line) as much as an East-West one (a balance between the People's Republic of China and the Euro-Atlantic worlds).²² While no less committed than his predecessor to the restoration of Russia's great power status, Putin embraced a more pragmatic approach to the region that focused on generating economic benefits to Russia.²³

When necessary, Putin has been prepared to use military force as part of a denial/compellence approach, most notably in Moscow's relations with Ukraine and Georgia. Yet, Moscow's strategy in the rest of the region has evolved over the last two decades. This evolution is reflected in a shift that recognizes the futility of trying to exclude the West altogether in favor of compartmentalizing and limiting U.S. and European influence, while incentivizing—rather than coercing—ties with Russia. As Alexander Karavaev of the Russian Academy of Sciences put it, “From the point of view of Russia's interests [in the region], it is necessary to pursue a conscious policy of regional integration within the framework of the strategy

of flexible partnerships.”²⁴ Russia still relies on the sudden incursion or limited military intervention, as in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 or Syria in 2015, to telegraph its hard power capabilities, but is becoming more adept at tailoring its approach using all the tools of statecraft—and also in accepting compromise outcomes.

Two areas merit special attention: the evolution in the Russian-Azeri relationship and the Russian role in finally achieving the convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, both of which provide templates for Russian action elsewhere in the region.

²¹ Thomas, op. cit.

²² Gvosdev, “Russia's Strategy,” op. cit.

²³ Freedman, p. 511.

²⁴ Alexander Karavaev, “Uniting the Caspian Sea: integration of the region in the framework of ‘network partnerships’ scenario,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, August 11, 2018, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/analysis/Uniting-the-Caspian-Sea-integration-of-the-region-in-the-framework-of-%E2%80%98network-partnerships%E2%80%99-scenario.html>.

A NEW TEMPLATE FOR THE RUSSIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONSHIP

When Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister of the Russian Federation in August 1999, the haphazard Russian strategy of trying to force the Republic of Azerbaijan into the exclusive Russian sphere of influence had clearly failed. Azerbaijan had joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1993, sent some of its energy via Russian export routes, and included Russian firms as part of Western-led consortia for energy development. But Azerbaijan had opted for a route running through Georgia and Turkey, rather than Russia, as its main export route for its oil and was leading the resistance to the preferred Russian outcome on the final legal disposition of the Caspian Sea. To counterbalance Russian pressure, then-President Heydar Aliyev turned to the United States for support, and his “overall strategy . . . was to resist Russian pressure by combining Azerbaijan’s national interests with the US government’s regional policy and the large volume of foreign investment by American and other Western oil firms.”²⁵ Even more troubling to the Kremlin, Heydar Aliyev’s national security advisor, Vafa Guluzade, was outspoken in his desire to see Azerbaijan moving beyond cooperation within Partnership for Peace to join NATO as a full member, and to offer either NATO or the United States the use of military facilities, which would have given the West direct access to the Caspian Sea. Guluzade was also quite clear in his desire to see the Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova (GUAM) grouping become a “military-

political-economic” union to reduce radically Russian influence in the region.²⁶ Ultimately, his vision was Azerbaijan serving as the eastern anchor of a Euro-Atlantic wedge and barrier between Russia and Iran and the creation of a corridor that would connect the Black-Caspian mega-region to the larger West.²⁷

During the 1990s, this approach seemed realizable because, as Boris Toucas has noted,

*Moscow was too weak to coerce former vassal entities in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. It therefore struggled to preserve influence through diplomatic pressure, covert economic dominance, and regional integration instead. Western buildup around the Black Sea region progressively challenged the notion that Russia could maintain regional dominance through nonmilitary means. As the European Union and NATO filled the post-Soviet power vacuum, Russia soon became aware that it was unable to stop the Alliance’s expansion eastward.*²⁸

It seemed logical that, in the face of Russian geopolitical weakness, NATO would, after taking in Republic of Bulgaria and Romania, start its strategic outreach across the Black Sea to the Caspian.

25 Pinar Ipek, “Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy and Challenges for Energy Security,” *Middle East Journal* vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 235, 236.

26 “A conversation with Vafa Guluzade, former national security advisor to President Heydar Aliyev and longtime political commentator,” *Online Analytical Input from Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy*, March 19, 2008, at https://biweekly.ada.edu.az/interviews/A_conversation_with_Vafa_Guluzade.htm; see, also, Martin Malek, “NATO and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on Different Tracks,” *Connections* vol. 7, no. 3 Summer Supplement (Summer 2008), esp. pp. 32, 42-43.

27 Vafa Guluzade, “Azerbaijan, Russia, and the Middle East,” *Washington Institute PolicyWatch* 154, June 16, 1995, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/azerbaijan-russia-and-the-middle-east>.

28 Boris Toucas, “Russia’s Design in The Black Sea: Extending the Buffer Zone,” *CSIS Commentary*, June 28, 2017, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-design-black-sea-extending-buffer-zone>.



Russia President Vladimir Putin with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev in Sochi, October 2019. (Kremlin.ru)

However, Heydar Aliyev was much more cautious than his national security advisor, and far less trusting that the United States or Europe would be prepared to risk confronting Russia in order to reorder the geopolitics of the region fundamentally—an assessment seemingly borne out by the lackluster response to the Russian incursion into Georgia nine years later. Guluzade resigned his post in October 1999.²⁹ A turning point for Azerbaijan’s “balanced” foreign policy was the Russian–Georgian War of August 2008. This weakened Azerbaijan’s belief in the ability of the West to counter Russian power projection or provide security guarantees to countries in the region.³⁰ Heydar Aliyev wanted to reach a bargain with Russia in which Moscow would end any efforts at “regime change” in Baku, would assist Azerbaijan in improving its internal security capabilities, and would facilitate access to Russian

markets for Azeri firms.

