

ISSN 2532-845X



GEOPOLITICAL REPORT

VOLUME 2

YEAR 2023



Geopolitical Report

Publisher: **SpecialEurasia**

Editorial Partners: **Mondo Internazionale ASP, MInter Group srl, Notizie Geopolitiche**

Website: www.specialeurasia.com

Email: info@specialeurasia.com

Online ISSN: **2532-845X**

Date: **May 2023**

Publisher: **SpecialEurasia**

Editors: **Silvia Boltuc, Giuliano Bifulchi**

Country: **Italy**

City: **Rome**

Address: **Via Torrenova, 407**

Language: **Italian, German, English**

SpecialEurasia

SpecialEurasia is a geopolitical Intelligence platform that transforms events into valuable outlooks, allowing public and private institutions, organisations, and individuals to confidently understand the increasingly complex international environment.

Our Mission

SpecialEurasia helps our members and partners to understand and navigate a complex and ever-changing global environment. Therefore, SpecialEurasia provides solid Intelligence for the decision-making process in international relations, security, and economics, supporting public companies and institutions with written and oral reports, risk assessments, infographics, tailored interactive maps, consulting and training courses.

Our Methodology

SpecialEurasia develops comprehensive, independent, and unbiased analysis by examining current events through our geopolitical methodology. This allows us to interpret the meaning of today's global events, block out the noise, inform decision-making and develop a more accurate view of the future.

Our Network

We have developed a solid network of international partners, contacts and sources which support our activities and projects. SpecialEurasia is not a media agency. Therefore, our goal is not to report daily news and events. By contrast, we want to read behind the lines of relevant events and inspect a single case from different points of view.

Geopolitical Report

SpecialEurasia's publication, *Geopolitical Report ISSN 2532-845X*, aims at investigating the current geopolitical and socio-cultural events and trends which are shaping the world of international relations, business and security creating a debate by allowing scholars and professional experts to share their views, perspectives, work results, reports and research findings. One can submit manuscripts, analytical reports, critical responses, short articles, commentaries, book reviews to info@special- Eurasia.com.

Information about the organization's goals, activities, projects and publications which can be freely downloaded can be found on the website www.specialeurasia.com.

Copyright © 2023 SpecialEurasia

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at info@special- Eurasia.com

Table of Contents

Iran and Georgia relations in the contemporary Caucasian dynamics	4
Introduction	4
Iran and Georgia economic cooperation and trade volume	6
Tehran-Tbilisi cooperation in transit projects	8
Conclusion	9
The second Karabakh war and Iran’s interests.....	11
Introduction	11
The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict	13
The Ukraine war and the decline of Russia’s influence	16
Iran and 3+3 Caucasus Platform.....	18
Features Of The Development Of Armenian-Iranian Relations After The Second Artsakh War	20
Introduction	20
Armenian-Iranian political relations: a geopolitical assessment	21
The development of Armenian-Iranian economic relations.....	27
Geopolitics of Iran: an interview with H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, the Ambassador of Iran to Italy	32
Introduction	33
The interview with H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri.....	33

Iran and Georgia relations in the contemporary Caucasian dynamics

Silvia Boltuc*

Abstract in English

While Iran and Georgia maintain diplomatic relations, there are several challenges that have limited their ability to develop a stronger and more cooperative relationship. On the one hand, Iran and Georgia have had historical cultural and economic ties, and both countries have expressed interest in developing closer relations. On the other hand, Georgia's close relationship with the United States, which has imposed economic sanctions on Iran, and Tbilisi's confrontation with Moscow, which is a strategic partner for Tehran, have undermined the Iranian-Georgian relations. This paper wants to examine the current status of Tehran-Tbilisi relations and assess possible future geopolitical scenarios concerning these two actors and the regional Caucasian dynamics.

Keywords: Iran, Georgia, geopolitics, Caucasus, United States, Russia

Abstract in Italiano

Anche se Iran e Georgia mantengono e loro relazioni diplomatiche, sono diverse le sfide che limitano le possibilità che i due paesi sviluppino una cooperazione maggiore. Da un lato, infatti, Iran e Georgia hanno per secoli avuto rapporti economici e culturali ed entrambe le parti hanno espresso la volontà e interesse nello sviluppare una cooperazione maggiore. Dall'altro lato, invece, la collaborazione e vicinanza della Georgia con gli Stati Uniti, attore che ha imposto le sanzioni ai danni dell'Iran, e lo scontro esistente tra Tbilisi e Mosca (con cui invece Teheran ha rapporti strategici e privilegiati), hanno limitato e minato le relazioni iraniane-georgiane. Questo paper si prefigge come obiettivo quello di esaminare l'attuale situazione delle relazioni tra Teheran e Tbilisi e stimare possibili scenari futuri geopolitici inerenti questi due attori e in ottica regionale caucasica.

Parole chiave: Iran, Georgia, geopolitica, Caucaso, Stati Uniti, Russia

* **Silvia Boltuc**, *SpecialEurasia Managing Director*, is an international affairs specialist, business consultant and political analyst who has supported private and public institutions in decision-making by providing reports, risk assessments, and consultancy. She is also the Director of the Energy & Engineering Department of CeSEM – Centro Studi Eurasia Mediterraneo and an editor/analyst at the Italian media agencies *Notizie Geopolitiche*, *Opinio Juris*, and *European Affairs Magazine*. Previously, she worked as an Associate Director at ASRIE Analytica. She co-authored the book “*Conflitto in Ucraina: rischio geopolitico, propaganda jihadista e minaccia per l'Europa*” (Enigma Edizioni 2022).

Introduction

In the Eurasian geopolitical chessboard, Iran and Georgia are two countries that have experienced alternate relations, although the two nations share a history of cultural and commercial ties.

Georgia was once part of the large Persian Empire: Iran has played a significant role in the development of Georgia by contributing to its architecture, literature, poetry, and educational system. In response, Georgia has been an important gateway for the Persian world to Europe and beyond. The interconnection between Georgia and Iran is tangible in Tbilisi's Old Town where it is possible to appreciate the Persian influences in the city's architecture. Periods of cooperation and enmity have characterised the relations between these two nations, while their geographical location has played a significant role in shaping their dynamics.

In the post-Soviet era, the two countries have witnessed fluctuations in their relations, from friendly to hostile, depending on their geopolitical priorities. As Georgia established closer ties with the West, its relations with Iran became more strained. Tbilisi challenge is balancing between the goal of becoming a European country and be part of the Euro-Atlantic structures and have good relations with the nearby Islamic Republic of Iran.

Territorial dispute over the autonomous region of South Ossetia has influenced Tehran-Tbilisi relations. Iran has supported the territorial integrity on this issue and has called for resolving the dispute through peaceful means. However, the relations between the two states have changed after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which led to Russia's recognition for South Ossetia's independence.

Considering the strategic role that the South Caucasus has in the Eurasian geopolitical chessboard and recent regional changes because of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, the Ukraine conflict, and the affirmation of a multipolar world, this paper wants to assess the current status of Tehran-Tbilisi relations as well as possible future developments.

Indeed, even though less studied than the Armenian-Iranian or the Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, Tehran evaluates Georgia as an important South Caucasian actor because of its strategic position on the Black Sea.¹

Currently, Georgia is the focus of international attention and is perhaps facing the most perilous confrontation in its history as a small Caucasian state. In the last years, especially after the beginning of the Ukraine conflict and the rise of US-China confrontation, the Georgian territory has become a "geopolitical battleground" where different interests from regional

¹ Javad Heiran-Nia, Mahmood Monshipouri, «Raisi and Iran's Foreign Policy Toward the South Caucasus», *The Muslim World*, Vol. 113(1-2), 2023, pp. 120-139.

and international powers collide: indeed, the US-Russian and European-Russian confrontation, the Turkish-Russian's ambitions in the Caucasus, and the Chinese *Belt and Road Initiative* have influenced Tbilisi's domestic and foreign policies.²

Looking at the map, it is undeniable that Georgia is at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, bordering Russia to the north, Turkey and Armenia to the south, Azerbaijan to the east, and the Black Sea to the west. Its location makes it an important transit country for energy resources, as well as a strategic gateway for trade between Europe and Asia. The strategic position and its internal market have made Georgia an interesting market for foreign direct investments (FDIs) in energy, tourism, IT and communications, banking, health, and real estate.³

In addition, the geopolitical importance of Georgia is multifaceted and can be traced to its historical legacy as a former Soviet republic that has attempted to transit to democracy and a Western-oriented foreign policy. Although the country is still facing domestic problems related to democracy, freedom, and the acceptance of Western value, Georgia has the potential to serve as a partner for the United States and the European Union countering the Iranian and Russian strategy in the South Caucasus.

Iran and Georgia economic cooperation and trade volume

Over the past several years, Iran and Georgia have been steadily increasing their bilateral trade turnover. The Iran-Georgia Chamber of Commerce has played a key role in promoting and facilitating trade between the two countries.

As of 2021, the trade turnover between Iran and Georgia has exceeded 285 million dollars. This marks a significant increase from just a few years ago when the trade volume was much lower. In 2022, Georgia exports to Iran reached the total amount of 29.7 million dollars, a volume bigger than the previous year (25.6 million dollars).⁴

One of the main drivers of the increasing trade between Tehran and Tbilisi is the geographic location of the two states. Georgia serves as a crucial transit point for Iranian goods heading

² Taniel Putkaradze, «Some Aspects of the Geopolitical Strategy of Georgia (On Politicization of the Kartvelological Studies)», *Causes of War Prospects for Peace*, Georgian Orthodox Church & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2009, pp. 182, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=d911b177-5305-367c-4fca-b31edoaf249a&groupId=252038.

³ Kipiani Victor, «Georgia is an attractive location for doing business and investments», *Mgaloblishvili Kipiani Dzidziguri*, n.d., https://www.mkd.ge/pdfLnews/georgia_is_an_attractive_location_for_doing_business_and_investment.pdf.

