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## Turkmenistan and military buildup in the caspian region: A small state in the post-unipolar era

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### ABSTRACT

Caspian Sea had been actually a Soviet internal lake. Iran was too weak to be a competitor/rival for the USSR. The collapse of the USSR had transformed Caspian Sea into the sea surrounded by several states and each of them vie for the Caspian Sea's natural resources. Caspian Sea became also important as the route for delivery of oil/gas. All of this led to considerable tensions among the states in the area and naval buildup. Even Turkmenistan, desert republic, started to build the navy and contribute to the rise of tension in Caspian Sea. All of this indicated the increasing global instability which followed the end of Cold War and the end of the USA unipolarity.

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With many places in the world where the potential for major military conflict is evident, the Caspian Sea usually falls below the radar. Yet it is one of the places where tensions run high and there is a clear potential for military conflict with great implications for global security. The collapse of the USSR, increasing competition for oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, the potential influence of this gas and oil in global demand for these essential commodities, and finally, the Caspian role as a delivery route for Turkmenistan/Azerbaijan gas to European markets have led to an increasing arms race in the region. Observers usually pay attention to the bigger players in the region, such as Russia and Iran, due to the residual mentality of the Cold

War and early postwar era. During the Cold War, the USA and USSR defined the basic configurations of global affairs, albeit even at that time the picture was not so simple. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the USA was the only shaper of global policies. By about the end of the Bush era, the US economic and geopolitical decline, both relative and absolute, had become evident. Still, no clear alternative center of power has yet emerged. Even if we assume China will be the paramount center in the future, it will take time to become the undisputable global leader. Until then, several centers of power will exist, and parts of the world will be in a state of permanent anarchy, a “gray area” with quite unstable sociopolitical conditions. The area around the Caspian Sea area is one of these.

The end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR also led to global fragmentations. In the past, Pax Sovietica and Pax Americana cemented relations between the powers in their spheres of influence. The collapse of Pax Sovietica and the beginning of the disintegration of Pax Americana led to new areas of intense tensions that could lead to military conflicts with potentially global implications. The Caspian Sea region is one of these. In the recent past, the region was basically controlled by the Russian empire/USSR, with Iran/Persia

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playing second fiddle. U.S. inability to exercise absolute control over this part of the world led to increasing tensions between the countries in the area, all vying for a piece of the oil/gas pie. For some of these countries, the Caspian Sea became an important location for pipelines to deliver gas to European markets. The volatility of the area, the unpredictability of its geopolitical configurations, and the new role of small states can be seen in Turkmenistan's position.

Turkmenistan, one of the most backward republics of the former USSR, has long been covered by desert. The notion of a navy would be associated mainly with the "ship of the desert" – the camel. Yet the collapse of the USSR and competition for oil and gas reserves led Ashkhabad to build naval forces. In this buildup, Turkmenistan was informed by the activities of other states in the Caspian Sea area.

## 1. Russian buildup

Russia as the tsarist empire and then the USSR has been present on Caspian shores for centuries, but has not until recently seen the sea as having naval importance. Until the collapse of the USSR, it was actually an internal Russian sea. Iran, which shares the shoreline, was too weak to create problems; in fact, Teheran was feared tsarist Russia and later the USSR. Not only did the collapse of the USSR lead to the emergence of several states with their own claims over the Caspian Sea, but it became an essential route for delivery of Central Asian/Azerbaijan gas to Europe, a project Moscow tried to prevent by all means. Awareness of the rich gas and oil deposits on the bottom of the sea has whetted Moscow's appetite. By 2000, according to Russian observers, Moscow also had become concerned over threats to its predominance in the Caspian region, primarily due to increased US presence.<sup>1</sup> It was not surprising that the Caspian navy suddenly emerged as a great priority for Moscow. Indeed, potential conflicts there are seen as more likely than in any other areas the Russian navy operates. Russia had a four blue water (ocean) Navy fleet to operate in world oceans, but none of these were modernized as quickly as the Caspian fleet.<sup>2</sup> Admiral Vladimir Vysotskii, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian navy, stated that the Caspian fleet would receive 16 new battleships by 2020.<sup>3</sup> Some observers assumed that this fleet received better ships than any other Russian ocean fleets.<sup>4</sup> This interest in the Caspian Sea indicates that Russia's top brass regard armed conflict there as much more likely than in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, despite 2005 and 2012 joint Russian navy maneuvers with China. Some members of the Russian elite believe war in the Caspian Sea could have global implications. Aleksandr Kniazhev, Senior Fellow of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science, pointed out that he "does not exaggerate when he states that the beginning of hostilities in Caspian Sea would mean the beginning of world

