

# How Iran Perceives Turkey's Rise in the South Caucasus

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## **Abstract**

As the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus continues to evolve, multiple divergent interests are bringing new dynamics into the Iran-Turkey relations. This article explores Iran's changing perceptions concerning the South Caucasus in general and Turkey's assertive geopolitical activism in the region, in particular. The authors argue that, given Turkey's increasing

influence in the South Caucasus and Iran's decreasing footprint in the region, the current geopolitical and geo-economic trends are likely to bring more conflict into the Iran-Turkey regional rivalry. Tehran is apprehensive of several key insecurities stemming from Ankara's growing activism in the South Caucasus. Apart from historical disagreements between Iran and Turkey over the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the East-West transit corridors and pan-Turkism in a bigger picture, Tehran perceives the underlying developments in the region as part of the West's "geopolitical plot" of containing Iran, in which Turkey plays a strategic role. Consequently, the South Caucasus is increasingly becoming an additional source of regional confrontation between Iran and Turkey.

**Keywords:** South Caucasus, Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's offensive of 2023, Iran, Turkey, Russia, threat perception.

Amid the systematic power shift in the global and regional contexts, regional powers have started to reevaluate their international standing (Ikenberry, 2018, p.13). Specifically, the shifting power structure at the regional level has paved the way for Turkey and Iran to embark on a proactive regional engagement (Mousavi Shafaei and Golmohammadi, 2022, p. 63). Over the past decade, Ankara has significantly advanced its regional activism from the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean to North Africa and from the Persian Gulf to—more recently—the South Caucasus. At the same time Tehran has been expanding its sphere of influence throughout the Greater Middle East (and—more recently—in the northern neighborhood. These parallel trends have created overlapping areas of interest for Turkey and Iran, and an uneasy rivalry sweeping across the wider neighborhood. While Ankara and Tehran have sought to settle their protracted disagreements over the Broader Middle East, the South Caucasus has turned into a new arena for geopolitical confrontation between the two regional powers with imperial history.

Over recent years, the post-Soviet status quo in the South Caucasus has significantly been challenged while an alternative order

is still to be established. Apart from uncertainties, the emerging quagmire in the South Caucasus implies a certain growing role of the regional stakeholders and increased region-specific dynamics in re-ordering the region. The eminent implication of this trend is the regionalization of cooperation and competition mechanisms used to shape the changing geopolitics in the South Caucasus, in which Turkey and Israel's growing influence in alliance with Azerbaijan has heightened Iran's strategic concerns.

In the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, the emerging geopolitical realities compelled Iran to start revisiting its conventional policy of neutrality in the South Caucasus. However, Tehran has not yet adopted any strategy towards active regionalism and its reaction to the dynamic developments in the South Caucasus is primarily influenced by its national security concerns (Golmohammadi and Azizi, 2022, p. 308). The 2020 ceasefire agreement between Yerevan and Baku with the active intervention of Russia and Turkey revealed Iran's weak stance in shaping the South Caucasian geopolitics. While Turkey and Russia actively proposed military-diplomatic initiatives to shape the outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (Isachenko, 2020), Iran was sidelined in the great game in the region. Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh of September 2023 came as a vivid manifestation of the strengthening of its geopolitical positions in the South Caucasus, as well as the consolidation of the Ankara-Baku strategic tandem.

This has made Tehran even more suspicious of any rival initiatives and intensified its threat perception towards alternative regional conflict resolution platforms.

A brief review of literature on Iran's regionalism in the South Caucasus and the Turkey-Iran regional rivalry shows a variety of approaches. While some researchers highlight the geopolitical and security drivers in Iran's regional activism (Dehghani Firuzabadi, 2010; Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023; Sinkaya, 2012), others emphasize the ideological nature of its engagement in the neighboring regions (Kamrava, 2016; Hakim and Jafari Valdani, 2016). Likewise, the existing literature largely explains the rivalry between Iran and Turkey in the region within the security paradigm, focusing on their

geopolitical competition (Özcan and Özdamar, 2010; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2017). Being the two largest stakeholders in the region, both Iran and Turkey have geopolitical ambitions that go far beyond their borders. Accordingly, Turkey-Iran competition in the South Caucasus has been subject to frequent shifts over decades, oscillating between pragmatic cooperation and uneasy rivalry. In recent years, scholars have also noted significant disagreement in their relations due to diverging ethno-political approaches (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2023; Avdaliani, 2022). Their contributions notwithstanding, these studies tend to offer a snapshot view of the Turkey-Iran rivalry in the South Caucasus but fall short of offering a comprehensive analysis of why and how Iran's perception towards Turkey's active regionalism evolved.

