

## Geopolitical Interests of Iran in South Caucasus and Georgian-Iranian Relations

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### Abstract

The paper explores geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards South Caucasus Region. To state more specifically, it provides analyzes about foreign policy priorities of Iran, geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus region, main obstacles and perspectives of cooperation development between Iran and South Caucasian states and main political, economic and legal aspects of Iran-Georgia relations.

**Keywords:** Caucasus, cooperation, geopolitics, Iran, location

### Introduction

Collapse of the Soviet Union was the most important upheaval of the second half of the 20th century that opened up new dimensions for security and national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the end of the 1980's and early 90's three important events helped Iran to develop relations with its South Caucasian neighbours. Simultaneously, ending of the "cold war" and the rise of New Independent States (NIS) changed Iran's geopolitical attitude towards the North. Besides, new security threats were just rising, such as conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, escalation of internal territorial conflicts in Georgia. While political processes at Iran's Western border limited its ability to conduct active policies, situation at its northern border opened up not only opportunities but threats. Under enormous pressure from its young population to achieve economic progress, and in result of increasing instability in the region, Iran drew its attention to its northern neighbours.

One of the main reasons of increased interests of Iran towards the South Caucasian region was related with the fact, that Caucasus was historically known to be a crossroads of trade from the Mediterranean to China and from the Baltic Sea to the Arabic world. Due to its strategic position, Caucasus was regularly the reason for territorial conflicts between, inter alia, the Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires. Regarding political, strategic and economic importance of the South Caucasus, existence of important oil and gas reserves has been the ground for involvement into this area by the following states and organizations, such as Iran, Turkey, Russia, the USA, NATO and the EU.

### Foreign Policy Priorities of Iran

Iran, officially the Islamic Republic of Iran, is located in the Southern and Western parts of Asia. The name "Iran", means "Land of the Aryans" which in Persian, has been in use natively since the Sassanian era. Regardless very old origins of this word, it became internationally used only since 1935. The country was known for the international society as Persia before. "Persia" and "Iran" are both used interchangeably in cultural contexts; however, title "Iran" is officially used in political contexts.

According to the size of the territory, Iran is the 18th-largest country in the world, with the area of 1,648,195 km<sup>2</sup> (636,372 sq mi) (Encyclopedia Britanica, 2012) with approximately 79 million people living in it. This country is geopolitically significant, as it is located in the Middle East and Central Eurasia. Iran is bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to the north. As Iran is a littoral state of the Caspian Sea, which is an inland sea, Kazakhstan and Russia are also Iran's neighbors to the North. From the Eastern side, the neighbors of Iran are Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the south it is washed by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, on the West country is bordered by Iraq and on the northwest by Turkey. Tehran is the capital, the largest city and political, cultural, commercial and industrial center of the nation. Iran is a regional power; it has an important position in international energy security and world economy as a result of its large reserves of petroleum and natural gas. To be more specific, 9% of the oil and 16% of the gas are coming from the Iranian reserves. Accordingly, Iran has the second largest proven natural gas reserves in the world and the fourth largest proven petro-

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leum reserves (Chitadze, 2011. P. 399).

Iran, with its long history, is home to one of the world's oldest civilizations. The first dynasty on the modern territory of Iran was formed in 2800 BC under Elamite kingdom. The Iranian Medes managed to unify Iran into an empire in 625 BC. They were succeeded by the Persian Achaemenid Empire, the Hellenic Seleucid Empire and two subsequent Iranian empires, the Parthians and the Sassanids, before the Muslim conquest in 651 AD. Iranian post-Islamic rulers expanded the Persian language and culture throughout the Iranian plateau. Early Iranian dynasties which re-asserted Iranian independence included the Tahirids, Saffarids, Samanids and Buyids.

Persian literature, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, art and other sciences became major elements of the Muslim and the World civilization. Iranian people reserved their identity despite being governed by foreigners in the ensuing centuries. Due to having the oldest roots, Persian culture was also adopted by the Ghaznavids, Seljuk, Ilkhanid and Timurid rulers. In 1501 emergence of the Safavid dynasty which promoted Twelver Shia Islam as an official religion of their empire, marked one of the most important turning points in Iranian and Muslim history. The Persian Constitutional Revolution established the nation's first parliament in 1906, within a constitutional monarchy. Monarchy in the country was abolished on April 1st, 1979 as a result of Islamic Revolution.

