



THE CASPIAN FLOTILLA: LAND-LOCKED BUT LETHAL

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It should not, by rights, matter very much. The Caspian Flotilla is the smallest of Russia's five naval formations, operates on a landlocked sea covering 371,000 square kilometres, cannot reach any ocean without being physically dismantled and moved by canal, and for most of its three-century existence was treated as a useful backwater — a place to test ideas, train conscripts, and police a lake. The Caspian is not the North Atlantic. It is not even the Black Sea. Yet on the morning of 7 October 2015, four small Russian warships moored at Astrakhan and Kaspiysk fired twenty-six Kalibr 3M54 cruise missiles at Islamic State positions in northern Syria. The missiles flew over Iran and Iraq. The targets were over 1,500 kilometres away. The Caspian Flotilla had just announced itself to a world that had not been paying attention.

Seven years later, in March 2022, the Flotilla fired again — this time at a Ukrainian fuel depot in Kostiantynivka, Mykolaiv Oblast. The geography had not changed. The strategic reach had not changed. What had changed was the target, the political context, and the degree of vulnerability of the formation conducting the strikes. That tension — between sanctuary and exposure, between offensive reach and institutional fragility — is what makes the Caspian Flotilla analytically worth the effort.

Â HISTORICAL BASELINE: THREE CENTURIES OF STRATEGIC PERIPHERY

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Peter the Great established the Flotilla in Astrakhan in November 1722, using it to support his Persian Campaign of 1722–23 and the assault on Derbent and Baku. The Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, which ended the Russo-Persian War, left Russia as the only power legally permitted to operate a military fleet on the Caspian — a monopoly that endured until the collapse of the Soviet Union. For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this dominance was

exercised by two gunboats and a handful of armed steamers. The Flotilla's significant moment came during the Great Patriotic War, when it provided convoy escort for Baku oil shipments to Astrakhan, supported the Stalingrad campaign logistically, and handled a portion of the Lend-Lease transit flowing through the Persian Corridor. It was awarded the Order of the Red Banner in 1945 for these services — a recognition that says something about what the Flotilla was actually for: logistics, not strike.

After 1991, the Flotilla contracted sharply. The Soviet dissolution required its assets to be divided between Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Most of the serious hardware — cruisers, destroyers, submarines — had never operated there; the Caspian was genuinely a second-tier theatre. The formation that emerged through the 1990s was modest, ageing, and postured for coastal patrol and search-and-rescue. What happened next was neither inevitable nor gradual.

Â **THE REINVENTION: KALIBR AND THE COLLAPSE OF TACTICAL GEOGRAPHY**

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The decisive shift began in 2011, when Moscow announced that sixteen new warships and missile boats would be delivered to the Flotilla by 2020. The instrument of transformation was the Kalibr 3M54 cruise missile system — and the vessels capable of carrying it. The Buyan-M class corvette, displacing around 950 tonnes and superficially unimpressive, carries eight Kalibr vertical launch cells. The Gepard-class frigate Dagestan, which entered Flotilla service in 2012 as the first Russian warship equipped with Kalibr, added a longer-range surface-to-air dimension. By 2015 the formation had three Buyan-M corvettes — Grad Sviyazhsk, Uglich, and Veliky Ustyug — in addition to the Dagestan.

The Syria strikes demonstrated a principle that the Russian military had grasped and Western analysts were still processing: in the land-attack role, a missile does not know or care whether its launch platform is on a landlocked sea, an ocean, or a canal. The Caspian's geographical isolation, which had always been treated as the Flotilla's strategic limitation, was simultaneously its greatest operational asset. No NATO surface vessel, submarine, or carrier air wing could reach it. No freedom-of-navigation operation was legally or physically available to the United States Fifth or Sixth Fleets. The 2014 Aktau Convention, signed by all five littoral states, had formalised the exclusion of extraregional powers from the Caspian. Russia had acquired a precision strike capability operating from a sanctuary. This is the core analytical finding of this paper : The Caspian Flotilla is not a naval formation in any conventional operational sense. It is a cruise missile battery that happens to float.