Instead, this article aims to explore the changing Iranian perceptions towards the South Caucasus during the period between the 2020 Azeri-Armenian war which had set the stage for major geopolitical shift in the region and Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh with a special emphasis on their impact on the developments in the South Caucasus and Turkey's assertive regional activism in the region. For the Iranian political establishment, Azerbaijan's moves to strengthen its geopolitical positions after the return of control over Nagorno-Karabakh are not motivated mainly by its newfound strength, but rather influenced meaningfully by Turkey's rising strategic interests and multi-vector policy in the South Caucasus and generally in Eurasia. In a bigger picture, Iran sees the underlying developments in the region as part of the Western powers' "geopolitical plot" to contain Iran and Russia, in which Turkey plays a strategic role (Velayati, 2023). The paper argues that, apart from Turkey's viable strategic vision and motives in expanding its engagement in the region, Iran's growing threat perception towards Turkey's uncertain intentions and the immediate consequences of such perception pose the risk of conflict between the two powers in the changing South Caucasian geopolitics.

### **WHEN DO STATES PERCEIVE THREATS?**

This theoretical section discusses how ideational and material factors interactively shape states' threat perception and foreign policy

choices. In an international conflict, states perceive a threat when they conclude that their security, territorial integrity, and economic interests are being threatened by others' active engagement. The multiplicity of drivers shaping a state's threat perception reflects the variety of conceptions espoused by international relations scholars. While the realist school of thought (Walt, 1987, p. 24) gives more weight to material factors and power imbalance in assessing threat perception, constructivists (Stein, 2013) highlight the role of ideational factors in states' insecurity perceptions.

There are also scholars who take both ideational and material forces into account (Cohen, 1978; Darwich, 2015). By examining six case studies of conflict relations between states, Raymond Cohen (1987, pp. 70-74) concludes that there are two very different dimensions of threats: active and passive, with the latter significantly influencing the parties' relations. For Cohen, a state's international vulnerability and domestic political considerations occasionally play a larger role in perceiving passive threats, especially in a crisis situation.

By distinguishing between threats and perceived threats, Cohen suggests an inclusive and multifaceted definition of threat perception: "Threat perception is the decisive intervening variable between action and reaction in an international crisis. When a threat is not perceived, even in the face of objective evidence, there can be no mobilization of defensive resources. Conversely, threat may be perceived, and countermeasures taken, even when the opponent possesses no malicious intent" (1987, p. 71). A state's threat perception, therefore, entails both active threats emanating from real sources of insecurity and passive threats stemming from predicted threats constructed through cognitive calculus.

May Darwich (2018), also looking at threat perception through the lens of realist assumptions, has developed a theoretical framework grounded on analytical eclecticism. Darwich argues that the relative power distribution in the quest for physical and ontological security is the key to understanding when and why states perceive threats (Ibid, pp. 57-64). In states' efforts to secure both their identity and physical security material and ideational factors interact. He assumes that

threat perception also has an internal dimension, which is generated by interaction among domestic groups and influenced by historical, cultural, and societal factors. Darwich's central argument is that two principal conditions are particularly relevant in shaping a state's threat perception: the clarity of the regional power distribution and the fluidity of the regime identity narrative.

Relative power distribution provides leaders with a clear structure to revisit their policy options to ensure the state's physical security, as the regional balance of power is shifting in favor of the rival parties. When ontological insecurity predominates over threat perception, a state prefers to redefine its identity narratives and force a new Self-Other distinction. This ontological insecurity dimension significantly influences the physical security dimension negatively, and therefore reinvents a state's narratives of friends and enemies in the region. For Darwich (2015, pp. 71-72), these two conditions are reinforcing each other when a state perceives that its physical security is being threatened and, accordingly, resorts to reframing its identity narratives to mobilize resources for enhancing measures to deal with the perceived threats.

