A HINGE IN EURASIA: REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES

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Abstract
While Asia and Europe lie in the same landmass, they have always been considered two separate and distinct continents. The land route between East (China) and West (Europe) must traverse the Caspian Sea or its northern (Russia) or southern (Iran) shores —with heightened attention due to international sanctions and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While geography dominates one's environment, it is one's will which molds destiny. Geography without infrastructure is a dot on a map. A door lies between East and West: the Caspian Sea, with the Caucasus as its hinge, and infrastructure as its lubricant.

Keywords: Caspian Sea, geopolitics, energy, infrastructure, Caucasus.

UM PONTO DE INFLEXÃO NA EURÁSIA: INFRAESTRUTURA REGIONAL E MUDANÇAS GEOPOLÍTICAS

Resumo
Embora a Ásia e a Europa estejam localizadas na mesma massa de terra, elas sempre foram consideradas dois continentes separados e distintos. A rota terrestre entre o Oriente (China) e o Ocidente (Europa) deve atravessar o Mar Cáspio ou suas margens ao norte (Rússia) ou ao sul (Irã), com atenção redobrada devido às sanções internacionais e à invasão russa na Ucrânia. Enquanto a geografia domina o ambiente, é a vontade que molda o destino. Geografia sem infraestrutura é apenas um ponto no mapa. Uma porta se encontra entre o Oriente e o Ocidente: o Mar Cáspio, com o Cáucaso como sua dobradiça e a infraestrutura como seu catalisador.

Palavras-chave: Mar Cáspio, geopolítica, energia, infraestrutura, Cáucaso.

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Большому кораблю — большое плавание.

[A great ship needs deep waters.]

1. OVERVIEW

Throughout history, physical environment has played a significant role in shaping the identity and development of all societies and nations. They accessed resources available within in their region, … in their surroundings. The overall circumferent location generally determines behavior of individuals and nations in domestic, regional, and global contexts. Yet, one's will shapes destiny.

Within Eurasia, namely the Caspian Sea region, there is a concurrent interplay between geography, political determination, potential, technology, and infrastructure, all competing to facilitate the efficient and timely transportation of resources to markets. The nation's domestic development, regional interaction, and international presence are all influenced by its geographical factors and its ability to enhance its technological capabilities to build infrastructure in order to achieve its national, regional, and international objectives. This, in turn, impacts economic development, international influence, and significance. Put simply, the combination of economic, social, and demographic changes, all connected to the rapid advancement of technology, have significant worldwide consequences that distinguish our current era from previous ones.

Geopolitics is essentially synonymous with "power politics", emphasizing that power is the determining factor in regional and international interactions. Geopolitics "is the study of how geography interacts with technology and the ceaseless struggle for global power". (Brands, 2023)

Since the 20th century, infrastructure projects have been striving to establish connectivity between East (China) and West (Europe). The prominence of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia is ever-growing. These projects are conflicting in their efforts to connect energy sources and goods to the markets. Contemporary pipelines

and transport routes are touted as being more cost-effective [22] and efficient, [23] offering a profitable and viable economic alternative [24] to traditional oceanic hauling.[25]

2. GEOPOLITICS AND THE CASPIAN SEA

Geographical elements are the foundation of international relations and shape political relationships (Cohen, 2015). States are inherently influenced by their geographical location, which establishes a natural connection with their neighboring countries. Furthermore, the extent of their territory significantly shapes their potential for international influence. States aim to evade the "territorial trap" by refraining from regarding territory as a determining factor, but instead viewing it in a historical context (Agnew, 1994) and recognizing its potential for development.

2.1 Eurasia

Europe and Asia share the same landmass, yet they are regarded as distinct continents. They become mainlands both interconnected and separated by the Caspian Sea. Reasons include the immense magnitude and substantial distances

