Chapter Two

WESTERN OBJECTIVES AND INTERESTS IN THE CASPIAN REGION

Primarily because of geopolitical and energy security reasons, the Caspian region is receiving increasing attention from the West. Extensive, but still largely unexplored, energy resources are concentrated in the Caspian Sea area and the countries of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Given the expected increase in world energy demand over the next 15 years, access to these supplies would benefit Western energy security. Moreover, the competition for control over these resources could have a major impact on the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia and the domestic evolution and foreign policies of such key states as Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran.

With an area roughly half the size of the United States and a population of nearly 72 million, the states of the Caspian region border on Russia, Turkey, China, Afghanistan, and Iran (see Figure 1), and their native populations have strong ethnic, cultural, and religious ties that transcend national borders. By 2010–2015, if current demographic trends continue, the population of the Caspian region could exceed 100 million. In light of its location in the heart of the Asian continent, instability, conflict, and crises in the region could have negative repercussions on a larger scale, including conflict between Russia and Caspian states; ethnic separatism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and western China; conflict between Russia and China, Turkey, or Iran; and conflict between the Caspian states and Turkey, Iran, or China.

Although there are many possible alternative futures for the countries of Central Asia and the south Caucasus, it is not difficult to
describe the scenario that best serves Western interests: a stable, secure, and prosperous region of independent, sovereign, democratic, free-market countries that respect human rights, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities and are successfully meeting the basic economic and social needs of their populations. Yet, for most Caspian states, this rosy scenario of the region’s future is not realistic in the face of the myriad threats to stability and peace. Indeed, as one prominent specialist on Central Asia has observed, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the area will become a zone of instability and crisis and perhaps even descend into chaos. Thus, the key questions

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2Martha Brill Olcott, “The Caspian’s False Promise,” *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998, p. 96. A potentially serious time-bomb waiting to explode is the inability of governments to meet the rising expectations for improved living standards generated by promises of future energy profits. For a discussion of this possibility, see Rajan
for NATO are whether, given the nature of the Alliance’s security interests, these threats and challenges would require any changes in the Alliance’s military missions, security responsibilities, plans, and force posture. Put simply, how important are Western security interests in the Caspian Basin, and to what extent might the use of NATO’s military assets be required to prevent or respond to threats to these interests?

Against this backdrop, the West has the following strategic objectives and interests in the region:

- First, by supporting the independence and sovereignty of the Caspian states, prevent any single country from establishing hegemony over the region.
- Second, gain and maintain access to the region’s energy resources.
- Third, reduce the likelihood of civil war or intrastate conflict in key states of the region.
- Fourth, impede the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Fifth, discourage the spread of militant, anti-Western Islamic movements.
- Sixth, prevent the spillover of conflict into areas that are of concern, principally Turkey and the Persian Gulf.

It is not enough, however, to simply state NATO’s objectives in the region. The Caspian cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, it must be put in the context of present and potential U.S. and Alliance commitments. The United States already has extensive security commitments and military deployments in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and northeast Asia. Our military forces are stretched thin in carrying out their missions and these commitments are unlikely to diminish anytime soon; to the contrary, they are likely to grow (in the Balkans, for example). Moreover, projected increases in defense spending are unlikely to close the gap between our capabilities and commitments.

Our European allies face similar constraints on their willingness and ability to accept new security undertakings. European governments remain preoccupied with threats in Europe and the challenges associated with achieving greater political and economic unity as well as a common foreign and security policy. In short, their finite resources and energies for the foreseeable future will be devoted to deepening and expanding the European enterprise. European governments will therefore have little stomach for undertaking new commitments that do not bear on this objective.

In sum, there is considerable reluctance, even as NATO expands the definition of its role, to undertake security responsibilities beyond Europe’s borders. Alliance peacekeeping operations in the Balkans have already strained NATO’s political cohesion and military capabilities. Consequently, the policy choices the United States and NATO will confront in the Caspian Basin will be made in the context of other commitments and limited resources. Western governments no doubt understand that the region has the potential to place new and overwhelming military, economic, and political burdens on the West. Before NATO embarks on ambitious new ventures in the region, it will need to carefully consider whether any expanded responsibilities are in line with its interests and capabilities in a vast and remote region that presents multiple sources of conflict and instability.