war in which all Central Eurasia would be involved."<sup>5</sup> Despite its own dire predictions about the implications of conflict in the Caspian Sea, Moscow noted that it could engage in war with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan as it already has with Georgia if its interests were ignored.<sup>6</sup> Here, of course, Moscow pointed to the Trans-Caspian gas line, which is to send Turkmenistan gas to Europe bypassing Russia. Moscow has tried to prevent this development by all means possible, for it would undermine the monopoly over gas supply to Europe and deprive Moscow of crucial revenue and geopolitical clout. Moscow made clear that it would engage in war with Caspian states if they made any moves that could endanger its interest. Moscow sent these messages not just by military buildup but also by maneuvers in the area, the most recent in September 2012.<sup>7</sup> While not excluding conflict with rival Caspian states such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Russia also encouraged their potential conflicts with Iran and would not object if Iran engaged in naval maneuvers in the Caspian Sea with their implicit threat to Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The tension with Azerbaijan and Baku's response

Not only Russia creates a problem for Turkmenistan and implicitly threatens it with naval buildup. Azerbaijan's relationship with Turkmenistan is far from smooth, and cooperation to deliver gas to the West via Ukraine or other routes could easily be transformed into open hostility. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan have tensions over control of the disputed oil fields in the Caspian Sea. These fields were discovered in 1989, or perhaps even 1959.<sup>9</sup> Azerbaijan actually controls them, but Turkmenistan does not recognize Azerbaijan's claims, and disputes began immediately after the collapse of the USSR. At the beginning of the post-Soviet era, Moscow still held authority as major arbitrator in the area, at least in the eyes of some post-Soviet leaders. Consequently, Turkmenistan president Sparmurat Niazov visited Moscow and asked Yeltsin for mediation. This mediation was apparently not too successful, and in 1997 tensions between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan became really high. Moscow clearly tilted toward Azerbaijan, and on 4 July Baku and Moscow signed an agreement to develop the disputed oil field.<sup>10</sup>

Predictably, Turkmenistan turned to Western companies. The tension grew to the point where Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan broke diplomatic relations,<sup>11</sup> and Niazov noted that the tension could well lead to war. In his view,

<sup>5</sup> Sergej Konovalov, "Sovsem ne mirnoe Kaspiiskoe more," *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 13 April 2012.

<sup>6</sup> "Voina na Kaspii mozhet stat' real'nost'iu," *Akton Biznes*, 22 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> "V. Mukhin: Kaspiiskoe vodianoje peremirje: V sporakh po povodu prinadlezhnosti ugle vodorodnykh mestorozhdenii na more poka pobezhdaet sil'nyi," *Central Asia.ru*, 3 September 2012.