[22] Trucking costs increase significantly as the distance of transportation grows, making it the most costly method for transporting petroleum. Although it is widely present, its usage is restricted to short distances when other options are not accessible. The costs of railroad tank cars do not increase significantly with distances, but they nevertheless remain higher than those of pipeline and waterborne alternatives. Additionally, railroad tank cars are not widely accessible. Waterborne exports can rival pipelines in terms of competitiveness, but their potential is constrained by geographical factors. Replacing a 150,000-barrel per day, 1,000-mile pipeline can be done using alternative methods. Option a) involves using trucks, each capable of carrying 200 barrels (8,400 gallons) and traveling 500 miles per day. This would necessitate a fleet of 3,000 trucks, with one truck unloading every 2 minutes. Option b) suggests using trains, with each train consisting of 75 cars carrying 2,000 barrels. These trains would need to make one daily trip, returning empty to the source along separate tracks to be refilled. Option c) proposes utilizing ships, specifically tank barges and tank vessels, in areas where rivers and coasts allow. These ships provide strong competition to pipelines. (Trench, 2001, pp. 2 - 3)

[23] Goods travelling by sea between China and Europe take 60 days, by land they will take 12-15 days (Lee, 2016) (Shahbazov, 2018).

[24] In the United States, oil pipeline shipments constitute about 17% of the total freight transported across the country, yet they account for less than 2% of the overall cost of national freight. (Wilson, 2007).

[25] In the United States, certain pipelines, such as *Big Inch* and *Little Big Inch*, were constructed as a response to the risk of German submarine attacks on tankers near the coast. The *Colonial Pipeline* was developed to counter the impact of a strike by the maritime union, while the *Trans-Alaska Pipeline* was constructed to address the difficulties caused by the Arab oil embargo of 1973. (Liu, 2020).

separating them, as well as the diverse array of languages and cultures present. Eurasia —Caucasus, Caspian Sea, Central Asia— has been referred to by various names, including the non-Russian former Soviet republics (Grant, 2012), the post-Mongol space (Kotkin, 2008), the Post-Soviet Space (Samokhvalov, 2016), the Former Soviet Union or Commonwealth of Independent States (Hutchings, 2016), or the Greater Turco-Caucasia. (Cutler, 2020).

Eurasia is significant. It accounts for 30% of the global gross domestic product, covers 30% of the world's land area, and is home to 50% of the world's population.[26] Eurasia connects East Asia's commodities and products with Western Europe. This connection is also known as the "Eastern Eurasia meta-region" developed through economic and technological advancements, seen in the context of mainly trade issues, such as China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI),[27] EU's *Global Gateway* (GG) (European Commission, 2021) or the US's backed *Build Back Better World* (B3W), but also perceived in military affairs leading to a significant shift in strategic perspectives (Walton, 2007).

An important geographical feature to bear in mind in Eurasia is that the majority of its countries are landlocked. Of the world's 44 landlocked countries, 16% of them are located in this region [two countries in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Armenia) and all five Central Asian countries, as well as Afghanistan]. The largest landlocked country in the world —Kazakhstan— is in Eurasia (UNCTAD, 2023). Uzbekistan is double-landlocked, meaning that in order to access the oceans, it must pass through two other countries. [28] Landlocked nations encounter various drawbacks that impede national income and progress, such as the absence of

[26] GDP: 29.73%; territory; 30%; population: 49.82%. In these calculations I included the following countries: Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), Caspian Sea (Iran and Russia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; plus Afghanistan), to which I added countries bordering said regions, from the Black Sea (Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine), from Anatolia and Middle East (Bahrain, Djibouti, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), from East Asia (China and Mongolia), and from the Himalayas (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan). Population data from UN Population Division; GDP information form the World Bank (2023) with data for 2022 (save Afghanistan, Lebanon and Syria [data from 2021]).

[27] BRI is a vey important umbrella mechanism for China's bilateral trade with BRI partners. As of March 2020, the number of countries that had joined BRI with Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs" with China were 138: Sub-Saharan Africa: 38, Europe and Central Asia: 34 (including 18 EU), East Asia & Pacific: 38, Middle East & North Africa: 17, South East Asia: 6, and Latin America & Caribbean: 18, BELT AND ROAD PORTAL, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn.

[28] The only other double landlocked country in the world is Liechtenstein, yet in a very different context.

seaports, coastal commerce hubs, and a substantial fishing sector. They face substantial transportation expenses for goods to and from international markets. These prevailing circumstances provide a disincentive for investment, erode any competitive advantage they may possess, and exclude them from fully participating in worldwide trade.

Eurasian landlocked countries have depended on transit states and become vulnerable to their manoeuvres (Idan & Shaffer, 2011). There is a likelihood of regional commodities and services becoming politicized, such as energy (Elliot, 2020), pipelines (Moradi, 2006), and transport (LRT, 2020). This is exacerbated by the implementation of sanctions with regional ramifications, seen in the cases of Russia (Valori, 2017) and Iran (Jaffe, 2018), which frequently involve conflicting economic and political interests.

