



CURRENT STATUS OF THE CONVENTION ON THE LEGAL STATUS OF THE CASPIAN SEA

Since the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea during the Fifth Summit of the Caspian Littoral States held in Aktau on August 12, 2018, a number of important steps and measures have been taken to further develop cooperation in the Caspian Sea. As of today, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have ratified the Caspian Convention, but Russia and Iran have not yet completed the ratification process. During the summit, President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov suggested holding the next Caspian summit and the First Caspian Economic Forum in Turkmenistan in 2019. However, the proposal to organize the Caspian summit was not adopted, while the forum is scheduled to be held on August 12, 2019 in Turkmenistan, and preparations are already under way.

The Turkmen parliament ratified the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea on December 1, 2018, and the presidents of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan ratified the document on February 8 and 22, 2019 respectively. The implementation of the convention now depends on when Russia and Iran will complete their internal ratification procedures. It should be noted that in September last year Ambassador-at-Large of the Russian Foreign Ministry Igor Bratchikov expressed hope that no state would deliberately extend the ratification process. According to Bratchikov, the early entry into force of the convention was in the interest of all the parties, given that the convention took into account national interests of all the Caspian littoral states. Based on this statement, it seemed that Russia would soon implement the ratification process. However, Moscow has not yet taken any concrete steps towards the ratification.

Iran, on the other hand, continues the internal discussion process on this issue. In fact, Iranian authorities evaluated the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in different ways. Conservatives and religious figures criticized Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, who signed the convention, and Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif, who was involved in the negotiations, for ignoring the country's interests. According to them, Iran should have a greater share of the Caspian Sea's area. The Iranian parliament currently holds intensive discussions on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, but it remains to be seen how the convention-related contradiction in the country will end. Due to the delay of the ratification process in Russia and Iran, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Beibut Atankulov stated that Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan had ratified the convention and expressed hope that

Moscow and Tehran would ratify the document by the end of the year.

The first meeting of the High-Level Working Group on the Caspian Sea took place on February 19-20, 2019 in Baku. First of all, the parties adopted the rules of the working group and exchanged views on the implementation of the agreements reached during the Fifth Caspian Summit. In addition, members of the working group reported on the implementation of internal procedures related to the ratification of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea and considered various aspects of cooperation in the Caspian Sea. Moreover, the parties discussed the draft agreement on the methodology for establishing straight baselines in the Caspian Sea and agreed on a number of its provisions. During the second meeting of the working group held on April 16-17, 2019 in Nur-Sultan, the parties continued discussing the issues raised in Baku. As it is known, the next meeting of the high-level working group will be held in July 2019 in Iran.

Apart from these meetings, other events dedicated to the development of cooperation between the Caspian littoral states were held this year. In particular, on February 26, the fourth meeting of authorized representatives of the Caspian littoral states was held in Ashkhabad to discuss the draft protocol on cooperation in combating illegal extraction of biological resources (poaching) in the Caspian Sea. The parties discussed in detail the draft protocol in accordance with the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, and made necessary corrections and recommendations. On March 14, Ashgabat hosted the first meeting of authorized representatives of the Caspian littoral states to discuss the draft agreement between the governments of the Caspian states on cooperation in the field of scientific research on the Caspian Sea. It is expected that the agreement will strengthen the legal framework for cooperation in conducting various scientific work in the Caspian Sea, as well as monitoring and preventing natural and man-made emergency situations.

In addition, the first meeting of the ministries of defense of the Caspian littoral states was held on April 24 in Astrakhan to discuss the ways of strengthening security in the region and the status of the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents in the Caspian Sea. During the meeting, Admiral Sergei Pinchuk, the commander of the Russian Caspian Flotilla, emphasized the importance of the agreement in ensuring the security of sea and air navigation in the region. The parties also expressed their readiness to discuss the draft agreement on confidence-building

measures in the Caspian Sea in the future. It is worth noting that on May 14, 2019, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the ratification of the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents in the Caspian Sea". Similar to the Caspian Sea convention, in addition to Kazakhstan, this document has been ratified by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, while Russia and Iran have not yet completed their internal ratification procedures.