### **A NEW REGIONAL (DIS)ORDER IN THE MAKING**

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 came as an exogenous shock that altered the regional balance of power and geopolitical realities in the region. The significant geopolitical shift has led to important changes in the South Caucasus' regional affairs: a new territorial conflict, the rise of regional powers, shifting alignments, marginalizing of the OSCE Minsk Group's role in the region's conflict resolution, declining Russian primacy, and competing regional configurations in an already fragmented region. The South Caucasian which has long been viewed as a "broken region" (Waal, 2012, p. 1710) has transformed from a sub-system organized around and against the Russian-led security arrangement into a transformational post-Russian space lacking homegrown integration and balancing mechanisms to contain regional conflicts. The rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus was underscored by Azerbaijan's lightning offensive

in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023, and very fast military and political reintegration of this region. Moreover, with Russia's decreased engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement as a result of its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, Russia's image as a mighty security provider was tarnished by its Caucasian neighbors (Laruelle, 2022). The Ukraine war has further stoked tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia, tempting Baku to take offensive military action to gain more territory. As the prospect of Russian-backed peace talks looked obscure, Armenian officials increasingly criticized Moscow's inability to support Armenia by enhancing its defense capabilities (Trevelyan, 2022).

The intersection of the Ukraine conflict with the transformation of the South Caucasus has at least two strategic consequences for the region. Firstly, since power politics will continue to dominate on the Ukraine front in the foreseeable future, Russia and the Western powers are reluctant (or unable) to build a stable security arrangement in the South Caucasus, (Sadiyev et al. 2021, pp. 284, 287). Secondly, the change in power politics in the region has led to a significant change in the strategic conceptions of regional powers and prompted them to strengthen their diplomatic-military leverages. In the absence of any viable integration project to develop conflict resolution mechanisms, the rising local powers' competition is becoming an additional source of instability in an already conflict-ridden region.

The interplay between the Karabakh conflict and the Ukraine war provides unprecedented room for outmaneuvering multiple aspirant regional powers with highly rival interests and further accelerating the end of the post-Soviet status quo in the South Caucasus. Russia's waning primacy in the region has benefited other stakeholders, primarily Turkey and China. While China is becoming a prominent provider of major infrastructure investments in the region, Turkey is gaining a new status as a potential peace broker in the South Caucasus to promote its geostrategic standing across the region (Laruelle, 2022).

“Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and its subsequently forced passiveness in the South Caucasus has created

a security vacuum in the region. The balance of power has shifted in favor of the Azerbaijani-Turkish nexus, creating a new geopolitical reality” (Ambrosetti, 2022, p. 18). The redistribution of power and breakdown of the status quo has increasingly become the source of concerns among regional stakeholders, namely Iran and Georgia, which are not engaged directly in the conflict but are not immune to its uncertain consequences. Although the changing power structure of the region has left more room to Georgia for outmaneuvering in its Caucasian foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia, yet without an efficient Western involvement, its concern is also growing over the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis.

Tehran is concerned about the emerging Ankara-Baku tandem as it might weaken Iran's geo-economic significance in the region's transit transportation, “while also ripping Iran off its exit to Armenia, leaving it encircled by the unified Turkish world” (Ambrosetti, 2022, pp.18-20). In a phone call with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on September 10, 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi made it clear that Tehran would not accept any geopolitical change in its border with Armenia, highlighting that Iran, as Armenia's powerful neighbor, was ready to play an effective role in preventing any changes in the region's geopolitics (Raisi, 2023). Although the recent regional openness might provide new momentum for Caucasians to reshape their own destinies, it may also provoke waves of regional tensions, as has become evident in Azerbaijan's latest actions aimed to finalize its reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Historically, competition has always been an integral characteristic of the South Caucasus. In recent years, this competition has become more regionalized, with Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran intensifying their efforts to design a new order in the region without involving extra-regional powers. However, there is a lack of consensus among these influential powers over the new geopolitical map of the region and conflict-resolution mechanisms. While Russia is cautious not to overestimate its primacy and approaches the changing regional geopolitics realistically through managing its relations with Iran and more so with Turkey, disagreements between Ankara and Tehran are



deepening and can spill into an open rivalry (Avdaliani, 2022, pp.77-82). However, it seems that the emerging geopolitical map of the South Caucasus will be shaped by security visions, geo-economic initiatives, and wider foreign policy priorities of Russia, Iran, Turkey, and to a certain degree, China.

