

FACTORS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEOSTRATEGIC TERRITORIES IN CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL PROCESSES OF THE GREATER CASPIAN REGION (THE CASE OF ASTRAKHAN REGION)

Rafik Usmanov^{1, *}, Vyacheslav Golovin¹, Maia Urazgalieva², Vladislav Kondratiev¹

¹*Astrakhan State University, Astrakhan, Russia*

²*L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan*

* *Corresponding Author. E-mail:usmanr@mail.ru*

ABSTRACT

Russia's spatial development strategy has a geopolitical dimension and aims to streamline it, accelerate socio-economic development of regions, and integrate them more closely, defining a list of macro-regions and their composition, and identifying priority geostrategic areas and cross-border geostrategic areas of the country. However, the status of these territories is not filled with real geopolitical content as a major transport hub, which determines their geostrategic character in matters of national security. On the example of the Astrakhan region, we studied the peculiarities and prospects of development of geostrategic territories in modern geopolitical processes of the Greater Caspian Region. The methodological basis of the study is a comparative analysis of the adopted legislative documents "Strategies of Socio-Economic Development of Regions of the Russian Federation" in 2005, the Spatial Development Strategy of Russia until 2030 (from 2016) and the Spatial Development Strategy of Russia until 2025. A number of criteria have been identified as essential: "borderland", concentration of socio-economic development efforts in a particular region, ensuring Russia's national security. The Astrakhan region represents the middle priority geostrategic transboundary territory of the Russian Federation and the world at large. In the framework of the implementation of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea of 12.08.2018, the Astrakhan region may be granted certain priority competences deriving from the provisions of the Convention and defining the status of the Caspian Sea. In modern geopolitical conditions the Astrakhan region acts as a kind of buffer of national security in the South of Russia, providing geostrategic and political interests of the country, which allow fully vesting the studied region with a special geostrategic status "a priority geostrategic territory of the Russian Federation".

Keywords: *Caspian region, geostrategic territory, geopolitics, cross-border territory, transport hub, priority territory, Convention, Russian Federation, Astrakhan region, national security, transport and energy framework.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern geopolitics studies the territorial aspects of the use and distribution of various resources, paying attention to the study of political factors in the interests of politico-military, economic and environmental security of states [21, p. 93]. Among the geopolitical

problems, the following are singled out: the inclusion in the world's communications, access to the seas, spatial interconnections in relation to the existing and future international centres of the world [19].

The evaluation of the general theoretical positions reveals that the notion of geostrategic region can be

considered as a region itself, as well as a definite space, which has a more capacious content. Within the framework of the mentioned comparison, for example, in the Russian Federation, a region (subject of the Federation) represents some segments of administrative and territorial space of the country, which are included in the system of certain world economic relations.

According to E.V. Afanasev, the division of geopolitical and geostrategic spaces into districts and elements, as well as their classification, is carried out by the state taking into account its national state characteristics for military conditions (politico-military, military-economic and military-geographical) [22, p. 15].

2. CURRENT SITUATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE REGION

Geostrategic territories are becoming increasingly important in geopolitical processes in different continents of the world at a time of increasing globalization, so fundamental concepts such as "geostrategic" and "geopolitical" region act as the most significant categories of the subject of geopolitics.

At the present stage, the Caspian region is taking on a particular geostrategic and geopolitical significance for the Russian Federation. Its primary significance is to ensure Russia's national security and interests in the post-Soviet area (the South Caucasus and Central Asia). The geo-economic factors are the natural resources and transport and communications potential, which determine the importance of the prospects for cross-border cooperation in this area.

Priority areas of development include: the creation of cross-border production zones and clusters; joint use of cross-border mineral deposits; collective solutions to environmental protection issues; combating cross-border organized crime and terrorism, smuggling, etc. [12].

Based on the above, within the framework of the global trends, Russia has begun to form a new socio-economic ideology of spatial development of the country on the basis of strengthening regional policy.

According to our estimates, the mentioned process takes place in several stages.

