

The Caspian Security Aberration

After-Effects of the Moscow-Tehran Strategic Axis

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“It’s moving at a pretty fast clip in a very dangerous direction right now.”

– William Burns, CIA Director,
commenting on Iran’s alliance with Russia,
26 February 2023

The enduring European War continues to emit insecurity to its whole periphery. There are few other places on the globe where that suggestion appears so evident than in the Greater Caspian region, which constitutes a part of the Silk Road region (a.k.a. Eurasia). One of the particular effects of the war became the advent of an alliance of strategic convenience between Russia and Iran. Beyond economic and political aspects, that alliance is attaining a clear and amplifying *military* dimension.

The Caspian Sea and the airspace over it function as the only available avenue of direct communication between two strategic partners. Beyond the increasing trade through the North-South transportation corridor, the sea and air routes are in extensive use for the shipment of Iranian military supplies to Russia. Mounting publicly-available evidence indicates the growing scope of mutually-advantageous defense cooperation. Moreover, the sea provides a staging area for Russian war operations against Ukraine. All of the mentioned and other patterns are manifesting the progressing trend of the militarization of the Caspian Sea.

In the meantime, that sort of activity contributes to the development of a crucial geopolitical milieu in which vast hydrocarbon reserves are explored, exploited, and

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exported. Furthermore, the Caspian Sea is emerging as a vital confluence of several transcontinental transit transportation corridors. Any potential contingences in that area would have disruptive effects on global supply chains and markets.

Providing the prominence of the Caspian Sea that outspreads far beyond the region, this IDD Working Paper examines the military facets of the Russia-Iran axis and their potential influence on security in the region. Particular emphasis is placed on those autonomous sub-state actors that can operate outside the mandates and directives of their respective states and, in so doing, could act to advance their own narrow interests. The Working Paper also focuses on potential hybrid scenarios, threatening energy infrastructures and transportation routes in the Caspian maritime domain, as well as on the available unconventional (asymmetric) capabilities of both parties. The current Working Paper is a continuation of two of my previous IDD publications (dated [20 December 2022](#) and [9 June 2023](#), respectively) that were focused on the broader geopolitical aspects and those related to maritime security in the Greater Caspian Sea region.

The Caspian Sea: An Extension of the European War Theatre

The gradually escalating geopolitical hostility between Russia and the West, which began in 2014, has dragged the Caspian Sea region into it. As early as 2015, warships of the Caspian Flotilla (CF) of the Russian Navy were delivering long-range missile strikes against “terrorist” targets in Syria. This turned to be only the beginning. The start of an all-out war in Ukraine in February 2022 directly embedded the Caspian Sea into the Russian course of action. All four naval platforms of the Caspian Flotilla armed with SS-N-27 Sizzler cruise missiles have occasionally struck strategic targets in Ukraine. Likewise, the Russian Airspace Force’s strategic bombers of long-range aviation have launched X-101 and X-555 cruise missiles from over the northern part of the Caspian. Beyond the destruction this has caused in Ukraine, that weapon has allegedly produced collateral damage to Caspian biodiversity, as the often-malfunctioning missiles that have fallen into the water have caused the mass death of Caspian seals after being exposed to the leaking propellant. Most recently, the Russian military command had to call off missile strikes from the Caspian theatre, since the extended flight time due to the long distance provides the Ukrainian side with more time to brace for impact thanks to early warning intelligence provided by the country’s Western partners.

The faltering war campaign in Ukraine is forcing Russia to reassign some of its Caspian Flotilla’s minor combatant ships and amphibious landing crafts to the Black Sea and the Azov Sea via the Volga-Don interconnecting canal (some of these have already been lost in action). Similarly, the Flotilla’s 177th naval infantry regiment and its 137th special operations detachment have been redeployed to the Ukrainian front from their bases in Dagestan.