2.2 The Caspian Sea region

The Caspian Sea is the largest inland expanse of water on Earth. While deemed a lake or a sea, it is an endorheic basin, meaning it has no outflows. It has an elongated shape, stretching 1,200 kilometers from north to south. The average width is 320 kilometers, with a high of 435 kilometers and a minimum of 124 kilometers. It has an area of 386,400 kms.^{2} and contains *circa* 78,360 kms.^{3} of water. This accounts for roughly 44% of the world's lacustrine water (Coffey, 2015, p. 2). Its size exceeds that of Japan or Germany, but falls short of California. It has a size that is five times greater than Lake Superior, and a surface area that is 1½ times larger than the total surface area of all the Great Lakes. Additionally, it is larger than the combined surface area of the world's seven largest lakes.

The Caspian Sea lattices multiple cultural, ethnic, religious, and civilizational boundaries. The region encompasses Persian, Slavic, and Turkic ethnic groups, with two dominant religious perspectives: Christianity and Islam —the latter with two interpretations: Sunnism in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia's Dagestani shores, and Shiism in Iran and Azerbaijan. The Caspian is a hydrological boundary and link between five nations (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan), and surrounding regions in the East (China) and west (Europe).

Since the collapse of the USSR, there has been increased focus on the Caspian

Sea, primarily because of its rich hydrocarbon reserves. The Caspian basin is believed to hold approximately 48 billion barrels of confirmed oil reserves and an estimated 8.76 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves (Indeo, 2018), which accounts for 10% of the global gas and oil reserves. (Penkova, 2014, p. 113) Therefore, it is not surprising that the Caspian Sea has been considered as "another Persian Gulf" (Altunisik, 1999).

The strategic geographical location of the region, situated between Europe and Asia, combined with its abundant hydrocarbon resources and the growing presence of important commercial routes such as the East-West and North-South Transport Corridors, or BRI (Labardini, 2023c), as well as past and upcoming regional infrastructure projects in energy and transportation, make the practical connection between Europe and Asia appear both natural, logical and essential not only for business and commercial purposes but for geopolitical goals as well. Most of these issues had been delayed due to lack of —a somewhat— clear legal definition of the Caspian Sea intending to end legal uncertainty for governments and transregional enterprises. (Labardini, 2020) The *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea* was adopted on August 12, 2018, providing a more precise legal framework yet considered as an interim solution. (Karataeva, 2020)

The Caucasus and the Caspian Sea are geographically situated —with a wide geopolitical vision— in a distinctive locality between China and Europe, as well as between Russia, the Baltic Sea, Iran, the Persian Gulf, and India (Labardini, 2023). Eurasia's geographical position situates it at a crucial intersection with geopolitical significance for Russia, Iran, Türkiye, USA, and EU (Kochlazade, 2016), as well as China and other powers.

3. EURASIAN CONNECTIVITY, THE CASPIAN SEA AND GEOPOLITICS

Humanity has learnt that Asia is very distant from the West —two worlds apart. With the Silk road, humanity grew accustomed and assumed as an existential fact that travel between East and West was very time consuming —except until recent times with long-distance transcontinental flight changing ways of life. Between Beijing and Madrid there are more than 13,100 kilometers —using the land route China-Central Asia-Caspian Sea- Caucasus-Türkiye-Greece-France-Spain

route— which would have taken between eleven and fifteen months traveling on camel at the exhausting daily pace of 30-40 kms. via the Silk Road theretofore known.[29] In contrast, little do we appreciate that the orthodromic distance[30] between Beijing and Madrid is 9,221 kms., while Baku-Seoul is 6,449 kms., and Mexico City-Baku is 12,631 kms., Mexico City-Beijing is 12,458 kms. and Mexico City-Sydney is 12,973 kms. This helps understand why Europe and Asia are perceived as two distinct continents in the same landmass.