The first stage was represented by the Concept "Strategy of Socio-Economic Development of Regions of the Russian Federation", which formulated a new policy of regional development of the country, based on the transition from the procedure of levelling socio-economic development of regions to the policy of socio-economic development of the Federation subjects in order to: improve the welfare and quality of life in Russia; achieve sustainable economic growth rates; strengthen the competitive positions of Russia and its regions in the global arena [11, p. 33].

This concept proposed the creation of "anchor regions" as "engines of economic growth", ensuring the

formation of a new framework of Russia's spatial organization through constituent entities of the Federation and large urban agglomerations which are connected by a common system of transport communications. "Anchor regions" are endowed with relevant national functions. Their importance is determined by the formation of transport infrastructure hubs (hubs and corridors of federal importance), which ensure the conjunction of Russian transport communications with international transport corridors; by granting these regions a special economic status (special economic zones and territories); by supporting pilot economic projects of federal importance; by locating national universities, major scientific, educational and infrastructure centres of socio-economic development in the core regions [11, p. 36-37].

According to the above criteria, the Astrakhan region could be classified as a key region: availability of a transport hub and infrastructure of road and railway transport; internal transport communications of the Volga and Volga-Don; the emerging international transport corridors "North-South" and "East-West".

The second stage is related to the draft Concept of the Spatial Development Strategy of Russia until 2030 (from 2016). Its development is based on the criteria of territorial commonality and interconnectedness of the regions' development potential, ensuring the effective "embedding" in the global economic exchange processes on the basis of activation and intensification of cross-border interactions [11, p. 86]. The most important task is to carry out the typology of border territories using a set of criteria of "danger - security", "opportunity - impossibility", "efficiency - inefficiency" of this cooperation. In today's world, borders are no longer seen as barriers, but as functions of the borderland and contact zone that provide active economic interaction [11, p. 101].

The Astrakhan region along with the leading subjects of the Russian Federation (Moscow and St. Petersburg, Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions, Krasnodar Krai, the Republic of Crimea, Primorsky and Khabarovsk Krai, Sakhalin region) were considered as the main contact zones of Russia in the sphere of international trade [11, p. 105].

Based on the accumulated potential and development prospects, the Astrakhan oblast was included in the "contact" (promising) regional growth zones on the basis of activation and intensification of cross-border interactions as well as "involvement" in global economic processes. The mentioned processes ensured further development of the Astrakhan transport hub and regional infrastructure, respectively, communications with international transport corridors. A new impetus for development is the creation of the Special Economic Zone of industrial and production type "LOTOS".

The third stage of development as an innovative industrial ideology is defined by the Strategy for Spatial Development of Russia until 2025. A new interpretation

of the concept "geostrategic territory of the country" is formulated, as the territory within the boundaries of one or more subjects of the Federation, which is crucial for sustainable socio-economic development, territorial integrity and security of Russia [24, p. 2].

In this context, the objectives of the said strategy are defined: 1) ensuring sustainable and balanced spatial development of the country; 2) reducing inter-regional disparities in the level and quality of life of the population; 3) accelerating economic growth and technological development; 4) ensuring national security of the country [24, pp. 7-8].

3. THE RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AREA'S PRIORITY

According to the estimates of a number of experts, Russia's spatial development processes have a geopolitical dimension and are aimed at streamlining the Russian space, development of regions and their closer integration [14, p. 1294].

The assessment of geopolitical developments in recent years allows us to note the characteristic features of the formation of priority geostrategic territories of the South of Russia. Thus, the Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol, as well as the regions located in the North Caucasus, were included in this category of territories after the wave of "coloured revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, as well as armed confrontation in the Middle East and Eastern Ukraine.

The Karabakh conflict and the expansion of Turkey's political influence in the South Caucasus confirmed the validity of this geostrategic classification of all subjects in the North Caucasus Federal District.

Among the regions of the Southern Federal District, the Astrakhan and Volgograd regions, as subjects bordering the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, are classified as geostrategic border territories of Russia. However, Astrakhan region has a system of complex and important geopolitical relations with four Caspian states, of which only Kazakhstan is part of the EAEU; therefore, the introduced "border" criterion cannot be objective and sufficient to assign it to this category of regions.

