

Caspian Neighbours in New Row

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Azerbaijan and Iran are falling out again over exploitation of Caspian Sea oil wealth

A planned visit by Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliiev to Iran has been postponed again, amidst a further cooling in relations between the two countries.

Aliiev chose to cancel a trip to Iran, scheduled for late February, on health grounds, as he was recovering from an operation in the US city of Cleveland. But it's clear that during his absence, relations had taken a turn for the worst, with the two clashing over the Caspian Sea.

Aliiev has been meaning to visit Tehran ever since he was re-elected in 1998. The two neighbours have a great deal in common and Iran has the largest population of Azerbaijanis in the world - at around 20 million it is three times greater than the population of Azerbaijan itself. But bilateral relations are poor.

Over the last year, tension has surfaced over a disputed area of the Caspian Sea. The five independent states that border it have yet to agree on how its resources are to be divided. The president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, has suggested they should meet on April 23-24 to hammer out a deal, but the meeting may be put off.

Russia and Azerbaijan are close to agreement on the Caspian and it was one of the issues discussed between Presidents Putin and Aliiev by telephone on March 5. However Iran, which has a smaller coastline than the other four states, is still proposing the division of the inland sea into equal parts, giving it 20 per cent of the waters.

Last June, an incident in the southern Caspian almost led to an armed confrontation between the two sides. Several Iranian warships, with air support, chased away two Azerbaijani vessels carrying out oil exploration in the area of the Araz-Alov-Sharg oilfield, on behalf of the major Western oil company in Azerbaijan, BP. The row died down, but bilateral relations suffered a heavy blow.

Then on February 22 this year, an Iranian warship crossed into Azerbaijan's territorial waters not far from the port of Astara. Baku official sources reported that the ship left after a patrol boat came out to meet it.

"As long as the sea boundary between Azerbaijan and Iran has not been definitively drawn, these incidents will happen," Iran's ambassador to Baku, Ahad Gazai, told Azerbaijani television. "Sometimes Azerbaijani ships sail without knowing which sector they are in."

Azerbaijani foreign ministry spokesman Metin Mirza said, "The president's visit to Iran will put an end to all these problems." But, with that visit still postponed, the Iranian oil minister Bijan Namdar-Zanganeh, said on March 6 that his country would start exploration work after the New Year, Novruz, March 21, in the disputed Alov-Sharg-Araz field.

Tehran is unlikely, however, to carry out this threat, believes Rasim Musabekov a political analyst and former adviser to President Aliiev. He said that the Iranians' position has become weaker, now that Moscow and Baku are on better terms and closer to a deal over the Caspian.

"I think that Iran is simply trying to improve its position in the Caspian and pose a threat to American interests as well," said Musabekov. "But if Iran does go ahead, then Azerbaijan's reaction will be quite tough and unpleasant and will be backed up by Turkey, the West and probably Russia."

Musabekov added that there were real doubts as to whether Iran had the technical capacity to explore the Alov-Sharg-Araz field. He said that in the past it was Azerbaijani specialists, using Azerbaijani ships and drilling equipment, who helped the Iranians with the kind of work they wanted to do there.

Another source of tension between Baku and Teheran has been Iran's support for Azerbaijan's enemy Armenia. Iran has continued to give economic help to Yerevan, despite Azerbaijani protests. On March 4-5, the Iranian defence minister, Ali Shamkhani, further angered Baku, when he visited Yerevan and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Armenians.

This enraged Azerbaijani parliamentarians, who were receiving a delegation from the Iranian parliament at the time. In a public meeting, opposition deputy Mais Safarli challenged the visiting deputies to justify their policies on the Caspian Sea and their relations with the "Armenian aggressor."

According to eyewitnesses, Safarli was even more aggressive with the Iranians in a private session. Deputies from the governing party New Azerbaijan kept silent but indicated their approval for what Safarli was saying.

Safarli also raised the issue of the rights of Azerbaijanis in northern Iran, complaining that they were unable to study in their own language in schools. Baku has applied to open a consulate in the northern city of Tabriz, but has so far been refused permission to do so.

In their turn, the Iranians complained about Azerbaijan's desire for military cooperation with Tehran's old enemy, the US - proving that the two neighbours are firmly in different camps in world politics.

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