However, the major impact caused by the European War on the Caspian Sea rests on the emergent strategic nexus between Russia and Iran. Since mid-2022, Moscow and Tehran have been increasingly cooperating in the military sphere and coordinating strategies aimed at the containment of Western opponents perceived as foes. Reportedly, Iran supplies Russia with much needed ammunition, including the scarce 152mm artillery shells, 125mm tank cannon projectiles, 122mm rockets, antitank guided missiles, cartridges for small and light weapons, as well as spare artillery barrels to replace ones worn out by intensive fire rate. That delivery multiplies Russian warfighting capabilities. Yet, the most important Iranian contribution is the loitering munitions (kamikaze drones) of the Shahed family (the Russian designation is Geranium). Reportedly, hundreds of these have already been used to target the Ukrainian cities, including Kiev. That compels the Ukrainian Defense Forces to pin its most effective air defense systems (supplied by Western countries) for protection of urban centers, whereas they remain indispensable in the combat zone to provide cover for Russian airstrikes against its field army units. Thus, a simple and cheap Iranian technical and tactical solution turns into a factor of strategic significance. Iranian personnel are now reportedly setting up a drone-assembling factory in the Russian region of Tatarstan. According to Iran's Minister of Defense, its arms exports in 2022 grew by 81 percent. The lion's share of it went to Russia.

Moscow compensates Iran through reciprocal arms supplies. The delivery of SU-35 jet fighters will notably elevate the combat capabilities of the IRIAF (Islamic Republic of Iran's Air Force) that now still rest on the degrading fleet of ageing U.S.-made planes supplied before the fall of Shah. Other items on Tehran's wish list allegedly include the S-400 air defense system, which is not much needed for Russia in Ukraine yet strongly wished by Iran to protect its nuclear facilities.

Most of that give-and-take of hardware and expendables is transported via the Caspian Sea (a lesser portion is delivered by cargo planes over the same sea). The freshly-minted partners have established a sealift between Iran's ports of Bandar Anzali and Amirabad and the Russian ports of Astrakhan and Mahachkala. Naturally, a major part of the cargo turnover consists of export-import trade merchandise; however, lethal loads are also present (vessels that carry such loads sail by switching-off their automatic identification systems in order to obscure tracking). Both allies are hastily improving their respective port infrastructure, have started to build new freight ships; Russia has begun dredging the mouth of the Volga River and plans to expand the Volga-Don intersecting canal that facilitates intra-theater maneuver. Recently Iran has expanded its merchant fleet on the Caspian Sea by adding some 15 additional vessels transferred there via the mentioned canal.

Moscow considers the Trans-Caspian connection between Russia and Iran as one of the few remaining "holes-in-the-wall" to access the countries of the Global South that are regarded as new economic partners and potential anti-Western sympathizers. As early as in mid-March 2023, the Russian National Security Council gathered to discuss "cooperation on the Caspian Sea," including "security aspects," according to the official

statement. Two months later, a Russian military delegation headed by Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, went to Iran. The program of the stay included, beyond other activities, a visit to an Iranian naval base and a branch of the naval academy on the Caspian Sea.

All those developments indicate that the strategic Moscow-Tehran axis is both real and active. One of the consequences of this de facto alliance is the militarization of the Caspian Sea, which is directly related to the European War and needs to be understood in the broader context of the looming global polarization. That may eventually breed crisis scenarios.

Hybrid Settings: No War, No Peace, and No Attribution

It is not easy to envisage a possibility of an overt conventional war or an armed conflict on the Caspian Sea—not for now, at least. Despite certain political frictions and tensions existing between some of the littoral countries, they all are controllable. In addition, there are no extra-regional actors with an established presence on the Caspian Sea. All five Caspian basin countries are intending to further exploit the energy resources and the transit transportation potential of the Caspian basin for their own benefit. That predisposition, logically, determines their nonviolent coexistence and mutual accommodation—notwithstanding dissimilar political systems or irritating foreign partnerships.

However, what seems logical in theory often does not pass the test in the world of Realpolitik, as understood by its proponents. Just 16 months ago, few people could imagine that Russia would launch an all-out war against Ukraine that is now reshaping the global landscape. ‘Never say never’—a phrase that nowadays gets increasing usage.

The effects of the European War have split the “Caspian Five” into two groups—winners and losers. The first group (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) is benefiting from shifting East-West supply chains and of an increased demand of energy from alternative sources. The second one (Russia and Iran) is partly isolated from global markets by the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime and seeks to break the seal. While Russia and Iran have operationalized the maritime leg of the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), they watch with concern developments of the alternative (rival) route: the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route (TITR, or the Middle Corridor). The latter geo-economic project, which provides the shortest viable terrestrial way from China to Europe, is gathering strength fast. Not only is TITR an economic competitor to INSTC, it also benefits Europe and enjoys American political support. This represents a red flag for both Moscow and Tehran, by virtue of being in confrontation with the “collective West.” In terms of security, there is eternal anxiety in both capitals on the potential advent of foreign military presence in the Caspian Sea to protect energy resources and supply chains. That perception strengthens a “zero-sum” logic.