Â **BASING, COMMAND AND REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS**

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The Flotilla's principal operational base is Kaspiysk, in the Republic of Dagestan, where the bulk of its strike vessels, naval infantry, and coastal missile units are concentrated. A secondary base at Astrakhan, the historical headquarters, remains operationally active and houses the 727th Naval Infantry Battalion. Makhachkala provides additional facilities. The move to consolidate operations around Kaspiysk, announced formally by Defence Minister Shoigu in April 2018, reflected sound operational logic: Kaspiysk places the Flotilla's assets further south, reduces response times to the central and southern Caspian, and positions the naval infantry closer to potential amphibious mission areas along the Iranian and Azerbaijani coastlines.

The command reporting relationship changed significantly in February 2025. A presidential decree reorganised Russian military district authority, stripping district commanders of control over naval and aerospace forces. The Caspian Flotilla, previously embedded within the Southern Military District (YuVO) headquartered at Rostov-on-Don, was transferred to the direct command of Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Aleksandr Moiseyev. The operational implications are not trivial. Integration with Southern Military District ground and air assets becomes more procedurally complex; in return, the Flotilla gains a cleaner line to the naval chain of command and, presumably, priority access to naval procurement and replenishment decisions made at the centre. Whether this represents genuine strategic elevation or administrative consolidation dressed as reform is a question to which the answer will appear in the budget figures rather than the decree language.

The current Flotilla commander is Rear Admiral Oleg Zverev, who commanded the formation during the September 2025 drills. Aviation support does not come from an organic Flotilla air arm of any significance — announced plans for Be-200 amphibious aircraft and Mi-14PB anti-submarine helicopters remain partially realised — and is drawn principally from the 4th Air and Air Defence Forces Army headquartered at Rostov-on-Don. This matters: The Flotilla's air cover is borrowed, not owned.

Â **ORDER OF BATTLE: SURFACE FORCES**

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As of April 2025, the Flotilla's surface strike component consists of the following:

The frigate Dagestan (Project 11661K Gepard-class) remains the flagship and the heaviest vessel in the formation — a 1,900-tonne ship with Kalibr vertical launch capability and, on paper, a meaningful anti-surface and land-attack role. Three Buyan-M class small missile corvettes — Grad Sviyazhsk, Veliky Ustyug, and Uglich — provide the bulk of the Kalibr

inventory. The small artillery ships Astrakhan and Volgodonsk (Buyan-class, the earlier and less capable predecessor to the Buyan-M) complete the named surface strike element.

Two Karakurt-class missile corvettes, Tucha and Typhoon, are reported as transferred from the Black Sea Fleet and operating in the Caspian as of April 2025. The Karakurt class is a genuine capability addition: at around 800 tonnes, these vessels carry Kalibr and Oniks missiles and represent a more modern strike platform than the Buyan-M, with improved stealth characteristics and sensor suites. Their transfer reflects both the pressures on the Black Sea Fleet — which has lost ships to Ukrainian strikes and needs to reduce its exposure — and Moscow's recognition that the Caspian is a more secure operating environment for precision strike assets.

Two Tarantul IV-class missile corvettes, Stupinets and Strelak, were expected to join the Flotilla during 2025–26. Mine countermeasures are handled by the Sonya-class minesweepers German Ugrumov and Magomed Gadzhiev, a Lida-class vessel, at least one Yevgenya-class small minesweeper, and two Project 697TB craft. Three Grachonok-class anti-saboteur ships are assigned to base protection. Six Serna-class landing craft provide the amphibious lift. Approximately twenty-seven Coast Guard patrol vessels of various types — including up to eleven Mangust-class craft, though some may have transferred to the Black Sea — operate in the Caspian region under FSB Border Service command, separately from but in coordination with the Flotilla proper.