The Silk Road flourished from ancient times until the XV century when resurgence of military hostilities in Central Asia and instability made merchants try the oceans with the subsequent shift in trade routes. This was also due to the conquest by leading Western European powers of much of the Asian rimland (Labardini, 2023). This further helps explain the growth —and today's dominant position— of worldwide East-West maritime trade. While the old network of Silk Roads originating in China and India and moving to the Middle East and Europe ran north and south of —and, to a lesser degree, across— the Caspian Sea, "since 1500, maritime transport has dominated trade between Europe and East Asia" —with more than 95% of containers East-West currently traversing the oceans (Kalyuzhnova & Pomfret, 2021, p. 1).

Throughout history, all land routes between East and West have always had to journey through one of three possibilities: the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus or this body of water's northern and southern shores: current Russia and Iran. Through history the northern and southern shores have always been controlled by two distinct political entities —save for some decades during the Mongol period. The Caspian Sea remained an option, yet only with technology did it become a veritable alternative.

By using different routes, geopolitical competition arises by engaging —or not— some neighbors. China designed BRI (Tiezzi, 2023), as its new and guiding economic and foreign policy framework with a focus on its direct neighborhood at its southern and western borders, yet reaching out to the Persian Gulf, Africa and

[29] Caravanserai were roadside inns placed some 32-40 kms. apart —"about a day's journey"— along major trade routes in the Silk Road. They doubled as hubs for the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture, as well as providing security to travellers (National Geographic, 2023).
[30] Shortest distance between two points on the surface of a sphere —the Earth.

Europe. By involving 15 Chinese provinces[31] (Umbach, 2019) and 138 countries, the purpose seems to engage with any possible country not in the Eurasian landmass irrespective of routes and means of engagement thus provoking competition between possible partners (Jacimovic, 2023). It becomes a public relations issue and not a large regional cooperation project, yet seemingly still capable of fostering some degree of collaboration.

3.1 Reshaping legal infrastructure in the Caspian Sea

Every infrastructure project necessitates the presence of multiple components for its realization. Despite careful planning, construction, funding, and operation of these projects, they will still be influenced by global markets, international tensions, and regional or global politics, which "can render them uneconomic or inoperable", and they will all "require strong and reliable transit states that have the strategic and commercial interests in keeping them in operation" (Bowlus, 2017, p. 17) A crucial element is to establish a minimal legal framework, encompassing legislation of all involved parties, as well as international agreements or treaties.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Presidents of the Caspian Sea countries convened on five occasions over a span of 30 years to address legal matters pertaining to this body of water. They held a sixth meeting to expand perspectives.[32] Individual Summits were unable to achieve the desired result. They were stepping stones to approve a mutually agreed treaty: the *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea* (CLSCS),[33] adopted in Aktau in 2018 —not yet in force due to lack of Iran's ratification. CLSCS has created opportunities to investigate and utilize the potential resources of the Caspian Sea and improve the economic development of the countries involved, both individually and collectively. Each Summit symbolized the integration of ideals that were formulated and acknowledged in multiple statements. CLSCS incorporates these commitments into

[31] Out of 193 members in the UN; and 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities, and 2 Special Administrative Regions in China.
[32] 23-24 April 2002 (Ashgbat), 16 October 2007 (Tehran), 18 November 2010 (Baku), 29 September 2014 (Astrakhan), 12 August 2018 (Aktau), and 29 June 2022 (Ashgabat).
[33] *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea,* signed at Aktau, Kazakhstan, 12 August 2018. Official texts in Azerbaijani, Farsi, Kazakh, Russian, Turkmen, and English available at http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328. In case of disagreement, English prevails (art. 24).

(regional) customary international law. CLSCS reflects past political agreements, established new parameters, and set paths for further expansion.

CLSCS's apparent purpose was to avoid categorizing the Caspian Sea as either a sea or a lake. This would allow the countries to have and utilize a shared space, ensuring security and addressing other concerns. Additionally, it would enable bordering states to exploit transboundary resources and construct pipelines, yet only with consent of countries whose territories are affected. There are currently no clear regulations regarding maritime borders in this context. (Labardini, 2020) CLSCS has also been considered an interim solution, including on delimitation principles between the opposite and adjacent Caspian States, which per CLSCS shall be bilaterally determined. (Karataeva, 2020) The convention's approach regarding seabed delimitation has been deemed "evasive" but "expected" (O'Byrne, 2018) or having "kicked the can down the road". (Dudley, 2018). The CLSCS has several window opportunities for improvement. (Gudev, 2022)

CLSCS provided opportunity for coastal states to exploit underwater Caspian Sea's natural resources. In 2017 and 2018 they agreed to jointly develop offshore Caspian hydrocarbon resources: Azerbaijan and Iran (Rahimov, 2018), Iran and Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (O'Byrne, 2018), or even trilaterally (Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia) to create a joint energy corridor (AzerNews, 2018). The agreements announced the adoption of CLSCS and facilitated joint development of the Caspian Sea in oil and gas matters between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (AzerNews, 2018b). They promoted collaboration between Azerbaijan and Russia in development of gas fields (AzerNews, 2018c), as well as in marine research (Mammadova, 2018).