Thus, the South Caucasus has turned into an increasingly dynamic and crowded space in which considering the region solely in terms of Russia-West competition is no longer an inclusive argument (Sadiyev et al., 2021, p. 289). Meanwhile, the multiplication of influential players also means that the region faces risks of being further fractured by local powers' proactive engagement and divergent alignments. The South Caucasus, already unsettled by the erosion of multilateralism on a global scale and increasingly interconnected with the Greater Middle East and the Black Sea's dynamics (Cornell, 2020), has now entered a period of competition with Russia, Turkey, Iran, and to some extent, China.

### **THE SPREAD OF IRAN-TURKEY RIVALRY TO THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

As a conflict-prone part of the post-Soviet space, the South Caucasus has increasingly gained significant strategic importance for both Turkey and Iran, where they aspire for a larger role and influence in reshaping the regional arrangements. The history of Turkey-Iran relations in the South Caucasus has arguably been formed by a wide array of geopolitical, geo-economic, and cultural drivers. Their long-standing rivalry in the region has been mainly influenced by the relative power distribution and is best defined by the traditional balance of power dynamics (Kamrava, 2016, p.18). After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, the center of geopolitical gravity has shifted away from great power politics towards regional power politics, in which Turkey and Iran are struggling for a pivotal role and, potentially, are even challenging Russia's primacy in the region. The geographical scope of Turkey-Iran geopolitical competition in the Greater Middle East has spread to the South Caucasus.

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey supplied Azerbaijan with advanced drones, trained Azeri forces, established

its military presence through a peacekeeping mission (along with Russians) in the conflict-ridden areas, and signed an inclusive treaty of strategic alliance, the so-called Susha Declaration (Avdaliani, 2023), to further extend its footprints in the changing regional landscape. Azerbaijan's military triumph and reclaiming of its territory, with Ankara's active diplomatic and military support, has altered the regional balance of power in Turkey's favor, causing Tehran's deep outrage. Ankara's growing influence and its increasing partnership with Baku in redrawing the geopolitical map of the South Caucasus has heightened Iran's uneasiness, pushing Tehran into managing the emerging regional power imbalance by siding with Armenia.

Unlike Turkey, Iran's influence and role in the South Caucasus has diminished significantly. Amid the redistribution of relative power in the region Tehran tried to readjust its regional approach, but its foreign policy still lacks any viable initiatives for active engagement. Several factors have been at play in constraining Iran's active role in the South Caucasus. Firstly, its approach towards the South Caucasus has long been passive and security-oriented (Koolae and Hafezian, 2010, p. 398). This has primarily been influenced by Washington's long-lasting hostility towards Tehran and the international sanctions imposed on Iran, which have turned the South Caucasus, like other neighboring regions, into a space of Iran's isolation (Atai, 2012, p. 127).<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, since 9/11, Iran's enduring ideological and security attachment to the Arab Middle East resulted in severe resource limitations for playing an active role in the South Caucasus. Thirdly, Iran's cultural and religious attachment to the Caucasians has not been used to create fertile ground for fostering bilateral relations. Instead, it has become a source of divergence and a factor contributing to the security dilemma, as evidenced by Baku's suspicion of the connections between Iran and Azerbaijan's Shiite clerics (Majidi and Zahmatkesh, 2013, p.132). The centrality of security and geopolitical considerations and the permanent focus on the Middle East have sidelined the South Caucasus from Iran's regional policy.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the reasons behind the lack of regionalism in Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus see: Golmohammadi and Azizi, 2022; Kamrava, 2016.

## **IRAN'S GEOPOLITICAL SECURITY CONCERNS**

In the post-Soviet era, Iran's regional policy in the South Caucasus has been mainly based on geopolitical and security considerations rather than ideological preferences (Atai, 2012, p.128). Contrary to what many expect (Özcan and Özdamar, 2010), Iran has never sought to export its Islamic Revolution to Shiite-majority Azerbaijan; instead it has embarked on a strategic partnership with Christian-majority Armenia (Avdaliani, 2022). Unlike its ideological activism in the Middle East, Iran has not approached the South Caucasus as part of its ideological strategic depth, rather it acted as a security-seeking actor. For Iran, the South Caucasus is a region with a complicated "security dilemma," caused by the involvement of extra-regional powers (Dehghani Firuzabadi, 2013, p. 218). Therefore, Iran has long been pursuing a balancing policy to deter threats posed by the extra-regional rivals' engagement in the region (Golmohammadi and Azizi, 2022, p. 302).