At the same time, Putin began a concerted effort of outreach to Baku that attempted to move beyond the deadlock in Russia-Azerbaijan relations of the Yeltsin years.³¹ The Putin approach may be summed up best under the moniker, “transactional neutrality.” Putin himself characterizes the success of Russia-Azerbaijan relations as resting on a “balance of interests.”³² This policy means making it worth Azerbaijan’s while not to transgress Russia’s geopolitical red lines in the region, but, in turn, commits Russia to a strategy where it never wants Azerbaijan to feel threatened. “Transactional neutrality” accepts the reality of Azerbaijan’s “multipolarity” and that Baku will have economic, political, and even security relationships with other major power

29 Zaur Shiriyeu, “Azerbaijan Loses its First Post-Independence ‘Brzezinski,’” *Daily Hurriyet*, May 12, 2015, at <http://www.hurriyet-dailynews.com/azerbaijan-loses-its-first-post-independence-brzezinski-82272>.

30 Zaur Shiriyeu, *Azerbaijan’s Relations with Russia: Closer by Default?* (London: Chatham House, March 2019), p. 9, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Azerbaijan2.pdf>.

31 Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova, “Azerbaijan’s foreign policy towards Russia since independence: compromise achieved,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* vol. 19, no. 2 (2019), p. 273.

32 “Vladimir Putin: Russia-Azerbaijan relations based on good-neighborliness and mutual respect,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, September 27, 2018, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Vladimir-Putin-Russia-Azerbaijan-relations-based-on-neighbourliness-and-mutual-respect.html>.

centers, including the EU, NATO, and the United States. Rather than trying to force Azerbaijan to sever those ties, the Russian approach focuses on managing those interactions so that Moscow's fundamental equities are not threatened. In short, Azerbaijan will not join NATO or any alliance of which Russia is not also a partner, and while Azerbaijan may have its own linkages, corridors, and export routes that bypass Russia, it will utilize Russia as one of its options and partners, and, more importantly, will never join any effort to contain Moscow or to use its geography to block Russia's access to the south. In return, Moscow accepts that, in other areas, Azerbaijan may choose options that go against Russian preferences and understands that this is the price of keeping Azerbaijan from cementing closer ties with the West.

As part of its reassurance of Moscow, Azerbaijan formally joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in May 2011, which foreclosed any option of joining NATO. Moreover, despite having been a founding member of GUAM, Azerbaijan resisted any efforts, particularly during the tenures of Presidents Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine and Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, to turn the grouping into anything more than a loose consultative association, much to Guluzade's lament.³³ This is in keeping with the principle outlined by President Ilham Aliyev, who noted: "Azerbaijan and Russia closely interact with each other within [the] framework of international organizations, traditionally supporting each other in the most important and pressing issues."³⁴

In turn, Russia has changed its tone towards Azerbaijan. During the 1990s, Russian foreign policy often characterized other former Soviet republics as junior siblings. As part of Russia's courtship of Azerbaijan, however, the Putin and Medvedev administrations were prepared to treat Baku as a near-peer, so that Azerbaijan has been raised to a position of equality in the trilateral Russia-Iran-Azerbaijan and Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan formats.³⁵ This treatment has turned Azerbaijan into a stakeholder vested in the success of these initiatives.

Moreover, for every move to engage with Western institutions, there is a corresponding balancing initiative towards a Russian-led organization. Azerbaijan is both a "dialogue partner" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the vaunted "anti-NATO" of the Eurasian plain, and it has a robust partnership with NATO. While not prepared to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Azerbaijan has been more deft at exploiting its position as a "keystone state"³⁶ to maintain economic linkages to the EAEU and ensuring that its own cooperation with the EU does not foreclose its trade with Russia or its participation in the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative.³⁷ In essence, Azerbaijan has decided on a foreign policy of not having to choose between good relations with Moscow and good relations with the West—and to focus on the strategic priorities of both sides.³⁸

33 "A conversation," *op. cit.*

34 "President Aliyev: Azerbaijan, Russia closely interact with each other within framework of international organizations, traditionally supporting each other in most important and pressing issues," *Azernews*, October 7, 2019, at <https://www.azernews.az/nation/156919.html>.

35 "Putin's Diplomatic Marathon Targets 'Uniting Key Players on the Black Sea,'" *Sputnik*, August 13, 2016, at <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201608131044233530-russia-south-caucasus-policy/>.

36 For more on the concept of the "keystone state" and Azerbaijan's position as one, see, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Keystone States: A New Category of Power," *Horizons* 5 (Autumn 2015), at <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2015--issue-no5/key-stone-states---a-new-category-of-power>.

37 Anar Valiyev, "Azerbaijan: Perspectives on Eurasian integration," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 8, 2016, at https://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian_integration_azerbaijan.

38 Thomas de Waal, "Azerbaijan Doesn't Want To Be Western: The Rhetoric and Reality of Baku's Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, September 26, 2014, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-09-26/azerbaijan-doesnt-want-be-western>.



Azerbaijan may have its own linkages, corridors, and export routes that bypass Russia, it will utilize Russia as one of its options and partners, and, more importantly, will never join any effort to contain Moscow or to use its geography to block Russia's access to the south.

Scholars Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova characterize this as the “pursuit of neutrality,” noting:

Azerbaijan’s foreign policy has remained cautious with regard to any ambitions to integrate into a larger community. Encouraged by energy wealth, Azerbaijan has considered itself to be powerful enough to chart a course in which it accepts a Russia-style governance model whilst positioning itself as a so-called ‘strategic partner’ of the West on energy issues.