On the example of the Astrakhan region, let us consider the geopolitical position and importance of Astrakhan, including the strengthening of cross-border cooperation with the neighbouring countries of the Caspian region.

Assessing the Black Sea-Caspian macro-region in the context of the "Caspian-Caucasus-Black Sea" triad, we should note the special importance of the subjects of the North Caucasus and Southern Federal Districts in maintaining international stability in the area from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, including the Astrakhan region, which serves as a natural border and a priority territory of the country. At the same time, the "southern network" of transport routes passing through the

Astrakhan oblast forms a new characteristic of spatial development of Southern Russia as a major factor in the "transport geopolitics" of the country involved in international transport systems [15, p. 77].

In this context, the Astrakhan region represents the middle geostrategic transboundary territory of the Russian Federation and the world as a whole. In a certain sense, we can also talk about the region as a kind of international "connecting" and "linking" junction (zone) between Europe and Asia.

To strengthen cooperation and coordination of interaction between the Caspian states, their national security and development of a common international agenda, it is advisable to approach the most pressing problem - the definition of the geopolitical centre of the Caspian region [28, p. 62].

Given that the indicator of the status of the region is the control over the most important strategic roads and routes on land and sea [22, p. 13], the Astrakhan region may be granted some priority competences arising from the provisions of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea of 12.08.2018 and defining the status of the Caspian Sea [16, p. 63]. The territory of the Astrakhan region may partially concentrate (to the already known functions - the establishment of the Border Directorate of the Federal Security Service of Russia in the Republic of Kalmykia and the Astrakhan region) certain priority powers in the following spheres of activity:

1. Conservation and reproduction of aquatic biological resources in the Volga-Caspian Basin.
2. Environmental rehabilitation of the Volga basin and the Russian sector of the Northern Caspian.
3. Formation of the Russian transport and logistics complex of the Caspian basin as a strategic priority for the country's development.
4. Development of international navigation in the Volga-Caspian Basin.

An analytical review of selected priority mandates of the Astrakhan region, which in perspective justify its designation as a "Priority Geostrategic Territory of the Russian Federation", demonstrates the special role of the region. It should be noted that the Caspian region possesses and retains the most important characteristics: 1) as a promising centre of economic growth of the Russian Federation subjects; and 2) as a border geostrategic territory of Russia.

Consequently, it can be argued that territories such as the Astrakhan region can be considered depending on their importance in several dimensions and scales: as a border territory and a priority territory; as a prospective and geostrategic territory; as a domestic territory and international level territory, also as an authorized subject in the geopolitical processes of the Caspian region. Undoubtedly, they also deserve special attention in terms of national security, which requires specific methods of their governance.

Astrakhan region has historically been a multi-vector territory, covering almost all elements of the above dimensions, therefore it has traditionally been regarded as the Russian Southern outpost with the formative centre of the Caspian region and the corresponding powers of the centre. The basis for a similar assertion is a common historical factor, as well as the current reality of its political, socio-economic, and cultural development. The mentioned region is a vivid example, reflecting the development of the Russian state with its multi-ethnic population, which carries out economic and political reforms without any deviations and "experiments", manifested in some regions of the country. At the same time, Astrakhan appears to be a more geopolitically consistent constituent entity, committed to the idea of nationwide unity and development. The epochal traditional thesis "Astrakhan is Russian Southern outpost" has already been formed and is actually recognized by neighbouring states (invariably used at international summits by scientists and experts from Caspian countries, consulates of Kazakhstan, Iran, etc.).

The geopolitical status of the Caspian region is changing with the new stage of integration processes and the implementation of energy megaprojects. Under these conditions, the Caspian can be seen as an "island of juxtaposition of worlds" - "East and West". It is an emerging geopolitical space that attracts the leading world players where the technological and socio-economic systems are breaking apart, and the new multipolar world order is being formed [18, p. 15].

All of this is quite natural and objective process of revival of the Astrakhan region in the status of a priority geostrategic region of the Russian Federation. Raising the geostrategic status of the Astrakhan region in the implementation of the mentioned proposals will give a new impetus to the socio-economic development of many regions, primarily in the European part of Russia.