Nevertheless, the Caspian littoral states are interested in developing economic cooperation. The First Caspian Economic Forum to discuss these issues will be held on August 12, 2019 in Turkmenistan. The forum will consist of three main events: the international conference, the Caspian exhibition of innovative technologies, and the ceremony of signing contracts between the companies and entrepreneurs. The international conference will focus on the following issues: implementation of joint investment projects and programs; exchange of experience in the creation and development of free economic zones; exchange of experience in legislation, standards, rules and statistical information in the field of economy; cooperation in digital economy; development of economic cooperation between the littoral states; and establishment of joint ventures. First of all, representatives of the Caspian littoral states will discuss how to create conditions for major projects in the oil and gas industry, electricity, transport, trade, agriculture, tourism and other areas, and identify ways to make the region attractive for foreign investments.

To conclude, new economic projects are expected to be launched in the Caspian region after the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. Indeed, the littoral states have expanded their cooperation on transit and transportation of goods across the Caspian Sea. However, the issue of the construction of underwater pipelines has not been resolved yet. In order to consider such projects, the convention must be ratified and implemented by all the coastal states. However, even after the ratification of the convention, Moscow and Tehran may oppose underwater pipeline projects on the pretext of protecting the Caspian Sea ecosystem. Naturally, geopolitical interests and competition in the energy field will be the main reason for such a possible opposition. In any case, as of mid-2019, the main objective of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is to persuade Iran and Russia to complete the convention's ratification process without further delay.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The 14th summit conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was held under the theme “Hand in Hand toward the Future” in Mecca. Participants addressed the common matters of concern for the Islamic World, such as Palestine, Islamophobia, extremism, problems of Muslim communities and minorities. During the summit, Turkey handed over the OIC chairmanship to Saudi Arabia.
- The meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council to commemorate the 25th anniversary of President Nazarbayev’s idea for Eurasian integration and the 5th anniversary of the creation of the EAEU was held in Nur-Sultan. Participants addressed the union’s current activities and prospects for further development, including the implementation of the EAEU Digital Agenda and the signing of a trade agreement with Serbia.
- During his visit to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, EU President Donald Tusk met with the leadership of each country to discuss regional and bilateral cooperation, border security, climate change, and environmental protection. Tusk confirmed the EU’s commitment to stronger partnerships with the region and individual countries, as part of its new Central Asia Strategy.
- The sixth High-level Political and Security Dialogue between the EU and the Central Asian states took place in Brussels, with Afghanistan invited as a special guest. Participants discussed the implementation of the new EU Strategy in areas such as regional cooperation in Central Asia, security and the promotion of Euro-Asian connectivity.
- During his visit to Uzbekistan, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier met with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to address issues of bilateral cooperation. Steinmeier also met with local businessmen to learn about the country’s trade and investment opportunities and with civil society representatives to discuss current developments in Uzbekistan. In conclusion, he met with students of the Urgench State University and visited Khiva.
- Uzbekistan’s authorities airlifted to Tashkent 156 Uzbek nationals, mainly women and children, who formerly lived in territories in the Middle East controlled by militant Islamic groups. The repatriates were handed over to Uzbek diplomats by Kurdish forces in Syria. It is reported that about 300 Uzbek women and children are still stranded in northeast Syria awaiting repatriation.
- Kazakhstan conducted the last third stage of the special humanitarian operation called Jusan, evacuating 171 Kazakh children from Syria. Upon return to Kazakhstan, they were accommodated in a special adaptation center for undergoing rehabilitation and receiving all required assistance. As a result of the Jusan operation, a total of 357 Kazakh children were brought back to their home country.