This leads to “an ‘interest-based’ multidimensional policy, which is generally pro-Russian but not necessarily anti-Western.”³⁹

The case of the Gabala radar station is quite instructive. During the 1990s, this was a hot-button issue in the relationship. Azeris saw in Moscow’s efforts to retain a foothold in Azerbaijan along the Caspian coast a last-ditch effort to salvage its position after the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus a threat to Azeri sovereignty. Russia, in turn, was panicked by any suggestion that the United States or NATO should replace Russia in running the facility. The lease was renewed in 2002 as a straightforward transaction that would have Azeri personnel alongside Russian military in running of the station. For a time in the mid-2000s, Gabala was offered as a possible site for a joint U.S.-Russia missile defense system, a proposal that would have suited Azerbaijan’s multidirectional approach in foreign policy by gaining credit for Baku in both Washington and Moscow. The rejection of that proposal by the Bush administration—and the development of new capabilities by Russia—made Gabala a less valuable strategic asset.

By the time the question of lease renewal came up in 2012, Gabala’s importance as a bargaining chip had been reduced. Azerbaijan did not depend on the rental income as an important source of state revenue. Russia had no fears that if it left the facility, American troops would soon have a foothold on the Caspian Sea. The station was closed and dismantled, the equipment sent back to Russia, the facility turned over to Azeri control, and all Russian personnel evacuated from Azeri soil. Moscow was prepared to evacuate the Gabala station precisely because it had confidence in the strength of the Russia-Azerbaijan relationship and no longer felt that the presence of Russian troops on Azeri soil served any strategic purpose.

One of the most critical services Azerbaijan performs for Russia is to serve as a conduit and mediator. At a time when other channels of communication have closed, Azerbaijan serves as the host for regular meetings between senior Russian and American military officials. As one Azeri official noted,

*Baku has not been chosen accidentally to host the meeting of the Chiefs of General Staffs of Russia and the United States. Baku becomes the center where the leading geopolitical players reach agreement. The current meeting can have an impact on the settlement of global and regional problems.*⁴⁰

Azerbaijan also facilitates the North-South corridor that connects Russia with Iran, and thus Europe with the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean basins. As Russian hopes for integration into the West have faded, the North-South corridor has acquired increased importance not just as an alternate for Russia. Moscow sees it as part of a much larger arc designed to connect the Arctic Ocean basin with the Indian Ocean.⁴¹ Thus, as researcher Elkhan

³⁹ Valiyev and Mamishova, p. 271.

⁴⁰ “Baku Meeting of U.S., Russian Military Chiefs,” *Baku International Policy and Security Network*, May 6, 2017, at <http://bakunet-work.com/en/baku-meeting-of-u-s-russian-military-chiefs/>.

⁴¹ “Putin Wants to Connect Russia’s Arctic Coast and the Indian Ocean,” *Moscow Times*, October 8, 2019, at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/08/putin-wants-to-connect-russias-arctic-coast-and-the-indian-ocean-a67626>.

Alasgarov concludes: “The geopolitical project of the North-South corridor, which is of strategic importance for Russia and which the country is implementing jointly with Azerbaijan and Iran, has its logical continuation to the East.”⁴² At the same time, Azerbaijan has been marketing itself as an alternative conduit for Russia to Western markets and as a sanctions-free interconnector between Europe and Russia.⁴³ By serving as this connector, Azerbaijan creates a series of “win-win” outcomes for itself and Russia.⁴⁴

Nowhere is Azerbaijan’s transformation from an anti-Russian barrier into a keystone state connecting Russia to the South and West more dramatic than its impact on the triangular Russia-Azerbaijan-Turkey relationship.⁴⁵ In the 1990s, a Turkey-Azerbaijan strategic alliance was seen as a way to block Russian influence in the greater Black Sea basin and as a way to contain Russia. In particular, energy corridors traversing Russian or Turkish territory for Caspian hydrocarbons explicitly were seen by all sides as inherently competitive and zero-sum. Gains by Turkey (or Russia) were viewed as ipso facto losses by the other. Today, the focus is on complementarity, not rivalry, within the framework of a trilateral Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan dialogue with a focus on a joint regional transport and energy hub in which all three countries participate and benefit.⁴⁶

Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova come to this conclusion:

*Strategic hedging vis-à-vis Russia has allowed Azerbaijan to ‘have it both ways’. On the one hand, Moscow’s geopolitical interests and ambitions in the region are not questioned. On the other hand, Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, including towards Russia, is being formulated in such a way that the principal national interests are adhered to.*⁴⁷

In an ideal world, Moscow would prefer that Azerbaijan become a full member of all Russian-led Eurasian organizations. Azeri neutrality, however, is an acceptable outcome because it ensures that Western power does not challenge Russian primacy in the immediate region and also guarantees Russia’s ability to be able to connect to the larger Middle East.

42 Elkhana Alasgarov, “Russia’s reversal to Islamic world and Azerbaijan’s role in the process,” *Trend News Agency*, October 1, 2019, at <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3126608.html>.

43 “President Aliyev: Azerbaijan, Russia,” op. cit., and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Baku’s Difficult Balancing Act,” *National Interest*, January 8, 2016, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/bakus-difficult-balancing-act-14841>.

44 Mushvig Mehdiyev, “Caspian Presidents Will Meet In Sochi Next Month To Discuss Regional Infrastructure,” *Caspian News*, July 4, 2019, at <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/caspian-presidents-will-meet-in-sochi-next-month-to-discuss-regional-infrastructure-2019-7-4-13/>.

45 For a discussion of the evolution of the Azerbaijan-Turkey relationship, see, among others, Mehmet Dikkaya and Jason E. Strakes, “A Paradigm Shift in Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations?” *Review of Socio-Economic Perspectives* vol. 2, no. 1 (June 2017), pp. 84-102.

46 “Azerbaijan supports Russia-Turkey partnership – MP,” *News.Az*, October 8, 2019, at <https://news.az/articles/politics/142257>.