Discussing international law inherently involves discussing international politics, which consequently influences the restructure of geopolitics. Caspian Sea riparian states made progress by adopting CLSCS. The convention demonstrates a desire to move forward from previous disagreements and collaboratively develop the Caspian Sea. Pragmatism to construct a basin not connected to any lake or sea. (Labardini, 2020)

3.2 Energy and geopolitics

In classical geopolitics, geography and surroundings impact upon foreign policy and action. In other words, geography matters. Yet, in a critical perspective, "it is not the geography that determines a state's position and thus its foreing policy, but it is the construction of certain images and language, which shapes the geopolitical space of interaction" (Schröder & Wessels, 2017, p. 46). Political actors and leadership may use a narrative —hub, centre, corridor, …— "in a strategic way to shape policy discourse from the perspective of their own interests … the narratives are … not only influenced by domestic politics but also by the changing dynamics of [international, regional and bilateral relations] together with political and economic developments in the regional context" (Dieke & Schröder, 2017a, p. 242). All will require investing into infrastructure to take a place from the map into the world's vision.

The Caspian region faces challenges to extract[34] and transport hydrocarbon resources to reach the markets, as well as financing.[35] Caspian hydrocarbon fields are far from the export markets and initially had to rely on old Soviet pipelines. Caspian countries could use their geographic position as a bargaining chip for export routes. *Ex.gr.,* Kazakhstan agreed in 1997 to build the Chinese-financed *Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline* (KCOP), the first pipeline to directly send Caspian oil to China; and Azerbaijan signed the *Contract of the Century* with eleven multinationals from eight countries to exploit its Caspian oil reserves in order to eventually deliver them to Europe.

The aspiration to access markets can promote international ties in energy transmission. Nations and multinational corporations collaborate to construct regional infrastructure, while also obtaining specialized expertise and support from

[34] The Caspian Sea's periodically freezing northern waters increase offshore costs and companies use Russian canals from the Black Sea to move drilling and maintenance equipment (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2013).

[35] Natiq Aliyev, former SOCAR president, stated that Azerbaijan in the early independent years "had a base of highly qualified specialists who were replaced by amateurs, domestic equipment and technologies, Soviet standards and oil fields that are being developed with old methods. We had all this, but we did not have the main thing - finance" [«Однако давайте вспомним, чем располагал Азербайджан в те годы. Мы имели базу, высококвалифицированных специалистов, которые были заменены на дилетантов, отечественную технику и технологию, советские стандарты и нефтяные месторождения, которые разрабатывались старыми методами. Все это у нас было, но не было главного – финансов».] (Алиев, 2003, стр. 69).

international financial organizations. The development of energy resources is primarily motivated by market forces, but it is also significantly impacted by domestic and regional politics, which will continue to change the landscape of energy production and distribution. (Koranyi, 2016, p. 1) Examples of Caspian Sea hydrocarbon transportation to Europe are the *Caspian Pipeline Consortium* (CPC), *Baku-Novorossiysky, Baku-Supsa* and *Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan* (BTC) oil pipelines, or even nultinational schemes such as the *Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum* (BTE) (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye) and the *Southern Gas Corridor* (SGC) (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye-Greece-Albania-Italy) gas pipelines.

Frictions among nations and allies can arise as a result of numerous factors, primarily of a political and economic nature, that affect various stages of energy and commodity transportation. These tensions also contribute to global conflict escalation. (Klare, 2014)

Recent Eurasian examples include the Russia-Ukraine gas crises of 2006, 2009 and 2014 (Sullivan, Kamensky, & Makholm, 2018), the 2009 Turkmen-Russia gas dispute (Gorst, 2009), the Belarus-Russia 2007 (Crane, et al., 2009) and 2020 energy disputes over gas (Abbasova, 2020) and oil (Kudrytski, 2020), or the 2017 and 2020 Belarus-Lithuania transport disagreeements (Jegelevičius, 2017) (Kubiak, 2020).

