

THE IMPLICATIONS OF AZERBAI- JAN'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP ON IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY

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Introduction

Iran is located in a turbulent regional environment. Its land borders are surrounded by seven countries and maritime borders by eight countries. Its diverse surroundings provide Iran with a unique geopolitical position and great opportunities; however, there are risks. Iran is one of the countries in the region that faces the most direct and indirect confrontations. It always faces threats that impact its national security. One of these threats comes from Azerbaijan, a state in the Caucasus. This threat is fueled by a historical factor; large parts of Azerbaijan belonged to Iran's territories until the 1990s. Regarding geopolitical threats, Azerbaijan had been under the former Soviet Union's control and later forged strategic partnerships with major and regional countries hostile to Iran.

Iran believes that Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships with major powers such as Russia and the United States and regional powers such as Turkey and Israel, will change the balance of power in the South Caucasus, threatening its national interests and security. These developments raise questions related to how such partnerships and the extent of their impact on Iran's national security and interests. Given, their ramifications, it is expected that Iran will enter into a confrontation with Azerbaijan and its allies.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on the school of realism in international relations, specifically on the balance-of-threat theory; this theory is established on the assumption that states work to achieve a balance against the most threatening actors (states) not the most powerful ones. According to this theory, states take into account four factors or sources when confronting any threat that jeopardizes their security or interests; namely the overall strength of the state (the sources of threats), geographical proximity, offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions. As for the methodology, the study uses the case-study approach. It focuses on the implications of Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships on Iran's national security, complex relations, and challenging calculations in the volatile South Caucasus, where conflicts could erupt at any time because of the rivalry among regional and international powers and their interactions in the context of global balance of power calculations.

The study discusses four main topics:

Iran-Azerbaijan relations.

Azerbaijan - major power strategic partnerships.

Azerbaijan - regional power strategic partnerships.

The impact of Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships on Iran.

Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

Iran-Azerbaijan relations are influenced by a critical historical factor, which is still impactful today. The South Caucasus was mostly under the control of successive Iranian empires. However, with the emergence of the Muscovy state in the 15th century and its quest for expansion, the region experienced changes. Its invasion of Astrakhan in 1556 marked the beginning of its advance toward the Caspian Sea and the expansion of its influence in the Caucasus. It is considered to be the beginning of contact or geographical rapprochement between Russia and Iran and the two empires' sharing of influence in the region. The northern part of the Caspian Sea was attached to Russia and the western and southern side of the sea to Iran.⁽¹⁾

With the advent of "Peter the Great" and his policies to expand the borders of the Russian Empire, especially toward the south and the east, the Russians occupied Baku, Derbend and Rasht, taking advantage of the anarchy in the Safavid state in 1722. Russia also concluded an agreement with Shah Tahmasp II. Accordingly, other territories were ceded to Russia. However, renewed Iranian power, which was associated with the rule of Nader Shah and the relative decline of Russian power, forced Russia to evacuate most of the territories it occupied on the southern tip of the Caspian Sea. The signing of the Treaties of Resht in 1732 and Kenja in 1735

was the outcome of this victory. This situation continued until the end of the 18th century.⁽²⁾ The ruler of Georgia triggered great wars between Russia and Persia (now Iran), placing his country under the guardianship of Russia. Therefore, the ruler of Georgia abandoned Persia, which he used to depend on. These wars resulted in the loss of Persia. The first war led to the Treaty of Golestan in 1813, and the second war to the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. Under the terms of these treaties, the Caucasus was separated from Iran,⁽³⁾ which includes what is today Dagestan, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, the regions carved out of Iran in the South Caucasus resulted in the establishment of new states, namely Armenia and Azerbaijan. On May 28, 1918, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic declared its independence. However, it was soon invaded on April 28, 1920, by the Soviet Army. After Azerbaijan was defeated, the Bolsheviks in Baku announced the establishment of Azerbaijan SSR. The Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR) was established on December 10, 1922. It consisted of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. On December 30, 1922, the Soviet Union was established. At that time, the Soviet Union included the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Ukraine, Belarus and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. The latter was abolished on December 5, 1936, and Azerbaijan was annexed directly by the Soviet Union. This remained the case until its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁽⁴⁾

