

Tehran Guns for Caspian Oil

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Regional tensions run deep in the Caspian, where gun boats, sharp tongues and bellicose threats are making serious waves.

Dialogue between the five states bordering on the Caspian Sea has intensified since Iran sent gunboats and aircraft to escort Azeri oil-exploration vessels from the Alov offshore oil field in late July.

It was the first time in a ten-year dispute over territorial waters that Iran has deployed force, and though its actions have been met with threats of reprisal activity has concentrated on a diplomatic solution.

Iran pointed to the fact that the boats were infringing the line agreed by Iran and the Soviet Union in the 1950s in an agreement which gave Iran around 11 per cent of the shoreline. Although it wants at least 20 per cent, the decision to use military hardware on July 23 shows how far Iran is willing to go to ensure it at least protects the waters it has now.

The talks which followed the incident involved the five Caspian nations - Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakstan, Russia and Turkmenistan - and clearly strengthened Russia's position.

Initially, Iran's actions worked in her favour. Teheran's threat of force drove oil giant British Petroleum, which owned one of the boats buzzed on July 23, to backtrack on its agreement with the Azeri government, suspending its operations in disputed offshore areas pending settlement. It also brought its claims to the international theatre.

Tehran has been accusing the Azeri government of "subservience to American imperialism," which it accuses of seeking to "dominate the region" since the mid-1990s, when Baku signed a series of major contracts with a number of international, mostly US-based, oil companies, inviting them to develop new oilfields in the Caspian.

Iran's muscle also came at an unexpected time, since it is expecting a historic visit from Azeri President Heidar Aliev. The visit expected in the coming weeks will be the first ever by a leader of independent Azerbaijan.

But the Khatami government may actually have used the coming visit as a spur for its aggressive actions. Aliev is planning to visit northern areas of Iran which are home to around 30 million ethnic Azeris, four times the population of Azerbaijan itself. The area was handed over by Russia in the early 19th century following a protracted war between Russia and Persia.

According to diplomatic sources, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami is responding to fears that Aliev's visit will drum up nationalist sentiment in the region. Since the president has already been accused by critics of "flirting with the West", he might be keen to show the ayatollahs that he has a hard-line streak.

Some Iranian voices did not hesitate to make threatening noises. Hours after the Alov incident, Mokhsen Rezai, secretary of the Iranian Legislative Council, made an unambiguous and brazen remark. "Azerbaijani leaders must rule their country so as not to give Iranian people a valid reason to demand a return of Azerbaijan, a former Iranian province, back to the bosom of Iran."

Aliiev, however, is not reconsidering his visit to Iran, where some 15 important bilateral agreements await his signature.

The main implications of the Caspian impasse were not obvious until the informal CIS summit held in Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi at the beginning of August. The summit was attended by ten CIS heads of state, including three Caspian nations: Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. At the meeting Azerbaijan was given unconditional support.

Heidar Aliiev was quoted as saying Russian President Vladimir Putin had undertaken to "broker a summit of four Caspian nations," cutting Iran out. The message to Iran was loud and clear: former Soviet nations in the Caspian are forming an alliance, and Iran isn't invited.

Referring to Putin, Aliiev sent another warning signal to Iran: the border between Iran and the former Soviet Union in the Caspian Sea will remain exactly as it has been since the 1950s. Further negotiations would be pointless.

Clearly concerned at Aliiev's take on the meeting, the Iranian deputy foreign minister, Ali Akhiani, flew to Moscow for an "urgent consultation" on August 9 to find out just what had been said at Sochi.

Akhiani's counterpart, Victor Kaliuzhny, reiterated concerns over "mounting tensions in the Caspian," saying that military force in the issue was "intolerable". He also implied that Tehran's claims to 20 per cent of the Caspian coastline were fantasy.

Still, the Iranian envoy left Moscow reassured. Apparently, the Russian side did not fully confirm Heidar Aliiev's interpretation of Putin's Sochi statements and assuaged fears that the other four states were ganging up on Iran. Although the claims for 20 per cent were brushed under the carpet, calling the former division sacrosanct meant that Alov, at least, remained - in Russian eyes - Iranian

With Russia and Iran still talking, the next Caspian summit due to be held in Turkmenistan in October should bear fruit even if Iran and Turkmenistan are suspicious of Russia's current policy.

Akhiani went from Moscow to Ashgabat to see Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov. The two were described as being "less than enthusiastic" at Kaliuzhny's remarks to journalists that Russia hoped that one day the Caspian summits would evolve into a permanent organisation.

Not only is Niyazov wary of any regional alliances, he is also aware that Turkmenistan would be a second tier member of any such group. Tehran, for its part, has no wish to be a member of the same club which has Azerbaijan - which it sees as being in bed with US - as a member.

Meantime, the West has not been remiss in joining the bargaining, too. On August 13 the Iranian ambassador was called to the Turkish foreign ministry in Ankara and told in no uncertain terms that Turkey was prepared to send in its troops if Iran played the military card.

Beyond fraternal feelings for the Azeris it seemed that western countries which have oil interests in the Caspian pushed Turkey - a NATO ally - into warning Iran. Turkey's sabre-rattling coincided with Azerbaijani defence ministry's own bellicose statements that any Iranian fighters violating Azeri airspace would be "shot down without warning." This escalation of tensions came only a few days after the Azeri government in Baku pledged never to use military force against "brotherly Iran".

Nearly any way you look at it, all these traumatic developments in the Caspian play into Russia's hands.

In their bilateral disputes, Caspian nations have no choice but to bring Russia in as their umpire or security guarantor. Well aware of this, Moscow is always ready to oblige and manoeuvres to keep all Caspian nations happy.

On the sly, Moscow has been stepping up its military presence in the Caspian. The Russian Coast Guard in the Caspian has recently been beefed up with new sophisticated gunboats, fitted with advanced cannons and missile launchers. In addition, warships from dismantled Soviet naval bases in Abkhazia on the Black Sea have been relocated to the Caspian.

As temperatures rise, the next episode in the Caspian saga is just as likely to be decided on the decks of a warship as at the negotiation table.

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