

# Power Struggles: Turkey and Iran's Influence in the Caucasus

No War, No Peace: Unresolved Conflicts in the Caucasus

Zinaida Bechná

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# Introduction to the South Caucasus Region

- This region is a critical nexus where East meets West. Its position links Europe to Central Asia, making it vital for trade and military strategy.
- The region also serves as a buffer zone between major powers like Russia, Turkey, and Iran.
- **Diverse Challenges:**
  - Ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity complicates unity.
  - Persistent territorial conflicts (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh) hinder stability.
- **Energy Resources:**
  - Rich in oil and natural gas, making it a focal point for energy transportation routes like pipelines to Europe.

# Turkey's Strategic Alliance with Azerbaijan

- **Cultural Bond:** Common language and ethnic roots underpin close ties.
- Post-Soviet Azerbaijan saw Turkey as a natural ally for independence and regional strength.
- **Military Significance:** The 2020 war reaffirmed Turkey's role as a guarantor of Azerbaijan's sovereignty.
- Bayraktar drones used in combat became a symbol of Turkish technological and strategic assistance.
- **Economic Pipeline Diplomacy:** Energy corridors bypass Russian influence, giving Turkey and Azerbaijan strategic autonomy.
- Investment in railway and road links complements energy trade.

# Turkey's Complex Relationship with Azerbaijan

- **Historical and Cultural Ties:**
  - Shared linguistic and cultural heritage as Turkic nations.
  - Strong bilateral relations rooted in mutual strategic and economic interests.
- **Military and Political Cooperation:**
- **Support in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War:**
  - Provision of advanced weaponry, particularly drones.
  - Deployment of Syrian fighters to support Azerbaijan.
- **Shusha Declaration (2021):**
  - Elevated military, diplomatic, and economic cooperation to a new level.
  - Commitment to mutual defense and regional stability.
- **Economic Collaboration:**
- **Energy and Infrastructure Projects:**
  - Key pipelines like TANAP and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route.
  - Integration of Azerbaijan into Turkey's broader energy strategy.
- **Trade and Connectivity:**
  - Expanding transit corridors linking Turkey to the Caspian region and beyond.
- **Implications for Regional Dynamics:**
  - Strengthened Azerbaijan-Turkey axis challenges Russian influence.
  - Enhanced strategic depth for Turkey in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

# Turkey's Relationship with Armenia

- **Historical Hostility:**
- **Legacy of the Armenian Genocide:**
  - Continued disputes over historical acknowledgment and reparations.
  - Lack of formal diplomatic relations.
- **Recent Developments:**
- **Attempts at Normalization:**
  - Sporadic dialogue aimed at reopening borders.
  - Trade agreements in discussion post-2020 war.
- **Challenges to Normalization:**
  - Turkey's overt support for Azerbaijan complicates relations.
  - Internal Armenian political resistance to Turkish rapprochement.
- **Strategic Calculations:**
- Leverage Armenia's geopolitical isolation to further Turkey's influence.
- Use Armenia as a potential bridge to economic projects in the region if normalization succeeds.

# Turkey's Engagement with Georgia

- **Strong Bilateral Relations:**
- **Strategic Partnership:**
  - Turkey as Georgia's largest trading partner.
  - Shared commitment to NATO integration.
- **Economic Cooperation:**
- **Energy Transit Routes:**
  - Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines.
  - Georgia as a critical transit hub for Turkey's energy needs.
- **Military Collaboration:**
  - Joint training exercises to enhance interoperability.
  - Support for Georgia's NATO aspirations.
- **Broader Implications:**
  - Georgia's role as a buffer between Turkey and Russia.
  - Stability in Turkish-Georgian relations contrasts with tensions elsewhere in the region.

# Iran's Role in the South Caucasus

- **Historical Context:**
  - Long-standing ties to the region dating back to the Persian Empire.
  - Policy focused on maintaining the status quo to prevent external influence.
- **Engagement with Armenia:**
- **Strategic Cooperation:**
  - Shared concerns over Azerbaijan-Turkey alignment.
  - Energy exports and economic trade as key pillars.
- **Geopolitical Significance:**
  - Armenia as a counterbalance to Turkish influence in the South Caucasus.
- **Relationship with Azerbaijan:**
- **Complicated Dynamics:**
  - Cultural ties to Iranian Azeris.
  - Tensions over Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel and support for anti-Iran movements.
- **Recent Challenges:**
  - Border disputes and transit issues exacerbate bilateral tensions.
- **Relations with Georgia:**
  - Limited engagement due to Georgia's pro-Western orientation.
  - Potential for collaboration on trade and energy routes remains untapped.