<sup>8</sup> A. Fatulla, "Transkaspiiskii gazoprovod mozhet stat' real'nost'iu," *Zerkala.az*, 28 April 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Feruza Dzhan, "'Sedar' vs. 'Kiaput': Kakoi sud rassudit Azerbaidzhan s Turkmenistanom?" *Fergana.News*, 3 July 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "S. Shakariants: Kaspii kak vozmozhnyi novyi front regional'noi konfrontatsii," *Central Asia.ru*, 21 June 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Karpenko, "Strasti vokrug Kaspii: Tikhoe i spokoinoe more stanovitsia predmetom razdora," *Geopolitika* 35 (4521), 5 September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "Sopernichestvo za Kaspii," *Arevelk Center*, 14 April 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Rossiia gotovitsia k voine s Iranom ili za Iran," *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 14 June 2012.

“the Caspian smells of blood.”<sup>12</sup> As early as 2007, Ashkhabad had a clear concern that its interest in the region would be overlooked and, during the meeting of Caspian states in Teheran, the Turkmenistan delegation insisted that no one act unilaterally.<sup>13</sup> Only later did negotiations between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan resume, possibly because both had concluded they needed to cooperate in the Trans-Caspian project to deliver gas to the West. By 2008, the leaders supposedly clinched the agreement that neither would engage in exploration or extraction of oil or gas in the territories in question.<sup>14</sup> Supposedly, Baku and Ashkhabad even decided in 2009 to solve the dispute through international arbitration.<sup>15</sup>

But the agreement was hardly cast in stone, and the two sides were far from a solution.<sup>16</sup> Azerbaijan still had disputes with Turkmenistan and Iran over Caspian oil fields,<sup>17</sup> and tension flared anew in summer 2012.<sup>18</sup> Baku also proclaimed that outside forces – an implicit reference to Russia – encouraged conflicts.<sup>19</sup> Due to the possibility of conflict with Russia, Iran, and Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan engaged in a naval buildup in the Caspian Sea. Russia’s navy was still the largest, but Azerbaijan increased its navy quickly, mostly due to collaboration with Israel. In 2009, Shimon Peres visited Baku and Azerbaijan gave Israel permission to create an electronic intelligence network.<sup>20</sup> After these events, cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan including in the military realm, increased even more. The relationship was cemented even more by the presence of a common threat – Iran. Iran, which is moving toward nuclear weapons, created an existential threat for Israel. It also emerged as a problem for Azerbaijan. Iran claimed that Azerbaijan is just an Iranian province and needs to be returned to the motherland, a claim justified as follows. First, Azerbaijan did belong to Iran until the early nineteenth century, when Iran lost it to the Russian empire. Second, ethnic Azerbaijanians are among the Iran minorities. People in Baku stated that Azerbaijanians – Turkic people different from the majority of the Iranian population – are discriminated against and should be unified with their brethren. All these factors increased tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan moved increasingly toward Israel, which became one of its major, if not the major, suppliers of weapons. In 2012 Israel provided Azerbaijan even more sophisticated weapons.

### 3. Iranian buildup

Iran has its own claims in the Caspian Sea. As a matter of fact, it is the Iranian and Turkmenistan positions that

prevent dividing the Sea between neighboring states.<sup>21</sup> Iran also is strongly against the trans-Caspian pipeline.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Iran engaged in military buildup and decided to create a submarine fleet in the Caspian Sea.<sup>23</sup> It also developed a plan for moving ships from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea in case of emergency.<sup>24</sup> Some observers considered strengthening the Iranian navy in the Caspian Sea “unprecedented.”<sup>25</sup>