Iran is one of the founders of the UN, NAM, OIC and OPEC. Modern political system of Iran, based on the 1979 constitution, comprises several intricately connected governing bodies. The highest state authority is the Supreme Leader. Shia Islam is an official religion and Persian is an official language.

**Foreign policy of Iran** refers to inter-governmental relationships between Iran and other countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran accords priority to its relations with other states in the region and with the rest of the world. This includes an involvement into activity of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), support of the Non-Aligned Movement and Cooperation with the states of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC). Concerning the problems on nuclear program of Iran, country is seeking new allies around the world due to its increasing political and economic isolation in the international community. This isolation is reflected in various economic sanctions, first of all from the US side and the EU oil embargo.

Iran is pursuing a policy of cooperation development with the countries of neighboring regions - Caucasus and Central Asia. Accordingly it increases political and economic influence in both strategically important regions.

## **Geopolitical Location and Significance of South Caucasus Region**

### ***Location between East and West / North and South:***

Speaking in terms of Geography, South Caucasus encompasses Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. These are three newly independent states with a short history of political independence and constitutional governance, though they have ancient history of statehood and traditions. We will briefly review each of them separately but emphasize their importance as members of one region.

Caucasus region, encompassing the North Caucasus and South Caucasus as well as the Caspian Basin, is one of the most coveted pieces of territory in the World, thanks to its geo-strategic location between Central Asian and European territories. The land corridor of South Caucasus fosters contact or confrontation between Russia on the North and Turkey and Iran on the South. On this same axis, various forms of Christianity face Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam. Furthermore, the fact that the area possesses large oil and gas deposits can lead to further cooperation and/or competition and eventually a conflict between regional powers and their external allies. These conditions make this area unified, strategic and security complex as well as an embodiment of conflict (Chitadze, 2007. P. 8).

On the one hand, the region remains a matter of profound interest of Turkey and Iran. On the other hand it remains a vital concern of Russia, which is sensitive to external influence or the possibility of actual physical threats to the region. Thus there are areas of possible clash of interests, which, in case of indifference, could easily develop into multilateral armed conflicts.

Even a rudimentary study of Caucasian history reveals that the region has been designated for peoples, nations and languages, still suffering from the aftermaths of earlier Tsarist conquests and colonial rule. It remains as a region of implication of sudden independence and formation of ethnic identities.

Caucasus not only serves as a meeting place between East and West, namely Central Asia and Europe, to some extent epitomized by the concepts - "New Silk Road" and the "Europe-Asia Transportation Corridor"- TRACECA, but it plays more important role in terms of security.

Security dimension connected to development of the region's energy potential should not be underestimated. The long-overdue resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, instability in the South Caucasus, with secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and unresolved Chechen conflict add significant risk-associated costs to investment plans for the region. They are sources of instability that pose security risks to all players. Therefore, the ground for cooperative politics exists and, in that sense, European efforts to enhance regional cooperation could turn out to be productive. The region remains one of the

most complex territories in the post-Soviet area, and comprises three heavily disputed areas – Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

In addition to various threats of conflict in the Caucasus region, since the exploration of the Caspian Basin has revealed significant deposits of oil and gas, new strains have emerged on regional stability due to conflicting interests of a number of regional and extra-regional powers. Perspective of transferring large-scale oil and gas deposits to industrialized Western Europe raises hopes of regional economic development and prosperity. However, “the belief that whoever secures the major share of the oil pipeline transit will gain enhanced influence not only throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia but also on a global scale”, highlights concerns about the future stability of the region. Thus, in terms of regional geopolitics, “control of the Caspian Sea, or even freedom of movement on it, represents a prize of considerable value”. Therefore, competition for influence among regional states, with its ideological, religious and political dimensions, lowers the threshold of possible armed conflicts erupting in the region.

Caucasus has always been a tasty morsel for many West European states which have never bordered the region. Everyone is aware of the significant geopolitical location of the Caucasus not only for the states bordering with it but also for the powers which currently assumed the rights to act the Justice of the Peace, to share and rule. Some analysts voice opinion that the Caucasus attracts the United States only by prospects of wide energy corridor. If we analyze the U.S. external political activity it will coincide with the functioning or planned routes of hydrocarbon transportation.

