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Constructive competition or destructive conflict in the Caspian Sea region?

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English Summary

The Caspian Sea region has hitherto largely been investigated from a New Great Game perspective that depicts the region as a geopolitical battleground between regional and external great powers because of its rich natural resources, strategic location, environmental issues and the legal disagreement. This dissertation, by contrast, looks at the Caspian Sea region through the lens of classical functionalism, which still acknowledges the difficulties and problematic starting situation of power politics in the region. This dissertation, however, seeks to show that there are ways forward by identifying mechanisms and means to transform the New Great Game into functional cooperation. The core aim of this thesis is to portray an alternative image of the Caspian Sea region.

Chapter 2 sketches the New Great Game image of the Caspian Sea region and the assumptions, concepts, and mechanisms (revolving around actors, aims, and motivation) this image is based on. It also introduces the existing criticism of the New Great Game concept and alternatives to it that have already been put forward. More precisely, the chapter identifies the gaps and limits of the mainstream academic literature, which provides this research with new avenues for alternative theoretical and empirical interpretations.

Chapter 3 revisits and revises classical functionalism via social constructivist insights to formulate an alternative framework to the dominant New Great Game line of assumptions. The first part discusses the most important concepts in classical formalism: the role of actors besides and beyond states, socialization, spillover, the role of shared issues, changing preferences, and technocratic starting point. This part also discusses the existing critiques of functionalism and responds to them. The second part offers my revised functionalism, which takes into account the social constructivist turn in International Relations. It puts emphasis on six core points: adding the role of economic and technical leverages, eliminating the European benchmark for cooperation, sidelining the division Mitrany made between political and technical cooperation, broadening technical cooperation by including the function of infrastructure, considering the role of transnational corporations (TNCs), and including the role of networking between functional agencies.

Chapters 4 through 6 apply the (revised) functionalist insights to three intertwined case studies, namely the Caspian Environmental Program (CEP), the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) project. Chapter 4 addresses three aspects of

environmental cooperation in the Caspian Sea region that have so far been omitted from research. First, it shows how shared environmental issues challenged the individual littoral states and brought their respective governments under the CEP umbrella in 1998. Second, this chapter shows how key actors (the UNEP, the UNDP, the GEF, and the World Bank) besides states are involved in shaping the politics of the Caspian Sea region and how their preferences, both political and economic, and networks affect the capacity, opportunity, and will of governments (e.g., ministries, parliaments, presidents etc.) to cooperate. Third, it explains the link between low environmental politics and the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea. It shows that lessons learned from environmental cooperation have spilled over into the discussion on the uncertain legal status of the sea, which culminated in the signing of *the Legal Status Convention*.

Chapter 5 revisits the BTC pipeline. This chapter illustrates that cooperation among the Caspian littoral states is not limited to environmental issues. The development of cooperative habits, which started in the CEP, continued and strengthened throughout the BTC project. More specifically, the chapter analyses the three phases of the BTC project: its planning, construction, and use. First, the chapter shows that during the planning phase, there was great uncertainty about the amount of extractable natural resources and how this would impact the foreign policies of the states in the region. This encouraged New Great Game scholars to make one-sided assumptions and exaggerations. Second, chapter 5 examines how economic, technical, environmental, and social challenges led to delays and investigations which almost stopped the pipeline project. However, these functional challenges also led to cooperation between multiple actors (state, non-state, and semi-state); their connections and interaction helped to meet the challenges in the Caspian Sea. Third, the chapter shows how the BTC pipeline has influenced the relationship between the Caspian littoral states since its construction. Finally, it argues that although the regional conflicts are still there, the BTC pipeline has de-escalated them by introducing new economic, political, and material constraints.

By using a similar line of argument, chapter 6 moves the discussion onto the SGC project. In doing so, it shows how cooperation on the CEP, *the Legal Status Convention* and the BTC pipeline have spilled over to the SGC project. It argues that the formation of cooperative habits continued and grew stronger through the SGC project. First, the chapter illustrates that during the planning phase, there was significant internal competition among the European energy companies and the SGC had to compete with other European pipeline projects rather than Russia or Gazprom's natural gas pipeline. Furthermore, this part of the chapter shows that

the relationship between Azerbaijan, the US, and Turkey grew cold during the planning phase because of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. This cold relationship put the direction of the SGC project under question during the planning phase. Second, the chapter illustrates the neglected role of that Italian region, which halted the SGC project for a time, incurring considerable political and economic costs, during the construction phase. However, it is argued that the networks of and interactions between multiple actors (BP and World Bank Group) helped to face these challenges in the project. Third, this chapter illustrates that the *Legal Status Convention* has created an opportunity to connect other littoral states to the project by constructing the Trans-Caspian-Pipeline. Finally, this chapter shows that similar to the BTC project, the SGC project has changed the dynamics of the regional conflicts by adding another mitigating layer, which has strengthened the “no peace, no war” situation in the region.

The conclusion, chapter 7, presents the new and better image of the Caspian Sea region on the basis of the preceding chapters’ findings. It also indicates some avenues for expanding the theoretical and empirical arguments developed in this dissertation. It argues that viewing the Caspian Sea region as a geopolitical battleground obscures important layers of a more complex reality, as well as the underlying dynamics of interdependency between different issues. The chapter illustrates that functionalism is capable of explaining constructive cooperation among the Caspian littoral states, but this occurs in service of a ruling elite in the Caspian Sea region.