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- During his visit to Uzbekistan, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev met with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to discuss the intensification of mutual cooperation, including the implementation of large investment projects such as the nuclear power plant construction in Uzbekistan. Medvedev then attended the first meeting of the Uzbek-Russian joint commission at the level of the heads of government held in Urgench.
- The meeting of the CIS Heads of Government Council was held in Ashgabat to discuss trade, economic and humanitarian relations. The parties signed a package of documents, including the agreements on cooperation between the CIS customs bodies in the protection of intellectual property rights, on coordination of interstate relations in fundamental research, and on cooperation in museum affairs.
- In 2019-2021, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) aims to contribute to increased exports in Turkmenistan through providing \$150 million worth of loans, as well as \$690 million for prospective projects to develop the country’s transport and transit potential, promote energy exports, and advance private sector operations. During 2011–2018, the ADB approved \$625 million of sovereign loans to Turkmenistan.
- During its plenary meeting, the Senate, the upper chamber of the Kazakh parliament, adopted the law ratifying the agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the EAEU and China. The agreement is intended to simplify technical regulation procedures, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and promote customs cooperation, but it does eliminate or reduce trade tariffs in mutual trade.
- Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan concluded the ratification of a bilateral intergovernmental agreement on laying a fiber-optic cable line through the bottom of the Caspian Sea between the two countries as part of the Trans-Caspian Backbone project. According to the document signed in March 2019, the project will be implemented by the Azer-Telecom, Transtelecom and KazTransCom companies.
- Representatives of the Indian company Casa Bianca visited the Namangan region of Uzbekistan and signed a contract with local farmers to export fruit and vegetable products to India. Following the visit, the first batch of Uzbek apricots was delivered to the Indian market and distributed through Big Bazaar, India’s largest trading network.
- The Georgian Aigroup and Chinese Changan companies will jointly construct a plant that will produce electric vehicles in Kutaisi by the summer of 2021. It is reported that the enterprise will employ up to 300 local residents, and at least 5,000 electric vehicles will be assembled 18 months after it is put in operation.

Society and Culture

- According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, approximately 20.1% of Georgians lived in absolute poverty in 2018. Rural residents were more likely to suffer from absolute poverty than those living in urban areas: 23.1% of those living in rural areas lived in absolute poverty, while the figure was 18% in urban areas.
- The Armenian parliament discusses introducing restrictions on bookmaking activities in the country by amending the existing law on gambling. If approved, the amendment, the purpose of which is to minimize possible gambling addiction, will allow bookmakers to operate only in four Armenian cities – Tsakhkadzor, Jermuk, Sevan and Meghri, effective from November 2020.
- The 2019 UEFA Europe League Final was held at the Olympic Stadium in Baku between the English football clubs Chelsea and Arsenal. Supporters’ groups representing both clubs criticized the organization of the match, including the ticketing procedure and pricing, and poor travel logistics. Arsenal called the UEFA’s decision to host the match in Baku an “unacceptable” situation that “cannot be repeated”.
- Belarusfilm offered sneak peaks of its four future movies, including the main national film of the year called ‘Kupala’. The full length biography of famous Belarusian poet and writer Yanka Kupala was filmed in Vilnius, Moscow and Minsk. Other projects are the first Belarusian teen sitcom ‘Illusions’, an untitled historical fantasy and a war movie ‘The Fate of a Saboteur’.
- The exhibition featuring paintings of participants of the 21st Painters’ Gathering of TURKSOY was inaugurated in Osh, the 2019 cultural capital of the Turkic World. The exhibition entitled “The Ancient City of Osh through the Eyes of 21st Century Painters” was inaugurated in the Suleiman Too museum, introducing paintings by 11 authors from 10 Turkic countries.
- The International Civil Aviation Organization recognized the Bukhara air hub in Uzbekistan as the best airport in the CIS in 2018. The Bukhara airport received an international status in 1999, and a new terminal complex with a capacity of up to 400 passengers per hour was built in 2011. Over 120,000 passengers use the airport’s services annually, including more than 15,000 foreign tourists.
- The first ethno-cultural festive event called Nur-Sultan EthnoFest was held in the capital of Kazakhstan. The program of the event organized by the mayor’s office of Nur-Sultan and the Association of Ethnic Sport of Kazakhstan included the exposition of yurts, the exhibition of horses and birds, an ethnic medieval-style bazaar, demonstrations of pottery and other traditional crafts.