Again, an overt conventional war on the Caspian Sea is a quite remote possibility, at present. However, a more likely option involves hybrid war. I define a hybrid war, in general terms, as *a postmodern war strategy based on complex and concealed application of tools of hard and soft power, aimed at the achievement of the desired goals without trespassing the distinction line between war and peace*. One of the principal features of hybrid warfare is the non-attribution and deniability of undertaken actions by its perpetrator, complicating a prompt and decisive response from the targeted opponent. At the same time, the nature of hybrid warfare does not exclude open actions of limited scope, based on the expectation that the adversary would opt not to escalate with a (commensurate) response.

In simple terms, a *hybrid strategy* can be understood as consisting of *balancing on the sharp edge in the shadow zone over the blurred lines between a tense peace and an open war*. Past decade's experience proves that such strategy could be effective and hard to counter.

A hybrid scenario is the most viable option for the Moscow-Tehran axis to disrupt their perceived competitors and opponents on the Caspian Sea. That suggestion requires closer examination of the potential actors that could be engaged from Iran and Russia's side in that maritime theatre.

Autonomous Sub-State Actors: Self-Governed, Self-Directed, and Self-Sufficient

In Iran, and more recently in Russia, there are several autonomous violent sub-state actors that require attention in relation to the discussed issue. I define an *autonomous violent sub-state actor* as *an entity initially established by a state actor to perform distinct military, paramilitary, or intelligence missions. That entity, over time, acquires political and strategic autonomy, non-controlled operational and technical capabilities, material self-sufficiency, and information outreach, all of which are exploited for the attainment of particular goals, objectives, and interests that are not necessarily in line with those of the state that established it*. In time of crisis, when the state system weakens, autonomous sub-state actors tend to boost their "sovereignty"—that is, they still formally act at the behest of "their" state, yet in reality increasingly pursue their own corporate interests.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC, a.k.a. Pasdaran) is a part of Iran's twin defense system. The prominence of that unique entity far surpasses its conventional military dimension. The Corps is the primary operator of whatever advanced special operation capabilities and possesses its own intelligence component. It enjoys overriding influence in Iran's complex state and political system, accumulates considerable economic potential and financial wealth, performs internal ideology enforcement missions, influences foreign policy, and manages all kinds of "unconventional" activities abroad.

The extraordinary status of the IRGC as a multifaceted and multilayered politico-military corporation makes it de-facto a “state-within-a-state.”

Since September 2022, Iran has endured a systemic crisis, revolving around mass popular discontent, economic failure, and the uncertainty over the issue of transition of the supreme power. The unfolding crisis has triggered militarized international behavior on the part of Iran directed towards its exterior perimeter, including Azerbaijan and Israel. The IRGC has played a central facilitating role in that campaign (including the issuance of threats, spread of subversive propaganda narratives, and projection of military posture). The Corps is also likely to be a key player (and stakeholder) in the process of the imminent transition of power, the conditions and outcomes of which remain unclear. In that process it will, most likely, prioritize its corporative interests above all others.

There is a broader picture that needs to be kept in one’s field of view. Allegedly, “Pasdaran, Inc.” is a prime mover behind Iran’s nuclear program. As the controversy over it is far from being over, and potential kinetic counter-options cannot totally be excluded, the issue of Iranian retaliation remains on the table (retribution is an essential part of Iran’s strategic culture). That retaliation may affect third uninvolved parties and/ or soft areas, not directly related to the aforementioned controversy.

In meantime, the war in Ukraine has sent Russia into systemic crisis that affects all its spheres. One of its myriad consequences has been the proliferation of armed paramilitary actors, either organized by the state or self-organized, in order to conduct the war. Most of these are vaguely branded as “private military companies” (PMCs). Only the two first words of this phrase reflect reality. Many of these entities had surpassed the notion of a company by their strength, capabilities, combat experience, and training level. Moreover, some paramilitary leaders clearly manifest personal political ambitions. The most expressive example is the “Wagner Corps.” Another is the Chechen paramilitary cluster wrapped into the structure of the Federal Service of the National Guard Forces (still formally loyal to the central government but enjoying the broadest autonomy). In the past several months, different state and private actors (such as companies, political parties, and individual oligarchs) have raised over 30 PMCs in total. For instance, reports indicate that the Gazprom energy corporation has formed three such entities from its security personnel.