47 Valiyev and Mamishova, p. 288.

LESSONS OF THE CASPIAN CONVENTION

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Russian Federation, along with Iran, “sought to retain their status as the leading countries in the region and insisted on the principle of condominium: common use of the resources of the sea.”⁴⁸ In practical terms, that meant that all the resources of the sea, no matter where they were located, would have to be developed jointly, with the profits apportioned to all Caspian states. It was also an effort by Russia to try and maintain the Caspian as a “closed” environment as if it were still a Soviet lake.

But the Yeltsin administration overplayed a weak hand in its efforts to strongarm the other Caspian littoral countries to accept its position. Azerbaijan took the lead in mobilizing both Western economic power and U.S. diplomatic pressure to push back against Russian demands both on the disposition of the sea and on the export of its energy resources.⁴⁹

Instead of imposing its will, Russia found itself losing ground, unable to control the agenda. The Yeltsin administration focused its efforts on trying to deny the use of the seabed and its resources to the other states of the region.⁵⁰ The Kremlin assumed that as long as the Caspian was seen to be a disputed zone, Western companies would be disincentivized to invest. Four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and the other states began a formal diplomatic process to try and settle the status of the Caspian. From that

year until 2018, more than 50 high-level meetings were held at the level of deputy foreign ministers, as well as dozens of head-of-state summits. Yet, Moscow was not incentivized to conclude any sort of accord rapidly in the hopes that preventing a settlement for the Caspian would hold up the development of projects that bypassed Russia.⁵¹

These efforts were not entirely successful. Despite the lack of a convention on the final disposition of the Caspian, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan began developing assets in the offshore zones that they claimed, buttressed both by Western investment and diplomatic support. As Western companies began to acquire interests in the region, they subsequently raised the question of how those investments might be secured. This opened the door for the United States and NATO to claim that securing energy infrastructure and export routes from the Caspian and Black Sea basins was an issue of concern for the Western Alliance, and for the Euro-Atlantic community to take on a larger role in security matters. Even when officials accepted that this region was not a priority for NATO as an alliance, proposals such as the creation of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) contact group or for the U.S. and other NATO Allies to offer security assistance were being proposed.⁵²

These developments challenged Moscow’s number one priority, which was to keep the Caspian region free of outside military involvement and deployments and to be able

48 Stanislav Pritchin, “Russia’s Caspian Policy,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 235 (April 18, 2019), p. 2, at <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD235.pdf>.

49 Freedman, p. 511; Pritchin, p. 3.

50 Sheikhmohammady et al, p. 153.

51 See, for instance, Vladimir Socor, “Nabucco Pipeline, Azerbaijan’s Shah Deniz Field Require Synchronized Development,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* vol. 7, no. 164 (September 14, 2010), at <https://jamestown.org/program/nabucco-pipeline-azerbajians-shah-deniz-field-require-synchronized-development/>.

52 Jennifer Cunningham and Steve Yetiv, “NATO and the Caspian,” *Journal of Energy Security*, April 19, 2012, at http://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&id=352:nato-and-the-caspian&Itemid=389; see also discussion in Richard Sokolsky and Tanya Charlick-Paley, *NATO and Caspian Security: A Mission Too Far?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), pp. 81-98.



The Fifth Caspian Summit at Aktau, Kazakhstan, 2018. (Kremlin.ru)

to secure Russian military primacy in the area.⁵³ Thus, Moscow began to shift its approach from pressure to accommodation, as part of an explicit appeal that Caspian problems could be solved within the family of Caspian nations and that there was no need for any outside European or American involvement.

To keep other Caspian states from inviting outside mediators as interested parties in a Caspian settlement—the United States, the European Union or even China—Moscow began to compromise on its position regarding division of the sea into national sectors in return for guaranteeing that no non-Caspian state would be given any rights or access to that body of water, especially in terms of deploying military assets. In 1998, Russia reached an agreement with

Kazakhstan that, while not ratifying the principle of national sectors, allowed for each country to delineate subsurface claims. In the next several years, Russia concluded a similar division with Azerbaijan and helped to broker an arrangement between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. With their offshore oil and gas assets now secure, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan were prepared to accede to Russian insistence that the Caspian be considered a closed security environment. This set the parameters for a settlement: Russia would be prepared to give ground on its maritime claims in return for recognition of its military primacy on the Caspian sea.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, deadlock persisted through the 2000s and much of the early 2010s, leaving the door open that in the absence of a final settlement,

⁵³ See, the discussion in John K.C. Daly, “Russia Convinces ‘Caspian Five’ to Bar Foreign Militaries From the Caspian,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* vol. 11, no. 83 (May 5, 2014), at <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-convinces-caspian-five-to-bar-foreign-militaries-from-the-caspian/>.

⁵⁴ Catherine Putz, “Caspian Sea Dispute Settled on the Surface,” *The Diplomat*, August 13, 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/caspian-sea-dispute-settled-on-the-surface/>; and “Caspian Sea deal benefits Russia, troubles Iran,” DW, August 15, 2018, at <https://www.dw.com/en/caspian-sea-deal-benefits-russia-troubles-iran/a-45051799>.

one or more of the littoral Caspian states might again be incentivized to involve outside, non-Caspian partners in the process. To prevent this from happening, and to burnish Moscow's reputation as a problem-solver, the Kremlin offered further compromises in the Russian position. Russia conceded that the seabed and the entire maritime area would be subdivided into national sectors, giving up on its initial position that the Caspian should be organized as a single condominium. Each Caspian state would end up with exclusive 15-mile sovereign territorial waters with an adjacent 10-mile exclusive fishing zone. The Russians also gave up their insistence that trans-Caspian infrastructure would require the approval of all Caspian states.⁵⁵

Russia also exercised renewed pressure on Iran to accept these concessions, and did so at a time when Tehran, reeling from the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the so-called "nuclear deal") and the re-imposition of U.S. economic sanctions, was looking for security and economic guarantees from Moscow. Iran acceded to the final text of the Caspian Convention, which was signed on August 12, 2018, at the Caspian Summit at Aktau, Kazakhstan. In commenting on the push to reach a final agreement, Gulnara Mamedzade of the Caspian Expert Club stressed:

