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Iran's growing influence in the South Caucasus

The war in Ukraine has led Moscow to turn away from the South Caucasus, throwing off the delicate geo-political balance in favour of Iran

In November of last year, the Azerbaijani special forces launched military drills near the Iranian border. This was followed by Ilham Aliyev's speech at the summit of the leaders of the Organisation of Turkic States in Samarkand, where he called upon the states present to pay attention to the rights of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran who are 'deprived of the opportunity to study in their mother tongue.' Adding fuel to his speech, Aliyev declared that Baku will continue its efforts to ensure that those 'separated from Azerbaijan remain loyal to the ideas of Azerbaijanism and never cut ties with their historical homeland.'

A few days later, at an international conference in Baku, he brought the issue up again, this time openly saying, 'we will do our best to protect the Azerbaijanis living in Iran,' whom he called 'part of our people.' It is worth noting that the topic of 'Southern Azerbaijan' nowadays occupies a prominent place in Azerbaijani media. Even the Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned the Azerbaijani ambassador over 'unfriendly statements' by Azerbaijani officials and 'misinformation about Iran' in the country's media.

In December, Azerbaijan held another large drill along the Iranian border, this time with Turkey, codenamed 'Brother's Fist', which was yet another irritant for Tehran.

Russia's growing reliance on Iran

This assertiveness could be understood as a response to the recent shift in the Iranian security apparatus in regard to Azerbaijan. Following the Second Karabakh War, Iran started to see its northern neighbour as a direct security threat, shifting away from a previous approach based on the 'Muslim/Shiite neighbourhood' principle.
The growing Israeli activities and Azerbaijan's threats to establish the

'Zangezur Corridor' by force resulted in relations with Baku being delegated to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the Foreign Ministry. Iran's military exercises in 2021 and 2022 near the Azerbaijani border should be evaluated in this context. This explanation makes even more sense in light of claims that Iran could transition from a theocracy to a military dictatorship following the death of the Supreme Leader.

Nevertheless, these latest incidents show Baku doesn't hesitate to risk, at least for now, escalating tensions with its southern neighbour. Azerbaijani decisionmakers think Turkey's and Israel's support will be a sufficient deterrent against Iran, which is bogged down in internal and external problems. However, there might be one factor that they overlooked when determining the best policy vis-à-vis Tehran: Russia's growing reliance on Iran.

Iran has viewed Russia as a colonial power in the region and a counterbalance to Iran.

The relations between the two countries have flourished since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky said in October that Russia had ordered over 2,400 Iranian-made attack drones to terrorise Ukrainian cities. As Russia's aggression in Ukraine continues, the quantity and quality of weapons purchased from Iran will most likely change. Still, Tehran is a reliable partner for Moscow to circumvent tough Western sanctions.

Historically, Iran has viewed Russia as a colonial power in the region and a counterbalance to Iran. But now, the paradigm shift compels Moscow to make some concessions to Iran, including in its backyard, the South Caucasus. Russia is turning a blind eye to Tehran's activities, increasing Iran's leverage in the new geopolitical configuration. In a meeting with Iran's Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian in 2021, his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov made it clear that Moscow was opposed to Tehran's military exercises along the Azerbaijani border. It is hard to imagine that Lavrov can say the same nowadays.

In this regard, the IRGC's large-scale war games on 17 October 2022, have been by far the loudest manifestation of shifting dynamics in Iran's favour. Baku was disappointed by Russia's lack of reaction to the drills, particularly to Iran's elite forces' practice crossings of the Aras River that forms the border between two states.

An open vacuum

Iran acts as a guarantor of geopolitical borders in the region with respect to Armenia. Tehran's main concern stems from the 'Zangezur Corridor' project, which is promoted by Baku to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhcivan exclave and then further to Turkey via Armenia's Syunik Province. Moscow supports the project since it will connect Russia with Turkey and be guarded by Russian military personnel. Meanwhile, Iran views the corridor as detrimental to its interests, fearing that it will cut off the transit route to Armenia. It seems Iran's power is sufficient, at least for now, to deter Baku from putting enough pressure on Armenia to agree to the opening of the corridor. Not surprisingly, the focus of Azerbaijan's political agenda has shifted from the 'Zangezur Corridor' to the 'Lachin Corridor' in recent months. In return, Tehran, which is satisfied with the current status quo, doesn't comment on Azerbaijan's blockade over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, unlike western countries.

However, if Azerbaijan continues its anti-Iran activities, especially its irredentist aspirations, tensions between the two countries will reach new heights. In this case, unlike Russia, Turkey's presence will not be sufficient to deter Iran since the power balance between the two is not asymmetrical. The US could fill the vacuum left by Moscow's partial withdrawal, but Baku is not a formal ally of Washington. Besides, bringing the US into the region does not appear to be an option for Azerbaijan, which is cosying up to Russia.

Azerbaijan doesn't have influence over Iran's large Azerbaijani-speaking minority to challenge its northern neighbour from inside. Even during the most recent nationwide unrest, protests among Iranian Azerbaijanis did not take on overtly ethnic connotations. On the contrary, Iranian authorities use such irritants to consolidate an already polarised society against an 'external enemy' and increase its deterrence vis-à-vis Baku. It may strengthen military and political support for Armenia, reducing Azerbaijan's leverage over the latter. While the war in Ukraine promises new waves of tension for the region, Baku should make its cost-benefit analysis carefully before further antagonising Iran.



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