The “Islamic Republic of Iran,” founded in the aftermath of the revolution against the shah’s ruling system in 1979, shockingly received the news of the collapse of the Soviet Union and had conflicting emotions of joy and fear. On the one hand, it was free of a neighbor that had posed problems for it for over 200 years. This opened up space for Iran to communicate with the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, which were previously part of the Persian Empire — until the early 19th century. On the other hand, it was fearful of the vacuum that appeared in the mentioned countries and how they could be employed against it by the United States and its regional allies, namely Turkey and Israel.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran’s former province Arran (also referred to as Aran), was inhabited by Tatars until 1918 — the word “Tatars” was used by Russian sources.⁽⁵⁾ It is located in the Southern Caucasus, adjacent to the western coast of the Caspian Sea, with an area of 86,600 square kilometers, or 46% of the total area of the South Caucasus. The language of the people is Azerbaijani, and the majority religion is Islam.⁽⁶⁾

Azerbaijan — Major Power Strategic Partnerships

The nature and substance of strategic partnerships vary, especially in terms of their significance and purpose. A strategic partnership could be a strategic alliance and could be a tool that is part of a country's foreign policy that only alters in line with its political and strategic calculations. Azerbaijan's relationships with major powers could be understood within the context of its national interests, the pending threats after the independence of Central Asia and the Caucasus republics from the Soviet Union, and the security vacuum that emerged — particularly Iranian threats; Tehran was considering Azerbaijan as part of its territory. The following reviews some of these partnerships between Azerbaijan and the major powers: the United States and Russia, highlighting their significance, purpose and limitations.

Azerbaijan-US Strategic Partnership

The United States recognized the independence of Azerbaijan on December 25, 1991. In March 1992, the United States opened an embassy in Baku. A few months later, Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Washington. Under the Clinton administration, the US-Azerbaijan relationship improved significantly, especially economically. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the two countries moved to a new level of strategic relations in light of the US global strategy, which prioritized the Middle East, South and Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

Azerbaijan worked to create an effective strategic partnership with the United States in order to receive support in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia. It tirelessly proved that it was a reliable energy partner by meeting the expectations of the United States and Europe through participating in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Trans-Adriatic Pipeline project and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline project to transfer energy from Shah Deniz. Azerbaijan fully supported the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq by opening its airspace and deploying troops.⁽⁷⁾

Azerbaijan-US relations, however, witnessed some tensions. During the Obama presidency, relations between the two countries deteriorated because the US administration focused frequently on human rights issues in Azerbaijan. Consequently, the latter declared its disagreement with the US position and considered US statements as acts of interference in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan and a means of pressure.⁽⁸⁾

However, despite the turbulence in relations at some points, one cannot escape the fact that Azerbaijan is important to the United States, especially in terms of securing energy supplies and as a link in the energy transit route connecting the South Caucasus with Central Asia without the need

to cross Russian and Iranian territories.

Azerbaijan welcomed the United States as an energy partner as well as all forms of economic cooperation. Azerbaijan also engaged in large-scale military cooperation with the United States and received defense equipment, services and training. However, the shift in policies during the Obama administration left Azerbaijan with a feeling of mistrust and the belief that the United States may at any juncture decline to continuously develop the active relationship with it. ⁽⁹⁾ This was demonstrated when Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Armenia on September 17, 2022. She described Armenia as a “peaceful, prosperous and democratic” country, while condemning the Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian territory as “illegal and murderous.” ⁽¹⁰⁾