Over the past three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran's strategic preferences have been maintaining the status quo in regional conflicts, Nagorno-Karabakh in particular, and preventing the turning of the region into a launchpad for U.S.-, Turkey-, or Israel-initiated anti-Iranian operations. In order to contain and isolate Iran, the U.S. has made every effort to implement the policy of "everything without Iran" (Hakim and Valdani, 2016, p. 38). Over the past decade, the U.S. and Israel have deepened security ties with the Arab monarchies to show their shared enmity towards Iran in the Middle East. Tehran now worries that similar steps are being taken by the de-facto Israel-Turkey-Azerbaijan triangle in the South Caucasus. In an article for the Tasnim news agency, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior foreign-policy advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, has linked the recent developments in the South Caucasus with the U.S. plan to extend the containment of Iran to the north where the emerging Turkey-Azerbaijan axis plays a proxy role (Velayati, 2023).

The perceived threats of being encircled by the U.S.-led Arab-Israeli bloc in the south and a Turkic-Israeli-Azeri bloc in the north has forced Tehran to abandon its traditional policy of neutrality in the region (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2023). Iran has long viewed Russia's active

involvement in the South Caucasus as a strong strategic buffer against the U.S. and its allies' presence in the region. For Tehran, more Russian engagement in the region meant less U.S., Turkey, and Israel's activism. However, as Russia has had to reduce its security commitments in the South Caucasus in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Iran's calculus started to change, increasing threat perception of the regional security dynamics (Golmohammadi and Azizi, 2022, p. 294).

Given Baku's intensifying ties with Ankara and Tel-Aviv following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Tehran fears that Azerbaijan is turning into Turkey and Israel's proxy. Historically, Azerbaijan has always been at the epicenter of geopolitical disputes between Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus. Following Azerbaijan's military attacks on Armenian territory in September 2022 and subsequent provocative moves to open the Zanzegur corridor crossing the Armenia-Iran border, relations between Tehran and Baku worsened unprecedentedly.

Although Tehran has long supported the return of Nagorno-Karabakh territories to Azerbaijan, it has also reiterated that the Armenian sovereign territories are a red line that Azerbaijan must not cross. In the midst of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stressed that "all territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, which have been occupied by Armenia, must be liberated and returned to Azerbaijan" (Khamaneh, 2020). At the same time, he emphasized the need to ensure Azerbaijan's respect for the international borders with Armenia.

Iran views the dynamics in Nagorno-Karabakh through a wider Eurasian lens, considering that the developments in the South Caucasus, in the Greater Middle East, the Caspian Sea area, and Central Asia are interconnected (Amir Abdollahian, 2022). While the regionalization of the conflict resolution fits well into Tehran's security interests, Ankara's relative independence in regional affairs remains baffling for Tehran: a less NATO-dependent Turkey is in line with Iran's geostrategic preferences, yet Ankara's assertive multi-vector regionalism raises concerns in Tehran.

Over the last decade, Turkey's regional activism has been increasingly accompanied by the militarization of its foreign policy strategy influenced

by President Erdoğan's ideology: if the Turks aspire for a bigger role and influence, they must engage in developments militarily and operationally (Erdoğan, 2018). Turkey's military-diplomatic involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was, in fact, a reasonable continuation of its assertive activism in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, and the Eastern Mediterranean (Yeşiltaş, 2020, p. 289). While Turkey's independent regionalism has resulted in growing rifts with the U.S. and the EU, and estrangement from NATO, Turkish leaders have learnt how to leverage their regional achievements against their Western allies to manage Ankara's quest for strategic autonomy (Dalay, 2023).

Reliance on military force in its regional activities in the South Caucasus has made Turkey step away from the "no war, no peace" approach to settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Has, Kaleji and Markedonov, 2020, pp. 2-3). Over the recent years, guided by the "one nation, two states" concept, Ankara and Baku have deepened their strategic ties, which has become an extremely significant factor in power redistribution in the region. To project its resoluteness against the emboldened Turkey-Azerbaijan axis, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) held several large-scale military exercises on the northwestern side of the Aras River that makes up the common border between Azerbaijan and Iran (Tehran Times, 2022).

