



DIVIDING THE CASPIAN SEA

The Caspian Sea is the unlikely scene of a geopolitical border dispute. No fewer than five countries are vying for a bonanza of newfound wealth beneath the sea, recently increasing military tensions in the region.

The Caspian Sea covers an area of 143,630 square miles (372,000 sq. km.), almost the size of California. Occupying a lowland area similar to the Persian Gulf to the south, the Caspian is below sea level and is the largest inland water body in the world.

Because the Caspian is below sea level, its waters are salty, although not as salty as the ocean. In fact, it contains both freshwater and saltwater fish. Perhaps best known among its freshwater fish is its sturgeon, from which caviar is derived. Four major rivers flow into the sea, including the Volga, Ural, Terek and Kura, keeping its salts diluted.

Five independent countries surround the Caspian, four of which were former Soviet Socialist Republics. Azerbaijan and Russia are located to the west, Kazakhstan to the north and east, Turkmenistan to the east and Iran to the south.

Throughout history, the Caspian Sea offered up few resources other than its fish. During the existence of the Soviet Union from 1922 through 1991, there was little reason for the four Soviet Republics to be concerned about their territorial claims

When the Soviet Union broke

up, however, western oil companies soon gained the opportunity to explore the Caspian and its larger lowland for petroleum. Because its geologic lowland structure resembles that of the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea quickly took on greater value to the new cash-strapped countries surrounding it. As claims and counter-claims were presented, it has required the dredging up of no less than 10 earlier international treaties in an attempt to answer all of the legal questions about ownership.

A recent article by Steve LeVine in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Hunt for Caspian Oil Stokes Border Feuds and Arcane Theories" (Aug. 3), explained the complicated background for the current conflict.

It wasn't until 1854 that Russia's Czar Nicholas I claimed the entire Caspian Sea as Russian waters. In the 1950s, however, the Soviet Union recognized a straight line, called the Astarah-Hosseingholi Line, running across the Caspian connecting Iran's northernmost borders. The Soviets conceded the territory south of this line to

Iran, representing about 11 percent of the Caspian Sea.

Actually, the Caspian Sea was once part of the Black Sea, only to be separated by the geologic uplift of the Caucasus. This is an important issue today because it is an "enclosed sea," which under recognized precedent and international law means that the sea floor should be treated as would a lake floor. This disallows any country from claiming a lion's share, but permits countries to control the floor closest to their shores and up to a median line in the Caspian.

Hence, boundaries have been drawn that divide up the sea floor, but that hasn't eliminated challenges. An Iranian patrol boat recently crossed this line and harassed a British Petroleum (BP) research vessel more than 50 miles (80 km.) north. This incident points out the potential for conflict over existing territorial claims regardless of precedent.

Historically, Azerbaijan has been the largest oil producer in the Caspian basin with its Baku and Second Baku oil fields.

The latest discoveries, however, have been off the Russian and Kazakhstan shores, encouraging these two countries to agree upon their Caspian borders.

Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, on the other hand, have not agreed. Iran refuses to accept the 1954 Astarah-Hosseingholi Line or adopt the "enclosed sea" precedent. Instead, it claims waters that overlap the claims of both Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Furthermore, Turkmenistan's claims overlap those of Azerbaijan, creating further confusion.

This situation begs for negotiation before any shells are fired. The most logical solution is for all parties to accept the "enclosed sea" precedent and the Astarah-Hosseingholi Line.

Honor is a major issue, however, among the participants and posturing to gain advantage is a recognized negotiation ploy in this part of the world. It will be interesting to watch this issue develop, given this background.

And that is Geography in the News. August 31, 2001. #587.

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