

Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus: Competition and Cooperation

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ABSTRACT The vacuum of power in the South Caucasus during the post-Cold War period has shaped the nature of rivalries between the regional and extra-regional powers. Iran and Turkey have special interests in the region in large part due to geographical proximity and historical background. The three newly established republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have created new opportunities for Iran and Turkey, but they have also been the sources of new threats for their neighbors. For Iranian policymakers, Azerbaijan and Armenia are of special importance because of their common borders. Through a geopolitical analysis, the author tries to answer the following questions: What is the nature of the rivalry between Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus? What are the differences in these two countries' foreign policy attitudes toward the South Caucasus? The main conclusion is that the competition between Iran and Turkey has been multifaceted and covers cultural, economic and political issues. Iran has adopted a more independent stance in its relations with the South Caucasus, and at the same time it is trying to limit the power and influence of the U.S. in its peripheral area. Whereas Turkey has shown its preference for a multilateral approach in collaboration with the West. Trying to gain a foothold in the region, both countries formulate and implement foreign policies aimed at expanding their political and economic interactions with these South Caucasian states.

Keywords Armenia; Azerbaijan, Competition; Cooperation; Geopolitics; Georgia; Iran; South Caucasus; Turkey

Introduction

It is claimed that the strategic significance of Iran and Turkey has diminished in the post Cold War era, but they are able to play the role of bridges which connect Europe and Asia, particularly the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. These two countries have the ability to implement foreign policies aimed at exerting their influence in the neighboring countries. Iran and Turkey have tried to deal with each other's nationalistic attitudes towards the South Caucasus with its strategic value and geographical proximity to their territories. The key

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factors that have led to their competition in this region include their overall national security concerns, their past cultural and historical linkages with the peoples of the Caucasus as well as a common religion-ethnic heritage, and the economic importance of the region largely because of its value as a feasible energy transport corridor. In this paper, an attempt is made to answer the following two research questions: What is the nature of the competition between Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus? What are the differences in these two countries' foreign policy attitudes toward the South Caucasus?

This inter-state rivalry could be analyzed in cultural, economic and politico-security spheres. Since Iran and Turkey have their own specific needs to form bilateral and multilateral relationships with other state and non-state actors at the regional and international levels, they have somewhat different foreign policies towards this region. Iran follows a more independent stance in its relations with the South Caucasus, but it occasionally cooperates with Russia as the dominant power in the post-Soviet space. Whereas, Turkey as a NATO member has shown its preference for a multilateral approach in collaboration with the West. Both countries formulate and implement foreign policies aimed at expanding their political and economic interactions with these Caucasian states.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Geopolitics

Critical theory deals with the research between reality and possibilities. In fact, between what it is and what it can be. Critical theory seeks to promote the basic situation of human life to more favorable conditions than the present conditions (Salahi, 2004: 132). Geopolitics as an analytical approach was developed in the first half of the 20th century and emphasizes the role of geography in international relations. Critical geopolitics, which tends to influence the usual geopolitical discourse, does not consider geography merely as the science of geographic places and status (Ahmadipour and Badiee, 2002: 2-5).

In critical geopolitics, international politics is not exclusively influenced by the state actors (e.g., governments and politicians), rather it is the product of the interactions beyond the official spheres which shape the geopolitics (Dodds, 1996: 573). This kind of interpretation of geopolitics provides a liberating viewpoint which distinguishes between the formal and informal (the state-centric vs the non-state

centric) approaches, and considers the relevance of ideational, economic, environmental and social factors (Mirheidari et al., 2011: 8-13). Unlike the past centuries' hard geopolitics, critical geopolitics seeks to shed light on the facts beyond certainty, ideology and prejudice. Among the strong points of this kind of geopolitics, one can detect the recognition of the existence of radical nationalistic attitudes, and the efforts aimed at lessening the significance of nationalistic attitudes that weakens justice-seeking regional and international cooperation (Jones and Sage, 2010: 316). In critical geopolitics, power is not an imposed top-down order representing a fundamental confrontation between the ruling class and the citizens, but it is an actual state-of-affairs in society.