### 4. Kazakhstan buildup

Even Kazakhstan, which tried to conduct a balanced foreign policy and avoid conflict with its neighbors, took note of tensions in Caspian region. Until 2003, Kazakhstan paid little attention to the Caspian Sea; in the first decade of the post-Soviet era, it had one boat and one ship.<sup>26</sup> Later, however, it noted the rising tensions and resources and began a naval buildup. It built a naval base in Atau<sup>27</sup> and now has a fleet of more than 20 ships and boats with 3000 personnel, supported by 12 fighter jets and other auxiliary forces.<sup>28</sup> Kazakhstan, following a “multi-vector” foreign policy, has tried to cooperate with all major players, yet does not seem to trust any of them fully. While maintaining a good relationship with Russia and supporting Moscow’s proposed idea of a Eurasian Union (actually proposed by Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbaev some time ago) Kazakhstan did not trust Moscow absolutely. Consequently, it has cooperated with the USA in the military arena starting in 2008, when Russia expressed resistance to upgrading the Kazakhstan navy in the Caspian Sea.<sup>29</sup> This cooperation continues to the present; Kazakhstan has acquired four US military ships<sup>30</sup> and, in general, modernized its navy with US help.<sup>31</sup> It also understood it could not be dependent on foreign suppliers and developed its own military industry. In 2012 it put into operation the first Kazakhstan-produced battleship. In 2013, it plans a new battleship with even more powerful guns.<sup>32</sup>

### 5. Turkmenistan’s response

In this situation, Turkmenistan engaged in its own ambitious naval buildup. On the collapse of the USSR, it

<sup>12</sup> “V. Mukhin: Kaspiiskoe vodianoie peremirie.”

<sup>13</sup> “Turkmenistan obnarodoval svoiu kontseptsiiu delimitatsii Kaspiia,” *Fergana News*, 4 August 2009.

<sup>14</sup> “Otnosheniia mezhdru Turkmenistanom i Azerbaidzhanom obostrilis iz-za spornogo mestorozhdeniia na Kaspii,” *Fergana News*, 21 June 2012.

<sup>15</sup> “Turkmenistan obnarodoval svoiu kontseptsiiu delimitatsii Kaspiia.”

<sup>16</sup> Viktoriia Panfilova, “Ashkhabad ukrepliaet pozitsii na Kaspii,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 12 October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Kononov, “Sovsem ne mirnoe Kaspiiskoe more.”

<sup>18</sup> “Azerbaidzhan otrugal Turkmeniiu za Kaspii,” *Rosbalt*, 18 June 2012.

<sup>19</sup> “Sh.Affasov: Azerbaidzhan-Turkmenistan snova energeticheskie spory na Kaspii,” *Central Asia.ru*, 12 July 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Kononov, “Sovsem ne mirnoe Kaspiiskoe more.”

<sup>21</sup> “S. Mamedov: Baku i Ashkhabad snova vzialis’ za ‘Kiapaz.’ Na Kaspii prodolzhaetsia bor’ba za neftiane mestorozhdeniia,” *Central Asia.ru*, 21 June, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Sergei Zhil’tsov “Transkaspiskii proekt,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 15 May, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Dzhani, “‘Sedar’ vs ‘Kiapas’.”

<sup>24</sup> Iurii Krupnov, “Kaspiiskaia karta SShA i NATO protiv Rossii i Irana,” *Iran News*, 3 July 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Sergeev, “Ashkhabad gotovit Moskve kaspiiskii ekzamen,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 1 June 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Karpenko, “Strasti vokrug Kaspiia.”

<sup>27</sup> A. Faud, “Torg s sil’nymi mira sego,” *gulestan.ws*, 9 April 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Karpenko, “Strasti vokrug Kaspiia.”

<sup>29</sup> Krupnov, “Kaspiiskaia karta SShA i NATO protiv Rossii i Irana.”

<sup>30</sup> “Sopernichestvo za Kaspii.”

<sup>31</sup> “Ekspert: Na Kaspii nachinaetsia novyi vitok gonki vooruzhenii,” *Rosbalt.ru*, 15 September, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Nataliia Kharitonova, “Gonka vooruzhenii na Kaspii,” *DeutscheWelle*, 14 September, 2012.

acquired a few outdated ships.<sup>33</sup> Moreover at the beginning of the post-Soviet era, Russia managed both Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan navies.<sup>34</sup> One could assume that Turkmenistan naval forces were not only minuscule but not actually controlled by Ashkhabad. There were several reasons for compliance with Russia. To start with, the Turkmenistan elite were just fully recognizing that they were the elite of an independent nation. They still had traditional deference to Moscow, which so recently had made all important decisions, and whose language was the lingua franca of the empire. Moscow was the source of expertise, cadres, and investments, and Turkmenistan, similar to other Central Asian states and quite different from Baltic states, was not sure it could manage alone.