The rise of PMC condottieri threatens the loss of the state’s monopoly on violence. The indicators of such trend have been multiplying recently. An important factor to keep in mind is that mercenaries are generally motivated by considerations of material gain. For instance, Wagner’s outfits in Syria were apparently involved in the seizure and protection of oilfields and associated infrastructure, in furtherance of the interests of private business actors. In the developing conditions of the gradually weakening central power and the increasing contention between different groups of influence, certain PMCs may emerge as an outsourced tool used by some of those groups or actors to accomplish their

own ends, which may differ from those of the state. Moreover, in case of fragmentation within the Russian state power domain, even the use of regular military capabilities for the same purposes is potentially possible, too.

Attack Scenarios and Capabilities: Underwater, Surface, and Air

To come to terms with potential scenarios on the Caspian Sea, first there is a need to examine the activities and capabilities of its potential perpetrators in other geopolitical theatres.

In the past decades, Iran has developed unparalleled asymmetric naval warfare capabilities and tactics (very few other countries come close). The architects of its naval asymmetric warfare doctrine—Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani and Brigadier Ali-Akbar Ahmadian (the former and the incumbent head of the Supreme National Security Strategy, respectively) and Commodore Ali Fadavi (the IRGC's Deputy Commander)—enjoy a high degree of influence on Tehran's security hierarchy decisionmaking process. It is hard to deny Iran's progress in developing that track, especially its adaption of sophisticated technologies. Iran applied its unconventional maritime assets and solutions during the Iran-Iraq War (in the course of the infamous "Tanker War") and in all succeeding episodes of proxy conflicts in the Gulf, the Mediterranean, and both the Red and Arabian seas. Remarkably, most of Iran's undertaken actions were of an overt nature.

Russia's pattern of activities looks different. It centers more on the clandestine (covert) end of the operational spectrum, perfectly fitting the hybrid mode. Russia traditionally paid attention to the development of its unconventional undersea capabilities, which fall under umbrella of the highly classified Main Directorate of the Deepwater Research of the Defense Ministry (Unit 40056, also known by its Russian acronym GUGI). GUGI has at its disposal highly-trained personnel, sophisticated submersible equipment, and a surface fleet disguised as merchant vessels or hydrographic ships. After the start of the European War, GUGI has significantly increased its intelligence gathering, and surveillance and mapping activity in the North Sea, especially in areas in which underwater pipelines, internet and electricity cables, and offshore wind power stations are located (this has raised concerns in the UK, the Netherlands, and Norway, amongst other NATO member states). As far as the Russian PMCs are concerned, no one has yet been able to publicly verify any maritime capabilities at their disposal. However, it has been reported that Gazprom's mercenaries have been recruited from the company's security personnel that were formerly employed on offshore oilrigs. Moreover, the *Redut* (the Stronghold) PMC has a maritime action group called *Priboy* (the Surf) within its structure.

Based on the above-described patterns, it is possible to discern several hypothetical hybrid operational settings in the Caspian maritime theatre, all of which fall short of an open or overt war scenario.

Underwater attack. The September 2022 frogmen attack on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 seabed gas pipelines (the source of which remains disputed) illustrates, first, the feasibility of such a clandestine action, and, second, the potentially sweeping effects of a successful operation of this kind. Four explosive charges, which damaged two tubes, effectively eliminated Russia from the highly lucrative EU gas market.

The Caspian Sea provides a target-rich environment for underwater attacks—seabed pipelines and interconnectors, internet and electricity cables, oil and gas rigs, ships, and vessels. An example of how it may appear: in May-June 2019, limpet mines reportedly mounted by the Iranian combat divers, damaged six oil tankers in the vicinity of the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. As it happens, Iran’s naval commando-training center of excellence is located on the shore of the Caspian Sea.

The effective protection of subsea infrastructure poses a particular challenge due to environment’s specifics. Equally, post-attack damage-control is also problematic, while the consequences may be grave. For instance, the destruction of cables located on the Caspian seabed could disrupt internet connectivity between several surrounding states and even regions (cables provide more communication bandwidth compared to satellites). In addition, it is possible to covertly mount technical intercept equipment on cables for intelligence gathering (instead of engendering their demolition).

Iran and Russia have a pool of well-trained and experienced personnel as well as a set of quite sophisticated equipment for such type of missions (in particular, both use German subaquatic gear, purchased from the free market). An underwater attack is a preferable option for delivering a limited warning message without overtly revealing the attacker’s origin.