What this order of battle does not contain is equally telling. There are no submarines, and no credible anti-submarine warfare capability — a point to which this paper returns. There are no medium landing ships of the kind that would make a serious opposed amphibious operation feasible; the Caucasus 2020 exercise exposed this gap when only six BTR-82AMs and around 500 marines conducted a landing against an undefended coastline near Zelenomorsk, and even that modest exercise required the full cooperation of the available Serna-class craft.

Â **COASTAL TROOPS AND NAVAL INFANTRY** Â

The ground component of the Flotilla is organised around the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment, formed on 1 December 2018 and based at Kaspiysk. Its structure follows what Russian analysts have described as the template for future naval infantry organisation: three infantry battalions, an airborne reconnaissance company, a UAV company, artillery, and specialist support elements — approximately 2,000 personnel at full strength. Equipment includes BTR-82A and BTR-80 wheeled armoured personnel carriers and MT-LB tracked carriers. The 414th Guards Naval Infantry Battalion, also at Kaspiysk, and the 727th Naval Infantry Battalion at Astrakhan

provide additional capacity.

Two coastal missile divisions — the 46th and 847th — are based at Kaspiysk, armed with the Bal coastal defence missile system carrying Kh-35 Uran anti-ship missiles. These provide shore-based anti-surface coverage of the Caspian approaches and, in extremis, could complicate any hostile naval operation in the western Caspian. They are, in operational terms, the land-based counterpart of the Flotilla's embarked Kalibr capability: another illustration of the principle that in the missile age, the vessel is the least essential element of the weapons system.

Â **THE UKRAINE WAR: WHAT THE FLOTILLA GAVE AND WHAT IT LOST**

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The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 placed demands on the Caspian Flotilla in both directions simultaneously. The Flotilla contributed to the initial strike campaign: on 20 March 2022 the Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed that Caspian ships had fired Kalibr missiles at a Ukrainian fuel depot in Mykolaiv Oblast, demonstrating that the land-attack role established in Syria remained operational. The Flotilla was also used as a feeder for the Black Sea Fleet — the Volga-Don Canal provides the only route by which ships can transit between the two theatres, and at least some vessels made that journey to reinforce a Black Sea Fleet progressively degraded by Ukrainian anti-ship missile and drone operations.

More consequentially, the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment was committed to ground combat in Ukraine. Its personnel fought in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. By September 2025, elements of the regiment were reported operating in eastern Ukraine, concentrated southwest of Kostiantynivka alongside units from the 40th, 61st, 155th, and 336th Naval Infantry Brigades. A naval infantry regiment fighting several hundred kilometres from its parent flotilla, against a peer adversary, with no amphibious mission in sight, tells you something about the state of Russian land force reserves in the third year of the war. The 177th was not deployed because it was the right tool for the job. It was deployed because available tools were running short.

Ukraine noticed. On 6 November 2024, Ukrainian Defence Intelligence conducted the first-ever drone strike on the Caspian Flotilla, with kamikaze drones hitting the small missile ships Tatarstan and Dagestan at their moorings in Kaspiysk. The distance from the Ukrainian border to the target was approximately 1,500 kilometres — the same figure that had defined Russia's own strike reach from the Caspian in 2015, now operating in reverse. The Makhachkala airport, less than ten kilometres from the base, was closed as a precaution. The strike did not sink either vessel, but it served notice that the Caspian sanctuary was less absolute than Moscow

had assumed.

Â **THE IRAN DIMENSION: THE CASPIAN AS LOGISTICS CORRIDOR**

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The Caspian's strategic significance during the Ukraine war extends well beyond the Flotilla's direct military contribution. The sea has functioned as the primary route for military logistics exchange between Russia and Iran — a function that Western intelligence services have documented in increasing detail and that represents one of the more consequential developments in the broader conflict ecosystem.

The initial flow was northward: Iranian-designed Shahed drones, subsequently manufactured in Russia and rebranded as the Geran-2, moved from Anzali on the Iranian Caspian coast to Astrakhan by ferry and cargo vessel, in volumes estimated at over 300,000 artillery shells, a million cartridges, and large quantities of drone components, all transiting by a route that avoided Western sanctions enforcement. Russian analysts have noted that the capacity of the Anzali-Astrakhan route exceeds five million tonnes per year and is structurally difficult to intercept.