The same feeling could be seen in other postcolonial nations, some of which continued to look at their former colonial masters with deference and deep respect. Britain, for example was often seen by Commonwealth members as a source of superior culture. The perception and nature of the phenomenon could be quite different, and the image often did not reflect ongoing changes. For example, the generations long decline of the US economy has no immediate implications on the image of the economy, and the role of the dollar as global currency reflects the economy of a generation or two ago. (In the same way, the light of a distant star or galaxy could reach the earth when the object had gone millions or even billions years ago.) Such a delay in understanding the nature of the changes in the Turkmenistan elite collective subconsciousness might explain why Ashkhabad was not assertive in defending its interest at the beginning of the post-Soviet era. The second reason Ashkhabad allowed Moscow to manage its navy was that Moscow continued to regard the Caspian Sea as basically a Russian lake and believed it could still manage the space basically alone. Last but not least, Turkmenistan was not fully aware of the huge economic benefits it could receive from managing the Caspian Sea. Still as time progressed, Turkmenistan fully took in both its independence and its importance as a major source of gas for global markets.

At this point, the Turkmenistan elite noted the manifold importance of the Caspian Sea. The natural resources on its bottom included large deposits of gas and oil; it also became the route for delivery of gas to Europe. Friction between Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia started and was reinforced by the increasing general instability in the region. Tensions with Azerbaijan became especially clear. Turkmenistan was aware of being much weaker than other Caspian states.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, after awhile, tensions with neighbors led it to engage in an ambitious naval buildup and general upgrading of military capabilities. By approximately 2009–2010, Turkmenistan had increased its military budget<sup>36</sup> to the current level of \$500–600 million per

year, according to some estimates the third in Central Asia after Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>37</sup> One could assume that navy received the lion's share of these sums when, in 2009, Turkmenistan authorities decided to build up the Caspian navy.

This was actually a beginning of an arms race in the Caspian Sea.<sup>38</sup> Turkmenistan started to celebrate Navy Day in fall 2011, and has announced a development program extending to 2015.<sup>39</sup> There was also modernization/expansion of the tanker fleet.<sup>40</sup> The naval buildup required naval bases and ports. In 2011, Ashkhabad proclaimed that a new port is to be built in city of Turkmenbashi.<sup>41</sup> Existing naval facilities in the city were also upgraded. The port has undergone modernization, making it usable for both civilian and military purposes, with storehouses for "civil defense and mobilization reserve."<sup>42</sup> All these efforts started to bring results. By 2012, Turkmenistan had 30 battleships in the Caspian Sea, making its navy larger than Kazakhstan's (20 battleships) and close to Azerbaijan's (37). It was also reinforced by the air force, apparently one of the strongest in the area: 250 planes and helicopters on Caspian shores.<sup>43</sup> Ashkhabad is not planning to stop at this point: "Turkmenistan also continues to increase its military presence at Caspian Sea and plans to buy for VMS (Navy) the most advanced military boats and weapons."<sup>44</sup> And it has started to demonstrate its naval prowess. In September 2012, it conducted the first Caspian Sea naval maneuvers in its history.<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Search for source of military hardware

Turkmenistan has not been able to produce its own battleships and other sophisticated weapons, and relies heavily on foreign suppliers. Russia was an obvious candidate. Turkmenistan bought eight ships from Russia<sup>46</sup> in 2008, and later signed an agreement with Russia to provide two military ships.<sup>47</sup> Iran also was apparently one of the earlier suppliers, albeit the relationship was rather specific. Instead of selling Ashkhabad the requested ships, Teheran gave Ashkhabad "seven patrol boats in many years long lease" in 2003.<sup>48</sup> According to Russian observers, the reason for Turkmenistan's turn toward Iran and Russia was

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Kalishevskii, "Tsentral'naia Aziia: Voennyi balans," *Fergana News*, 9 October, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> "Port Turkmenbashi gotovitsia k radikal'noi modernizatsii," *Morskoe Vesti*, 2 April 2012; Aider Kurtmulaev, "Kaspil: porty, tankery i perevozki," *Oil & Gas Eurasia*, 3 March 2012.