Azerbaijan–Russia Strategic Partnership

The South Caucasus, located in southwestern Russia, is one of Russia's peripheral environments or the so-called “near-abroad.” The region plays a significant role in Russia's Eurasian policy. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia pursued a policy of non-interference in the external environment for almost a decade. However, since Vladimir Putin came to power, Russian geopolitical outreach was revived. This was part of Putin's strategy to restore Russia's global position. The increasing importance of the Caspian Sea, its geo-economic issues, investments, and the growing presence of Western powers in the established independent republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which Russia considered a vital space, convinced the Kremlin to reconsider its presence and relations with regional states, including Azerbaijan, where Russia was concerned about the growing influence of the United States. ⁽¹¹⁾

Azerbaijan worked to gradually improve relations with its larger neighbor Russia after bilateral relations were negative in the 1990s. Their advanced relationship helped establish a strategic partnership in the early 21st century. In Azerbaijan, Russia's military support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict complicated relations between Moscow and Baku and made the development of effective bilateral relations with Azerbaijan difficult to achieve. However, positive changes in Russian foreign policy directions since the beginning of the third millennium, and the increasing number of high-level mutual visits, marked a new era of bilateral relations and cooperation resulting in agreements that established and then reaffirmed friendship and strategic partnership between the two sides. ⁽¹²⁾ This rapprochement bore fruit when a new Azerbaijan-Armenia war erupted again over areas in Karabakh on September 27, 2020, and lasted 44 days. The two countries concluded a

ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia, which provided for Baku to reclaim control over the provinces in the region. Articles 8 and 9 of the agreement provided for the restoration of all economic and transport links in the region. It also stipulated that Armenia should ensure the safety of transport lines between Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to ensure the free movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. The agreement indicated that transport vehicles should be surveilled by the border guards of the Russian Federal Security Service. "By the agreement of the parties, the construction of new transport communications connecting the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic and the western regions of Azerbaijan will be ensured."⁽¹³⁾

Moreover, on February 22, 2022, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Russia's President Putin signed a declaration on the "alliance between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation" in Moscow. It included several points, namely the improvement of bilateral relations to a qualitatively new level, the agreement on the legal status of the Caspian Sea dated October 12, 2018, was considered as an applicable legal base for maintaining and strengthening security and stability in the Balkans, including energy and transport corridors and technology.⁽¹⁴⁾

Russia and Azerbaijan aim to develop strategic partnerships in various fields including politics, economics and culture. Russia is attempting to balance its role with the that of Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan. Through its foreign policy, Baku is trying to achieve some level of equity in its relations between Russia and the West, which is accused by Moscow of attempting to destabilize the South Caucasus through fueling the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and separating Russia from its "near-abroad."

Azerbaijan-Regional Power Strategic Partnerships

Azerbaijan has not only worked to achieve a balance in its relations with international powers to tackle threats and promote its interests but has also at the same time forged relations with regional powers to achieve a balance against Iran, its powerful neighbor.

Azerbaijan-Turkey Strategic Partnership

Turkey is Azerbaijan's top partner. Turkey-Azerbaijan relations have flourished since the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991. Turkey was the first to recognize it. Bilateral relations have drawn closer since that time. The two countries are currently tied by projects in the political, military, economic, cultural and social spheres, while relations between the two peoples are embodied in the dictum: "one Nation, two states."⁽¹⁵⁾

On the military side, Azerbaijan and Turkey have signed several military training agreements. In June 1996, the two countries signed a cooperation treaty in the military, technical and scientific training fields in Ankara. The July 1999 agreement resulted in the deployment of Azerbaijani peacemaking forces to Kosovo within the Turkish Battalion. This was the first foreign mission of Azerbaijani armed forces.⁽¹⁶⁾ Turkey has long supplied Azerbaijan with weapons and other military assistance. In 1993, Turkey closed its border with Armenia in solidarity with Azerbaijan.