*Russia and other countries reached the consensus **right in time**. The Convention was signed in 2018 because risks were accumulated over the region. The Convention is based on providing the Caspian Sea with security and **protecting it from third countries**. We don't want military bases of foreign countries be*

*deployed nearby our borders. [emphasis added]*⁵⁶

The Caspian Convention has not settled all outstanding issues.⁵⁷ More critically, some of Moscow's concessions on the Caspian Convention were recouped in side agreements which guarantee the right of Russia to sail naval forces throughout the open waters of the Caspian and which mandate environmental studies for all trans-Caspian undersea construction, a possible backdoor veto for projects like the proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline that would connect Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Director of the Caspian-Eurasia Center Ksenia Tyurenkova sees its conclusion and ratification as heralding a "new stage in development of relations between the Caspian states, about [the] possibility of intensification of integration processes."⁵⁹ Specifically, the Russians have enshrined the principle that Caspian issues are the preserve only of Caspian states, a situation which sets up Russia as the first among equals in determining the region's agenda. Researcher Stanislav Pritchin concurs, noting that while "Moscow failed to defend the principle of the condominium, in order to develop regional resources without Western companies. . . . It also managed to resolve territorial issues with its neighbors via a compromise arrangement. At the same time, Russia has succeeded in its aim of preserving the Caspian Sea as a closed regime for the armed forces of third countries."⁶⁰ Having established this principle for one part of the greater Black Sea region, Moscow seeks now to extend this understanding to other parts of the Caspian-Black Sea mega-region.

⁵⁵ "The Caspian Sea Treaty," *Strategic Comments* vol. 24, no. 9 (November 2018), pp. i-ii.

⁵⁶ Gulnara Mamedzade, "It's crucial to seize the moment with Caspian long-term development concept," *Vestnik Kavkaza*, December 24, 2018, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Gulnara-Mamedzade-%E2%80%99Crucial-to-seize-the-moment-with-Caspian-long-term-development-concept%E2%80%9D.html>.

⁵⁷ "What Does the New Caspian Sea Agreement Mean For the Energy Market?" *Stratfor*, August 17, 2018, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/what-does-new-caspian-sea-agreement-mean-energy-market>.

⁵⁸ Pritchin, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Ksenia Tyurenkova, "Signing of Caspian Convention is only beginning of long journey," *Vestnik Kavkaza*, July 21, 2019, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Ksenia-Tyurenkova-Signing-of-Caspian-Convention-is-only-beginning-of-long-journey.html>.

⁶⁰ Pritchin, p. 5.

APPLYING THE AZERBAIJAN AND CASPIAN TEMPLATES

A reasonable observer can suggest that the Russia-Azerbaijan relationship is unique. After all, Baku has several geopolitical vulnerabilities—including the frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the weaknesses that a government based on “authoritarian upgrading”⁶¹ generates—which allows Russia to promote its interests. On the other hand, there is also a danger of assuming that the way Russia has conducted its affairs with Georgia and Ukraine, particularly the use of hard and sharp power instruments, reflects Moscow’s default *modus operandi*. However, it may be that Ukraine and Georgia (and in the larger Black Sea region, Romania) are the special cases, and that, whenever possible, Russia is more inclined to pursue its strategy of transactional neutrality with the states of the region. In fact, there is evidence that even a Georgian or Ukrainian leadership that would be inclined to embrace the policy prescriptions of a “transactional neutrality” would find Moscow more receptive to bargain.

More importantly, aspects of the Russia-Azerbaijan template are being applied even to NATO and EU members in the greater Black Sea region, especially with Bulgaria, a former Warsaw Pact ally that “defected” to join the EU and NATO, and Turkey, which during the Cold War was explicitly positioned to block Russian access into the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

As with the Caspian countries, Russia has internalized the lesson that accommodation and compromise can create more receptive bargaining partners and that, as in the Caspian example,

reaching out to regional competitors with a pitch of solving problems “among the neighbors” can generate results. As Moscow pulls back on some of its maximalist demands of the past, it is finding that both Bulgaria and Turkey are more inclined to agree with Russia that regional problems can and should be solved without the involvement of the United States.⁶²

Moscow’s denial/compellence tactics failed spectacularly with Bulgaria during the 1990s and early 2000s, as Sofia brushed aside Russia’s largely impotent objections and pursued full membership in both the EU and NATO. As a member of NATO, Bulgaria has signed agreements that provide for the temporary basing of NATO forces on Bulgarian soil—giving access to the U.S. military into the inner portion of the Black Sea, and also takes part in NATO missions in Europe and out-of-area. These are realities that Moscow reluctantly has learned to live with. Russia cannot get Bulgaria to leave the Alliance and assume a formal neutral status, as with Azerbaijan, but it can attempt to incentivize Bulgaria to limit NATO efforts to contest the Black Sea. In this task, Moscow has had some successes.

In particular, Bulgaria rejected the 2016 proposal for the creation of a joint Bulgarian-Romanian-Ukrainian brigade that would play a role in Black Sea security, and the following year also provided no support or encouragement for Romanian proposals to set up a joint naval task force among the NATO Black Sea states.⁶³ Bulgaria also has opposed the suggestion that Black Sea countries could “reflag” the naval assets of non-Black

61 For a discussion of this concept in the Eurasian context, please, see, Edward Lemon, “Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan: Democratization or Authoritarian Upgrading?,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2019, at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/06/mirziyoyevs-uzbekistan-democratization-or-authoritarian-upgrading/>.