<sup>37</sup> "V Turkmenistane na Kaspiiskom more postroiati novyi port," *Korabel.ru*, 19 September, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> "Port Turkmenbashi gotovitsia k radikal'noi modernizatsii."

<sup>39</sup> Karpenko, "Strasti vokrug Kaspii."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Turkmenistan osen'iu vperve provedet voennye ucheniia na Kaspiiskom more," *Fergana News*, 30 August, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Panfilova, "Ashhabad ukrepliaet pozitsii na Kaspii."

<sup>43</sup> "V sostav VMS Turkmenii voshli dva raketnykh katera 'Molnii'," *warsonline*, 10, October, 2011; Altyn Magaiuna, "Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan narashchivaet svoi voenno-morskoi flot," *TUS.ozodi.org*, 13 Aprel, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Kalishevskii, "Tsentral'naia Aziia."

<sup>33</sup> It was not surprising that in Moscow elite minds, Turkmenistan was hardly related to a navy.

<sup>34</sup> Karpenko, "Strasti vokrug Kaspii."

<sup>35</sup> "M. Khusainov: Novyi vitok 'kaspiiskoi likhoradki,'" *Central Asia*, 5 October, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Panfilova, "Ashhabad ukrepliaet pozitsii na Kaspii."



clear. On one hand, for Iran and Russia, selling weapons to Turkmenistan was a source of cash and helped diversify the arms market. On the other hand, Iran, which has the second largest Caspian navy after Russia,<sup>49</sup> and especially Russia hardly see in Turkmenistan a military, much less a naval force that could create problems. As a matter of fact, in Russian minds, Turkmenistan related not to the sea but to the desert and only one type of “ship” at its disposal (camels called in Russian are “korabli pustyini,” ships of the desert). Still, Turkmenistan understood that it could not always rely on Russia’s goodwill especially when Moscow realized Turkmenistan could create a problem in the future.

Consequently, Ashkhabad tried to diversify sources of weapons including ships. The West, especially the USA, was the most obvious choice. The USA wants to prevent Russian and Iranian influence in the Caspian region, and therefore does its best to provide weapons and improve navies of states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan under the umbrella of the new Washington-sponsored initiative, “Caspian Guard.”<sup>50</sup> In 2011, Turkmenistan got American patrol boats (patrul’nyi kater) from the USA. The EU was also on the Turkmenian list of at least potential sellers of modern weapons. The EU proposed sending troops to the Caspian Sea area for peacekeeping.<sup>51</sup> While EU members might not be involved in selling weapons to Turkmenistan directly, Europeans made sure weapons found their way to Turkmenistan and its navy. For example, in 2012, Turkmenistan bought two patrol boats from Turkey armed with Italian guns.<sup>52</sup>

The West was not the only possible alternative. In 2003, Turkmenistan bought seven patrol boats, some of them from Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> In 2009, Ukraine president Viktor Yushchenko proposed that Turkmenistan buy Ukrainian armored carriers and tanks (bronetekhnika).<sup>54</sup> During president Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov’s March 2012 visit to Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich made clear that Kiev could be an important source of military hardware for Ashkhabad.<sup>55</sup> Yanukovich’s offer does not mean that Kiev is deeply attached to Turkmenistan, regardless of Kiev’s desire to find in Ashkhabad a source of cheap gas and a market for Ukrainian weapons. Ashkhabad was just one possible customer. The Ukrainian leader also visited Baku, where they discussed delivery not just of gas but of Ukrainian military hardware, and perhaps delivery of Ukrainian weapons.<sup>56</sup> Azerbaijan with its frantic rearmament process seems to be a huge market for weapons.<sup>57</sup>