⁴ Trading Economics, «Georgia Exports to Iran», 2023, <https://tradingeconomics.com/georgia/exports/iran>.

to Europe and beyond.⁵ This is especially important for Iran given the economic sanctions imposed on Tehran by the United States. Iranian companies have been increasingly turning to Georgia as a way to bypass these sanctions and reach European markets.

Moreover, Iran is negotiating with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, and Greece to launch a new multimodal corridor: the Persian Gulf-Black Sea project.⁶ This corridor will connect Iran to Europe using rail and sea links. Specifically, it will connect Iran with Georgian Black Sea ports via Armenia and/or Azerbaijan. Cargo will then reach the Bulgarian ports of Varna and Burgas via Greece to wider Europe, helping increasing the trade turnover.

Another factor contributing to the growth in trade between the two regional players is the presence of a large Iranian community in Georgia. This community facilitate trade by acting as intermediaries between Iranian companies and Georgian traders.

According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Iran's exports to Georgia have increased at an annualised rate of 17.3 percent over the last 25 years, from 2.71 million dollars in 1996 to 146 million dollars in 2021.⁷ The main products that Iran exported to Georgia in 2021 were ethylene polymers, unglazed ceramics, and iron blocks. On the other hand, Georgia's exports to Iran have increased at an annualised rate of 10.3 percent over the last 25 years, from 2.22 million dollars in 1996 to 25.6 million dollars in 2021. The main products that Georgia exported to Iran in 2021 were sawn wood, ferroalloys, and packaged medications. In 2021, Iran had a large net trade with Georgia in the exports of metals, stone, glass, plastics and rubbers.⁸

Tehran's trade turnover with Tbilisi amounted to 138,000 tons worth 78.2 million dollars during the first five months of 2021. The Islamic Republic of Iran exported about 124,000 tons of goods worth 46.7 million dollars to Georgia in 5 months, which is an increase of 200 percent in terms of value and 144 percent in terms of volume, compared to the same period in the previous Iranian year. Meanwhile, Iran's trade turnover with Georgia, which

⁵ Caucasus-Asia Center, «Georgia-India relationship turning into a “strategic-economic partnership”», *Medium*, 2022, <https://medium.com/@caucasusasiacenter/georgia-india-relationship-turning-into-a-strategic-economic-partnership-741949be9d32>

⁶ Nikos Papatolios, «Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: why does Iran need a new gateway?», *RailFreight*, 2022, <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/02/09/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-why-does-iran-need-a-new-gateway/>.

⁷ «Iran / Georgia», *OEC*, s.d., <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/irn/partner/geo>.

⁸ «Georgia and Iran Trade», *OEC*, 21d.C., <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/geo/partner/irn>.

amounted to 78,200 tons worth 44.4 million dollars, increased by 76 percent in terms of value and 76.7 percent in terms of volume in the first five months of 2021.⁹

Despite the growing trade ties, there are still some challenges that need to be addressed. For example, there have been issues with trade tariffs, which have slowed the pace of trade between the two countries.¹⁰ Furthermore, both Iran and Georgia still face economic challenges, including currency fluctuations and inflation. Finally, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan reflect on Tehran-Tbilisi exchange possibilities.

Nevertheless, the overall trend in the Iran-Georgia trade is positive, and with continued cooperation, the two countries can continue to benefit from each other's markets.

Tehran-Tbilisi cooperation in transit projects

Iran is interested in using Georgia's strategic location to diversify its transit routes. The South Caucasian state is an important transport hub for Iran as an alternative route to Russia and Europe. Tehran and Tbilisi are working together within the framework of the international transport corridors Persian Gulf-Black Sea and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).¹¹

Georgia is a key link in the Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: the corridor provides that cargo from the Persian Gulf countries and India will be delivered to Georgia through the territory of Iran, then Armenia or Azerbaijan, and from Georgian ports to Bulgaria and Greece. The project was put forward by Iran in 2016 with the main goal of creating an alternative to the Turkish route to Europe.¹²

Delegations from Armenia, Iran, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Greece agreed on the text for the creation of the corridor in April 2022.¹³

In November 2021, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia held separate negotiations on this project and agreed on a trial launch of the route. The reason was Azerbaijan's efforts to delay the

⁹ Elnur Baghishov, «IRICA unveils details of Iran's trade turnover with Georgia», *Trend.az*, 2021, <https://en.trend.az/business/economy/3493748.html>.

¹⁰ Iran Press Agency, «Iran calls for lifting tariffs on export to Georgia», 2020, <https://iranpress.com/content/22372/iran-calls-for-lifting-tariffs-exports-georgia>.

¹¹ Silvia Boltuc, «Geopolitics of INSTC: an interview with Aleksandr Sharov», *SpecialEurasia*, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/03/17/geopolitics-instc-sharov/>.

¹² Nikos Papatolios, «Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: wh does Iran need a new gateway?», *RailFreight*, 2022, <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/02/09/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-why-does-iran-need-a-new-gateway/>.

¹³ Hasmik Meliksetyan, Zhanna Vardanyan, «Relations between Georgia and Iran in the context of geopolitics», *Orbeli Center*, 2022, <https://orbeli.am/en/post/1058/2022-12-14/Relations+between+Georgia+and+Iran+in+the+Context+of+Geopolitics>.

agreement and boycott a possible passage through Armenia, and Georgia siding with Baku's claims. Iran tried to balance between Yerevan and Baku's requests and conducted separate meetings.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is designed to connect India with Russia and Northern Europe, replacing the Suez Canal. Azerbaijan is already part of the project, and thanks to the North-South Highway, Armenia may also apply to become an active part of the corridor connecting Iran to Georgia.¹⁴

Conclusion

On April 29th, 2023, during the meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Georgia, Mahmoud Adib, and the President of Georgia's Caucasus University, Kakha Shengelia, the parties discussed expanding bilateral cultural cooperation, as well as promoting joint educational and research projects.¹⁵ The meeting highlighted that both Tehran and Tbilisi are interested in developing cooperation and ties in different fields despite their different agenda in foreign policy.

Iran and Georgia have a complex history of relations, which have been shaped by multiple factors, including their geographic location, religion, and external influences. The two countries have experienced periods of cooperation and enmity, but despite the challenges, they have maintained cultural and economic ties over the years. With increasing cooperation in areas such as transportation, energy, and tourism, Tehran and Tbilisi have the potential to develop a lasting partnership, which can benefit both countries.

Sanctions and lack of a new nuclear pact reduce cooperation possibilities between Tehran and Tbilisi. In 2011, for example, Georgia implemented a bilateral visa-free policy with Iran, which led to a fourfold increase in the number of Iranians visiting Georgia. However, Georgia unilaterally cancelled the visa-free agreement with Iran in July 2013 and strictly complied with the sanctions imposed on Tehran by freezing 150 Iranian bank accounts, following which Iranians visiting Georgia decreased by 72 percent.¹⁶

¹⁴ Dzhonni Melikjam, «Vzaimootnosheniya Gruzija-Iran i Koridor Sever-Jug», *Fond Norabank*, http://www.noravank.am/rus/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=14948.

¹⁵ Mehr News Agency, «Iran, Georgia stress developing cultural, scientific coop.», 2023, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/200020/Iran-Georgia-stress-developing-cultural-scientific-coop>.

¹⁶ Tawheed Verstan, « Iran-Georgia economic relations; From the rose revolution to the embargo. The high wall of the Euro-Atlantic Approach », 2022, <https://www.tahlilbazaar.com/news/151933/>-روابط-اقتصادی-ایران-

گرجستان-از-انقلاب-گل-رز-تا-تحریم-دیوار

Tbilisi multiple times in the last decades showed interests for the Iranian oil and gas sector, which might reduce its dependence on Turkey. The signing of a new nuclear agreement might be a significant boost in the cooperation between the two players.

For Iran, the role of the Caucasus region increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when each of the republics of the South Caucasus began to pursue independent policies. Although Georgia is not a neighbouring country, it could be a gateway to Europe as it has been under the Persian Empire.

The increasing cooperation between Tehran and Tbilisi might alarm the neighbouring Baku: in November 2022, the Azeri TV channel *Xəzər* broadcasted a report titled “Iran’s secret activities in Georgia” that highlighted the role of an Iranian religious cells established in the Georgian territory.¹⁷ Despite most of the Georgian citizens practice Orthodox Christianity, approximately 10,7 percent of Georgians are Muslim (mainly in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti regions): therefore, Iran might exploit the religious element to promote its strategy and increase its presence locally.¹⁸

¹⁷ Report, «Iran vedet tajnuju dejatel'nost' v Gruzii pod prikrytiem religii», 2022, <https://report.az/ru/media/iran-vedet-tajnyu-deyatelnost-v-gruzii-pod-prikrytiem-religii-video/>.

¹⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, «Who Are Georgia’s Muslims?», 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-muslim-population/25090162.html>; George Sanikidze, Edward W. Walker, «Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia», *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*, 2004.

The second Karabakh war and Iran's interests

Javad Heiran-Nia*

Abstract in English

Iran has historical and cultural ties with the South Caucasus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tehran has promoted economic and strategic interests in the region balancing its strategy among local dynamics and foreign actors' policies. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed the Caucasian geopolitical scenario and, therefore, influenced Tehran's approach to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In this paper, the author investigated the Iranian position on the second Karabakh war and Tehran's attempts to stabilise the region and promote its economic and political partnerships.

Keywords: Iran, South Caucasus, geopolitics, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Artsakh

Abstract in Italiano

L'Iran ha legami storici e culturali con il Caucaso meridionale. Dal crollo dell'Unione Sovietica, Teheran ha promosso interessi economici e strategici nella regione bilanciando la sua strategia tra le dinamiche locali e le politiche degli attori stranieri. Il conflitto del Nagorno-Karabakh del 2020 ha cambiato lo scenario geopolitico caucasico e, quindi, ha influenzato l'approccio di Teheran ad Armenia, Azerbaijan e Georgia. In questa ricerca, l'autore ha esaminato la posizione iraniana durante la seconda guerra del Karabakh e i tentativi di Teheran di stabilizzare la regione e promuovere i suoi partenariati economici e politici.

