



The Depleting Water Levels of the Caspian Sea: Why the Choice to Hold COP29 in Baku is So Pertinent

Event Report

On 11 September 2024, the European Institute for Asian Studies organised the conference “The Depleting Water Levels of the Caspian Sea: Why the Choice to Hold COP29 in Baku is So Pertinent.” Underlining the ecological and economic significance of the Caspian Sea to its littoral states, the conference called for collective action in the region.

Anticipating the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference, the 29th Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP29) in Baku, Azerbaijan from 11 to 22 November, renewed international focus brings a favourable momentum to tackling the region’s challenges. The depleting water levels of the Caspian Sea not only impose urgent concerns for local biodiversity and economies, the Caspian Sea is also key to the future infrastructure of global trade, creating high stakes for the international community. Recognising the urgency of the situation, the panel called for joint efforts in scientific research and institutionalised development, displaying international readiness for support.

Water depletion emerges as a key issue to be addressed. With 80% of effects from climate change being water-related, the region faces the risk of water scarcity and shoreline depletion. Research finds that the northern part of the maritime area – currently with depths under 5 metres – is significantly at risk, potentially disappearing within the next 75 years at the current rate of progression. Forecasts for 2024 have anticipated a third major decline in water levels, impacting the region’s climate and threatening at-risk ecosystems and local economies.

The panel discussed the contribution of dams on the Volga River to the issue of water depletion, as flows from the river account for over 75% of water running to the Caspian Sea. Collaboration among regional stakeholders can help slow down the progression of the sea’s deterioration, of which the conditions are not completely reversible. Since the Tehran Convention, there have been 4 multilateral agreements in addressing collaborative environmental challenges, with the 5th protocol currently being finalised and implemented. To better understand the scope of the region’s effects, the panel called for enhanced multilateral engagement and institutionalised cooperation in scientific research.

The indispensability of the region is becoming ever more evident, as it also serves as a key transportation link between Asia and Europe. Known as the “Middle Corridor,” or Trans-Caspian International Trade Route (TITR), the area’s ecological crises can create



obstacles to the development of trade route infrastructures. The Middle Corridor is pivotal to global economic connectivity, as conflict and tensions increasingly present vulnerabilities in existing trade routes. The countries of the Greater Caspian Region—in particular Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—are the main drivers emphasising the potential of the Middle Corridor to the international community, as well as the need for support in mitigating the risks of the depleting water levels in the Caspian Sea and the economic development of the region.

The socioeconomic impacts and ecological concerns surrounding the Caspian Sea urge for greater European and international support, while resources from the World Bank are expected to become available by the end of 2024. As financial support is set to ameliorate infrastructure and economic initiatives, 3 areas of implementation of collaborative efforts were stated: 1) prioritising water preservation; 2) consolidating scientific research; and 3) engaging the international community. As some countries in the region face the grand challenge of water scarcity with the threat of severe drought by 2040, it calls for a more realistic approach, stressing collaboration over division.

The discussion concluded with a Q&A engagement with the audience, addressing required climate action and its funding, expectations towards the incoming European Commission's new climate strategy and the role of China in the Caspian Sea preservation effort. As the region remains critical to China's transports, the Middle Corridor is forecasted to remain a priority, also for China.

Anticipating the COP29 in Baku in November, the panel shed light on its potential for the future of the Caspian Sea. With water depletion threatening the biodiversity and economic wellbeing of surrounding countries, scientific research through collaborative efforts, as well as international aid, are considered as key to slowing the progression and impact of climate change, not only in the Greater Caspian Region, but also globally.