In addition to military assistance, Turkey has also provided political support to Azerbaijan. In the summer of 2001, Iran's warplanes attacked Azerbaijani ships that were carrying out excavations in the southern Caspian Sea. Iran claimed that the fields were located in its territorial waters and later repeatedly violated the airspace of Azerbaijan with fighter jets. Turkey dispatched several fighter jets to Baku, which participated in a symbolic parade in Baku. This move demonstrated Turkey's support for Azerbaijan and mitigated the Iranian threat. Turkey has also played an active role in ending the refugee and internally displaced persons crisis in Azerbaijan. Starting from the 1990s, Turkey provided humanitarian assistance to the displaced Azerbaijanis and set up Turkish camps in Azerbaijan to provide relief assistance to war victims. Moreover, the Turkish government has provided thousands of scholarships to Azerbaijani students to study at Turkish universities.⁽¹⁷⁾

During the visit of Turkey's President Abdullah Gul to Baku in August 2010, the parties signed a new strategic partnership and mutual support treaty, which was passed by the Parliament of Azerbaijan on December 21 of the same year. In September 2010, Turkey and Azerbaijan signed another deal to establish the Turkish-Azerbaijani High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, aimed at increasing bilateral cooperation. Under the agreement, if a third party attacks either side, the two countries must provide military assistance to each other. The agreement also states that the parties are bound to strengthen "military-technical cooperation, arms supply and the establishment of infrastructure for possible joint operations in the future."⁽¹⁸⁾

In recent years, Azerbaijan and Turkey have held joint military drills. On July 29, 2020, the Turkish and Azerbaijani armed forces held comprehensive military drills in Azerbaijan, named "Turkish-Azerbaijani Eagle 2020," days after the outbreak of border clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Commenting on these drills, Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin stated that Turkey would hold military exercises in Azerbaijan, and there is indeed a military and security pact with it. He stressed that Turkey

was determined to support Azerbaijan till the end, no matter the source of the threat.⁽¹⁹⁾ Both held joint military exercises called “Unshakable Brotherhood 2021,” also referred to as “Unbreakable Brotherhood 2012” in Nakhichevan Province running from October 5 to October 8, 2021. It was directed against Iran. On June 15, 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his counterpart also signed the Shusha Declaration on allied relations. It outlined a roadmap for several sectors: technology, industry, defense, energy, transportation and the economy.⁽²⁰⁾

Along with the most visible aspects of the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership and the cultural and linguistic ties— given the fact that Turkey is considered as Azerbaijan’s elder brother — is cooperation on energy supplies, including energy corridors. Azerbaijan’s relative isolation from world markets as a geographically landlocked country prevents its natural resources from being exported. Therefore, as production increased, Azerbaijan was in need to build new oil and gas pipelines. This was supported by Western countries. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline contributed to cementing Turkey-Azerbaijan energy relations.⁽²¹⁾

One of the most important dimensions of Turkey’s foreign policy toward the Caucasus is the policy of pipeline Turkification and energy transfer through Turkey to other places. The geopolitical and geostrategic location, the easy access to open waters and the location between East and West have given Turkey a privileged position.⁽²²⁾ Turkey attempts to connect its territories with Azerbaijan through corridors of energy and railroad. At the end of October 2017, the railroad between Baku, Tbilisi and Kars was officially opened to connect the three countries. It aspires to transporting 1 million passengers annually between these countries and goods up to about 6.5 million tons per year.⁽²³⁾

Simultaneously, Turkey attaches importance to the development of trade and investment relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani Prime Minister Ali Asadov stressed that about 5,000 Turkish firms are active in Azerbaijan. This, according to Asadov, indicates that Turkey leads the ranking of foreign firms in Azerbaijan. He added that “Turkish firms participate in about 450 projects worth \$17 billion in the state budget. More than 2,600 Azerbaijani firms operate in Turkey.” Asadov referred to the participation of Turkish firms and their Azerbaijani counterparts in the reconstruction of the liberated areas of Karabakh.⁽²⁴⁾

The Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership is strategic, serving the interests of the two countries and cementing their political presence at the regional and international levels.