Parole chiave: Iran, Caucaso meridionale, geopolitica, conflitto Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh

* **Javad Heiran-Nia** holds a Phd in International Relations. He is an Iranian analyst based in Iran. He is the director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran. E-mail: J.heirania@gmail.com

Introduction

The cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and geographical ties of the South Caucasus with Iran inevitably involve Tehran in this region. Throughout history, Iran and the South Caucasus have been under the same state entities: this region has been part of the Persian Empire in different historical moments but has also experienced Russian and Turks rulers.

For the first time after the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) treaties, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Caucasus was independent, and a power vacuum was left.

In the early 1990s, exporting revolution and ideological tendencies were considered Iran's primary political goals in the region.¹ Therefore, at that time, there was an idealistic view of

¹ Hunter, Shireen, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International*, Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2010, p.169.

Tehran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus, but history showed that geopolitical motives and realistic policies had been the objective basis of the Islamic Republic's regional strategy.² After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran focused its strategy in the South Caucasus on the following principles:

1. Historical and cultural connection with the local population, which provides a suitable platform for Iran's political and economic presence in the Caucasus.
2. The Caucasus' role as a transit area through which Iran could reach North and East Europe; the activation of this transit route might increase Iran's leading role in two ways: firstly, Iran can reciprocally deliver the goods of North and Eastern European countries to the Persian Gulf, and secondly, it might be an alternative way for European countries to communicate with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.
3. From a security point of view, Tehran considered the Caucasus a buffer zone between Iran and other regional and international powers. Based on this, any insecurity in this region has a destructive effect, creating a threat against Iran. Vice versa, any insecurity in Iran will negatively affect security and stability in the Caucasus. Therefore, achieving sustainable security and stability in the Caucasus is considered a strategic goal for Iran.³
4. Preventing an increasing U.S., Israel and NATO influence in the region and, therefore, along its border.
5. Expanding economic cooperation with regional countries as support for political cooperation.
6. Establishing Tehran as a mediator in the regional crises.
7. Assistance to regional countries for membership in regional and international organisations.
8. Expansion of security cooperation with Caucasian countries in areas such as the fight against terrorism, drugs and organised crimes.
9. Taking advantage of Iran's geopolitical position to connect different regions of the Caucasus, Central Asia, Persian Gulf, Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East and exploit the willingness of Caucasian players to cooperate with Iran.

² Mahmood Monshipouri, Javad Heiran-Nia, "Iran's Security Interests and Policies in the South Caucasus," *Iran and the Caucasus* 25, 2021, p. 285.

³ Ahmed Kazemi, *Security in South Caucasus*, Tehran, International Studies and Research Institute of Abrar Moaser, 2005, p. 10.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several interethnic conflicts took place in the area. The beginning of tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the following first Nagorno-Karabakh war represented a severe threat to Iran's national security. Due to the above, Tehran was willing to end the conflict multiple times and made extensive diplomatic efforts in this direction, trying to engage as a mediator. Iran's mediation process lasted from January to September 1992, from Karabakh's occupation until Shusha and Lachin's occupation.⁴ The main advantage of Tehran as a mediator was the perception of its neutrality by Yerevan and Baku.

Following the Second Karabakh War, which started on September 27, 2020, Iran also demanded an end to the military conflict and a political solution.⁵

Despite the close relations between Tehran and Yerevan, under the pressure of the public opinion of the Azeri minorities inside Iran, four representatives of the Iranian leadership in the Azeri-speaking provinces supported the Republic of Azerbaijan. Although this cannot be considered official support by the central government of Tehran, the event was significant as it shows how the conflict could also drive internal division in Iran and lead to instability.⁶

Iran played a passive role during the war, not engaging directly. As an outcome, the Second Karabakh War has led to geopolitical changes in the region to the detriment of Tehran.

The balance of power changed, and Turkey and Israel gained a leading role in the area. The final goal of Azerbaijan and Turkey is still the creation of the so-called Zangezur Corridor, a transport corridor which would provide Azerbaijan with unimpeded access to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic via Armenia's Syunik Province. The passage can provide new strategic transportation routes for actors such as the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, NATO, and Israel.⁷

The Zangezur Corridor can expand the desired alliance between Ankara and Baku to the Central Asian region. Connecting Turkey to the mainland of the Republic of Azerbaijan

⁴ Mahmoud Vaezi, *Geopolitics of the crisis in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Tehran: Publications of the Institute for Political and International Studies, 2007, p. 186.

⁵ Raza Rahimi, "The geopolitical consequences of the Karabakh war for Iran," *Tabnak News Agency*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.tabnak.ir/004GKn>.

⁶ "The support of four leadership representatives from the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war," *Tabnak News Agency*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.tabnak.ir/004Dno>.

⁷ Shuaib Bahman, "Behind the scenes of Aliyev's psychological operation against Iran," *Khabaronline News Agency*, February 6, 2023, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1727945>.

through Nakhchivan and the Zangezur Corridor has two primary goals: linking the two states and Europe and linking Turkey to Central Asia through Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea.

The Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), established on the initiative of Turkey in 2009, might expand its communications by creating this corridor. OTS is an intergovernmental organisation founded by the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. Uzbekistan joined the organisation later, and Hungary, Turkmenistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Northern Cyprus) are observer members.⁸

In the aftermath of the Ukrainian war, this corridor offers, in addition, a route which bypasses Russia and Iran under a severe regime of sanctions. Accordingly, this route has attracted the attention of the European Union, which continues to search for alternative trade routes bypassing Russia.

Meanwhile, Turkey is crucial for restoring the “Middle Corridor”, a route China had previously prioritised as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to strengthen regional market connectivity.⁹ Based on this, establishing the Zangezur Corridor will remove Iran from the vital international connectivity network, which might suffocate Iran’s geopolitics. Baku’s recent stances regarding the attack on Azerbaijan’s Embassy in Tehran and the lack of permission for Iranian trucks to cross the border of Astara confirmed this thesis.

Closing the Lachine Corridor is also a pressure tool that Baku is currently using to obtain acceptance of the creation of the Zangezur Corridor from Armenia.¹⁰ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the attack on the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Iran, Baku is trying to create an environment through which it can impose the Zangezur Corridor on Tehran and Yerevan. Mainly, Azerbaijan exploits these events to justify political, security, diplomatic, military and defence cooperation with Israel, especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This atmosphere might be behind Baku’s suppression of the Shiites of the Republic of Azerbaijan, including the Huseynyun movement, which is close to Iran.¹¹

⁸ Javad Heiran-Nia, Mahmood Monshipouri, “Raisi and Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward the South Caucasus,” *The Muslim World*, February 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12460>.

⁹ Barçın Yinanç, “The Middle Corridor Calls for Turkish-European Cooperation,” *The Turkey Analyst*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/701-the-middle-corridor-calls-for-turkish-european-cooperation.html>.

¹⁰ Bahman, Op.cit.

¹¹ Omar Ahmed “The Huseynyun: Iran's new IRGC-backed movement in Azerbaijan,” *Middle East Monitor*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211009-the-huseynyun-irans-new-irgc-backed-movement-in-azerbaijan/>.

On the other hand, Armenia is trying to internationalise the conflict and involve Europe in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue after the 2022 war to create a balance of power in its favour. According to the Armenian governance, Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) did not adequately support the country. Based on this, Yerevan brought the Lachin Corridor issue to the International Court of Justice, and the Court ruled the opening of this corridor by Baku.¹²

From Iran's perspective, establishing the Zangezur Corridor will hinder the connection between Iran and Russia and the linkage of Europe through Armenia. In this situation, Iran would be forced to pass through Azerbaijan to connect to Europe and Russia. Nevertheless, the experience of blocking Iran's route to Nagorno-Karabakh and charging heavy customs duties in the areas liberated by Baku following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has shown that the Republic of Azerbaijan is not a reliable route for Tehran, and Baku will use it as a pressure lever against the Iranian leadership.¹³

Moreover, the creation of this corridor might overshadow the North-South International Transport Corridor (INSTC), which is vital for Iran, India and Russia. The war in Ukraine has made this issue even more important for Moscow and Tehran. Creating the Zangezur Corridor can disrupt the INSTC and remove Iran from the network of regional corridors. Based on this, Tehran considers cutting the land connection with Armenia and changing its borders with the Caucasus as its red line.

The leader of Iran raised this issue in his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.¹⁴ As a result of Tehran's threats in the case of Baku changing Armenia's borders, Azerbaijan might try to turn Iran's transport zone to the Armenian Syunik province into a buffer zone. In this regard, several Azerbaijani governmental media accounts and a ruling party M.P. proposed creating a buffer zone in Armenian territory along the border with Azerbaijan. This idea shows how the concept of 'Zangezur' is quickly becoming a new and unstable territorial brand promoted by government officials, activists, intellectuals and social media users, much like Russia's 'Novorossiya' project. The proposed buffer zone adds additional space to existing requests for a corridor. Although such zones are usually justified as

¹² "International Court of Justice rules that Azerbaijan must open Lachin Corridor," *The Armenian Weekly*, February 22, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/02/22/international-court-of-justice-rules-that-azerbaijan-must-open-lachin-corridor/>.

¹³ "Persecution of Iranian truck drivers and businessmen by the Republic of Azerbaijan," *Tabnak News Agency*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1076949>.