The Caucasus was one of the most affected regions by the reshuffle in world politics after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The strategic position of the South Caucasus between Europe and Central Asia gained further attention during the war in Afghanistan since American military and political involvement in the region has gradually increased. It has a potential to stabilize the region, but America’s uncertain objectives in the region add unpredictability to regional politics in general.

### **Iranian Factor in the Geopolitics of South Caucasus**

Historically, Caucasus represented one of the main directions of the foreign policy of Iran. In the beginning of the 19th century, after several losses in the wars against Russian empire, Caucasus was far from the country, which was considered to be under its domination for a long time. Tsarism, later Bolshevik Russia, has managed to separate Iran from the Caucasus affairs.

In 1991, collapse of USSR has opened the new perspectives to the Iran’s power in Caucasus. Everybody expected, that it would start the serious fight between Iran

and its historically geopolitical rival Turkey to gain influence over the Caucasus and Central Asia. De-facto, it had to be the confrontation between two “models” – Turkish secular, oriented to the West and Islamic, antiwestern orientations (Chitadze, 2011. P. 617).

Undisputedly Caucasus is strategically important for both – Iran and Turkey. It is also clear, that for Turkey and Iran Azerbaijan plays one of the most important roles in terms of increased political power in the Region. From ethno-linguistical and cultural point of view Turkey is tightly connected with Azerbaijan. As for similarities between Iran and Azerbaijan, it is connected with the religion, too, because, majority of Persians like Azerbaijanians are Muslim Shiites. Besides, Persian culture has seriously affected Azerbaijan during the centuries. As it is known, modern territory of Azerbaijan was part of the Persian Empire for a long time.

As to the period after the ending of the “Cold War”, Azerbaijan and Iran established diplomatic relations and started intensive trade relations between the two states. However, Azerbaijan signed oil contracts with the Western leading oil companies on September 20, 1994, which is known as “Century Contract”, but after the pressure from the US side, Azerbaijan finally refused 5% share to Iran at the International Oil Consortium. Accordingly, Iranian State Oil company was refused to explore the oil and gas reserves on the territory of Azerbaijan, including Caspian Sea sector.

Such careful attitude of Tehran towards Baku is especially caused by so-called “South Azerbaijan” factor – more than 20 million of ethnic Azerbaijanians (more than twice than in Azerbaijan itself) are settled in the territory of North Iran. Iran considers this factor as a potential threat to its national security. They are afraid in Tehran, that possible escalation of separatism and nationalism in Northern Iran can pose a serious threat to the unity of the Iranian statehood.

Other factors, which complicates the relations between two countries is the fact, that Azerbaijan has warm relations with the west, and due to it, official Tehran tries to develop cooperation with Russia and Armenia by importing of the Russian military weapons and construction of gas pipeline towards Armenia. Except for the economic interests, the aim of the Russian-Iranian alliance is decreasing the influence of Turkey and USA in the Region (Moshenin M.M., 2001, p.173).

In terms of Armenia’s geopolitical position, cooperation with Iran becomes a chance to get out of the blockade in which Armenia has sandwiched. As far as most of the Iran’s export heads to Europe the Transcaucasian countries can take advantage of new alternative routes from Iran to Europe. Through cooperation with Armenia, Iran is seeking its way out of isolation. Such convergence is not contrary to Russia’s strategy in the region that has become a

significant factor for Turkish expansionism.

As the largest foreign trade partner of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran is interested in the stability of their political systems in order to become long-term partners.

A very serious problem that could destabilize the situation in the Caucasus is economic rivalry, unfolding mainly over control of oil-bearing areas of the region and its transport corridors.

The aim of Iran in the Caucasus is to provide a stake in Caspian oil and gas resources and become the main transit country. That is why Iran is interested in economic and political stability in the Caucasus and the legitimization of local regimes in order to have long-term partners, because all Transcaucasian states represent profitable and underdeveloped markets for export of Iranian oil.

