



The Strategic Importance of the Caspian and Black Sea Regions for Europe's Energy Security

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The Caspian and Black Sea regions hold significant geopolitical importance for Europe's energy security, due to their strategic location, abundant resources, and critical role as transit corridors linking energy-producing areas with consumer markets. [Together, these regions serve as a vital bridge between energy-rich Central Asia and energy-dependent Europe.](#) The significance of these regions also extends beyond energy and trade, encompassing economic potential and a strategic role in regional stability and broader security dynamics. Given their geopolitical and geostrategic value, ensuring the security of these regions has become a priority for external actors, often from geopolitically opposing sides. The regions' energy reserves, trade flows, and transportation infrastructure increasingly influence both regional and transregional stability and security frameworks.

Geopolitical Rivalry

The Caspian and Black Sea regions occupy a pivotal position in the geopolitics of energy security. The Caspian Sea region, [home to five hydrocarbon-rich littoral states](#) — Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia — holds substantial geopolitical weight due to its vast energy resources. Meanwhile, the [Black Sea region serves as a critical transit corridor](#), linking Caspian energy supplies to European markets and shaping broader security dynamics. Energy security and access to natural resources are [central drivers of regional dynamics](#), attracting the strategic interest of external powers including the United States (US), the European Union (EU), China, and Türkiye. Control over transit corridors and pipeline infrastructure is increasingly linked to broader geopolitical influence across the South Caucasus

and Central Asia. For stakeholders aiming to enhance their strategic footprint, reliable access to these energy routes is critical for securing long-term energy diversification and regional stability. The following sections analyze the involvement of both regional and external actors in shaping the evolving geopolitical landscape.

European Union

The issue of energy resource transportation to the EU gained critical importance following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. On May 28 of that year, the European Commission published the [European Energy Security Strategy](#), which laid out plans to reduce the EU's dependence on Russian energy, especially natural gas. This effort intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The escalation of Western sanctions against Russia highlights the urgent need for the EU to secure alternative energy sources and routes.

As a result, the Caspian Sea region, accessed via the Black Sea, emerged as a strategic alternative for diversifying Europe's energy supply and reducing reliance on Russian oil and natural gas.

In response to Russia's war in Ukraine, the European Commission launched the [REPowerEU plan in May 2022](#), promoting energy savings, clean energy production, and the diversification of energy imports. This plan complements the [EU's external energy engagement strategy](#), with a focus on expanding the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), a critical infrastructure connecting the Caspian Sea region to Europe. The Commission views the [SGC as essential for enhancing energy security](#), particularly for Southeastern EU member states.

The war in Ukraine thus served as a turning point, prompting the EU to pursue long-term energy resilience by reducing dependency on Russian resources and reinforcing cooperation with alternative suppliers in the Caspian and Black Sea regions.

United States

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has been actively engaged in the Caspian Sea region due to its strategic geopolitical significance. To advance its strategic goals, the US seeks to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian and South Caucasus countries. This engagement was particularly strong in the 1990s, wherein the [US helped strengthen the region's energy export infrastructure](#) by assisting in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. A key US interest thus lies in ensuring accessible, depoliticized, and reliable energy supplies, which would help [reduce its dependence on the Persian Gulf and other unstable regions](#). Rising energy prices and political risks, such as the use of energy as a geopolitical tool by oil-producing nations, underscore the importance of the Caspian Sea region in enhancing global energy security and market stability.

China

China, in turn, has focused on securing its western energy supply routes, making the Caspian Sea region a critical component of its broader economic strategy.

China's investments in the Caspian Sea region's energy infrastructure and its growing economic relations have [enabled Central Asian countries to diversify their trade and energy transit routes](#). In order to access the Caspian Sea's energy resources, China is working to secure its western borders by strengthening ties

with neighbouring countries. A key priority of China's energy security strategy is to make direct investments in pipelines, which ensures uninterrupted access to oil and gas that is not reliant on international maritime route challenges. In recent years, [China has invested in the energy sector and various projects in Central Asia](#), with the main goal of strengthening Beijing's influence in the region, counterbalancing the growing spheres of influence of both Russia and the US.