¹⁴ Mogsen Paak Aein, "Why is Iran clearly opposed to the collapse of the geographical borders of the Caucasus region?", *Khamenei.ir*, July 29, 2022, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=50682>.

security measures, military and infrastructural installations are established, accompanied by symbolic references to the “liberated territories”.¹⁵

The Ukraine war and the decline of Russia’s influence

The Ukraine war has affected the power balance in the South Caucasus and has reduced Russia’s influence in this region. When Moscow proposed a 9-point cease-fire agreement between Baku and Yerevan through mediation in 2020, there was no talk of creating a corridor. Until the last two years, while Turkey and Azerbaijan were pressuring for the creation of this linkage, Russia resisted it. But the Ukraine war has blocked Moscow’s routes to the west, and the Kremlin will inevitably look for new transportation corridors for trade and communication with other parts of the world. Therefore, Russia’s attitude towards establishing the Zangezur Corridor might be changed.

Although Moscow has not yet publicly supported its implementation, they are not against its creation because they see this corridor as a means of facilitating their access to Armenia, Turkey, European countries, and the Arab Middle East. Of course, Russia would prefer to be in charge of the corridor’s control, or at least it to be under Armenia’s. On the other hand, Baku and Ankara believe this linkage’s control, management, and ownership should be under Azerbaijan.

To further complicate the already intricate balance of this small piece of land, western parties also want peacekeeping forces deployed in this area in the form of NATO of Western European countries.¹⁶

As a result of Russia’s inaction, with Armenia’s invitation, the E.U. is set to join Russian peacekeeping forces there with a monitoring mission.¹⁷ As an ally of Armenia within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Russia should provide military support to Armenia in case of aggression. Nevertheless, Moscow did not provide the necessary assistance during Azerbaijan’s attack against Armenian sovereign territory in September 2022. Accordingly, since December 12, the peacekeeping forces have shown that they cannot or do not want to deal with the siege of Karabakh by the Azeri.¹⁸

¹⁵ Laurence Broers, “Is Azerbaijan planning a long-term presence in Armenia?” *Chatham House*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>.

¹⁶ Bahman, Op.cit.

¹⁷ Kirill Krivosheev, “Could the New EU Mission Sideline Russia in Armenia-Azerbaijan Settlement?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 16, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89060>.

¹⁸ Ani Mejlumyan, “For Armenians, CSTO missing in action,” *Eurasianet*, September 15, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/for-armenians-csto-missing-in-action>.

In this complex scenario, several media platforms suggested Armenia wanted to withdraw from CSTO, but Yerevan's leadership denied this possibility. Notably, while the United States House of Representatives speaker, Nancy Pelosi, was visiting Armenia, some Yerevan's citizens gathered to demand Armenia's withdrawal from CSTO.¹⁹

Russia has criticised and doubted the future presence of European representatives in the region and considers it the presence of NATO and U.S. proxies. Moscow has announced that the Russian border forces, stationed on the border of Armenia since 1992, will react to the European Union observers' behaviour according to the field's developments.²⁰

As for Tehran, it has also expressed its opposition to the presence of E.U. troops in the South Caucasus. In this context, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, in a conversation with Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, called the opposition to the presence of foreign forces in the region a shared view of Tehran and Baku.²¹

The European Union (E.U.) is also looking to Azerbaijan for an alternative to Russian gas. In July, Brussels signed an agreement with Baku aimed at doubling its Azerbaijani gas supply by 2027 – although the total contribution to the E.U. gas deficit remains small.²² Nevertheless, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created several opportunities for Azerbaijan. Russia's distraction exposes the weaknesses of the peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, which comprises 1,960 service members and approximately 2,000 civilian support staff but still lacks a mandate or defined rules of engagement. Furthermore, the international response to Russia's aggression is a golden opportunity to unify the rhetoric of various post-Soviet conflicts and the legitimacy of their different actors' claims. With Europe and the U.S. mobilising over Ukraine's territorial integrity and the illegality of the occupation, the debate over the nuances and variable pathways of Eurasia's conflicts are easily swept aside.²³

¹⁹ "Armenian protesters demand their country leaves Moscow-led military alliance," *Euronews*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/19/armenian-protesters-demand-their-country-leaves-moscow-led-military-alliance>.

²⁰ Tambiyani Samvel, "Progress seen in talks to settle Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict," *Armenian Club*, March 2 2023, <https://www.armenianclub.com/2023/03/08/progress-seen-in-talks-to-settle-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-2/>.

²¹ "Iran's opposition to the deployment of foreign forces in the Caucasus region," *Khabaronline News Agency*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1684071>.

²² Laurence Broers, "Is Azerbaijan planning a long-term presence in Armenia?" *Chatham House*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>.

²³ Laurence Broers, "With Russia distracted, Azerbaijan escalates in Karabakh," *Chatham House*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/russia-distracted-azerbaijan-escalates-karabakh>.

Moscow's weakness has also caused Iran to step forward as Tehran feels a dangerous vacuum of Russian control in the region.²⁴ Earlier, by holding the "Conquerors of Khyber" exercise, Iran announced to Russia that wherever Baku and Ankara want to violate Iran's red lines, Tehran will secure its interests regardless of Moscow's considerations.²⁵ Based on this, the more severe presence of Israel in the Republic of Azerbaijan will not be ignored by Iran. In its recent exercise, the IRGC's ground forces also crossed the Aras River by building a floating bridge to give a strong message to Baku regarding the creation of the Zangezur Corridor on the one hand and the presence of Israel near its borders on the other hand.²⁶ Notably, Baku put much effort into increasing Israel's influence in its country: Azerbaijan's parliament voted to open its embassy in Israel in response to the opening of the Iranian consulate in the Kapan provincial capital of Syunik Province.²⁷

Nevertheless, Iran is coordinating and aligning with Moscow in the Caucasus not to harm the strategic interests of both sides: the two countries signed a 25-year long-term agreement and are deepening convergence in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union.²⁸ Of course, Russia has become more dependent on Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially after the Ukraine war. For the Kremlin, Azerbaijan is a pivotal link for a more isolated Russia seeking new routes to Iran and Asia.²⁹

Iran and 3+3 Caucasus Platform

After the Second Karabakh War, Turkey announced its intention to establish a 3+3 cooperation format in the South Caucasus: Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, plus Turkey, Russia, and Iran, to strengthen intra-regional economic cooperation and new transit connections. Considering the security situation of these countries, this initiative was welcomed more by Russia and Iran and much less by Georgia and Armenia.

²⁴ Gabriel Gavin, "Iran Is Filling Armenia's Power Vacuum," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/01/iran-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-russia-nagorno-karabakh-syunik/>.

²⁵ "Iran's decisive warning with 'Conquerors of Khyber'," *Fars News Agency*, October 3, 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14000710000772>.

²⁶ "Passing of IRGC forces from Aras in front of Azerbaijan's eyes," *Tasnim News Agency*, October 23, 2022, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/08/01/2791820>.

²⁷ Gavin, Op.cit.

²⁸ Kataryna Wolczuk, "Rilka Dragneva, Putin's Eurasian dream may soon become a nightmare," *Chatham House*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/05/putins-eurasian-dream-may-soon-become-nightmare>.

²⁹ Laurence Broers, "Is Azerbaijan planning a long-term presence in Armenia?" *Chatham House*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>.

For Armenia, participation in this platform along with Azerbaijan seems challenging after widespread conflict, as Yerevan has avoided agreeing on any land trade corridor with Azerbaijan until border disputes are resolved. In fact, the opposition parties in Armenia see the proposed format of cooperation and transit routes as another set of concessions in favour of Baku, which puts Armenia's sovereignty into question. Even the participation of Iran does not seem to be enough to eliminate Yerevan's scepticism. In the case of Georgia, Russia's involvement in this platform, according to Tbilisi, brings negative consequences.

On the other hand, Baku seems unhappy with Iran's participation, while it has experienced diplomatic tensions with Tehran over the Zangezur Corridor. From Iran's point of view, this platform is an excellent opportunity for more influence in the region. Iran has even announced its readiness to meet with foreign ministers of the 3+3 countries in Tehran.³⁰

In conclusion, considering that during the Karabakh war, Iran, unlike Russia and Turkey, was largely absent and lacked leverage, Tehran is currently interested in a 3+3 platform. Iran believes this format might open the country's political, security, commercial, economic and transit cooperation horizons.

In addition, the great advantage of this platform is that all regional countries have been involved, and the initiative is solely in the hands of the regional states and not actors such as the U.S. and NATO.

³⁰ "Tehran ready to host meeting of 3+3 south Caucasus format," *Shargh Daily*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.sharghdaily.com/Section-iran-256/871091-tehran-ready-to-host-meeting-of-south-caucasus-format>.

Features Of The Development Of Armenian-Iranian Relations After The Second Artsakh War

Liana Petrosyan*

Abstract in English

Iran and Armenia maintained diplomatic relations and had a relatively strong relationship, particularly in the areas of trade and energy. Tehran and Yerevan share a border and have historical, cultural, and religious ties. The two countries have cooperated on various issues, including transportation, energy, and tourism. Since the strategic role that Armenia plays in Iranian foreign policy, Tehran and Yerevan have also worked together on regional security issues, particularly in relation to the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. This paper aims to analysing the status of Armenian-Iranian relations and their development after the Second Artsakh War by considering the diplomatic and economic collaboration.

Keywords: Armenia, Iran, Artsakh War, Zangezor Corridor, geopolitics

Abstract in Italiano

L'Iran e l'Armenia hanno mantenuto relazioni diplomatiche e hanno un rapporto relativamente forte, in particolare nei settori del commercio e dell'energia. Non solo Teheran e Yerevan condividono un confine e hanno legami storici, culturali e religiosi, ma i due paesi negli anni hanno anche collaborato in diversi settori quali trasporti, energia e turismo. Dato il ruolo strategico che l'Armenia svolge nella politica estera iraniana, Teheran e Yerevan hanno anche cooperato su questioni di sicurezza regionale, in particolare in relazione al conflitto del Nagorno-Karabakh. Questo articolo si propone di analizzare lo stato delle relazioni armeno-iraniane e il loro sviluppo dopo la seconda guerra dell'Artsakh soffermandosi specialmente sulla collaborazione bilaterale nel campo della diplomazia e dell'economia.