Geographically, Iran is more affected by developments in the South Caucasus than Turkey, Russia, and Georgia. Iran has an 800-kilometer-long border in the region, which leaves it vulnerable to potential local conflicts. It is also the only country adjacent to the conflict zone in Nagorno-Karabakh. This leaves Iran in a sensitive situation: the traditional balancing between Armenia and Azerbaijan seems to be ineffective as siding with Armenia in a bid to rebuild the power balance in the region is fraught with more escalation and uncertainty in Iran's fragile relations with Azerbaijan.

### **IRAN'S APPREHENSIONS ABOUT THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR**

Tensions between Tehran and Baku have further escalated since Azerbaijan overtly quested for a land connection to its exclave of Nakhchivan via Armenian territory. Tehran is worried that Azerbaijan

is seeking to cut Iran's border with Armenia by taking control of the Armenian frontier strip across Syunik. In response to Baku's plan to open an east-west Azeri corridor, the so-called Zangezur corridor, Iran's Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, in a ceremony dedicated to the opening of a consulate in Kopan, the center of Armenia's Syunik region, stressed that "Iran will not permit the blockage of its connection route with Armenia, and in order to secure that objective the Islamic Republic of Iran launched a war game in that region" (Amir Abdollahian, 2022). Immediately after Azerbaijan's military buildup along the border with Armenia in September 2023, Iran's President Raisi sent a military delegation to Baku, re-warning it that Tehran would resist any attempts to cut Iran's access to Armenia (Raisi, 2023).

Given the recent domestic unrest and rising international pressure on Iran for providing Russia with its drones in the Ukraine war, it seems that the Turkish and Azeri authorities have decided that it is the right time to roll Tehran back from its position in the Zangezur corridor (Mamedov, 2022). Apart from being an east-west Azeri corridor crossing the Armenian border, the Zangezur corridor is increasingly becoming an additional source of regional disagreement in Turkey-Iran relations. Undoubtedly, Azerbaijan could cross Iran's red lines in redrawing the borders to the extent that it is certain about Turkey's staunch support.

Iran views Turkey's desire to get connected to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia by the Zangezur corridor, which Tehran has named "NATO's Turanist corridor," as an attempt to disconnect Iran from Armenia. During his meeting with Erdoğan in July 2022, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei openly warned that "any plan that could block Iran's historical border with Armenia is unacceptable" (The Armenian Spectator, 2022). Generally speaking, Iran sees the initiation of a "Turkic corridor" extending from Central Asia to Turkey as a serious challenge to its national and regional interests.

Iran perceives multiple geopolitical threats over the Zangezur corridor similarly. Firstly, Iran would lose its border connection and transportation link with Armenia. It would also cut its direct access to Russia, making Iran's connection with the region dependent on the

political will of the Turkish-Azeri axis. Secondly, Iran's strategic value in North-South and East-West corridors, above all China's Belt and Road Initiative, would shrink significantly. Iran would also lose its logistic role in connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, which would weaken its strategic leverage over Baku (Tastekin, 2022). Thirdly, Iran worries that an east-west Azeri corridor rests heavily on the pan-Turkism aimed against Iran.

Finally, this corridor would expand NATO's footprint in the region, surrounding Iran with numerous local and extra-regional opponents. Given the new dynamics of regional developments in the Black Sea region after the Ukraine war is over, as well as the reviving of Ankara's strategic value in the Transatlantic alliance, Turkey's involvement would reflect NATO's footprint in the shifting South Caucasian geopolitics (Larsen, 2021). Turkey's rising influence in the region is seen by Iranians as benefiting NATO, which adds to Iran's feeling of uneasiness (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, p. 133).

Seemingly, the increasing tensions between Tehran and Baku are heightening the risk of another war in an already conflict-torn region. If Azerbaijan crosses Iran's red lines, specifically by establishing the Zangezur corridor, Tehran might not be as passive as it was during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Consequently, this would inevitably lead to Turkey's major intervention. Iranian leaders seem to be strongly determined to face their perceived threats in the South Caucasus. In his recent speech, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei sent a clear message to Baku. Addressing Baku's anti-Iranian moves, he said: "In the war with Saddam's regime, the Soviet Union and America, NATO and even some Muslim countries, including neighboring Turkey, were against us, but we won" (Khamanei, 2023). Threat perceptions in conflicts often have led to unintended consequences, so rising hostilities in the South Caucasus may escalate the long-lasting rivalries between Turkey and Iran.