4. CONCLUSION

The Spatial Development Strategy [24] defines the fundamental directions of development of the Russian statehood such as sustainable and balanced development of the country's regions, ensuring the accelerated pace of economic and technological development. It is based on the "geopolitical dimension" as the most important factor of national security and stability of the national development.

A new political-economic approach to the socio-economic development of the country in modern conditions is obvious and justified. However, the individual criteria for classifying regions as geostrategic territories are not filled with real geopolitical and economic and legal content.

The Government of the Russian Federation, while defining transport and energy frameworks as Russian development priorities in order to integrate into the

global geopolitical space at the country level, does not fully designate objectively the criteria indicated in reality. For example, according to the proposed ideology, the Astrakhan region is endowed with the status of "Border Geostrategic Area of the Russian Federation bordering the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union", although the region is simultaneously involved in a more complex system of geopolitical relations with the four Caspian states, of which only Kazakhstan is part of the EAEU.

The Astrakhan region is the only median geostrategic transboundary territory in the South of the Russian Federation, which is a "junction" hub or conjunction zone between Europe and Asia, which gives it the status of a special international cooperation zone in the integral system of modern geostrategic and geopolitical processes of Eurasia and the Greater Caspian Region. Therefore, the Astrakhan region should be considered according to its significance in several dimensions and scales, as: 1) a priority geostrategic territory of the Russian Federation; 2) a promising centre of economic growth of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation; and 3) a border geostrategic territory of the Russian Federation. The mentioned provisions allow to attribute the Astrakhan region to a special status of a constituent entity with separate priority powers.

Astrakhan region forms a new content of functional characteristics of spatial development of the South of Russia, being the most important factor of "transport geopolitics" of the country involved in international transport systems. In this context, the region also represents the middle geostrategic transboundary territory of the Russian Federation of the conjunction between East and West.

The modern "Caspian process" is characterized by complex geopolitical problems, which are accompanied by the emergence of new factors of Russia's influence on world development as a "territory of juxtaposition of worlds" - "East and West", in which area the "fracture" of technological and world economic patterns is implemented, and the new multipolar world order is formed.

Geostrategic and geopolitical risks and threats in the Caucasus-Caspian basin-Central Asia area should determine new approaches to the assessment of national security issues, which also determine new views on the leadership, centre and ideology of the regions in the Greater Caspian Region area.

In the geopolitical dimension of the Caspian region, Astrakhan region acts as a unique "hub" linking three strategic regions (the Caucasus, the Caspian Basin, Central Asia). In this area a new world economic order is taking shape, and Astrakhan becomes the epicentre of the "Volga," "South" and "Caspian" connection in Russia, defining the geopolitical exclusivity and importance of the Astrakhan region. Consequently, the region appears to be one of the pivotal ones in the country's geopolitical

construction, ensuring the strengthening of Russia's position in this space [4, p. 218].

Under current geopolitical conditions, the Astrakhan region acts as a kind of buffer of national security in the South of Russia, ensuring the country's geostrategic and political interests, which allow the investigated region to be fully endowed with a special geostrategic status - a priority geostrategic territory of the Russian Federation. That is why the senators of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation supported the initiative of the Governor of the region Igor Babushkin to include the Astrakhan region in the list of priority geostrategic territories of the country.

Transparency and constructiveness on the part of ruling political elites play a major role in shaping a positive international climate in the region. Political analysts draw attention to the ability of political leaders to negotiate constructively and present their positions and assessments of events accurately [34]. Dialogue is what enhances security and strengthens integration ties, which are so necessary in a region with a multi-faith cultural tradition.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The article has been written by a team of authors, all authors have taken equal part in the theoretical analysis of the problem and in carrying out the research.

R.Kh. Usmanov summarized the data and wrote the original manuscript, considering the main topical issues. V.G. Golovin analyzed and summarized the ideas of researchers on the problem, identifying the main perspectives. M.E. Urazgalieva was responsible for collecting, analysing and interpreting the results of the work. V.V. Kondratiev contributed to the editing of the article and the analysis of contemporary literature.

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