Russia

Meanwhile, Russia seeks to maintain and expand its traditional sphere of influence across both the Caspian and Black Sea regions. Vast reserves of energy resources, access to major consumption markets in Asia and Europe, and an extensive transit network [provide Russia with great opportunities to strengthen its position](#) on the international stage. Russia's goal is to use energy diplomacy in its foreign policy to restore influence over states of the former Soviet Union and reverse their growing ties to the West. Russia considers the post-Soviet space (which includes a significant part of the Black and Caspian Sea regions) as [its historical sphere of influence and as a key region for its ontological security](#). Russia does not hesitate to intervene beyond its borders, as maintaining its influence in these regions is of utmost importance.

Iran

Iran's geopolitical strategy also prioritizes the Caspian and Black Sea regions. Energy diplomacy remains a cornerstone of Tehran's foreign policy, shaped by both domestic strategic goals and global position. The strategies of key global actors, such as the US, the EU, Russia, and China, are particularly influential. A core objective of Tehran's policy is to strengthen relations with former Soviet Union states, China, and other Asian nations. However, Iran's pursuit of its geopolitical ambitions [is frequently constrained by evolving regional dynamics](#) and, more significantly, by intense US pressure and sanctions.

Iran and Russia, both major Caspian littoral states, share a complex relationship marked by overlapping interests and strategic rivalry. They are [united in their desire to limit Western military and political influence](#) in the region and are cautious of Caspian states seeking to diversify their trade and energy routes. While their long-term goals may differ, Tehran and Moscow often cooperate to achieve short-term tactical advantages, maintain influence, and block external powers from altering the regional balance.

China also plays a vital role in Iran's foreign policy, especially under the burden of US sanctions. In 2021, Iran and China signed [a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement](#), which Tehran hailed as a major diplomatic and economic achievement. Although the agreement does not shift the regional balance of power, it does affect geopolitical dynamics and counters US efforts to isolate Iran.

Despite its favourable geographic location and large oil and gas reserves, Iran is excluded from regional energy infrastructure projects. Western sanctions prevent international oil companies from investing in Iran, limiting its participation in the Caspian Sea region's energy development.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, one of the world's largest landlocked countries, sits between China and Russia and holds vast oil, gas, and mineral resources. Its significant production and export capacity may position it as a key regional and global energy player in the coming decades. Since independence, [Kazakhstan has balanced energy ties with both European and Asian countries](#), though it has long held a special connection to

Russia through Soviet-era infrastructure links. The Kremlin continues efforts to restore influence over Central Asia's energy sectors. Meanwhile, [China holds stakes in multiple natural resource extraction projects](#) in the country.

Despite being a key export destination for Kazakh oil, the [EU currently serves as a strategic challenge for Kazakhstan](#) as many of its major pipelines run through Russian territory. In the current geopolitical context, Kazakhstan must carefully balance relations between Moscow and the West to safeguard its energy interests.

Turkmenistan

Over the past decade, Turkmenistan has increasingly been viewed by the EU as a potential energy partner through the SGC. However, alongside its historic relationship as a provider of energy to Russia and China, Turkmenistan faces a significant lack of export routes to Europe. To increase the volume of natural gas exports, the [construction of the Trans-Caspian pipeline is a necessary addition to the SGC](#), as it would enable the transportation of natural gas from Central Asia to the EU.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's location and geopolitical significance make it a key player in Europe's efforts to diversify energy supplies. At the close of the 20th Century, Azerbaijan concluded its [first international agreements on Caspian oil and gas development](#), establishing the foundation for large-scale energy infrastructure projects that would shape regional energy dynamics for decades to come. These developments spurred substantial infrastructure growth, enhancing both regional stability and the independence of Azerbaijan and its neighbours. The BTC oil pipeline was a milestone, followed by the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, which evolved into the [South Caucasus Pipeline \(SCP\)](#), allowing Azerbaijani natural gas to reach European markets.

A major step in Azerbaijan-EU energy cooperation was the [2006 Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in Energy](#). In 2011, the [Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor](#) launched a vital initiative to deliver Caspian natural gas to Europe, crucial for diversifying and securing the EU's energy supply.