Azerbaijan-Israel Strategic Partnership

Since the declaration of independence, Azerbaijan has found in Israel a supportive state. It was one of the first among the newly formed post-Soviet republics to recognize Israel on December 25, 1991. Diplomatic relations were established between the two countries on April 6, 1992, when Azerbaijan became involved in a bloody conflict over the fate of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In April 1993, in response to the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories, Israel supported Baku in this conflict by providing Azerbaijani troops with stinger missiles.⁽²⁵⁾

Azerbaijan was also economically fragile, politically unstable and militarily weak compared to neighboring Armenia. Therefore, Tel Aviv found an opportunity to help Baku develop its military arsenal. Due to the shock triggered by the defeat in Karabakh in 1994, Azerbaijan invested heavily in Israeli arms and looked for strategic partners. For Israel, the establishment of such a relationship with a non-Arab or Islamic country was a strategic goal and complemented its strategy of encircling its regional adversaries.⁽²⁶⁾

In this context, the parties exchanged high-level official visits. Israel has evidently great interest in this relationship within the framework of its anti-Iran policy. During his visit to Baku in 2012, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman described his country's ties with Azerbaijan as "more important for Israel than (the then existing relationship) with France."⁽²⁷⁾

Over the past years, Azerbaijan and Israel have respected regional sensibilities. Israel has maintained its embassy in Baku since 1993. Azerbaijan refused to open a diplomatic mission in Israel. The Azerbaijani authorities have always interpreted this diplomatic imbalance by referring to "political restrictions." Azerbaijan uses the complex geopolitical situation, especially its proximity to Iran and membership in international Islamic organizations as reasons why it cannot open a diplomatic mission in Israel. However, the two countries have continued their cooperation in the security, military procurement, energy, communications, medicine, trade, educational and cultural fields.⁽²⁸⁾ In May 2008, the Azerbaijani president described relations between Baku and Tel Aviv as "an iceberg, nine-tenths submerged, away from the eyes of outsiders."⁽²⁹⁾

But things have started to change recently. Azerbaijan officially opened its embassy in Israel on March 29, 2023, and Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Azerbaijan on May 30, 2023, at the invitation of Aliyev. The latter said that the opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tel Aviv created "more opportunities to have closer interaction." Herzog's visit was a new step in the expansion of bilateral relations with Azerbaijan.⁽³⁰⁾

In the field of armaments, Azerbaijan was Israel's second largest destination of arms exports between 2018 and 2022. These weapons, in particular precision aircraft and missile interception systems, played an important role in Azerbaijan's success in the second Karabakh War.⁽³¹⁾ The volume of trade between Israel and Azerbaijan reached \$200 million in 2020. Between 2016 and 2020, Israel accounted for 69% of Azerbaijan's major arms imports. Azerbaijan's oil exports to Israel also grew and now account for more than 40% of its imports.⁽³²⁾

The Azerbaijan-Israel strategic partnership is based on several pillars: Baku's need for weapons and military technology, Israel's need for energy and joint interests. Azerbaijan is home to the last remaining Jewish community in the Caucasus. Other factors that play an important role in the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Israel include shared concerns about Iran, the pursuit to balance relations with Russia, and the role of the Israeli lobby in supporting Azerbaijan in the United States, especially in light of the power that the Armenian lobby enjoys in Washington.

The Implications of Azerbaijan's Strategic Partnerships for Iran

Due to the geopolitical and geo-economic factors, Azerbaijan's international and regional strategic partnerships have adversely affected Iran. In response, Iran has been forced to pursue various strategies to confront them.

Impact on Iran's National Security and Interests

Azerbaijan is not an ordinary country for Iran, its northern neighbor. Baku has a strategic location, natural resources and a predominantly Shiite population. Since its independence, Azerbaijan has raised Iran's concerns. What adds uncertainty toward Azerbaijan is its strategic partnerships with countries that are considered to be hostile to Iran. Drawing upon realism, namely the balance of threat theory, Iran and Azerbaijan are both balancing the threat toward each other. According to Stephen Walt, states tend to ally against the most threatening opponents (states/actors) or simply threats rather than against the most powerful states. Walt argues that the level of one country's threat is affected by the following four factors (criteria): aggregate power (variables such as population, industrial and military capability, technological power), geographical proximity, offensive capabilities and offensive intentions.