The return flow has included military technology — anti-aircraft systems, captured NATO components for reverse engineering, and, according to reporting from early 2026, Su-35 spare parts and radar systems routed to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for post-strike reconstitution. Russia is also reported to have concluded an agreement in December 2025 to supply Iran with 500 Verba man-portable air defence systems and 2,500 associated 9M336 missiles, with deliveries scheduled between 2027 and 2029. Whether these will transit the Caspian is not confirmed, but the route is available, established, and difficult to monitor.

This logistics relationship reframes what the Caspian Flotilla is protecting. It is not merely a strike platform or a regional power-projection tool. It is the naval component of a supply chain that sustains both Russia's war in Ukraine and Iran's military posture in the Middle East. The Coast Guard patrol vessels — FSB Border Service controlled, operating in parallel — provide the law enforcement and interdiction capacity that would theoretically catch any attempt by a third party to disrupt that supply chain. In practice, no such attempt is currently feasible without the cooperation of Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, neither of which has shown any appetite for it.

Â **FSB PRESENCE AND BORDER SERVICE OPERATIONS**

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The FSB's presence in the Caspian theatre operates through two distinct channels. The FSB Border Service maintains its own fleet of patrol vessels — approximately twenty-seven of various types as of 2025, including Mangust-class craft — which operate separately from the Navy's Flotilla under an independent chain of command. Their primary missions are counter-smuggling, counter-narcotics (the Caspian's position relative to Afghan trafficking routes makes this a genuine operational priority), counter-terrorism along the Dagestani and Astrakhan coastlines, and the protection of offshore energy infrastructure. They participated alongside Flotilla vessels in the Caucasus 2020 exercise, which provides the clearest public evidence of coordination between the two structures, but coordination is not integration.

The second channel is the standard counter-intelligence and security function: FSB officers embedded with the Flotilla command, as they are embedded with all Russian military formations of significance. Given Dagestan's particular security environment — the republic has generated a disproportionate share of Russia's Islamist militant activity and remains a FSB operational priority — the counter-intelligence presence at Kaspiysk is likely heavier than the Flotilla's size alone would warrant. No public source confirms the assignment of FSB special units (Alpha or Vypel) to the Flotilla on a permanent basis, though their deployment for specific exercises or threat responses would be unremarkable and unannounced.

Â **THE REGIONAL BALANCE: LESS DOMINANT THAN IT APPEARS**

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Russia's Caspian Flotilla is the most capable naval formation on the sea, but the gap between it and its neighbours is narrowing in specific and important ways. Azerbaijan has used its hydrocarbon revenues to build a fleet of thirty-eight warships, including four submarines — a capability the Russian Flotilla entirely lacks and has no current plan to acquire. Iran's Caspian Northern Fleet, based at Bandar Anzali, now includes the 1,400-tonne Dilman destroyer, capable of carrying cruise missiles and torpedoes, alongside corvettes and patrol vessels. Iran has demonstrated the ability to transit Ghadir-class midget submarines from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian via inland waterways — a capability that, once realised in operational numbers, would confront a Flotilla with no anti-submarine sensors or weapons with a genuinely novel threat.

Turkmenistan presents a different asymmetry. While its overall fleet is modest, the number of anti-ship missile launchers deployed on Turkmen vessels exceeds those on Russian Caspian ships — a statistic that sounds alarming until one considers that the two countries are not adversaries and the Flotilla's coastal missile divisions provide shore-based coverage that complicates any naval approach to Russian-controlled waters. The point is not that Turkmenistan poses a threat but that the Flotilla's quantitative dominance masks qualitative gaps that are not invisible to the countries around the sea.

The October 2025 Jamestown Foundation reporting on a meeting of naval delegations from Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan in Saint Petersburg — at which Russia proposed a multilateral 2026 naval exercise — illustrates a diplomatic reality: Moscow seeks multilateral legitimacy for a Caspian security architecture that preserves its own dominance while co-opting the other littoral states into a framework that excludes NATO. This is a familiar Russian approach. Whether the other four states accept it on Russian terms or extract concessions in return is a question the 2026 exercise may partly answer.