Countries pursue different approaches —through collaboration and coordination or competition and confrontation— to achieve common objectives such as greater revenue, energy security, and economic independence. Projects intersect without colliding. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, possess abundant hydrocarbon resources and inherited a variety of USSR's pipeline networks. (Ibrahimov, 2018).

Prior to the USSR's collapse, there was no geopolitical competition in Eurasia. Subsequently, the new nations pursued distinct strategies to attain economic and institutional diversification, as well as to diminish reliance on Russia. Following seven decades of Soviet Union monopoly, countries began to attract significant attention for exploration, development, and production of hydrocarbon resources through investments and partnerships with foreign energy firms, primarily from the United States, Europe, and China.

To build pipelines from Caspian Sea sources to European markets, through time, countries evidence economical and political motivations, preferring the easiest and more economical routes —subjected to geopolitics. This is confirmed by analyzing the timeline of when and where major international pipelines were built in Eurasia, as well as to the intended purpose for their construction. (Labardini, 2021b) Caspian oil moves through pipelines, ports, ships, and railways. Two pipelines —CPC and BTC— dominate the network, with over 50% of available capacity. Smaller pipelines together with Russian pipelines available to Caspian production provide another 25%. This is supplemented by smaller, but significant, routes involving railways, swaps with Iran and other transport options (World Bank, 2008, p. 7).

Two different regions emerged between Asia and Europe: Northern and Mediterranean Europe. The vast majority of oil pipelines link consumption centers in Northern Europe, both in direct source-to-consumption pipelines and in ocean-to-consumption-center pipelines. Major oil sources for Northern Europe are Russia and the Northern Sea. By building —in the Soviet era— one pipeline —*Druzhba*— with two branches to former Soviet republics and allies in the Soviet bloc, Russia became dominant in the north. Decades later came the development of pipelines in the Mediterranean.

In the Southern region, one set of pipelines were developed to reach the oceans and another set to reach the consumer markets from the coasts. By doing so, these pipelines seek for the shortest/quickest possible route to reach the oceans and the world markets. The major sources for these pipelines is Russia, but they also include Caspian Sea states (Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan), and Irak.

Another distinct feature is the timeline for the Mediterranean (or Caucasus) pipelines. Northern pipelines linking the Asian sources with Northern Europe were built first, with NWO in 1956 and *Druzhba* in 1964, followed by ocean-to-consumption centers pipelines (AWP and ADRIA) as new European consumption centers developed. The southern pipelines (BNP [1998], BSP [1999], CPC [2003], and BTC [2006]) were built in less than one decade, yet some 3 to 5 decades after the northern pipelines —save for KCP (1970).

This also indicates global changes. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the newly sovereign nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus were faced with the challenge of addressing their lack of direct access to the sea by undertaking significant regional infrastructure projects. (Alisgandarli, 2017). This needed significant and protracted negotiations between governments and companies, in order to surmount intricate technological challenges, but mostly to solidify an agreement, (Garibov, 2017a) amidst coordination and cooperation between competing and confronting interests of governments, with crisscrossing interesting in possible collission. The development of the Caucasus pipelines was only possible after the USSR's demise. This allowed the newly independent countries, which were facing challenging economic conditions after gaining independence, to independently receive foreign revenue that was previously received by the USSR. Among the 10 countries in Eurasia, only Russia, Iran, and Georgia had coastlines, which gave them significant geopolitical importance in accessing global markets. It is worth noting that Georgia is the only one amongst Eurasian countries with access to oceans that is not subject to international sanctions.

4. FINAL COMMENTS

Development of Eurasian large regional infrastructure projects has dramatically changed the concept of the region and its presence and relevance, weight and germaneness for the world scene. This has been the result of several complementary factors.