62 Mikhail Simonov, “New configuration born in Istanbul: EU-Russia-Turkey without US?” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, October 29, 2018, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/analysis/New-configuration-born-in-Istanbul-EU-Russia-Turkey-without-US.html>.

63 Siemon T. Wezeman and Alexandra Kuimova, “Bulgaria and Black Sea Security,” SIPRI Background Paper (December 2018), pp. 4-5, at <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-background-papers/bulgaria-and-black-sea-security>.



Lieutenant General Andrey Botsev, Bulgarian Chief of Defence, and General Petr Pavel, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee attend a ceremony in Bulgaria. (NATO)

Sea NATO members as a way to circumvent the Montreaux Convention governing strict limits on access to the Black Sea by outside navies.⁶⁴

Like Azerbaijan, Bulgaria talks about the importance role Sofia attaches to serving as a mediator between Russia and the West, and the need for Bulgaria to maintain good relations with Russia. In part, this view is driven by economic and energy considerations. Russia is both an important trading partner as well as an energy supplier to Bulgaria. Like the Azeris observing the somewhat lackluster Western response to the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008, the Bulgarians were very disappointed by the European and American response to the cancellation of the South Stream project in 2014. This project was designed to send Russian gas to Central Europe

via a pipeline that would connect Russia to Bulgaria, and which would have generated transit fees and investment into the Bulgarian economy. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Donbas, other Europeans appealed to Bulgaria's sense of solidarity as a NATO and EU member to suspend the project. Yet Bulgarians do not believe that their sacrifice was adequately compensated, especially when Russia reoriented the project to come ashore in Turkey.⁶⁵ Bulgaria now sees new opportunities in connecting to this new Turkish Stream line and to serve as a gas hub and distributor of Russian energy within the EU.⁶⁶

In some ways, Bulgaria's evolving relationship with Russia is a mirror reversal of Azerbaijan's: a security partnership with the West, but an

64 Igor Delanoe, "Russia Extends Black Sea Control," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2019, at <https://mondediplo.com/2019/02/08black-sea>.

65 "Bulgaria prepares to transport Russian gas to central Europe," *Reuters*, November 30, 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/bulgaria-gas-russia/bulgaria-prepares-to-transport-russian-gas-to-central-europe-idUSL8N1Y34QS>.

66 "Will Bulgaria Become Europe's Next Gas Hub?" *Novinite Insider*, July 15, 2018, at <https://www.novinite.com/articles/191083/Will+Bulgaria+Become+Europe%E2%80%99s+Next+Gas+Hub%3F>.

energy partnership with Russia. In pursuit of that goal, Bulgaria pursues a defensive approach to Russia's geopolitical interests in the Black Sea: defending against Russia's ability to project power into the Alliance, but not actively contesting or attempting to roll back Russia's current position in the Black Sea, eastern Europe, and the eastern Mediterranean. Bulgarian pragmatism is reinforced because of an even more dramatic shift on the part of Turkey in terms of its own relationship with Moscow. Like Bulgaria, "Turkey has always taken care that the Black Sea should not become a conflict zone between Russia and NATO by maintaining a balance between its positions as member of NATO and a neighbour of Russia."⁶⁷

As Turkey has emerged as one of the world's leading "middle powers,"⁶⁸ Ankara has sought to redefine itself from being the West's (and specifically NATO's) representative and proxy in favor of being viewed, as researcher Selim Koru has noted, as "an entity of its own, friendly to the West but separate from it."⁶⁹ Turkey, like Russia, also has faced its own disappointments with its lack of success in being able to integrate fully into the Euro-Atlantic world on its own terms and with a position of leadership. This has made the Turkish strategic establishment, starting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, much more receptive to Russian proposals that, in the Caspian-Black Sea mega-region, its two leading powers, Turkey and Russia, should serve as coordinator of its security and economic relationships. In particular, the same line Russia had used with Caspian Sea states—the notion of solving regional problems "ourselves" without the need for or involvement

of outside actors, especially the United States—has fallen on fertile ground in Ankara. Indeed, an argument that resonated with the Turkish side was that "Ankara would actually see increased US presence as a factor weakening its regional position and a potential constraint on pursuing own foreign policy objectives."⁷⁰

Other reports have looked at much greater detail at the evolution of the Russia-Turkey relationship, especially how a NATO Ally now has a de facto strategic partnership with Moscow. What is important to stress here is how Russia's embrace of the "transactional neutrality" approach has been able to generate that shift. Again, as with Bulgaria, Russia does not pressure Turkey to leave the Alliance or end its cooperation, and Turkey remains one of NATO's core countries in terms of fulfilling security missions around the Euro-Atlantic area.⁷¹ Instead, Russia seeks de facto "neutrality" on the part of Turkey when it comes to Black Sea and Caspian issues, where other NATO members and NATO-aspirant countries have problems with Russia.⁷² Even prior to the dustup with the U.S. over the Turkish purchase of Russian S-400 missiles, and the crisis that emerged over northern Syria in fall 2019, Russia already had succeeded in getting Turkey to prioritize its interests over alliance solidarity.⁷³

Russia has made economic benefits the linchpin of its courtship of Ankara. Thus, as researcher Igor Delanoe concludes, Turkey has no incentive to take "action that could risk its Black Sea condominium with Russia. Its solid relationship with Russia on energy, strengthened by the Turkish Stream gas pipeline — the offshore section was completed

⁶⁷ Delanoe, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Gürol Baba and Murat Önsoy, "Between Capability and Foreign Policy: Comparing Turkey's Small Power and Middle Power Status," *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 13:51 (2016), 3-20.


⁶⁹ Selim Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2018, p. 3, at <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/bssp2-koru.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Adam Klus, "The New Strategic Reality in the Black Sea," *New Eastern Europe*, April 22, 2014, at <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2014/04/22/the-new-strategic-reality-in-the-black-sea/>.