Azerbaijan's Politico-Security Status in Foreign Policy Priorities of Iran and Turkey

The unresolved security problems in the Caucasus could have drastic implications for national security of Iran and Turkey and for regional security dynamics. The Republic of Azerbaijan was at the center of the disagreement between Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus after the fall of the Soviet Union (Cornell, 1998: 50). One key area of differences related to the options for oil and gas supplies and transportation routes such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline. The arms race is another controversial factor for the regional and global actors of the South Caucasus and enters into their security calculations. Azerbaijan, which has rejected the Russian offers of establishing closer bilateral defense ties, has been the recipient of Turkey's military aid. If there were to be defense cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan, it would be more tactical than strategic (Olga and Szayna, 2003: 387). In 2012, the Republic of Azerbaijan purchased \$1 billion worth of weapons from Israel including the acquisition of anti-ship missiles. In fact, anti-ship missiles could threaten Iran's interests in the Caspian Sea. Baku has also purchased missile systems at the cost of \$300 million from Russia (Valiyev, 2012: 3).

Abulfaz Elchibey, the first president of Azerbaijan who established close relations with the United States and Turkey, paved the way for Ankara's influence in Azerbaijan. At the same time, Elchibey's open irredentist statements threatened Iran's territorial integrity

(Abedin, 2004). He once stated on Azerbaijan's public TV that "I dream of Tabriz every night. I wish to go to Tabriz even on my knees. After Azerbaijan's independence, we seek unity with Iran's Azerbaijan (province)." These political slogans predictably led to Iran's strong objection to any statement which undermines its national security. However, the next heads of state of Azerbaijan– Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev– did not repeat such nationalistic claims to Iranian territories (Taghaviasl, 2000: 154). The United States and Turkey are assuming that the issue of ethnicity could change Iran's foreign policy behavior. Thus, one of the reasons for the U.S. support for the expansion of Turkey's role in the region is to utilize Iran's potential ethnic vulnerability.

In reaction, Iran is very sensitive to any Turkish policies aimed at changing the map of the region. For instance, Iran is strongly opposed to the Turkish plan to cede Karabakh to Armenia in exchange for relinquishing parts of Armenian territory which connects Iran to Azerbaijan. Similar security concerns of the Turkish leaders led them to order Turkish jet fighters to fly over the Caspian Sea during the Iran-Azerbaijan's dispute in the summer of 2001 as a show of support for Baku. This action could be explained by the principle of the front line defense in managing security risks. This incident showed that Iran and Turkey might be prepared to use military force to defend their national interests in the region, if certain conditions arise.

Armenia's Politico-Security Status in the Foreign Policy Priorities of Iran and Turkey

As part of the North-South axis, Armenia is placed within the Tehran-Moscow-Yerevan triangle, which is created to counter Azerbaijan's influence as a regional ally of the West, decrease Turkey's regional influence and limit the Western presence in the Caspian Sea (Blandy, 2008: 7). The East-West axis composed of the United States, Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan keeps a close eye on any changes in Iran's growing relationship with Armenia. Because of Yerevan's ties with regional and global powers, Baku considers the North-South axis a security threat against its national interests. To neutralize this perceived threat, Azerbaijan relied on the East-West axis which had advocated the policy of "everything without Iran" (Dehghan Tarzjani, 2000: 42).

Following the geopolitical changes triggered by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenia's strategic value increased in the South Caucasus. Armenia has the most combat-ready troops in the South Caucasus, and has been the recipients of Russian military hardware with an affordable price tag. In addition, Yerevan may count on the U.S. assistance in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute with the help of its powerful lobby in Washington. It means that Armenia makes use of Russia's influence in the South Caucasus and simultaneously keeps the option of relying on the influential Armenian diaspora abroad to gain the Western support in its confrontation with Azerbaijan. Russia as both a global and regional power has been a valuable friend for Armenia. Moreover, the Moscow-Yerevan cordial relations are strategically significant for Iran which has viewed the cooperation between these two states as an obstacle to Turkey's expansionist policies in the region and a leverage against Azerbaijan which might threaten Iran's territorial integrity with its irredentist claims (Asatryan, 2002: 23-24). Despite Iran's mostly anti-U.S. orientation, Armenia regards Tehran as a balancing factor against Ankara's support for its key regional rival (i.e., Azerbaijan) (Nixey, 2010: 131).