Based on these factors (criteria), we will explore the impact of Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships on Iran's national security and interests:

Aggregate power: The greater a state's total resources (population, industrial and military capability, technological power), the greater a

potential threat it poses. Iran's aggregate power indicates that it is superior to Azerbaijan. It has a vast area of 1,648,195 square kilometers (636,372 square miles), a distinct geopolitical location, an estimated population of 85.03 million people in 2021,⁽³³⁾ significant military capabilities, and great economic capabilities as it is an exporter of oil, gas and a lot of minerals. In spite of the detrimental impact of international and US sanctions on Iran, Azerbaijan is a small country. It has an estimated area of 86,600 square kilometers, a population of about 10.2 million people and modest military capabilities compared to Iran.⁽³⁴⁾ Hence, Baku works to balance the threats posed by Iran and Armenia by resorting to establishing special strategic partnerships, especially with Turkey and Israel.

Given the heated competition over economic opportunities and strategic corridors in the Caucasus, Iran has deemed the Azerbaijani-Turkish strategic partnership to be risky in terms of the implications on national interests, especially in regard to Turkey's support for the Zangezur corridor, which if implemented would pass through the border strip between Armenia and Iran, controlled by Yerevan. Baku wants this corridor to act as a link to Nakhichevan, a region in Azerbaijan between Armenia and Iran. This corridor will eventually pass across Turkish territory, connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey (east-west) through southern Armenia. Iran firmly opposes the establishment of this corridor because it will reduce the dependence of other countries on it in terms of goods and people transportation from Nakhichevan to the mainland of Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. In addition, Tehran is concerned that the corridor will cut off Iran's territorial access to the Eurasian Economic Union through Armenia, and Russia, one of Iran's most important economic partners.⁽³⁵⁾

Geographical proximity: According to Walt, distance is important in determining a threat, the closer a country is, the greater the threat is. The majority of the Azerbaijani people are Shiite. The only thing separating them from the Azerbaijani community in northwestern Iran, who constitute 16% of its population, is the Ars River. Due to Shiite and Azeri national aspirations, Iran fears that they will pose a challenge to its national security. During the reign of the shah, Azeris established an autonomous authority in the Azerbaijan region for a year from 1945 to 1946. This was realized by the support of the Soviet Union, which was occupying northern Iran at that time.

Azerbaijan and Iran adopt two divergent political systems. Azerbaijan is a secular state. The government is democratic and presidential republican in nature. Iran's government is complex; a mix of Islamic theocracy with

democracy. Some of the Iranian people tend to oppose (do not recognize) this theocratic ruling system, i.e., they tend to delegitimize it.

Iran does not see a threat from the Russia–Azerbaijan strategic partnership, because Iran and Russia have changed from rivals to allies due to the new geopolitical realities and are allies of Armenia, although they attempt to remain neutral in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Armenia believes that any US–Azerbaijan strategic partnership endangers its national security and interests. The United States has worked to isolate and exclude Iran from Azerbaijan and the Caucasus depending on the policy of “everything without Iran,” especially in the fields of energy, strategic corridors and military exercises and maneuvers.

Iran is also concerned about the presence of Israel near its borders due to the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. Israel works to have an intelligence presence in Azerbaijan. Thus, Iran accuses the government of Azerbaijan of allowing Israel to spy on it and carrying out sabotage operations and assassinations inside Iran from or through the territory of Azerbaijan. Iran believes that Israel propagates Iranian danger to the South Caucasus both secretly and publicly. Israeli President Isaac Herzog during his meeting with his Azerbaijani counterpart in Baku in May 2023, said that they discussed in depth “the entire global and regional security structure that is endangered and threatened by Iran.”⁽³⁶⁾

Offensive capabilities: Walt believes that countries with offensive military capabilities are more dangerous than those with defensive military capabilities. Although Iran’s offensive capabilities are far greater than Azerbaijan’s, the latter has worked to remedy the imbalance in recent years. Although Azerbaijan declares that it aims to establish a defensive balance with Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran believes that it is also targeted by Azerbaijan’s military capabilities, and its strategic partners, especially Israel in particular and Turkey — through espionage, assassinations and sabotage operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program.