⁷¹ See, for instance, see Gülnur Abyet, "The Evolution of NATO's Three Phases and Turkey's Transatlantic Relationship," *Perceptions* vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 19-36.

⁷² Delanoe, op. cit.

⁷³ Boris Toucas, "Turkey Has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests," *CSIS Commentary*, February 13, 2018, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-has-no-allies-black-sea-only-interests>.

A large, white, four-engine military aircraft with a distinctive black nose cone and a large, black, conical radar dome mounted on top. The aircraft is parked on a tarmac, and its nose is pointed towards the camera. Two ground crew members in military uniforms are standing near the front landing gear. The aircraft's registration number, 160304, is visible on the side of the fuselage. The background shows a clear sky and some trees.

Russia seeks de facto “neutrality” on the part of Turkey when it comes to Black Sea and Caspian issues, where other NATO members and NATO-aspirant countries have problems with Russia.

A NATO E-3A Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft sits on the tarmac in Konya, Turkey. (NATO)

last November — and Rosatom’s construction of Turkey’s first nuclear power station, at Akkuyu on the south coast, act as a safety net.”⁷⁴

Like Azerbaijan, Turkey offers itself as a conduit for Russia to Western markets. It no longer sees its mission as denying Russia the ability to reach Western markets while privileging non-Russian sources. Turkey now stresses that it will facilitate all energy export routes including those from Russia. This not only guarantees a steady, affordable stream of energy for Turkey’s own economic growth as well as the income from transit fees, but makes Turkey much more important to Europe’s overall energy security and economic health. This serves as a major driver for Russia-Turkey rapprochement.⁷⁵

Thus, as Ilgar Mamedov, a researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences, concludes:

*Moscow and Ankara work together thanks to regional interests in the South Caucasus, in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in the Black Sea region. When it comes to these matters, both countries are cooperating with each other very actively. Formats such as Russia-Turkey-Iran, Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan are really fruitful. This cooperation contributes to regional security. ... Turkey is a member of NATO, but in current conditions, this membership isn’t really in Turkey’s interest. Cooperation and partnership with Russia brings Turkey more benefits than relations within NATO.*⁷⁶

Russia understands and expects that there will be differences of opinion and interest, and so has been working to ensure that divergences—especially over Syria—can be accommodated without overall damage to the relationship. Despite Western and particularly American predictions of an imminent split between Ankara and Moscow, the transactional relationship has worked to dampen possible sources of conflict. As Igor Delanoe reminds us:

*The main strength of Russia and Turkey’s partnership is their ability to focus on shared processes, rather than vainly seeking shared strategic objectives. They are geopolitical competitors cooperating on a limited and selective basis in the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Middle East, within frameworks that allow them to channel competition. The Astana platform for peace talks in the Syrian conflict is one example.*⁷⁷

Here, Russia has the model for Caspian diplomacy as a guide. Moscow has celebrated the conclusion of the Caspian Convention as a prime example of regional powers being able to settle their differences without the need for interference or direction from the United States. The same template is being applied in the search for a settlement in Syria: the Astana process that brings together Turkey and Iran with Russia, the expansion of the Russia-Saudi strategic dialogue, and the effort to jury-rig a series of compromises and create a patchwork of enclaves and deconfliction zones that would give different groups in Syria and their outside backers a stake in a postwar settlement.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Delanoe, op. cit.

⁷⁵ “Energy projects pave way for stronger Turkey-Russia rapport,” *Daily Sabah*, October 4, 2019, at <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/10/04/energy-projects-pave-way-for-stronger-turkey-russia-rapport>.

⁷⁶ Ilgar Mamedov, “Russia and Turkey should protect their interests, working together with natural partners,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, February 28, 2019, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Ilgar-Mamedov-Russia-and-Turkey-should-protect-their-interests-working-together-with-natural-partners.html>.

⁷⁷ Delanoe, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Russia’s Word Increasingly Means More in the Middle East than America’s,” *World Politics Review*, October 6, 2017, at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23317/russia-s-word-increasingly-means-more-in-the-middle-east-than-america-s>.



Russia President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Saudia Arabia, October 2019. (Kremlin.ru)

Not only with Turkey, but also with other Middle Eastern powers—the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, State of Israel, and Iran—Russia has consistently emphasized that its approach—combined with its stewardship of a Caspian-like process—can bring better results than reliance on American power and intervention. Indeed, in recent years, Russia has stressed that it is the only major power positioned to bring together the regional rivals.⁷⁹ Thus, “Russia’s interests are fundamentally connected with resolving the situation in the Middle East.”⁸⁰

More audaciously, Russia has proposed applying the Caspian template to a much more important waterway—the Persian Gulf—arguing that the

erratic and uncertain nature of U.S. foreign policy decision-making of the last several years has jeopardized the stability of the region.⁸¹

On July 23, 2019, the Russian Foreign Ministry released its Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region.⁸² As with the Caspian Convention, the security concept for the Persian Gulf proposes a “renouncement of permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states” in the Gulf—a formulation that is specifically designed to apply to the United States.⁸³ At the same time, by reconfiguring the definition of the region so that Russia, as a Caspian and Black Sea power, is a closer stakeholder than the more distant United States, the proposal envisions a role for Russia as

⁷⁹ “Putin says Russia can play key role in Middle East, has good Iran ties: Arabiya,” *Reuters*, October 13, 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-russia-mideast-idUSKBN1WS092>.

⁸⁰ “What Does Turkey’s Syria Offensive Mean For Russia?” *Moscow Times*, October 10, 2019, at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/10/what-does-turkeys-syria-offensive-mean-for-russia-a67678>.

⁸¹ “No foreign military presence is key to Persian Gulf stability – Russia’s security concept,” *RT*, July 24, 2019, at <https://www.rt.com/news/464901-gulf-concept-russia-us-iran/>.