Parole chiave: Armenia, Iran, conflitto del Nagorno-Karabakh, Corridoio di Zangezor, geopolitica

* **Liana Petrosyan**, Candidate of Historical Sciences, Lecturer of Department of Iranian Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the Yerevan State University.

Introduction

Neighbouring countries Armenia and Iran considered each other as partners and friends after Armenia declared its independence. It is no coincidence that the catchphrase “we are brothers, only religion separates us” is widely spread between the two nations.

In 1992, Iran, with a balanced approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the First Artsakh War, created new prospects for developing bilateral relations between the two countries. Especially after Azerbaijan and Turkey closed their borders, encircling Armenia, the Iranian border was a transit and escape route for Armenia, avoiding Georgia, which was experiencing a lack of security and internal stability.

After the end of the First Artsakh War and the victory of the Armenian side, Armenia and Iran started establishing and strengthening multilateral relations, striving to expand economic cooperation.

Economic relations between Tehran and Yerevan have expanded significantly over the past three decades. Armenia's positive attitude towards Iran, which led to the establishment of bilateral relations, can be attributed to Tehran's balanced approach during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia's political elites, indeed, were firmly convinced that Iran was interested in maintaining the status quo in the Republic of Artsakh after the signing of the May 1994 ceasefire.

Tehran's concerns over Azerbaijan's leading ally, Turkey, particularly the spread of pan-Turkism ideology in Iran's border regions and Ankara's increasing influence in the South Caucasus, further favoured the relations between Armenia and Iran.

In addition, Iran fears the growing cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel and reports about Israel's use of Azerbaijani territory for various anti-Iranian operations contributed to Tehran preventing a possible change in the situation in Artsakh. Therefore, when Azerbaijan unleashed a full-scale war against Artsakh and the Republics of Armenia on September 27th, 2020, Armenians believed that Iran would publicly condemn Azerbaijan. Following the release of several analyses reporting the transfer of thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan through Turkey and the reports about their participation in the clashes near Iran's borders led the Armenian expert circles to expect a sharp reaction from Iran against the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Israel axes. Nevertheless, Tehran reacted more softly: the Iranian side called for the cessation of hostilities and the resumption of negotiations.

A new political balance has already taken shape in the post-war region, against the background of which the importance of strengthening and developing bilateral multi-layered cooperation has increased even more for both Iran and Armenia.

Armenian-Iranian political relations: a geopolitical assessment

The end of the 44-day war in 2020 coincided with the formation of a new government in Iran led by Ebrahim Raisi. During his first press conference in 2021, he announced his foreign policy priority to be the region and relations with Iran's neighbours.¹ Iran is the only neighbour of Armenia whose national security interests coincide with Armenia's interests.

¹ ISNA, *Avalīn nešast-e ḥabarī-e raisī be o 'nvān-e rais ḡomhūr-e montaqab* (Raisi's first press conference as the newly elected president of the republic), June 21, 2021, <https://www.isna.ir/amp/1400033123906/>.

And from this point of view, Armenia predicted that the newly elected President of the Republic of Iran, conservative E. Raisi, would continue that political line.

After assuming the presidential seat, Ebrahim Raisi hosted the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, twice. In particular, within the framework of the meeting held in 2022, the President of Iran stated that ensuring security and peace in the Caucasus was highly important to them. According to Raisi, the regional players should resolve the problems of the Caucasus, and any interference by foreigners will lead to new challenges.²

During his visit to Yerevan almost immediately after the Second Artsakh War, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced that the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia is Iran's red line.³ Notably, Iran publicly emphasised the maintenance of the 42-kilometre border with Armenia. This was especially evident after May 12th, 2021, when the Azerbaijani military illegally crossed the southern border of Armenia in the Syunik region.⁴ Azerbaijan advanced its positions several kilometers deep in the territory of Armenia and refused to retreat, despite the demands of the Armenian side.

Baku claimed these territories to belong to Azerbaijan and presented its maps from the Soviet period as proof. In response, the R.A. Prime Minister declared that these documents were fake, and the Armenian media published the map of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, which proved that the mentioned territories belonged to Armenia.⁵

Following the exchange of accusations, Iran announced its support for preserving Armenia's territorial integrity. Official Tehran used the expression "red lines", the violation of which would make them intervene in the conflict.

Iran's statements about red lines refer to the Syunik region, what the Azerbaijani side calls the "Zangezoor Corridor", which Baku declared to be willing to take with the use of force if

² Azat Evropa/Azatowt'yown, *Hayastani varchapeti ayen Iran bekowmnayin klini erkow erkrneri zargac-man gorc'owm. R'aisi* (The visit of the Prime Minister of Armenia to Iran will be a breakthrough in the development of both countries. Raisi), November 1, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32110532.html>.

³ Armenpress, *Mer karmir gic'y' Hayastani tarac'qayin amboghjakanowt'yowonn e'. Irani AG naxarar* (Our red line is the territorial integrity of Armenia. Foreign Minister of Iran), January 27, 2021, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/1041595.html>.

⁴ HETQ, «*Or&e' kerp chenq karogh handowrjhel steghc'vac' iravitwaky'*». *P'ashinyany' S& ltwoum teghi ownecac'i masin* ("There is no way we can tolerate the created situation": Pashinyan about what happened in Sev Lake), May 13, 2021, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/130777>.

⁵ Armenpress, *Karty GSh VS SSSR svidetel'stvujut, chto ozero Sev prinadlezhit Armenii: JeKSKLJuZIV* (Maps of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR indicate that Sev Lake belongs to Armenia: EXCLUSIVE), May 18, 2021, <https://armenpress.am/rus/news/1052685.html>.

needed. On the contrary, according to the tripartite agreement signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on November 9th, 2020, the communications in the region should have been unblocked.

The Iranian side is concerned about Armenia not being in control of the so-called corridor, although it passes through its territories. The dispute started from the different interpretations of the 9th article of the declaration on the ceasefire in Artsakh by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Baku adheres to the “broad and maximalist interpretation” and believes that the “transport connecting routes between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic” means the “Zangezoor Corridor”. Meanwhile, the Armenian side remains loyal to the “narrow and minimalist interpretation”. Yerevan emphasises that the word “corridor” is found only in the third paragraph of the ceasefire declaration, which is dedicated to entering Armenia from Artsakh through the Berdzor Corridor. Accordingly, due to the lack of direct mention of the term “corridor” in the 9th article, Yerevan is not ready to extend this concept to the transport route between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan through the territory of Armenia.

The possible passage of this corridor near the border of Iran and Armenia in the city of Meghri, located in the south of the Syunik province of Armenia, has caused fears in Iran. Iran is particularly concerned about Azerbaijan’s threats to create a corridor with the help of military force. For example, on April 21st, 2021, in an interview with Azerbaijan Public Television, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, announced that regardless of Armenia’s wishes, the so-called “Zangezoor Corridor” will be implemented. If Armenia opposes it, the Azerbaijani side has threatened to use armed force.⁶ Under these circumstances, Tehran worries about a possible escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan near Iran’s northwestern borders. At the same time, it should be noted that Iran, like Armenia, is not against Azerbaijan’s access to the Nakhichevan exclave and supports unblocking transport routes in the region.

In addition, Iran perceives the so-called corridor as an attempt to interrupt the Armenian-Iranian land border and expand the border with Turkey. This circumstance represents a tremendous geopolitical and economic risk for Iran. Iranian border with Azerbaijan has already

⁶ RIA Novosti, *Aliyev zajavil o podvizhkah po Zangezurskomu koridoru i ob"jasnil, pochemu jetot vopros obsuzhdaetsja s Rossiej* (Aliyev announced progress on the Zangezur corridor and explained why this issue is being discussed with Russia), October 5, 2021, https://ria.ru/20210510/koridor-1731685300.html?fbclid=IwAR3HbyeteUkFT__OLOThBRX8o6xvFyOiNiurcDl6akTJO3GfveDFND14uhQ,10.05.2021.

significantly expanded, and Turkey and Israel's influence in the region has increased; while relations between Ankara and Tehran have been of competition, Tel Aviv's presence along its borders represents a significant threat to Iranian domestic security.

The first concern for Iran is the negative impact of the tension and border disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Iranian transit route through Armenia. A vivid example is the problems experienced by the Iranian trucks on the Goris-Kapan highway, which started after the Second Artsakh War. Indeed, 21 kilometres of the 400-kilometre route from Nor-duz (a city in Iran which borders Armenia) to Yerevan is currently under Azerbaijan's control. Before the war of 2020, when this part of the route was entirely under the Republic of Armenia's control, Iranian drivers had no problems travelling to Armenia and Georgia. However, after the 44-day war, the situation changed: claiming that a part of the Goris-Kapan highway is located in Azerbaijan's territory, Baku demanded each Iranian transit truck to pay 130 dollars.⁷ In response, the Iranian government developed alternative routes to prevent the disruption of Iranian transit and trade with Armenia, Georgia, Russia and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The first alternative land corridor is the Tatev-Aghvani route, which completely bypasses the territory occupied by Azerbaijan. Iran has announced that it will complete the unfinished part of this road inside Armenia.⁸

Iran's second response to Azerbaijan's restrictions on the Goris-Kapan highway was the more active usage of the Caspian Sea as an alternative to the land route through Azerbaijan to Russia. In the first phase, from October 23rd, 2021, six sailings were inaugurated to connect the northern ports of Iran to Astrakhan and Makhachkala in Russia, as well as to Aktau port in Kazakhstan. In the second phase, until the end of March 2022, they planned to increase their number to eight.⁹ The situation on the Goris-Kapan highway clearly showed that the differences and border tensions between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia affect both these two countries and Iran.

⁷ Civilnet, *Goris-Kapan tvanaparhin gand'owmneri veraberyal Adrbejani pashtonakan t'very' iratesakan chen* (Azerbaijan's official figures regarding tolls on the Goris-Kapan road are not realistic), January 31, 2022, <https://www.civilnet.am/news/648166/>.