While Ukrainian weapons would be most likely used against Armenia, Yanukovich also played the role of peacemaker and proclaimed he would do his best to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh problem by peaceful means.<sup>58</sup> Kiev was also clearly aware that the relationship between Baku and Ashkhabad was quite tense and that, in the case of war, Ukrainian weapons might be used against Turkmenistan. The fact that Ukraine could provide weapons to both Turkmenistan and its potential enemy seems did not bother Ashkhabad much, for it has accepted this purely pragmatic framework of the relationship. Ashkhabad has a strong interest in Ukraine for legitimate reasons. Indeed, Ukraine as a source of weapons was not accidental. Ukraine has a developed industrial base and consequently a developed military industry – all the legacy of Soviet era – and has been anxious to find a market for military hardware. Kiev is also aware that to be one of the major suppliers of weapons and naval hardware would make its relationship with Ashkhabad much stronger and help in obtaining the most desirable commodity – gas.

While proposing to help upgrade Ashkhabad military capabilities, Kiev was aware this would irritate Moscow for a variety of reasons. One was Moscow’s understanding that upgrading the Turkmenistan military, especially its naval capabilities, would make it harder for Moscow to exert force in case of conflict with Ashkhabad. Still, Kiev did not feel it should necessarily pay attention to Moscow. The same thought was definitely in the mind of Belorussian president Lukashenko when he discussed various proposals with his Turkmenian counterpart. Minsk’s participation in upgrading Turkmenistan’s military potential was almost surely discussed, for Lukashenko takes all available opportunities to sell Belorussian weapons, even if the customer is such a Western enemy as Iran. Indeed, Lukashenko has been anxious to engage in military cooperation and arms sales with Iran for a long time. In dealing with Iran, he was not much afraid of antagonizing the West because Minsk was already black-listed. Moscow was not against Minsk deals for, with all its frictions, with Iran it did not regard Iran as a major competitor in the Caspian Sea, at least at present. Moreover, Minsk most likely plays an important role as an intermediary. Moscow, which formally joined in the tough sanctions against Iran, could send at least some weapons to Iran via Minsk keeping its door open for future upgrading of the Iranian/Russian relationship if Moscow’s relationship with the West deteriorated.

Minsk could sell the weapons to Iran and receive Moscow’s tacit blessing, but could not do so with Turkmenistan. The reason was obvious: the weapons could be used against Russia. Indeed, it went without saying that with all its friction with other Caspian states, it is Moscow that is seen by Ashkhabad as a major problem. Modernizing its armed forces was done mostly against possible predicaments from the Moscow side. Still, having no trust in Moscow and keeping in mind a variety of possibilities, Lukashenko definitely discussed the ways Turkmenistan could upgrade its military with Belorussia’s help. Ashkhabad certainly was happy to

<sup>49</sup> Magaiuna, “Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan narashchivaet svoi voennomorskoi flot.”

<sup>50</sup> Karpenko, “Strasti vokrug Kaspii.”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “Sopernichestvo za Kaspii.”

<sup>53</sup> Panfilova, “Ashhabad ukrepliaet pozitsii na Kaspii.”

<sup>54</sup> Tatiana Ivzhenko, “Ukraina rasshchityvaet na turkmenskii gaz,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 12 March, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> “Turkmenia pomozhet Ukraine v usloviakh ukhushdeniia otnoshenii s Rossiei I E S – SMI,” *Regnum*, 12 March, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Tatiana Ivzhenko and Sokhbet Mamedov, “Voennaia tekhnika v obmen na nefi,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 29 April, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> “Azerbaidzhan i Ukraina obsudiat voennoe sotrudnichestvo,” *Rosbalt Kavkaz*, 16 March, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> “Ianukovich poobeshchal Azerbaidzhanu zamirit’ Armeniiu,” *Rosbalt Ukraina*, 28 April 2011.

discuss these matters and diversify its sources of military hardware.