⁸² The full document can be found on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

⁸³ “Tehran Welcomes Russia’s Concept for Persian Gulf Security - Iranian Foreign Minister,” *Sputnik*, September 2, 2019, at <https://sputniknews.com/military/201909021076705043-tehran-welcomes-russias-concept-for-persian-gulf-security---iranian-foreign-minister/>.

an honest broker to maintain the balances and preserve stability.⁸⁴ Finally, Russia would seek to negotiate and then guarantee a non-aggression pact between Iran and its neighbors.⁸⁵

Russia. More importantly, involvement in the larger Middle East is designed to safeguard Russia's more dominant position in both the Caspian and Black Sea basins.⁸⁹

In all of these matters, Russia seeks "to insert itself as the responsible mediator" capable of organizing the rules of engagement for a stable and predictable "Cold War" between the major power centers in the region, in contrast to a reckless and unpredictable United States.⁸⁶ Saudi Arabia may become the biggest convert to Russia's Caspian approach. Riyadh has become frustrated with the scale and scope of U.S. support and is more open to a Russian approach to regional security issues that emphasizes "productive cooperation and compromise."⁸⁷

Most significantly, Russia has used its new-found influence in the region to thwart the U.S. effort to use Saudi Arabia as a pressure point against the Russian economy. Now, instead of competing against Moscow, Riyadh is actively coordinating with the Russians in an effort to set a stable price "floor" for energy, to help guarantee revenues for both their treasuries. In addition, given the continued uncertainties that Western sanctions create for European and U.S. financial institutions to consider lending to Russia or facilitating investment, Moscow hopes to continue the trend of securing funds from Middle Eastern sources into its economy.⁸⁸

Russia recognizes that it cannot eliminate the U.S. presence or role from the Middle East, but it seeks to reduce or weaken the American footprint and to create economic and political opportunities for

84 "Russia: Moscow Outlines Plan for Collective Security in Persian Gulf," *Stratfor Situation Report*, July 30, 2019, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/russia-moscow-outlines-plan-collective-security-persian-gulf>.

85 "Tehran Welcomes," *op. cit.*

86 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Russia is the real winner in any US-Iran conflict," *The Hill*, May 9, 2019, at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/442843-russia-is-the-real-winner-in-any-us-iran-conflict>.

87 Ruslan Mamedov, "What to Expect from Putin's Visit to Saudi Arabia," *Al-Monitor*, October 10, 2019, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/russia-saudi-putin-expectations.html>.

88 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Russia's Hand is Visible Everywhere in the Middle East," *National Interest*, September 12, 2017, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-hand-visible-everywhere-the-middle-east-22272>.

89 On Russian objectives, see, the report, "US and Russia Interests in the Middle East," *NSI*, June 2017, at <https://nsiteam.com/sma-reachback-us-and-russia-interests-in-middle-east/>.

TO UNDERSTAND THE SOUTH, LOOK NORTH

What is Moscow hoping to achieve with its greater Black Sea strategy? To some extent, the southern strategy is a mirror of its northern/Arctic strategy. Both seek to promote Russia's domestic economic development, incentivize foreign partners to invest and ignore broad-based U.S. and EU sanctions, create a geopolitical demand for Russia to continue to act as a regional hegemon and as one of the great powers, and to insist that in both these zones, there is no need for U.S. or NATO involvement to promote peace and security.⁹⁰

Russia cannot compete with the United States or China on a truly global scale, for it lacks the resources and the power projection capabilities. Instead, concentrating Russian efforts on the Arctic and the Caspian-Black Sea mega-region gives Russia the ability to remain relevant as one of the great powers and to defend that status without creating unnecessary strains on the Russian state and economy. It invests other major powers in Russia's continuation as a great power so that it can maintain balances and thus regional security. It opens opportunities that can drive demand for Russian goods and services and supports Russia's geo-economic strategy of serving as the essential interconnector between the economic engines of Europe and China while connecting the Russian heartland to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

Certainly, Putin enjoys the limelight of being seen as a global statesman and in the position of near-peer equality with the United States, and cementing the Russian position in the Caspian-

Black Sea mega-region validates Russia as one of the agenda-setting powers in the 21st century international system. More importantly, it creates an independent basis for Russian power that is not dependent on the sufferance or good will of the United States. Putin and the Russian foreign policy establishment more generally were pleased with the public declaration of French President Emmanuel Macron, who in May 2018 declared:

I also recognize the very role that Russia has now built for itself both in its immediate environment and in some other regions of the world, for example, in the Middle East. This newly acquired role of a strong leader imposes a new responsibility. And I am well aware of Russia's irreplaceable role in some international issues.⁹¹

Partnership with the West proved not to be the pathway to "making Russia great again." Instead, Putin has shifted his focus from an East-West horizontal axis to viewing Russia's future as resting on the North-South axis of the Arctic and the greater Black Sea region. For Russia's friends and foes alike, these are the areas of the world where the future of Russian power will be decided.



⁹⁰ On the Russian northern/Arctic strategy, see, among others, Nastassia Astrasheuskaya and Henry Foy, "Polar Powers: Russia's Bid for Supremacy in the Arctic Ocean," *Financial Times*, April 27, 2019, at <https://www.ft.com/content/2fa82760-5c4a-11e9-939a-341f5ada9d40>; James Gordon, "Is America Losing Out on the Northern Sea Route?" *Raconteur*, September 2019, at <https://www.raconteur.net/finance/northern-sea-route>; and F. William Engdahl, "The Huge Implications of Russia's Northern Sea Route," *New Eastern Outlook*, November 22, 2017, at <https://journal-neo.org/2017/11/22/the-huge-implications-of-russia-s-northern-sea-route/>.

⁹¹ "France Recognizes Russia's New Role in International Relations," *Sputnik*, May 24, 2018, at <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201805241064779745-putin-macron-meeting-international-relations/>.

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