Offensive intentions: This can be realized by provoking separatist movements. This is mainly due to the desire of a number of Azerbaijani officials to annex Iranian regions to their country on the basis of shared ethnicity. Aliyev angered Iranians when, in November 2022, he spoke about that region located in the north of Iran, which includes Azeris. Aliyev described them as “part of our nation,” although Baku carefully refrained from making statements, Tehran could interpret this as support for a possible separatist movement. However, since the massive anti-government protests began in Iran September 2022, Baku ramped up its rhetoric by referring to northern Iran as “Southern Azerbaijan.”⁽³⁷⁾

In fact, this name is inaccurate; for example, Azerbaijan itself was called by several names such as Arran before 1918 and it had not existed before this date. The name Azerbaijan was used only inside the territories currently located in the north-west of Iran.

The Limits of Iran's Strategic Response to Threats

Iran seeks to preserve the regional balance of power in the South Caucasus and maintain the status quo. It is in the interest of Iran to keep Azerbaijan weak. However, the geopolitical realities point to change, especially in light of Russia's focus on Ukraine and the West's desire to replace Russian energy supplies with Azerbaijani ones.

In this regard, Iran's strategy to confront Baku and its allies has different dimensions, most notably the following:

Political and diplomatic containment: Against the backdrop of the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran on January 27, 2023, the truck crisis, Azerbaijan's accusations of Iran recruiting individuals for the sake of espionage and attempting to disrupt Azerbaijan's constitutional order, establish Islamic law and assassinate Azerbaijani public figures, Iran responded through diplomatic channels and worked to overcome tensions. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Azerbaijan to reconcile, lessen tensions and explore avenues for cooperation.

Threats and the flexing of muscle: Iran has repeatedly declared its refusal to change the existing geographical borders. This was clearly disclosed by the statement of the Commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Forces Kioumars Heydari in 2021. He stated, "Iran is very sensitive to changes in the official borders of countries in the region, and considers it unacceptable. All the legal borders must be preserved. One country's weakness in preserving its borders does not justify the disruption of [the status quo] at the borders caused by the foreign aid another country receives. Iran will not allow this."⁽³⁸⁾ Iran also held military exercises for the third time in 2022, near the borders of Azerbaijan, sending a message that force as an option in dealing with threats from the northern front with Azerbaijan is not excluded.

Economic containment: Within the framework of Iran-Azerbaijan relations, economic aspects have always been of particular significance. Iran and Azerbaijan have concluded many agreements and memoranda to facilitate trade. These include a trade agreement, the encouragement and support of mutual investment deals, a memorandum for the avoidance of double taxation, a maritime trade agreement, a customs agreement, a land transport agreement and an air transport agreement. The issue of the rights sharing on the Caspian Sea was also addressed with other Caspian

countries by the 2018 agreement.⁽³⁹⁾

Despite political tensions, Baku and Tehran have maintained strong trade relations. Bilateral trade increased from \$608 million to \$688 million between March 2022 to March 2023. Transit constituted a particular driver for improving relations. During a visit to Iran in July, Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev noted that international transport between Baku and Tehran grew by 58%, highlighting that thousands of Iranian companies are active in Azerbaijan. One agreement was also signed to complete the construction of a road bridge over the Astarachai River which separates the two countries. Amid increased tensions between the two neighbors, the project stalled in 2021. A multinational project is planned to link India with Europe and Central Asia via Iran and Russia. Land roads may pass through Azerbaijani territory. Against this background, Baku signed an agreement in 2022 with Moscow and Tehran to develop the initiative.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Iran proposes the “Aras Corridor” project which links Azerbaijan to the Nakhichevan exclave through Iranian territory instead of the Zangezur corridor. This strategy helps in reducing tensions through economic cooperation.

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