

A New Focus on the Caspian Region Turning the Periphery into the Centre

Review >
Central Asia

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh once again addresses one of his favourite themes, the control of hydrocarbon resources in Central Eurasia and the Caspian region. With 14.6 per cent of the world's proven oil resources and almost 50 per cent of its gas reserves, the Caspian region has become the focus of tough competition in which both state and non-state actors have a stake.

By Frédéric Grare

Amineh tries to analyse the phenomenon in relation to globalization. Globalization, he argues, is not only an economic process but involves a variety of 'transnational processes and domestic structures with countries engaging one another economically, politically and culturally'. Hence the need for a new theoretical framework, which he calls neo-geopolitics, that returns to a strong geographical focus in the analysis of complex realities. Neo-geopolitics distances itself from classical realism in its refusal to centre entirely on the state as the sole protagonist in international relations. On the contrary, it stipulates that the division of global space must also take into account transnational governmental and non-governmental institutions, religious groups, and organizations such as companies, armed forces, terrorist groups, and environmental organizations.

However, despite this supposedly new approach, the book does not really distance itself from a neo-realist perspective. State politics still constitute, and rightly so, the bulk of the analysis. The description of the impact of factors such as international corporations, the drug trade, or Islamic groups, does not question the primacy of the state and its quest for power as the driving force of regional relations. The Caspian states themselves, but also external parties such as Turkey, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States, are undoubtedly constrained in their respective policies by multinational corporations, and the instability created by drug dealers or Islamic groups. They

remain, nevertheless, the ultimate decision-makers. Moreover, the degree of autonomy of such non-governmental forces is sometimes questionable.

Afghanistan is a particularly revealing example in this regard. Many (but definitely not all) Islamic groups had a large degree of autonomy but at the same time served as proxies for some of the external parties mentioned above. Already for quite some years, Afghanistan has been the location of regional and global conflicts conducted through its local warring factions.

The book's contention that its hydrocarbon resources make the Caspian region one of the most important areas of the post-Cold War era, also seems highly debatable. The Caspian type of energy resources (oil and gas) may be vital for advanced industrialized countries, but this alone does not make the region 'one of the most important geopolitical areas in the post Cold War era'. Other factors such as fear of terrorism, partly developed in this region in the power vacuum left by the disintegration of the Soviet empire, play at least as important a role in the present evolution of the region. Moreover, the quantity of resources is an important factor for the hydrocarbon business, but certainly not the only one. Accessibility, production costs, and consequently international hydrocarbon prices, are at least as important for investment decisions. Taking this aspect into consideration, the Middle East, not only possessing greater resources but with much more favourable conditions for exploitation, is still better placed in the global competition for energy and likely to remain strategically more important in the fore-

seeable future. As a consequence, Caspian hydrocarbon may well be an element of Russia-US relations in the region, but it remains secondary in the hierarchy of priorities which structure these relations.

This is not to say that Caspian hydrocarbon resources are unimportant. They remain the main and in some cases, only opportunity for the Caspian states in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. So far, however, they remain essentially a potential. Hydrocarbon production is yet to be developed and exported. The Caspian states are facing the challenge of using these resources to become more effectively part of the global system.

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh's book does nevertheless constitute a good synthesis of existing knowledge about the energy issue in the Caspian region. Throughout, it greatly helps to clarify some aspects of a complex situation and facilitate the understanding of an important stake in a part of the world which remains predominantly unknown to the public at large. ◀

- Amineh, Mehdi Parvizi, *Globalisation, Geopolitics and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region*, The Hague: Clingendael International Energy Programme (2003), pp. 260, ISBN 90-5031-085-0

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