## **CONTENTIONS OVER TRANSIT CORRIDORS**

The emerging Iran-Turkey uneasy rivalry in the South Caucasus also has geo-economic dimensions. Tehran views Turkey as its main geo-

economic rival in the South Caucasus, which seeks to sideline Iran from the transit and energy routes (Vatanka, 2022). Turkey aims to create a “path-dependency” situation in its relations with neighboring countries and regions. In this vein, Ankara tries to place itself at the epicenter of East-West energy and transit corridors (Arkman, 2019). Such a goal requires Turkey’s active presence on the ground, including in military terms, in the areas through which transit corridors from China to Europe are to pass. The South Caucasus is of crucial importance to realizing this plan, where Iran, given the alternative routes it can offer, is seen as an obstacle that needs to be bypassed. A hidden but very momentous factor is the role of the North-South and East-West international corridors, above all the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI can use the South Caucasus as a potential route to Europe. The BRI’s designated Northern Corridor (China-Central Asia-Iran-Turkey/Mediterranean) would pass through Iranian territory. But Turkey has tried to prevent the China-Central Asia route from passing through Iran, and sought to establish the Middle Corridor and the Caspian Corridor instead. The Middle Corridor is to connect China to Kazakhstan and then, through the ports of Aktau and Kurik in the northeast of the Caspian Sea, to Azerbaijan. It further stretches to Turkey through Georgia. If the southern route of Zangezur is launched through the Armenian province of Syunik, Turkey will be able to access the Caspian Sea directly through Azerbaijan’s territory, without the need to pass Georgia, and from there to Central Asia (Kenderdine and Bucsky, 2021). If the Turkey-Nakhchivan-Baku route is operationalized, Ankara would become a preferred partner for China in West Asia. This would further push Iran to the sidelines in the changing transit equations in the South Caucasus.

The war in Ukraine has further reinforced the geostrategic importance of the Middle Corridor as a third vector of the Eurasian transit route aiming to connect Asia and Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and Turkey (Eldem, 2023, p.2). In Turkey’s strategic vision, the Middle Corridor is a very attractive trade route, not only because it provides a direct connection to Eurasia but also because it decreases the dependence of other Turkic states on both Russia



and Iran. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the current war in Ukraine have changed the power dynamics in the region and opened up unprecedented opportunities for Turkey to strengthen its strategic partnerships with Turkic states in Central Asia and Azerbaijan using multilateral initiatives such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

Turkey's intensifying ties with the Turkic republics along with their desire to be less reliant on Russia and China provide Turkey with better leverage to enhance its footprint in the East-West corridor equations. Turkey also shares a common geo-economic interest with the EU in building the Middle Corridor, as the EU seeks to diversify its energy supplies and strengthen the resilience of its supply chains. Needless to say, the establishment of the Middle Corridor would reduce Russia, Iran, and China's influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, while increasing Turkey and the EU's role in shaping Eurasian geoeconomics (Eldem, 2023, pp. 3, 6).

Tehran's growing concerns over Turkey-backed transit initiatives, Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor in particular, have prompted Iran to activate the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Armenian territory. The INSTC is a multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road routes that connect the Persian Gulf and Indian ports with Russia. While the railway connection remains incomplete, Tehran and Russia, together with India and more recently with Armenia, started to take practical steps to implement the INSTC. Apart from its multiple geo-economic advantages, the Ukraine conflict and subsequent sanctions imposed against Russia by the collective West are the strongest driver in advancing the INSTC, as Moscow seeks to find alternative routes to the markets in neighboring regions and elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite the overall practical steps taken by Iran and Russia, obstacles still persist for the North-South Corridor.

### **WORRIES OVER PAN-TURKISM**

Iran also perceives the growing threat emanating from Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations across its Azeri-populated northern borders. In his speech at a victory parade in Baku marking Azerbaijan's victory in the

Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkish President Erdoğan infuriated Iranians by reciting a nationalist folkloric poem about Azeri-speaking people in Azerbaijan and Iran separated by the Aras River. It is considered a pan-Turkic message calling for the unification of all Turks, including Azeris living in Iran (Motamedi, 2020). The poem recited by Erdoğan caused a political storm among Iranians and was perceived by Tehran as an offensive act against its territorial integrity. In response, Iran's then Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, referring to President Erdoğan: "Didn't he realize that he was undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan?... No one can talk about our beloved Azerbaijan" (Zarif, 2020). For Tehran, Azerbaijan and Turkey's aspirations to play the pan-Turkic card against Iran is heavily supported by Israel. Tehran increasingly fears that the recent geopolitical gains of the Azeri-Turkish axis in the region could turn into ethnopolitical calls for a "Greater Azerbaijan" (Vatanka, 2022).