Thus, as in the gas/oil deals, Kiev and Minsk pay little attention to nearby Russia, which could well be displeased by all the military/naval deals. Belorussia and Ukraine also ignored EU and the USA. It is clear that neither Minsk nor Kiev discussed with Washington or Brussels their potential arms deals with Turkmenistan any more than their gas proposal.

## 7. Conclusion

During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the geopolitical picture was basically clear. The global community was divided between the two major military/geopolitical blocs – Warsaw Treaty and NATO – who masked their geopolitical conflict by ideological moralizing and competing socioeconomic and political programs. Of course even at that time, not all powers were firmly attached to the two major centers, and many were engaged in semi-independent plays. Still they did this because the great powers decided not to be engaged for various reasons. One was the assumption that small power activities were not related to their vital interests and no competing center of power was involved. After the Cold War the USA had emerged as the only superpower, but soon enough its economic problems and related military setbacks demonstrated the limits of its abilities to shape the global process. Since US problems – mostly related to the continuous economic decline – will most likely accelerate in the future, Washington's influence on the global process will decline even more. As a matter of fact, one should not exclude the catastrophic scenario where the American empire collapses with the same speed as post-WWII Britain and the USSR.

At the same time, the EU is still unable to emerge as a unified political entity with a common budget and military forces. Russia and especially China are rising. But Russia is no match for the USSR, even in the most optimistic views on its economy and military buildup. Moreover, some observers believe Russia's decline is continuing, due to degeneration of its heavy industry, health, and educational systems. Russia's recovery is thus of the same nature as American economic "progress" when service "bubbles" were a cover up for actual economic decline, which has become painfully clear only now (2012). China is still in the process of becoming a

superpower, and it will take years before it reaches absolute predominance, if present processes continue.

In this situation, the process of global disintegration increasingly reveals places of high tension. These did not exist when the global powers built Pax America and Pax Sovietica and not only fostered but froze conflicts when it was in their interest. Moreover, many present conflicts could not exist because the states were part of USSR or Yugoslavia. Here the situation was quite similar to that of early twentieth-century Africa; being part of the colonial empire of the West precluded any conflict unless European powers themselves engaged in war. In the past, the conflict over the Caspian Sea could hardly exist, not only because the USSR was much stronger than Iran, but because the future independent states in the region except Iran were part of one country.

Now all this is in the past. The Caspian Sea, a sea of peace for the last century or so, has become a place of confrontation of several new and old states, with Turkmenistan one of the important players. In the past, states such as Turkmenistan would most likely search for a superpower as patron. This is not so now, when states have much more flexibility and engage in interaction with much less concern for the positions of the strong players. Turkmenistan, for example, claims a considerable segment of the Caspian Sea. Ashkhabad definitely took Russia – the strongest power along the Caspian shore – into consideration. Its other major concern is Azerbaijan, another small state. It is true that Baku is supported by the USA. But this backing is not direct and Baku is not sure the USA would support it directly in conflict with Turkmenistan. The search for military hardware has also exhibited flexibility quite uncommon in the Cold War era, when the supply of weapons was directly related with geopolitical loyalty. Turkmenistan has purchased weapons from such diverse sources as the USA and Ukraine. The USA itself did not regard sale of weapons as a sure sign of geopolitical marriage and became quite pragmatic, even in a way uncommitted. Indeed, Washington provides weapons for Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, especially via Israel, despite the fact that Baku and Ashkhabad could be engaged in war in the future. All this demonstrates that international relationships may be much more complicated and unpredictable than before.