

BOOK REVIEW:

“Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region”

REVIEWED BY **NAGHI AHMADOV**



“Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region” by Agha Bayramov, Routledge, 2022, 202 pp.

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The collapse of the USSR radically changed the situation in the Caspian Sea region, and led to the emergence of new independent states, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This brought with it an active geopolitical struggle around the region. The reason for the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Caspian Sea region that is rich in hydrocarbon resources, according to multiple researchers, was a new version of the “Great Game”. With the increase in the number of regional players, new problems arose that required immediate solutions. The former legal regime, inter alia, no longer meets the new conditions due to the lack of provisions regulating the interstate ownership of the sea. Besides, while great powers are pursuing their own goals in the region, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in recent years have been increasingly showing their desire to free themselves from the excessive guardianship of external powers. That is all about the geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region, which has been discussed at length on the pages of the book under review. Moreover, given its strategic location, the Caspian Sea region has become a prime transport link between Europe and Asia due to the ongoing Russian-Ukraine conflict. The study of the geopolitical features of the Caspian Sea region is consequently becoming more relevant than ever at the present stage. Therefore, the book titled “Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region” by Agha Bayramov is a timely work.

Dr. Agha Bayramov is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Groningen and in the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University. His research interests lie primarily in the area of the geopolitics of energy in the Caspian Sea region, climate change and energy transition in the South Caucasus.

This book aims to shed light on the growing role of state and non-state actors in the Caspian Sea region. The author presents a novel and unorthodox interpretation of the Caspian Sea region. The author picks

out three case studies, namely the Caspian Environmental Program (CEP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC), and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to explore the peculiarities of relationships among littoral states in light of functionalism via social constructivism.

The book is divided into introduction and five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 critically examines the major theoretical and empirical works on the New Great Game in the Caspian Sea region. It also advances the alternatives to predominant perspectives. According to Dr. Bayramov, the current literature did not succeed merely including states and marginalizing the rest of the actors in the study of the New Great Game (p.18). By including companies, banks, financial institutions, and NGOs the author claims that he helped the New Great Game debate moving forward (p.18). From the theoretical standpoint, by persisting in orthodox and obsolete state-centric assumptions the existing literature has come to naught, hence dismissed today world's complexities, geopolitical tendencies, the consequences of globalization (p.23). At the same time, nearly all developments are empirically explained as part of this so-called New Great Game in the relevant literature (p.23).

Dr. Bayramov highlights that the concept of the New Great Game oversimplifies the dynamics of geopolitics, thereby overlooking the fundamental distinction between 19th and 21st centuries international systems (p.27). He rightly points out that relying wholly on the New Great Game paradigm to analyze the Caspian Sea region leaves numerous critical questions unanswered (p.31).

Chapter 2 suggests an alternative perspective to the New Great Game, specifically classical functionalism. The author briefly touches upon the classical functionalist assumptions of David Mitrany, Ernst Haas and Leon Lindberg, and coalesces their key points (p.39), as well as introduces a revision of functionalism via social constructivism (p.68). Dr. Bayramov, referring to Brent Steele, maintains that “the key component of a functional approach is that it can be employed across borders, across allegiances and identities, because it works towards the common needs of individuals, regardless of allegiance or group rivalries” (p.42). It is noteworthy that the author contends that “when something is framed as technical, cooperation is easier because it

changes people's tendency to view something within a power political zero-sum framework" (p.68). According to revised functionalism, by understanding the fact that 'regions are socially constructed and can be redefined', one can expound the reasons behind changing complex dynamics (p.70).

Chapter 3 presents the first case study – Caspian Environment Program (CEP) – through the lens of the revised functionalist perspective. The author acknowledges that some ecological problems which the Caspian Sea's environment suffers, such as fluctuation of water levels, land degradation, loss of marine biodiversity (p.70). He draws attention to the fact that environmental issues are largely beyond capacities of an individual state due to their scale and intricacies. Taking into consideration this point, the governments of the littoral states decided to set up the CEP as a regional umbrella program to facilitate sustainable cooperation in 1998 and this led to signing the Tehran Convention, the first ecological and legally binding agreement in 2003 (p.79). The author comes to a conclusion that shared environmental resources have served as a useful starting point for the present-day cooperation in the Caspian Sea (p.80). He brings out that the coastal states moved forward from discussing ecological issues to regional security issues step by step (p.100). He finds out that 'there is a parallel and complex interconnection between the agreement reached on the environmental protocols and the agreement reached on the legal status of the seabed' (p.103). Differing from European integration, the author is certain that the objective of the cooperation of littoral states, in particular Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is to secure autonomy and independence (p.104).

Chapter 4 depicts the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline as a case study and analyzes the three phases of the project: planning, construction and usage. Dr. Bayramov contends that 'the BTC is much more than a piece of energy infrastructure because it is the main impulse for interaction between international and regional actors' (p.111). The author rejects the scholars who support the idea that Russia, Iran and Armenia were trying to sabotage the project. On the contrary, he asserts that it was one of the BTC pipeline's key stakeholders, Georgia, who blocked the pipeline's construction

because of environmental issues (p.119). Besides, he explores in depth the technical, economic, and social challenges in the planning and construction of the BTC (p.126) and considers that disregarded material and non-material issues created barriers for the BTC project (p.120). From a revised functionalist perspective, the BTC has given to the coastal states ‘material integration opportunity as an alternative to naïve political integration path and regional conflict’ (p.126). Therefore, in his opinion, the BTC pipeline should be regarded as a way of bringing different actors together and enhancing their interaction scope (p.130).

The chapter 5, entitled “A new round in the Caspian pipeline game: The Southern Gas Corridor” emphasizes the economic, environmental and technical challenges of the SGC project. Calling the New Great Game literature’s explanation narrow and exaggerated, he examines the three phases of the SGC project through the lens of revised functionalism and contends that the project has faced challenges beyond and besides Russia, Iran, and China during these periods (p.145). Dr.Bayramov finds that ‘the changing dynamics and complex interconnection between different developments should be explained in order to understand the full picture in the Caspian Sea region’ (p.148). Based on the fact that China, Iran, and Russia are involved in this project, in his view, even if there is a ‘Great Game’, it is about constructive cooperation rather than destructive rivalry (p.163).

In the concluding chapter, the author once again castigates the New Great Game literature depicting it as superficial and less systematic and requests switching to ‘more cautious, synthetic, and analytical ways of discussing the Caspian Sea region’ (p.176). Debating the three interlinked case studies he exposes that the littoral states can cooperate on shared issues regardless of the existing conflicts, competition, and geopolitics (p.183).

Overall, this book, mainly focusing on cooperative competition, has found answers to the multiple unexplored questions and overlooked sides of the Caspian Sea region. The author has fully and fairly discussed the New Great Game narrative in comparison with revised functionalism. His work has revolved around three case studies; i.e., CEP, BTC and SGC. He has discussed in detail the historical events

and challenges behind the emergence of these projects. Its findings revealed that besides states that are involved in constructing the Caspian Sea region's politics, several non-state actors have also affected the regional dynamism, which is probably the most intriguing part of the book since this aspect has not been generally touched upon in relevant literature. Along with all the positive angles, this book needs an updated review particularly after Russian occupation of Ukraine. Moreover, the author does not seem to be fully in picture, when he explicitly pushes aside the claims about Russia's interventions to prevent the implementation of the above-mentioned projects. In any case, this work is engrossing and worthwhile for the general reader, as well as those students, scholars and policy makers who may be interested in geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region.