Asia and Europe are part of the same landmass, yet they are regarded as distinct continents. The land connection between East (China) and West (Europe) —the Silk Road— functioned effectively until the 15th century, when armed conflicts reemerged in Central Asia, causing trade to shift towards maritime routes. Since then, maritime routes have prevailed —with more than 95% of containers East-West traversing the oceans. (Kalyuzhnova & Pomfret, 2021, p. 1)

Historically, there were only three East-West land routes: Caspian Sea/Caucasus, or the northern and southern borders of the sea, *i.e.,* Russia or Iran. With 1,200 kilometers North-South, the Caspian Sea offered very distinct environments —freezing temperatures vs. hot temperatures, with accompanying

varying environments. Throughout history, save for a few decades under Mongol rule, these two regions were governed by two distinct political entities. In today's fierce global competition landscape, the land route has emerged as a potential challenger to the dominant marine route. The current geopolitical landscape, characterized by sanctions, conflicts, and political difficulties, has facilitated the emergence of a new "Middle Corridor" through the Caspian Sea/Caucasus, as an alternative to the northern and southern land routes.

This would have still been insufficient. Geography asserts its influence on countries. To transform a dot in the map into a location of regional and global power relevance requires infrastructure, including legal, oil, gas, transportation, and logistics. Infrastructure projects are inherently complex and encounter formidable obstacles and hardships in order to be successfully completed. Projects are highly intricate, encompassing technical, financial, social, and political aspects. They incur significant costs for all parties involved, including governments, corporations, international financial institutions, and technicians. They are characterized by instability, from conception to commissioning, requiring great endurance and resilience. Regional infrastructure must withstand numerous challenges, including domestic factors (unemployment, national economic development, and clashing political views), and international pressures, such as global and domestic crises, regional and global geopolitics, and shifts in political eras. After years of operation, they consistently demonstrate a characteristic: a mutual destiny shared by nation and region.

Oil pipelines were modernized or built to reach the oceans. *Baku-Novorossyisk, Baku-Supsa, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan,* and *Caspian Pipeline Consortium* pipelines broke the Russian monopoly on Caspian Sea oil. Later on, gas pipelines evidenced a veritable geopolitical game, with projects counteroffered to stall opponents' proposals.

Intricacies showing the dimensions of economic and political interests involved become quite evident when we consider that SGC (with its components SD2, SCPX, TANAP and TAP)[36] was initially developed by six countries (Azerbaijan,

[36] Respectively, the *Southern Gas Corridor* (SGC) gas pipeline, including *Shah Deniz II* (SD2), *Southern Caspian Pipeline Expansion* (SCPX), *Trans-Anatolia Pipeline* (TANAP) and *Trans-Adriatic Pipeline*

Georgia, Türkiye, Greece, Albania, and Italy), yet it may further develop to the East —with Turkmenistan via a *Trans-Caspian Pipeline* (TCP) [hopeful yet somewhat doubtful (O'Keefe, 2021)]— and into Europe —with the Balkans and South Eastern Europe via the *Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline* (IAP) and the *Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria* (IGB) pipelines.[37]

Infrastructure initiatives, trade agreements, and cultural encounters serve as various means of establishing ties between states and areas. (Flint & Zhu, 2019) Interplay between geographical contexts, views, and political processes may be seen as a relational form of power (Allen, 2003), embracing models of assemblages (Dittmer, 2014), with a world-systems approach (Taylor, 1992), or identifying geopolitical concepts as outcome of structure and agency (Flint, 2016). In this sense: "Economic, social and demographic change, all linked to rapid technological change, have global implications which may mark out the times we live in now from those that went before" (Scarlett, 2015, p. vi).

With infrastructure, Eurasia has a total new face. This is now even more drastic after the Azerbaijani victory in Karabakh in 2020.

Energy is an enduring and essential element sustaining significant industrial hubs. Eurasia has acclimated to prevailing conditions with a focus in the Caspian Sea/Caucasus region thanks to successful infrastructure projects that are now linking Asia and Europe, offering further gateways for transport corridores.

The Caspian Sea serves as a door between East and West allowing to avoid its northern and southern shores under international sanctions, further compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its hinge is the Caucasus enabling movement of geopolitical, commercial, and cultural exchanges. Infrastructure built in Eurasia acts as the lubricant of such hinge, by transforming a mere dot on a map into a tangible reality and significantly influencing geopolitics at both regional and global levels.

(TAP) (Southern Gas Corridor, 2020) (Trans Adriatic Pipeline, 2016).

[37] Respectively, TCP joining with Turkmenistan, IAP with Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia, and IGB with Greece and Bulgaria.

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