Iran sees Turkey's pan-Turkic moves in the South Caucasus as part of Ankara's grand strategy of revitalizing the "Turkic world" bloc. Ankara's recent attempts to rebuild the Organization of Turkic States, which brings Turkey together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, have also heightened uneasiness in Tehran. Iran fears that Turkey's growing geopolitical influence among Turks can destabilize Iran's Azeri-populated northern provinces and threatens its territorial integrity (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2023, p. 134). Iran also worries that, with a newly found strength thanks to Turkish-Israeli support, Azerbaijan could fall into a miscalculated "Balkanization trap" against Iran (Khamanei, 2023).

Thanks to its stronger standing after the 2020 victory, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has adopted an unprecedented offensive tone with regard to Iran. At the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, by indirectly referring to the Azeri minority in Iran he said: "The Turkic world does not consist of independent Turkic states only, its geographical boundaries are broader" (Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2022). In fact, in his recent remarks Aliyev openly threatened Iran's territorial integrity, stating: "We will do everything to protect Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, including Azeris living in Iran. They are

a part of our nation” (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2023). Nevertheless, Iran does not perceive Baku’s irredentist claims as immediate physical insecurity, rather it is strongly apprehensive of the growing pan-Turkic sentiments that are leveraged by its regional rivals—Turkey and Israel.

A bigger fear for Tehran is that Azerbaijan may be used as a launch pad by hostile powers to expand their influence into northern Iran. The rise of Turkism in Erdoğan’s active regionalism in Central Eurasia and its growing influence inside Azerbaijan have been increasingly unsettling Iranians, who perceive him as an ardent protector of the entire Turkic world, including Azeris on both sides of the Aras River.

\* \* \*

As the regional disagreements are deepening between Tehran and Ankara, the geopolitical areas of their competition are expanding. Over the last decade, the geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus has been underlined in Turkey’s Eurasia policy aimed to reach Central Asia by building an arc of influence along Iran’s northern border. This arc of influence could turn the region into a buffer zone for Turkey, allowing it to counterbalance Iran and Russia in the neighboring regions and get effective negotiation leverage in its relations with Tehran and Moscow. By enjoying a much more practical role in the region than its Western allies, Turkey is increasingly seeking to place itself at the epicenter of China’s BRI projects and initiate alternative geo-economic mechanisms to reduce the region’s dependence on Russia and Iran. In this vein, Turkey shares significant strategic interests with the West, which may provide the basis for a rapprochement between Ankara and the West and a revival of Turkey’s traditional role in the Transatlantic bloc.

Following his reelection in 2023, President Erdoğan appointed Hakan Fidan as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Remarkably, Fidan is an influential former spymaster and one of the leading architects of Turkey’s recent geopolitical activism in the Middle East and South Caucasus. His appointment may signify that in the next five years

Erdoğan will prioritize hot issues in Turkish foreign policy, like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus (Dalay, 2023), that is, regions where Iran and Turkey have disagreements. Soon after his reelection as president, Erdoğan made his first overseas trip to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Azerbaijan. In a meeting with his Azeri counterpart, Erdoğan stated that “the Zangezur corridor is not a problem with Armenia but with Iran. Iran’s behavior upsets both Azerbaijan and us” (Watch, 2023). This firm stance in siding with Azerbaijan is seen by Tehran as Turkey’s consistent effort to push for a bigger role in the South Caucasus.

The strengthening of Ankara-Baku relations will force Tehran to provide more support to Armenia in order to stand against the implementation of the Zangezur corridor project. While Iran and Turkey know how to manage their geopolitical differences, they are increasingly engaged in a deeper proxy competition in the South Caucasus. Given the redistribution of power in favor of the Turkish-Azeri axis, Iran’s feeling of physical and ontological insecurity may lead to unintended countermeasures, regardless of whether Turkey has any anti-Iranian malicious intent. Thus, the South Caucasus is increasingly becoming an additional source of geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Turkey, which is expected to intensify further as Turkey’s influence grows and Iran’s perception of geopolitical insecurities increases.

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