The strengthening of relations between Iran and Armenia coincided with the onset of the Karabakh conflict and was a function of Baku's foreign policy behavior. In fact, security concerns over Azerbaijan's policies supported by Turkey led to Yerevan's decision to move closer to Tehran (Koolae, 2015: 382). Yerevan refused to vote against Iran in international organizations and did not participate in enforcing the U.S.-imposed anti-Iran economic sanctions. Iran and Armenia have maintained good relations because of their shared geopolitical and economic interests (Atai, 2009: 116).

The fact that both countries have been subjected to attempts by their rivals and antagonists to become isolated regionally and globally, have resulted in the expansion of their bilateral ties. Iran and Armenia have signed a score of agreements, but the absence of a clear definition of an ideal type of foreign relations has put a limit on the development of Iranian interactions with its Northern neighboring countries. Therefore, Iran has not attained an appropriate relative position in the South Caucasus in proportion to its capabilities and power.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey took side with Baku. Because of Azerbaijan's huge energy reserves and its strategic location along the Caspian Sea as well as Turkish concerns for transnational ethnic kinship, Ankara will

continue to support Azerbaijan in any future war between its two neighbors to the east. In the meantime, Ankara has tried to normalize its relations with Yerevan more seriously after the adoption of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy advocated by the former Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. In November 2009, Armenia and Azerbaijan foreign ministers signed a peace agreement with the aim of rapprochement with the mediation of France, Russia, Switzerland and the United States. However, the agreement was not ratified in the two countries' parliaments for internal political reasons and the borders remained closed (Hayrapetyan, 2011: 9). The normalization of bilateral relations with Turkey was not welcomed by certain domestic political factions, interest groups and political leaders including the nationalist political party known as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*), Karabakh war veterans as well as some prominent figures such as Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of Armenia. Likewise, Turkey's nationalist groups have been against any compromise, and view the establishment of good relations with Armenia as a betrayal of Azerbaijan who is their trusted ally and important trade partner. It is not surprising that Azerbaijan opposed the reopening of Turkish-Armenian border and put pressure on Ankara to call for the resolution of the Karabakh dispute before making any conciliatory move (Falkowski, 2009: 2-3).

It should be mentioned that Turkey does not intend to establish better relations with Armenia at the expense of undermining its close relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan. The conflicting statements by Turkish political leaders prove this point. For example, Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former foreign minister announced in Washington that Turkey welcomed the normalization of relations with Armenia. Less than a month later, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vowed to continue pressures on Armenia in a joint press conference with President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev (Iskandaryan, 2009: 38). It seems that the normalization of the relations and reopening of the Armenian-Turkish border is a U.S. proposal rather than a joint policy of the two neighbors which are trying to score points off each other. For the purpose of strengthening U.S. dominance, American policymakers have tried to bring Armenia into U.S. orbit by persuading Yerevan to retreat from the Russian-backed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Baban and Shiryev, 2010: 99). Consequently, the U.S. has suggested ways of resolving the conflict between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Armenian politicians have set two conditions for the normalization of relations with Turkey (i.e., the investigation about Armenian Genocide in 1915 and Turkish recognition of this tragedy). However, Turkish leaders believe that if these conditions are met, Armenia will be encouraged to ask for more concessions. A major obstacle to the successful conflict resolution is that the South Caucasus lacks a viable regional security structure. The three South Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) have been unable to engage in constructive strategic dialogues with one another, let alone with their neighbors. The recent history of Iran-Azerbaijan vs Turkey-Armenia bilateral relations reveal that the two sets of neighbors regard each other as long-term security threats at their borders.