# Iran's Challenges in Regionalism

- **Security-Oriented Foreign Policy:**
  - Focus on preventing conflicts from spilling over into Iranian territory.
  - Limited proactive engagement in regional cooperation initiatives.
- **External Pressures:**
- **Western Policies:**
  - Efforts to marginalize Iran in energy and transit projects.
  - "Iranophobia" limits Tehran's influence in Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- **Turkey's and Russia's Expanding Roles:**
  - Sidelining Iran in emerging geopolitical configurations.
- **Domestic Constraints:**
  - Economic challenges hinder Tehran's ability to invest in regional initiatives.
  - Internal political divisions limit foreign policy coherence.



# Geopolitical Rivalry: Turkey vs. Russia

- **Competing Interests:**
- **Turkey's Objectives:**
  - Assert influence in the Turkic world.
  - Counterbalance Russian dominance in the South Caucasus.
- **Russia's Objectives:**
  - Maintain its role as the primary security actor.
  - Prevent Turkey's overreach in its perceived sphere of influence.
- **South Caucasus as a Battleground:**
- **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict:**
  - Turkey's military support for Azerbaijan reshaped the conflict.
  - Russia's peacekeeping presence secures its foothold.
- **Implications for Regional Stability:**
  - Risk of renewed conflict as both powers push their agendas.

# Iran's Approach to Armenia and Azerbaijan

- **Balancing Act:**Iran's sizable Azeri population (~15 million) makes its policy toward Azerbaijan particularly sensitive.
- Close ties with Armenia counterbalance perceived threats from Azerbaijan-Israel cooperation.
- **Energy Diplomacy:**Iran provides critical energy resources to Armenia, especially given the country's geographic isolation.
- **Security Concerns:**Tensions with Azerbaijan include border disputes and fear of a separatist spillover.

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# Iran's Limited Engagement with Georgia

- **Geostrategic Limits:** Georgia's orientation toward the West makes Tehran cautious about overreaching.
- **Trade Opportunities:** Sanctions hinder Tehran's ability to capitalize on Georgia's trade corridors, despite potential benefits.
- **Missed Political Influence:** Iran's inability to build soft power in Georgia contrasts with its deeper ties elsewhere in the Caucasus.

# Economic Dimensions of Turkey's and Iran's Regional Policies

- **Turkey:**

- Dominates economic ties through energy pipelines and trade agreements.
- Turkish companies lead in construction and infrastructure in the Caucasus.

- **Iran:**

- Despite sanctions, Iran remains a significant energy supplier, especially for Armenia.
- Limited trade with Georgia and Azerbaijan restricts Tehran's economic leverage.

# Challenges for Iran in Regional Integration

- **Security-Oriented Approach:**
  - Iran prioritizes preventing external threats over active engagement.
  - Regionalism suffers due to Tehran's defensive strategies.
- **External Pressures:**
  - Western policies aim to marginalize Iran's influence.
  - Competing interests from Turkey and Russia reduce Tehran's relevance.
- **Domestic Constraints:**
  - Economic instability undermines investment in regional initiatives.
  - Political divisions within Iran hinder coherent foreign policy strategies.

# Geopolitical Rivalry: Turkey vs. Russia in the South Caucasus

- **Turkey:**
  - Strengthen influence in the Turkic world.
  - Undermine Russian dominance.
- **Russia:**
  - Maintain its security presence through peacekeeping missions.
- **South Caucasus as a Battleground:**
- The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exemplifies competing agendas.
- Turkey's military aid to Azerbaijan directly challenges Russian influence.

# Impact of Turkey and Iran's Policies on Regional Stability

- **Stabilizing Roles:** Turkey's focus on economic interconnectivity reduces risks of isolation for Azerbaijan.
- Iran's consistent stance against external interference seeks to preserve status quo peace.
- **Destabilizing Factors:** Renewed tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh threaten to draw in Turkey and Iran indirectly.



# Protests in Georgia and Regional Implications

- **Local Factors:**

- Dissatisfaction with perceived pro-Russian policies fuels nightly demonstrations.

- **International Concerns:**

- Suspensions of strategic ties with Western powers leave Georgia isolated.

- **Turkey and Iran's Role:**

- Both countries watch developments carefully but avoid direct involvement to protect their interests.

# Future Prospects for Turkey and Iran in the South Caucasus

- **Turkey's Strategic Outlook:** Further deepening of ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- Limited scope for progress with Armenia without resolution of historical grievances.
- **Iran's Path Forward:** Opportunities to act as a mediator in regional disputes.
- Enhanced regional engagement contingent on easing of sanctions.

# Conclusion: Strategic Outlook

- Turkey's proactive policies position it as a dominant regional player.
- Iran's cautious approach seeks stability but limits influence.
- **Regional Balance:**
  - Stability depends on cooperation among Turkey, Russia, and Iran alongside Western partnerships.