⁸ IRNA, *Ġozīyāt-e tavāfoq-e Īrān va Ārmanestān barāi-e sāht-e masīrhāi-e trānzīti-e ġadīd* (Details of the agreement on the construction of new transit routes between Iran and Armenia), October 6, 2021, <https://irna.ir/xjGcvZ>, 06.10.2021.

⁹ V. Antonov, *Iran zapustit shest' sudohodnyh linij po Kaspijskomu morju v Rossiju i Kazahstan* (Iran will launch six shipping lines across the Caspian Sea to Russia and Kazakhstan), *Kaspiskij Vestnik*, October 18, 2021, <http://casp-geo.ru/iran-zapustit-shest-sudohodnyh-linij-po-kaspijskomu-moryu-v-rossiyu-i-kazahstan>.

Iran is also concerned about geopolitical shifts and changes in the balance of power in the region, which can threaten Iran and weaken its influence in the South Caucasus. In the context of this “big game”, Iran attaches great importance to neutralising threats from Turkey, Israel and the West. In this regard, unlike Russia and other countries, Iran does not consider the tension in the South Caucasus only as a “border tension” between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Iran is well aware that the events taking place on the northwestern border can seriously affect the political influence of Iran and Russia in the Caucasus region and the development of events beyond. Forming an alliance between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Israel on the northwestern borderlands of Iran will not only be dangerous for internal security but seriously affect Tehran and Moscow’s interests.

In this sense, Iran considers the creation of the so-called “Zangezoor Corridor” a problem that will provide NATO member Turkey with direct military access to the Caucasus and the western basin of the Caspian Sea. Indeed, many Iranian elites and experts believe that the expansion of Turkey’s presence in the South Caucasus, especially in the so-called “Zangezoor Corridor”, will contribute to the spread of pan-Turkism in the region, which poses a direct threat to the northwestern areas of Iran, inhabited by the Iranian Azeri minorities.

In addition, Iran is deeply concerned about Israel’s growing presence near its northwestern border, given the close ties between Israel and Azerbaijan, which expanded significantly during the Second Artsakh War. In particular, Iran fears the possible participation of Israeli companies in restoring occupied Armenian territories near the Iranian border, namely in the regions of Varanda, Jrakan and Kovsakan. Iran justifiably worries that this may provide space and opportunity for espionage and other security threats against Iran’s national interests and security. In this regard, Tehran’s leadership has repeatedly warned about the danger of Israel’s presence on its borders: Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian announced at a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on October 6th, 2021, in Moscow that “the Islamic Republic of Iran is deeply concerned about Israel’s presence in the Caucasus”.¹⁰

Iran also objected to extra-regional players in the region after E.U. observers started their mission at the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In July 2022, Iran’s spiritual leader

¹⁰ Sputnik Armenia, *Iran ne poterpit geopoliticheskikh peremen i izmenenij karty na Kavkaze - glava MID* (Iran will not tolerate geopolitical changes and map changes in Caucasus - FM), October 6, 2021, <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20211006/glavy-mid-rossii-i-irana-obsudili-situatsiyu-na-yuzhnom-kavkaze-33996521.html>.

Ali Khamenei announced that any action by Azerbaijan and Turkey to block the Iran-Armenia border would be unacceptable to Iran.¹¹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the imminent opening of the Turkish consulate in occupied Shushi after Iran opened its consulate in Kapan (located in the Syunik region), which is highly strategic to Iranians. Moreover, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iran, A.H. Abdollahian, participated in the opening ceremony of the consulate and announced that the Iranian authorities were ready to support the opening of the General Consulate of Armenia in Tabriz.

One of the most important theses of the Iranian Foreign Minister's speech was that Iran perceives the security of Armenia and the region as its security, respect for territorial integrity and internationally recognised borders. According to him, the Iranian side, together with its diplomats in Yerevan and Kapan, will work towards the further development of Armenian-Iranian trade and economic relations. A.H. Abdollahian also stated that the Syunik region is a vital part of the North-South international Transport Corridor (INSTC), and Armenia's role in this project is essential¹². It turns out that while Turkey and Azerbaijan are working towards implementing the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" project, Iran and Armenia are planning to create a "Persian Gulf-Black Sea" international transport and transit corridor with the participation of India and several other countries.

On July 19th, 2022, "Tehran 43" seems to be replaced by "Tehran 22". During the Second World War, the meeting of the three leaders of the Anti-Hitler coalition in Tehran was a prelude to the Yalta Conference. In 2022, another, if not global, then at least a regional war is going on, in which new twists are planned, so the leaders of the likely winning countries discussed the future of the world. Large-scale negotiations between the leaders of Iran, Turkey and Russia were held for the first time five years ago in Astana, and the meeting in Tehran was the second in this format.

Within the framework of the meeting, during the bilateral and trilateral negotiations, the parties discussed various issues, including the Armenian-Iranian borders. Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei expressed Iran's stance that Tehran will not tolerate closing the Armenian-Iranian border or creating barriers to its operation. It is noteworthy that during the meeting with the President of Turkey, advancing the above-mentioned thesis, Khamenei

¹¹ Khamenei.ir, *Čerā Īrān moḥālef-e šariḥ-e barḥam ḥordan-e marzḥāi-e ḡoqrāfiāiy-e manṭaqei-e Qafqāz āst?* (Why is Iran openly against the change of the geographical borders of the Caucasus region?), July 29, 2022, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=50682>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, *Kapanowm teghi e' ownecel IIIH glxavor hyowpatosowt'yan bacman araroghowt'yowny'* (The opening ceremony of the General Consulate of Iran took place in Kapan), October 21, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNFTSALM_Pc.

added that the Armenian-Iranian border has a history of thousands of years. Hence, the Iranian side attaches importance to its security and unhindered exploitation. The Supreme Leader, in fact, firmly stressed to Turkey and Azerbaijan that the Armenian-Iranian border is older than the fictitious history of these countries and that the false agenda they are trying to advance in the region is doomed to destruction.

While the alliance between Turkey and Azerbaijan is based on the common Turkic element and geopolitical advantages, Iran and Armenia have had a unique relationship throughout history. Firstly, Armenia is the only Christian country bordering Iran, and the Armenian community is active in the Islamic Republic, becoming an additional connecting link between the two states. And from this point of view, the Iranian side often points to Christian Armenia and the Armenian community as a counterweight to accusations of intolerance and radical politics. In addition, around 200,000 Armenians are integrated into Iranian society, and some of them hold important government positions. Tehran can lobby for contacts with Western countries through the influential Armenian diaspora, so the Iranian authorities are interested in close cooperation with Yerevan.

The development of Armenian-Iranian economic relations

Tehran has been in severe international isolation for several years, exacerbated in recent years due to the maximum pressure policy of the United States. Consequently, Iran is particularly interested in overcoming these restrictions: Armenia, under partial blockade, is one such option.

The Armenian side is a valuable economic partner for Iran. At the end of 2020, the trade turnover between the countries amounted to 400 million dollars, which may seem insignificant on a national scale, but it is notable considering that 315 million dollars of them consist of export from Iran. Tehran supplies Armenia with both food and industrial products, as well as oil products and gas. According to official data, in the first ten months of 2022, the trade turnover between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Iran increased by 45.3%, reaching 565.5 million U.S. dollars, instead of 338.9 million in the same period of the previous year, and at the end of the year, that figure reached 700 million dollars. According to the data of the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia in January-October 2022, in the balance of mutual trade between the Republic of Armenia and Iran of 565.5 million

U.S. dollars, the export from Armenia to Iran was 91.71 million dollars, and the import from Iran to Armenia was 473.78 million dollars¹³.

In addition, it should be mentioned the signing of the agreement on establishing a free trade area (FTA) by Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2018. Armenia remains the only EAEU state bordering the Islamic Republic, so in perspective, Armenia can become a transit point for the export of Iranian goods to international markets.

Within the framework of the Armenian Prime Minister's visit to Iran in 2021, the leaders of the two states discussed strengthening trade and economic ties. In particular, the interlocutors considered the provision of active activity of the Meghri free economic zone and the possibility of applying the free trade regime between Iran and EAEU as a stimulus for developing cooperation in this field. The parties prioritised the development of regional communications, particularly transport and cable communications from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea. Pashinyan also noted that Yerevan is ready to discuss the participation of Iranian construction companies in the international tender for the Sisian-Meghri section of the above-mentioned project and the implementation of joint new programs in the fields of healthcare, latest technologies, education, science and culture.¹⁴

In 2022, the second official visit of the delegation led by Nikol Pashinyan to Iran took place, within the framework of which the Armenian Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure Gnel Sanosyan and Iran's Deputy Minister of Oil, Director of the National Gas Company Majid Chegeni signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of natural gas. In addition, another memorandum was signed, which further expanded the gas-for-electricity exchange agreement until 2030. Based on that, the electricity exchange tariff will also change with the increased volume of exported gas. In particular, Iran used to export one million cubic meters of gas to Armenia daily, and based on the new memorandum, it will be doubled.

¹³ Sputnik Armenia, *Hayastan–Iran tntesakan kapern y'ndlaynvovm en. ar'& towry'` t'verov ow apranqatesaknerov* (Armenia-Iran economic ties are expanding: trade in numbers and products), December 8, 2022, <https://armeniasputnik.am/20221208/hajastaniran-tntesakan-kapern-yndlajnvum-en-arevtury-tverov-u-apranqatesaknervov-52364680.html>.

¹⁴ Prime Minister of Armenia, *Teghi e' ownecel HH varchapeti kartwat& aycy' Iran. HH-i & IIIH-i mij& storagrvel e' Bnakan gazi olortowm hamagore'akcowt'yan masin p'oxy'mbr'nman howshagir* (The RA Prime Minister's short visit to Iran took place: A memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of natural gas was signed between Armenia and Iran), November 1, 2022, <https://www.primeminister.am/hy/press-release/item/2022/11/01/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-to-the-Iran/>.

