

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR

Moscow Expanding Ties With Iran to Counter Growing Turkish Influence Around Caspian

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 32

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February 25, 2021 05:37 PM Age: 3 weeks



Russian naval exercise in Caspian, late 2020 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Moscow is alarmed by the expansion of Turkish influence in the Caspian region, most immediately by Turkey's enthusiasm for trans-Caspian natural gas pipelines, something that could undercut Russia's ability to dominate that market. In response, Russia has expanded its own naval activities in the Caspian to signal that it remains a force to be reckoned with there because it could interrupt such flows by force (TRT Russian (<https://www.trtrussian.com/ekonomika/ankara-rada-podpisaniyu-soglasheniya-po-kaspiyu-mezhdu-baku-i-ashhabadom-4543408>), February 23; KavkazGeoClub (<https://kavkazgeoclub.ru/content/vyhod-turcii-na-kaspiy-perekraivaet-gazovuyu-kartu-evrazii>), February 16).

These Russian actions have, in turn, been concerning to Azerbaijan, the chief beneficiary of the expansion of Turkish influence in the Caspian region and a proponent of further trans-Caspian transit links with Central Asian countries. In response, Baku has directed its own naval force to prepare to defend pipelines and other energy infrastructure in the Caspian Sea from attack either by other countries or by non-state terrorists. Such preparations do not mean that any attacks are imminent, but they have their own dynamic, especially given that the Azerbaijani government has chosen to discuss them so publicly (Report.az (<https://report.az/ru/armiya/v-svyazi-s-nachalom-novogo-uchebnogo-goda-v-vms-azerbajdzhana-provodyatsya-meropriyatiya/>), February 11; Kaspiyskiy Vestnik (<http://casp-geo.ru/vms-azerbajdzhana-gotovyatsya-k-zashhite-energeticheskoy-infrastruktury-na-kaspii/>), February 18).

But Moscow has not limited its actions in the Caspian to its own forces. In recent weeks, it has held two exercises with Iranian ships in the central and southern portions of that sea, where most of the hydrocarbon fields and energy infrastructure between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan exist. It has been able to do so because Tehran is at least as worried about the implications of growing Turkish influence in the region as Moscow is (Caucasus Post (<https://capost.media/views/turtsiya-pytaetsya-vydavit-s-yuzhnogo-kavkaza-rossiyu-i-iran/>), February 24; see EDM (<https://jamestown.org/program/growing-azerbaijani-central-asian-ties-likely-to-trigger-conflicts-with-russia-and-iran/>), February 18).

Iran does not have a significant fleet in the Caspian Sea or more generally—as measured by the number of ships, their size and their armaments. But earlier this month, Alireza Tangisiri, the commander of the naval forces of the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guard Corps, announced that Tehran has begun building larger and more heavily armed vessels, which will help make Iran a true naval power (Vzglyad (<https://vz.ru/news/2021/2/12/1084732.html>), February 12). Most Russian analysts have dismissed this as Iranian braggadocio, but they have nonetheless suggested that Moscow could benefit from such a development. In the Persian Gulf, a larger Iranian presence would reduce the burden on the Russian navy to counter the United States fleet; and in the Caspian, a larger Iranian force could limit the spread of Turkish influence and provide protection to the north-south trade route that Russia and Iran both favor. As a result, some in Moscow are now asking what Russian shipbuilding industry could do to help Tehran (Vzglyad (<https://vz.ru/world/2021/2/20/1085855.html>), February 20), despite the fact that Russia's own shipyards are deeply troubled (Nezavisimaya Gazeta (https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2020-12-17/1_1122_armament.html), December 17 2020).

In a new *Vzglyad* commentary, Moscow security analyst Aleksandr Timokhin writes that, from many points of view, the current moment seems propitious for such cooperation. Moscow could provide Iran not only with important components for its navy but also, if Tehran were interested, with finished ships. Iran has already purchased three Russian-produced submarines and, thus, has experience with Russian yards and equipment (*Vzglyad* (<https://vz.ru/world/2021/2/20/1085855.html>), February 20). He focuses on the advantages that a larger Iranian navy would give Russia in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, allowing Moscow to “delegate” to the Iranians part of the task of containing the US that, “crudely speaking,” the Russian navy does not have sufficient strength to do on its own. But it seems clear that the Russian analyst is also interested in seeing Iran develop its naval presence, albeit within limits, northward. Moscow would like the Iranian fleet there to be strong enough to help Russia contain Turkey but not so strong as to be in a position to promote Tehran’s plans for an expanded Iranian empire including “Armenia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and other” lands to its north.

That is not the only factor limiting the expansion of such cooperation, Timokhin contends. Iran wants to develop its own shipbuilding industry rather than being forced to rely on Russia, especially given that Tehran remembers well that in the 1990s, Moscow, under pressure from the West, stopped supplying the Iranian navy. At least some Iranians fear that this could happen again, and they do not want to put themselves at risk. But at the same time, other Iranians, aware of the limitations of their national yards, are interested in speaking with the Russians or even the Chinese—and their conversations with Beijing in this regard may be another reason for Moscow to seek to promote its own services. According to Timokhin, the possibilities of a massive Russian assistance program for the development of the Iranian navy are thus quite limited, although some moves in that direction may be possible. If worries about Turkey over Caspian routes or east-west tensions intensify, Moscow is likely to try to secure Tehran’s agreement for a tighter relationship than it now wants.

One sign Moscow may be moving in that direction is the revival of talk about an even more gigantic project involving Russia and Iran: the possible construction of a 7,200-kilometer-long canal across Iran that would carry cargo and allow for the movement of ships between the Caspian and the Persian Gulf. Conversations among Russians, Iranians and Indians about such a project have been on-again, off-again throughout the last five years (*Vzglyad* (<http://www.vzglyad.ru/economy/2016/4/8/804331.html>), April 8, 2016 and *Kavkaz Uzel* (<https://kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/378/posts/35165>), November 1, 2018); but now, some observers suggest these discussions may take off, which could benefit Russia and Iran in two important ways (*Kavkaz Uzel* (<https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/378/posts/47015>), February 16).

On the one hand, such a canal would be a boon to north-south trade and undercut Turkey’s east-west projects. And on the other hand, it would allow Iran’s navy to move ships from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian in the event of need, just as Russia has moved ships from the Caspian to the Sea of Azov to pressure Ukraine (see EDM, May 31, 2018 (<https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-shifts-flotilla-from-caspian-to-azov-sea-giving-it-a-new-offensive-capability/>), and November 27, 2018 (<https://jamestown.org/program/russian-caspian-flotillas-capacity-to-project-force-threatens-littoral-states-and-ukraine/>)). But even if neither of these Russian projects bear fruit, they highlight the fact that Moscow’s contest with Turkey in the Caucasus not only involves Iran but has gone to sea, adding a new dimension to this geopolitical competition.

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