Drone attack. Iran is one of the pioneers and current leaders on the global market of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), including their various strike versions. The September 2019 attack, in which a swarm of 19 drones hit oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and caused a spike in global energy prices, is the best-known example of Iran’s UAV outreach. Notably, that operation was performed as a “false flag” attack. It appears that the type of strike drone used was the Shahid-136 model, whose estimated cost is around \$40,000 per unit, the damage the attack caused totaled hundreds of millions of dollars.

Iran has been allegedly supplying precisely that type of weapon to Russia recently, and now is reportedly assisting that country to produce it domestically. Iran is also said to be testing unorthodox solutions like the conversion of regular merchant vessels into drone-carriers. Such “arsenal ships” could release swarms of strike drones (loitering munitions) against selected targets like crowded ports, offshore oil and gas platforms, other critical infrastructure, and ships in the open sea. In fact, drone-carrying ships enable longer-range firepower projection, and thus perform the function of a sub-strategic weapon.

Speedboat attack. Since the 1980s, Iran has achieved a supreme skill in the mass use of armed speedboats against different kinds of surface targets. It has built a “mosquito fleet” of *many hundreds* of such manned crafts. Yet, in recent years, the speedboat option has attained another dimension—the advent of unmanned crafts (a.k.a. remotely piloted vehicles or surface drones). The scope of the threat posed by such weapon illustrates the statistics of maritime operations of Yemeni Houthi forces (an Iranian proxy). Between 2017 and 2021, 16 out of 24 Houthi attacks against shipping in the Red Sea involved the use of Iran-designed surface kamikaze drones.

Swarm attacks by speedboats (both manned and unmanned, and potentially aided by UAVs) pose a significant threat to shipping lines and both offshore and onshore critical infrastructure. Iran has a full set of such weapons, and it appears that Russia is developing them, too, based on lessons learned from its war with Ukraine on the Black Sea.

The hybrid options are not limited to above-defined three types of attack, presented here to provide a glimpse of potential threats. For instance, a cyber strike would likely support kinetic actions. Moreover, in case of escalation, other available capabilities and assets would be engaged as well. This may be the topic of a future IDD Analytical Policy Brief or Working Paper.

Synopsis

- The strategic alliance between Russia and Iran, which has an evolving militarized dimension, is changing the security equation in the Greater Caspian Sea region.
- A shared vision of the adversary (the “collective West”) cements the Realpolitik foundations of this alliance and determines its performance.
- The Caspian Sea provides—at the moment—the only viable route directly connecting both partners, what makes it their strategic commons.
- The foregoing raises a contradicting dilemma: although Moscow and Tehran are interested in preserving their Trans-Caspian link, they may also contemplate undermining the energy projects and transportation routes that benefit Western actors as well as those belonging to the core of the region itself.
- Thus, although the emerged settings on the Caspian Sea lessen the prospect of open conventional armed conflict, it still leaves space for a range of hybrid or asymmetric disruptive opportunities.
- Possible hybrid actions (even limited by its scope) could aim at causing political pressure on designated parties, signaling discontent, manipulation by energy prices and insurance rates, and so on.
- Certain autonomous sub-state actors with disruptive capabilities that operate within the Iranian and Russian contexts could act on the Caspian Sea separately from the imprimatur of their states, based on their own institutional, corporate, or private agendas, motivations, and interests.

- Any potential disruption to critical pieces of infrastructures and supply chains in the Caspian basin would have an impact on the global economy and on the internal stability of the littoral states.
- Both regional and extra-regional stakeholders should undertake cooperative measures and actions to enhance security in the Caspian Sea theatre.
- Improving collective maritime domain awareness (MDA) would be the first essential step in this regard.

All assumptions made in this Working Paper are probabilistic. Even so, the probability-impact ratio persists. The risks associated with any violent disruptive scenarios related to the energy and transportation sectors on the Caspian Sea may seem low at present. Yet, if any of such scenarios materialize, their resulting impact would be extremely high.

Therefore, even the lowermost degree of potential threats requires its integration into the security calculi of various states. The uncertain dynamic and unforeseen consequences of the European War, together with many other variables, could intensify the militarization of the region and, in turn, shape the establishment of a more insecure status quo. Such an evolution of the regional security environment could eventually turn the Greater Caspian region into a tinderbox, whereby a single spark could result in unsought developments of formidable magnitude and consequences.