Within the framework of the visit, the parties also discussed cooperation issues in infrastructure development, energy, agriculture, construction and other fields and noted the importance of implementing joint projects aimed at facilitating cargo transportation and the need to complete the construction of the third power transmission line between Armenia and Iran. Iranian companies also decided to start the construction of the 7.2 km long Qajar tunnel in the spring of 2023. Accordingly, creating a new North-South corridor from Norduz to Verzeghan and Tabriz will improve the movement of goods and transit opportunities and significantly reduce the length and time of the road.

Furthermore, it is planned to open two large enterprises with Iranian capital in Armenia in 2023. They will inaugurate the first Iranian trade centre in Armenia, in Yerevan, with an area of 20,000 square meters, of which 2,000 square meters will be allocated to petrochemical companies. In general, more than 100 large Iranian companies will be represented in the shopping centre, for the creation of which the Iranian side has invested 5 billion dollars. Armenia plans to open a similar trade centre in the capital of Iran, the financial issue of which has not yet been resolved.¹⁵

Moreover, Armenia will play a vital role in the North-South transport and energy corridor, which includes communication and energy projects connecting the Persian Gulf with the Black Sea. It consists of several components: a railway between Iran and Armenia and constructing a North-South Road connecting the two countries to the Black Sea ports of Georgia.

On May 25th, 2021, the delegation led by the Iranian Minister of Road Construction and Urban Development, Mohammad Eslami, arrived in Armenia to discuss to Iran's participation in the construction sector, especially infrastructure development projects, the creation of joint ventures and the involvement of investors from both countries in joint projects. Eslami reaffirmed his interest in participating in constructing the southern part of the North-South transport corridor, particularly the Artashat-Meghri section. According to Eslami, Iran is ready to create a consortium of leading Iranian companies to involve them in developing, financing and implementing this project.¹⁶

¹⁵ Golos Armenii, *2023-in Irany' Hayastanowm erkow xoshor d'er'narkowt'youn kbaci* (In 2023, Iran will open two large enterprises in Armenia), December 9, 2022, <https://www.golosarmenii.am/am/article/166322/2023-in-irane-hayastanum-yerku-khvoshvor-dzyerrnarkuthyun-kbatsi>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Economy of Armenia, *Vahan Qerobyann ow IIIH twanaparhneri & qaghaqashinowt'yan naxarar Mohammad E'slamin storagrel en p'oxy'mbr'nman howshagir* (Vahan Kerobyan and the Minister of Roads and Urban Development of Iran Mohammad Eslami signed a memorandum of understanding), May 5, 2021, <https://mineconomy.am/news/2293>.

The day after M. Eslami's visit, Iranian Foreign Minister M.J. Zarif arrived in Yerevan. The latter already had meetings with the highest political leadership of Armenia, including the Prime Minister, the President and his Armenian counterpart. However, there was only one statement regarding his visit, according to which Armenia and Iran continue work on the Persian Gulf-Black Sea transport corridor.¹⁷

Thus, the need to create an international transport and logistics corridor connecting the Persian Gulf with the Black Sea and constructing the North-South highway has been discussed for at least 15 years. The recent increase in Iran's interest in the implementation has many reasons: first of all, the current geopolitical shifts, in particular, with the emergence of projects to unblock regional communications due to the 44-day war. It is appropriate to remind here that M.J. Zarif's same visit to Armenia took place within the framework of his regional tour in the South Caucasus. And, the trend towards de facto cessation of Western sanctions policy against Iran is another factor that allows Iran to begin to respond significantly to recent regional transformations. First of all, due to the fact that the absence of sanctions will allow Tehran to initiate new, rather large-scale programs.

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that although these infrastructures have not been implemented yet due to several circumstances, they are highly strategic both for Armenia and Iran. In this light, Azerbaijan and Turkey actively oppose these connections by trying to reduce their international attractiveness. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to prevent their financing with massive international donors.

On the background of ongoing dynamics in the South Caucasus, Iran-Armenia's relations might increase and will not be seriously hindered by the West, which traditionally considered active ties between Yerevan and Tehran permissible and acceptable. Even in case of an escalation between Iran and Azerbaijan, it is unlikely to lead to an open armed conflict. Firstly, the damage from this would outweigh the benefits that Iran could receive. Secondly, Azerbaijan is unlikely to take active steps to occupy a part of Armenia's territory because, in this case, it will face serious opposition from Iran and the West, which accounts for most of Baku's oil and gas exports. Finally, Russia, which managed to establish and maintain good

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, *Hayastani Hanrapetowt'yan & Irani Islamakan Hanrapetowt'yan mij& erkoghm haraberowt'yowwneri veraberyal hamar'ot teghekanq (2019-2020't')* (Brief information on bilateral relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran (2019-2020)), January 26, 2021, https://www.mfa.am/hy/interviews-articles-and-comments/2021/01/26/armenia_iran/10770.

relations with all these countries, can stabilise the relations between Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Against this background, the most critical problem of Yerevan seems to be the demonstration of an extreme level of consistency in implementing these projects, despite the Turkish and Azerbaijani opposition. The leadership of Armenia should also stop subordinating its interests to those of other actors and players. Armenia is facing a great opportunity for development: an opportunity that any power and authority have no right to miss.

Geopolitics of Iran: an interview with H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, the Ambassador of Iran to Italy

Silvia Boltuc*

Abstract in English

Located in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran, thanks to its geographical position, historical-cultural heritage and natural resources, is a key player in regional and international geopolitical dynamics. SpecialEurasia met H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, Ambassador of Iran to Italy, to discuss the current domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The interview moreover investigates future trends of the Middle Eastern country which, on the one hand, can exploit the benefits deriving from geography, natural resources, and historical-cultural heritage, on the other hand, has to face the difficult challenge of the economic sanctions imposed by the West to counter the Iranian nuclear program and attempt to subvert the internal political order.

Keywords: Iran, geopolitics, Middle East, Mohammad Reza Sabouri, diplomacy

Abstract in Italiano

Paese del Medio Oriente, la Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran grazie alla sua posizione geografica, ricchezza storico-culturale e risorse naturali si pone come un attore fondamentale nelle dinamiche geopolitiche regionali e internazionali. SpecialEurasia ha incontrato S.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, Ambasciatore dell'Iran in Italia, per discutere le dinamiche attuali interne e in politica estera della Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran e comprendere quali sono le direttive future del Paese mediorientale che, se da un lato può sfruttare i benefici derivanti da posizione geografica, risorse naturali, ed eredità storico-culturale, dall'altro deve affrontare la difficile sfida delle sanzioni economiche imposte dall'Occidente per contrastare il programma nucleare iraniano e tentare di sovvertire l'ordine politico interno.

Parole chiave: Iran, geopolitica, Medio Oriente, Mohammad Reza Sabouri, diplomazia

* **Silvia Boltuc**, *SpecialEurasia Managing Director*, is an international affairs specialist, business consultant and political analyst who has supported private and public institutions in decision-making by providing reports, risk assessments, and consultancy. She is also the Director of the Energy & Engineering Department of CeSEM – Centro Studi Eurasia Mediterraneo and an editor/analyst at the Italian media agencies *Notizie Geopolitiche*, *Opinio Juris*, and *European Affairs Magazine*. Previously, she worked as an Associate Director at ASRIE Analytica. She co-authored the book “*Conflitto in Ucraina: rischio geopolitico, propaganda jihadista e minaccia per l'Europa*” (Enigma Edizioni 2022).

Introduction¹

Located in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran, thanks to its geographical position, historical-cultural heritage and natural resources, is a key player in regional and international geopolitical dynamics.²

At the crossroads of the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia, Iran's geographic location makes it a major logistics hub for transportation and trade with access to both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.

In the background of the international energy crisis, with several states seeking diversifying their energy supplies, Iranian vast oil and gas reserves might establish Tehran as a trading partner.

The interview with H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri

SpecialEurasia met H.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, Ambassador of Iran to Italy, to discuss the current domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The interview moreover investigates future trends of the Middle Eastern country which, on the one hand, can exploit the benefits deriving from geography, natural resources, and historical-cultural heritage, on the other hand, has to face the difficult challenge of the economic sanctions imposed by the West to counter the Iranian nuclear program and attempt to subvert the internal political order.

What is the current state of relations between Iran and Italy?

“Relations between Iran and Italy have always been exemplary compared to relations with other European countries. For many Iranians, Italy is the gateway to Europe. The most important assets for joint work are the high potential for political, economic and cultural work between the two countries, as well as the positive outlook of the two nations towards each other.

In the political field, because of common interests and threats in the bilateral, regional and international arenas, there is great work capacity, and continuous consultations between the authorities of the two countries have been conducted.

¹ SpecialEurasia originally published this interview in Italian. Cf. Silvia Boltuc, «Geopolitica dell'Iran: SpecialeEurasia Incontra S.E. Mohammad Reza Sabouri, Ambasciatore dell'Iran in Italia», *SpecialEurasia*, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/05/09/iran-mohammad-reza-sabouri/>.

² Arash Reisinezhad, «Iran's Geopolitical Strategy in the West Asia: Containment of 'Geography' and 'History'», *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.11(1), 2020, pp. 59-88.

In the economic field, we believe that the most important indicator in the relations is the complementarity of trade relations and the interest of the entrepreneurs of the two states to work together. Iran's political and economic stability is a precious opportunity for Italian companies and investments, which can exploit the region's market of 500 million people.

In the cultural field, Iran and Italy are the holders of two world civilisations and cultures. Both countries have their own styles in different fields of culture, literature, art, music, architecture, etc. and they have a lot to offer.”

From your point of view, is it possible for Italy to play a more significant role in facilitating relations between Iran and Europe?

“As I said, Iran and Italy have common interests and face common threats. This could be a good motivation for Italy to help resolve some challenges and obstacles in the relationship between Iran and Europe.