In late 2020, Azerbaijan began exporting gas to Europe via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), opening new opportunities for European markets. In July 2022, [the European Commission signed an agreement with Azerbaijan](#) to double gas imports to 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027, helping to reduce the EU's reliance on Russian energy.

Georgia

Georgia, a key Black Sea littoral state, plays a pivotal role in the transportation of Caspian energy resources to European markets. All major pipeline routes, including the Baku-Supsa⁴, BTC, and BTE pipelines, traverse Georgian territory. In the context of evolving regional dynamics and heightened geopolitical tensions, Georgia's role has grown increasingly strategic, particularly for the EU.

As Europe seeks to diversify its energy supply and reduce dependence on Russia, Georgia serves as [a critical transit corridor](#) for the secure flow of Caspian energy to European markets. This route remains the [only viable alternative for delivering hydrocarbons](#) from the Caspian Sea region to Europe while bypassing

Russian territory. Georgia's energy infrastructure thus strengthens regional connectivity and directly supports EU energy security and strategic autonomy.

Türkiye

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye emerged as a key geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus, establishing strong political, economic, and cultural ties, particularly with Georgia and Azerbaijan. In the context of an increasingly globalized world, the growing demand for energy continues to shape both economic priorities and strategic policymaking. Recognizing this demand, Türkiye prioritized [developing secure and economically viable infrastructure](#) to transport Caspian hydrocarbons to Western markets. The BTC oil pipeline and BTE gas pipeline are flagship projects designed to ensure the safe and efficient export of energy resources. Beyond their economic significance, these initiatives enhance Türkiye's geopolitical standing and contribute to the political and economic stability of Azerbaijan and Georgia. This corridor now serves as a vital bridge between East and West, reinforcing regional cooperation and enabling further infrastructure development for Caspian energy exports.

Armenia

Armenia has traditionally aligned with Russia, serving as its primary geopolitical ally in the South Caucasus. This alignment has been shaped by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and historical tensions with Türkiye. Armenia's participation in Russian-led organizations such as the [Collective Security Treaty Organization \(CSTO\)](#) and the [Eurasian Economic Union \(EEU\)](#) has further reinforced its strategic ties with Moscow.

The outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, during which Russia remained largely passive as Azerbaijan regained control of territory, triggered a shift in Armenia's foreign policy. Dissatisfaction with Russia's inaction led Yerevan to seek closer ties with Western partners. At the outset of 2025, [Armenia signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with the US](#). In March, Armenia's parliament approved the initiation of EU accession talks, and on April 4, it adopted a law to formally launch the accession process.

Should Armenia sign a peace agreement with Azerbaijan and succeed in normalizing relations with Türkiye, it could enhance its role in Europe's energy security. Yet this pivot faces significant obstacles — primarily Russian opposition. Moscow views Armenia's Western integration as a threat and maintains a strong military presence in Gyumri, Armenia, under an agreement effective until 2044, giving it substantial influence over Armenia's security policy.

Conclusion

This evolving strategic landscape highlights the increasing interdependence between energy security and traditional security dynamics across the Caspian and Black Sea regions. While much of the external competition has concentrated on securing energy resources in the Caspian Sea basin, the strategic importance of the Black Sea region, a transit hub for Caspian energy supplies and as a zone of heightened competition, has simultaneously increased. The Black Sea serves as a vital connection point between East and West, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Growing interest from the West in

Black Sea security, alongside EU diversification efforts, has further elevated the region's strategic significance.

Both regions thus hold critical strategic importance for Europe, Asia, and the Middle East by providing a central geographic location and opportune access to natural resources and critical transit routes.

Furthermore, the Caspian Sea basin countries – endowed with substantial energy resources – [play a vital geopolitical role as viable alternatives to Russian energy](#). This positions them as essential partners in advancing energy diversification strategies.

Enhancing transit infrastructure across this broader Black Sea–Caspian Sea corridor strengthens Europe's energy resilience by reducing dependence on single-source suppliers. Given the region's strategic location and resource potential, the Black Sea–Caspian Sea corridor must be recognized as a priority area in current international policy, energy diplomacy, and security planning. Over its most recent rotation, the RCN team has been instrumental in assisting Romanian counterparts in neutralizing historical ordnances and armed, uncrewed surface vessels, which had the potential to pose significant damage to large ships.