Â **VULNERABILITY AND TIME-LIMITED DOMINANCE** Â

The November 2024 Ukrainian drone strike on Kaspiysk introduced a question that the Flotilla's planners had previously been able to defer: what happens to a surface fleet operating on a confined, inland sea when precision uncrewed systems become ubiquitous and cheap enough that any moderately capable actor can acquire them? The Caspian has no depth. There are no sea lanes to the open ocean through which a threatened vessel might transit to safety. The five littoral states share 7,000 kilometres of coastline, and the sea's maximum width is 435 kilometres — well within the operational range of modern loitering munitions, anti-ship drones, and coastal missile systems fielded not only by Russia but increasingly by Azerbaijan, Iran, and prospectively others.

The Grachonok-class anti-saboteur vessels, the 2M-3 automatic anti-aircraft systems deployed during the Ocean 2024 exercise, the electronic anti-drone guns reported in use during the September 2025 drills — these are responses to a threat environment that is qualitatively different from anything the Flotilla was designed to face. The Buyan-M corvettes that fire Kalibr missiles at targets in Ukraine are 950-tonne vessels with limited air defence capability, no point-defence anti-ship missile system worth the name, and a freeboard profile that makes them visible to any drone operator with a commercial optical sensor. Their value as a strike platform is real; their survivability in a contested Caspian is a different question, and not one that Russian defence analysts have addressed with conspicuous candour.

There is a structural irony here. The Flotilla's sanctuary status — the landlocked geography that made it useful as a strike platform — is the same characteristic that makes it difficult to reinforce, impossible to disperse to safe waters, and confined to an increasingly transparent operational environment. The Volga-Don Canal that allows ships to transit to the Black Sea takes time, requires dismantling of masts and superstructures for some vessels, and is itself a potential interdiction point. A Flotilla under serious threat in the Caspian cannot simply sail away. It must either fight where it is or be broken down and moved by canal — neither of which is an attractive option under fire.

Whether drone technology develops to the point where surface vessels on a confined inland sea become genuinely untenable is a question raised rather than resolved. The answer depends on factors — sensor costs, swarm capability, electronic countermeasure development, political willingness to use such systems — that are not yet settled. What can be said is that the trajectory is not favourable to the Flotilla as currently constituted, and that the addition of Karakurt-class corvettes and Tarantul IVs, while welcome to Russian planners, does not address the fundamental vulnerability. The Flotilla may be acquiring better strike capability at precisely the moment that the environment in which it must survive is becoming more hostile.

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Sources consulted: Wikipedia (Caspian Flotilla entry, updated March 2026); Caspian Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Caspian Flotilla: Current Status and Prospects for Development' (November 2022); USNI Proceedings, 'The Caspian Flotilla: Russia's Offensive Reinvention' (August 2021); Hudson Institute, 'Securing the Caspian' (March 2026); Jamestown Foundation, 'Caspian Littoral States Sign Cooperation Document' (November 2025); CEPA, 'Will the Caspian Region Be Drawn Into the Iran War?' (April 2026); Eurasian Research Institute, 'The Russian Navy in the Caspian Sea: A New Chapter'; GlobalSecurity.org, Ocean 2024 exercise reporting (September 2024); Xinhua, Caspian Flotilla naval drills (September 2025); Kyiv Post and RBC-Ukraine, reporting on November 2024 Ukrainian drone strike; Wikipedia (Coastal Troops of the Russian Navy; Russian Naval Infantry); T2COM G2 Operational Environment Enterprise, 'Russia To Add New Naval Infantry Divisions'; DigitalShield, 'The Caspian Sea: A Fortified Sanctuary for the Russo-Iranian Strategic Rear Guard' (2026); TASS, Ocean-2024 reporting (September 2024); Center for International Maritime Security, 'The Caspian Challenge' (2023).