In foreign policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran has an approach based on dialogue and constructive interaction based on mutual respect. That is why we welcome the contribution of Italy or any other country to help achieve this goal. This will and determination exist on the Iranian side. I hope that, as in the past, we will also witness this will on the Italian side.

Unfortunately, I have to admit that tourism between the two countries is the missing link in our cultural relations and, in other words, in the relations between the two populations. I hope that with serious planning in the public and private sectors, we can also resolve this point. Of course, bilateral political relations have never been without problems. But I believe that if there is the will based on mutual respect and common interests, we can overcome the existing obstacles.”.

In recent months, international media have published much news and information about Iran, underlining the importance of the demonstrations.³ What is Tehran's position on internal protests? Do these protests have a geopolitical value?

³ Ida Sarkisyan, «Protest in Iran: Popular Demand or Enemy Provocations?», *SpecialEurasia*, 2022, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/11/16/iran-protest-geopolitics/>.

“Freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate are enshrined in our Constitution. What we have seen in recent developments in Iran has been the transformation of civil protests into full-blown riots. Unfortunately, some regional and European countries and some terrorist groups, by miscalculation, have entered this matter.

Interestingly, over 10,000 weapons that foreign agents intended to smuggle into Iran were confiscated during this period. We respect the right of citizens to protest and it is the duty of the state to respond to the demands of civil society. Unfortunately, creating crisis and chaos is always on the agenda of the United States and Israel, and Iran is paying the price for its independence-based policies.”.

What geopolitical role does Iran play in the Middle East? What are the main drivers of Iranian foreign policy?

“Stability and sustainable security in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf area are the main axes of the regional policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We have always believed that these two objectives are achieved with the will and cooperation of the countries of the region.

The presence of foreign forces in the region and looking at security models borrowed from outside have not only not given positive results so far, but have contributed to instability and competition between local actors.

Economic development will be achieved because of sustainable stability and security achieved through regional cooperation. The experience of recent years has shown that Iran cannot be ignored in the Middle East, an important and strategic geographical area.”.

How do you evaluate Iran’s relations with the two main players in the Eurasian geopolitical arena, the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China?⁴

“The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not look to the Eastern or Western model. Just as we value our relations with Western countries on the basis of mutual respect and interests, we also value our relations with Russia and China on the same basis. There are centuries-old relations between Iran, Russia and China in various spheres: political, economic and cultural.

⁴ Vlad Kondratiev, «Russia and Iran Intesify Trade and Economic Ties», *SpecialEurasia*, 2022, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/03/30/russia-iran-trade-business/>; Silvia Boltuc, «Chinese Interests in Iranian ports», *SpecialEurasia*, 2022, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/01/27/china-iran-port/>; Silvia Boltuc, «Russia-Iran Entente on Eurasian Current Issues and Dynamics», *SpecialEurasia*, 2021, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2021/11/18/iran-russia-cooperation/>.

As for China, the recent visit of a high-ranking Iranian delegation to Beijing, led by President Raisi, helped to delve into the various dimensions of cooperation between the two countries at different bilateral, regional and international levels. In the framework of the China-Iran talks, agreements have been made and growth of economic, commercial, tourist, cultural and industrial collaborations is expected.

As for Russia, we have had relations for three hundred years and we share a long history of cooperation on matters of common concern. This collaboration encompasses a wide range of sectors, from science and culture to energy. Given the formation of new power blocs in the international system, it is important for us to create synergies with decisive countries such as Russia and China.”

What is Iran’s view of the Ukraine crisis? And how has this geopolitical event affected Iran?

“The Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a position of active neutrality since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis. We have lived the experience of war on our skin for many years, so we are well aware of its effects and human, material, and psychological consequences. Since the beginning, we have tried to mediate between the parties. Our President of the Republic and our Minister of Foreign Affairs have had several talks with the Russian and Ukrainian authorities on this matter.

We support the independence and territorial sovereignty of countries in compliance with international law. Therefore, we have never agreed to recognize the self-proclaimed and separate regions. We believe that the solution to the crisis in Ukraine is not to send weapons to the warring parties. We do not consider war the solution to the differences between the two states and we believe that the Ukrainian crisis must be resolved through political dialogue and negotiation.”

For decades, your country has suffered from Western sanctions that have affected its economy and, consequently, the lives of the Iranian people. What strategies has the Iranian government adopted to address sanctions and exploit domestic natural and industrial capabilities?

“The sanctions have caused disruptions and slowdowns in performing sectors of the Iranian economy to some extent. But more than affecting the Iranian government, they have affected the economic conditions of the population.

Dealing with sanctions in recent decades has made Tehran identify and use ways to neutralize and evade sanctions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, has led the country's economic and infrastructure sectors to achieve independence and self-sufficiency and access to indigenous and local knowledge somehow.

According to official statistics over the past year, Iran's non-oil exports amounted to 48 billion dollars and Iran's imports 53 billion dollars, which shows the continuation of foreign trade despite the sanctions.”.

What are the main guidelines for Iran's economic development? Are there prominent industrial and financial sectors that can attract foreign companies and investors?

“Despite the desire to cooperate with large foreign companies, we do not wait for their investments and rely on our local strength and capabilities. Iranian laws provide for many concessions for foreign investment.

Many economic advantages, including skilled labour and the cost-effectiveness of energy vectors, have created an excellent economic environment that can be exploited by foreign companies if they have the will.

The lack of access to some Western technologies has favoured the acquisition by Iranian “knowledge enterprises” of modern technologies, while the state sector has provided them with the necessary support. There are currently 51 science and technology parks and 12 technology and innovation campuses in Iran, where 1,700 knowledge enterprises and 11,000 technology units work.”.

Because of its geographical location, Iran plays a strategic and logistical role in Eurasia. Tehran supports the North-South International Transportation Corridor (INSTC)⁵ and is part of other international lines of communication. Can you better explain Iran's transport and logistics strategy?

“The North-South International Transport Corridor can create the framework of a powerful communication network from the Indian Ocean to the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. The geographical position of Iran is such that it can be placed at the crossroads of this path.

⁵ Emil Advaliani, «The Expansion of the International North-South Transport Corridor: geopolitical Updates», *Silk Road Briefing*, 2023, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/04/04/the-expansion-of-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-geopolitical-updates/>; Silvia Boltuc, «Geopolitics of the International North-South Transport Corridor: an Interview with Alexandr Sharov», *SpecialEurasia*, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/03/17/geopolitics-instc-sharov/>.

This corridor can be a trade link between Asia and Europe and facilitate the transfer of goods from East Asian countries to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The most important advantage of this project is to shorten the distance between Asian countries to Europe; this corridor is, in fact, approximately 60% shorter than the sea route from India to Europe via the Suez Canal. It also cuts cargo handling times from India to Northern Europe from 40 days to 20 days.

In addition, the East-West Corridor can connect East Asian countries and China to Europe. China is one of the most important exporters of goods to Europe and the shortest and cheapest land route is to transport goods from Iran by rail. It takes approximately 45 days to ship goods from China to Europe by sea, and using the railway route through Iran cuts the transportation time and cost by half, and as a result, increases the productivity of economic activities.”.

The recent agreement for the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, promises positive consequences for the region, starting with the civil war in Yemen. How did Iran agree? What are the expectations and what are the unknowns?

“The Islamic Republic of Iran has always believed in the principle of dialogue and believes that there is no alternative to this principle. This is the only method that can solve problems and settle misunderstandings and further develop cooperation between political players in the region and beyond the region. We have entered into negotiations with Saudi Arabia in Iraq, Muscat and China with this principle in mind.

We hope that as these two countries and the countries of the region draw closer together, we will see important developments in the Persian Gulf area and regional relations by replacing the current state with economy, trade and culture so that our region can take the distances from its current situation, which results from the militarism of extra-regional countries.

This region should be able to base its security on development and cooperation between countries. We need regional security, comprehensive and indivisible security that includes all countries in the area, security that is not based on the traditional concept of militarism, but on development and relations between states.”.

During the negotiations, the Saudi side believed that Yemen should also be discussed, but from the point of view of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Yemen issue is an internal phenomenon of the country. Yemenis are aware of the existing problem and how to deal with it.

Iran's point of view on the Yemen issue is different. We have always stressed that the problem in the country can be solved based on a political solution.”.

What is your opinion on relations between Iran and Azerbaijan considering the recent tensions between the two countries?

“As neighbouring countries, Iran and Azerbaijan have strategic relations. Of course, we also have enemies, like the state of Israel. This regime has built its existence on the instability and lack of security in the region, especially in the Islamic world. Realizing that some parties benefit from the creation of differences between Iran and Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran is trying to overcome these tensions through diplomatic initiatives.

Within the framework of the agreement between Iran and Azerbaijan, and in particular, in the three rounds of telephone talks between the foreign ministers of the two countries, we achieved a relative relaxation of the climate and the adoption of some concrete steps for dialogue between the relevant authorities of the two states to overcome misunderstandings. We hope to restore relations between Tehran and Baku to their natural state.

In the economic field, fortunately, the trend of commercial collaborations is always growing despite the political issues. We hope this rate of development continues to grow exponentially.

The Islamic Republic of Iran underlines the fact that a new page must be opened in relations between Tehran and Baku and that they need a new atmosphere. We believe tensions disturb bilateral relations and are in line with the interests of those actors who always see their own advantage in creating tension between neighbouring countries. We hope for a correct and fair continuation.”.



SpecialEurasia

Website: www.specialeurasia.com

E-mail: info@specialeurasia.com



MInter Group srl

Website

www.mintergroup.eu

E-mail

info@mintergroup.eu



Mondo Internazionale

APS

Website

www.mondointernazionale.org

E-mail

segreteria@mondointernazionale.org



Notizie Geopolitiche

Website

www.notiziegeopolitiche.net

E-mail

redazione.notiziegeopolitiche@gmail.com

Copyright © 2023 SpecialEurasia

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial use permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permission Coordinator,” at info@specialeurasia.com.