According to some analysts, Iran is very much interested in stability of the South Caucasus. The main reason is that de-facto Iran became isolated from a political and economic point of view after Washington declared Iran as "Axis of Evil" in 2002. In its complicated situation, Iran applied for support to its Northern neighbors. At the end of March, 2003, former Minister for Foreign Affairs Kemal Kharaz conducted the business meetings in the three South Caucasian (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia) states. According to an official version, the main reason for consultations was preparation for the visit in South Caucasus of the former President of the Islamic Republic Mohammad Khatami. However, within the negotiation process with Iranian diplomat, regional security issues were dominated. After making official announcement we can assume, that main purpose of this meeting was the idea of creating the regional security system by the format 3+3 (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia + Russia, Turkey, Iran). According to Iranian Minister, implementation of this idea can become a direct way for the stability in Caucasus, which would promote resolution of the existed conflicts by peaceful means.

The idea of the Iranian diplomat concerning formation of the Regional security system was expressed in the South Caucasus with less enthusiasm. It can be assumed, that Tehran's attempt to play key role in processes in South Caucasus, has been failed. Iran failed to consider that South Caucasian Republics would not "dare" to be allied with Iran in joint regional security system, because they have been in the US sphere of influence for a long time.

It is known, that for a long time Washington has been expressing its concerns about Iran's working on nuclear program (together with Russia). Furthermore, USA accuses Iran of sponsoring international terrorism. The situation was complicated after diplomatic official Tehran categorically refused to stop the uranium enrichment program despite attempts from the International community.

All information above clearly shows, that due to the US factor, position of Iran in the Region will be complicated, which will increase the tension in the Black Sea-Caspian

Region for its part. Due to continuation of the pressure over the Iran by US side, agitation is expressed in Erevan. It is natural, Iran is a strategic partner of Armenia, because two countries have common land border. At the same time, the border between Turkey and Armenia is blocked and the country is in state of war with Azerbaijan. Furthermore, it is differed from the foreign policy and national security priorities of Georgia and Armenia.

### **Iran-Georgian Relations**

In order to have a better grasp on Iran's foreign policy approach towards the South Caucasus, Tehran's relations with Georgia should be analyzed.

As it is known from the history, due to the convenient geographic location of Georgia, Iran always had interests towards this South Caucasian country. Gaining control over Georgia was giving an opportunity to Persia to establish contacts with Muslim Khanates of North Caucasus, also in achieving influence on the country, which is located in the crossroads of Europe and Asia and where main trade links were crossing the territory of different Georgian Kingdoms and Principalities.

In 1801, after annexation of Georgia by Russian Empire, Iran lost control over Georgia. Regarding modern period, for Iran it is not acceptable that Georgia participated in Caspian energy projects and strengthened relations with Turkey and the West. At the same time representatives of the Iranian authorities realistically evaluate the existed situation towards Georgia and try to keep normal relations with Georgia. One of the main reasons is using Georgian territory and especially Georgian ports to export Iranian products and accordingly to be involved in the implementation of foreign-trade operations. Very soon after restoration of the national independence, in 1995, former President of Iran Hasemi Rafsanjani visited Georgia with three-day visit, when after the meeting with the former President of Georgia he travelled to West Georgia to observe functioning of Batumi and Poti ports at the Black Sea coast. After the visit, Mr. Rafsanjani Iran has pointed out the importance of those ports for economics of Iran.

Later, before and after "Rose Revolution" period, several important official meetings were held between high-rank representatives of Georgia and Iran. It clearly shows, that despite the different foreign political orientation and no common borders, both countries are interested in strengthening bilateral relations.

The war between Georgia and Russia has opened a new chapter of bilateral cooperation. Georgia is desperately seeking a way out of its political dependence on Russia and Iran can play a positive role in this matter. For example, in 2006 Moscow imposed heavy economic sanctions against Georgia, it cut transport links and announced that it would increase current gas price for Georgia from \$110 to \$230

per 1,000 cubic meters (Chitadze, 2011, p.620). After this fact, it became clear, why a closer relationship with Iran is so important to Georgia. By the decision of the authorities in Tehran, in January 2006 import of natural gas from Iran to Georgia was implemented. As one of the regional powers in the South Caucasus, Iran has the potential to supply Georgia with gas and to be an alternative energy importer for Georgia. Stronger economic ties with the Islamic Republic could help Tbilisi to diversify its trade. Tehran is eager to find a new customer for energy exports and to expand its economic ties. Following the conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi, the latter announced that gas from Iran and Azerbaijan could totally replace Russian gas (today Georgia imports gas only from Azerbaijan). Moreover Iran and Georgia agreed to swap electricity via Armenia.

