

The second Karabakh war and Iran's interests

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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, Azerbaigian 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

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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 Mogsan 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 Tambiyán 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>.