It is interesting to pay attention to the fact, that in October 2008, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iran visited Georgia. Despite the fact, that for mass-media main topics of negotiation are not familiar, it can be assumed, that possibility of joining Iran to stability pact in South Caucasus has been considered.

#### ***Official Meetings between Georgian and Iranian Officials after “Rose Revolution” Period***

When we discuss about the normal partnership relations between Georgia and Iran, it is necessary to have a word about official meetings between high-rank officials of two countries. We should mention the following visits among them. From Georgian side:

July 6-9, 2004 - Visit of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili to the Islamic Republic of Iran;

September 19, 2006 - Meeting between the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili and the President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the framework of Annual Session of the General Assembly of UN;

October 28-29, 2008 - Visit of the Chairman of Friendship Group with Iran in Georgian Parliament Nugzar Tsiklauri to the Islamic Republic of Iran

March 2-7, 2009 - Visit of the Minister of Reintegration of Georgia Temur Iakobashvili to the Islamic Republic of Iran;

January 18, 2010 - Official visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia Gregory Vashadze to the Islamic Republic of Iran;

From the Islamic Republic of Iran:

January 20, 2008 - Visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Manouchehr Mottaki to Georgia;

September 17, 2008 - Visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Manouchehr Mottaki to Georgia;

May 19-22, 2010 - Visit of the Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran Ramin Mehmanparast to Georgia. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2012, Georgia-Iran Relations)

#### ***Legal Framework of the Bilateral Cooperation***

Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have signed 47 bilateral documents, including:

1. Air Transport Agreement between the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the government of the Republic of Georgia;

2. Agreement on Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments between the government of the Republic of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran;

3. Agreement between the government of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the Avoidance of double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion regarding taxes on income and capital;

4. Agreed Minutes on Economic, Trade, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Republic of Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran;

5. Agreement on Trade Cooperation between the government of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### ***Economic Aspects of Cooperation between Georgia and Iran***

It could be fruitful to emphasize that after abolition of the visa regime between Iran and Georgia in 2010, Iranian investments in Georgian economy have been increased in the fields of property, trade, tourism, transport and restaurant businesses and different joint ventures have been grounded. In the first quarter of 2012, there have been implemented the investments on 247 thousand US dollars. According to the National Statistical Service of Georgia, in the first quarter of 2012, about 13600 citizens of Iran visited Georgia, which prevails the dates of the previous years by 91% (Iranian Investments in Georgia, 2012, p.9).

According to official statistics, volume of the trade between Georgia and Iran in January – April 2012 prevailed 22,6 million dollars. Export from Georgia – 1,6 million dollars, import – 21 million dollars. In 2011, volume of Export from Georgia was 16,2 million US dollars, import – 64,8 million US dollars. (Iranian Investments in Georgia, 2012, p.9)

We should point out, that during the meeting of Georgian and Iranian trade chambers, representatives of the Iranian companies have expressed their interest for making investments in agricultural, banking, transport and manufacturing sectors of Georgia.

## Conclusion

Speaking about Iran's interests in the Caucasus, Tehran has repeatedly offered its services in settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Iran is willing to act as a mediator in this area. Iran maintains quite cautious policy which is non-hostile towards Armenia. This could be expected in terms of good-neighborly Iranian- Azerbaijani relations. Moreover, Iran trades with Armenia, supplying gas and building railways together with transport monopoly Russian Railways.

Iran and Georgia have had relations for centuries. Georgia, throughout its history, has several times been a part of the Persian Empire, specifically under the Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanid, and Safavid dynasties. Accordingly there has been a lot of political and cultural exchange, and Georgia is often considered as a part of Greater Iran. Iran (Persia) and Georgia, or the Georgian tribes, have had relations in different forms, beginning with trade in the Achaemenid era. The relationship became more complex as the Safavids took power in Iran and attempted to maintain Iranian control of the Georgian kingdoms. This continued until the 19th century when Russia took the Caucasus from the Qajars. In the early 20th century, Iran-Georgia relations were merged into Iran-Soviet relations. Since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, the two nations have cooperated in many fields including energy, transport, trade, education, and science. Iran is one of Georgia's most important trading partners and the Intergovernmental Joint Economic Commission is functioning between the two countries.

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