The Role Perceptions of Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus

Brzezinski considers the Caucasus as a chessboard of a great game. The lack of initiative among Iran's foreign policymakers has resulted in subjugating Iran's relations with its South Caucasian neighbors to the Russian and American influence in the region. Thus, a change in Iran's foreign policy towards the United States and Russia is a prerequisite for the establishment of meaningful relations with the three former Soviet Republics (Atai, 2012: 133-134). This is also the case for Turkey's policies towards this region, since its support for the pro-Western leaders is partly due to the great powers' competition. As a NATO ally, Turkey is expected to cooperate with the U.S. to confront the real and potential threats to Western interests arising from Russian expansionism in the South Caucasus.

From the traditional Western viewpoint, Turkey is able to convince the governments of the South Caucasian states to be active partners in safeguarding the long-term energy security of the EU by building stable and secure oil and gas transportation routes from Central Asia and the Caucasus to Europe. A key role of Turkey is to connect the two regions and help the attainment of the goals of increasing the U.S. hard power and the EU's soft power (Marketos, 2009: 95). Turkey's regional policies has been mainly in line with the general foreign policy orientation of the United States and NATO. In recent years, the new Turkish politicians have tried to change the role of Turkey in the Western alliance, since they believe a subordinate role

has reduced Ankara to the level of a minor player in the country's neighborhood.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has asserted that the regional security should be guaranteed by the countries in the region because the internationalization of the regional conflicts will not help their resolution. In contrast, Turkey has been in search of a trans-regional mechanism in the South Caucasus with the help of the Western powers to reduce the influence and power of Iran and Russia. The security policies advocated by the leaders in Turkey and Iran are based on different geopolitical outlook for the foreseeable future. Ankara and Tehran are not in direct confrontation with each other, but then they are competing for influence as parts of a subtle post-Soviet geopolitical reconfiguration involving both regional and extra-regional powers.

Turkey's Cultural Attitudes towards the South Caucasus

In addition to evaluating the impact of Turkey's politico-security and economic objectives on its regional policies, one has to examine social and cultural factors that shape the nature of the involvement of Ankara in the South Caucasus. It is claimed that cultural considerations are of secondary importance for Turkish policymakers when compared to security and economic concerns (Ismayilov, 2010:52).

Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey was the only independent Turkic state in the international system, but five new Turkic republics (i.e., Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) were established in Central Asia and the Caucasus in 1991. Relying on Turkish language and culture, Ankara has been trying to expand its relations with these countries. Turkey's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is aimed at coaxing the regional countries to believe that Ankara's influence-seeking policy is not based on Pan-Turkism which calls for the unification of all Turkic peoples inside and outside Turkey. Rather, it is based on Turkey's concerns for their shared identity and destiny (Marketos, 2009: 104). Some critics of the Turkish regional agenda accuse Ankara of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Ottomanism sentiments which have affected its policies towards the Central Asian and Caucasian states (Hajiyousefi, 2005: 113).

In Davutoğlu's view, Turkey has multiple indices of identity similar to the social-cultural fabric of Iranian society. Hence, Ankara

ought to formulate its foreign policy with an eye to its cultural diversity and multi-faceted identity. Using soft power, Turkey's foreign policymakers are trying to maximize the benefits of its historical advantages in the region. Ankara is recommended to play a major role in the regional subsystems by 2023 to mark the centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic (Davutoğlu, 2008: 77). Since the 20-Year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran calls on the country to become a dominant regional power by 2025, the stage is set for the continuation of the Iranian-Turkish rivalry in the South Caucasus.

The Central Asian countries have shown their reluctance to come under the domination of Ankara, and Azerbaijan is the only Turkic state that has received Turkey's advances with open arms. Moscow is concerned about Ankara's nationalistic plans for the region since Russians have had the nightmare of the incursions of the Turks and Tatars. Iran also opposes Pan-Turkism for fear of the impact it might have on its Azeri ethnic minority group. However, the ruling AK party has pursued a more moderate policy towards Iran. Meanwhile, some political leaders in Turkey look at the pre-dominantly Shiite Iran with suspicion (Cagaptay, 2009) and have demanded this issue to be taken into consideration in the foreign policymaking process. Turkey which is the home of Sunni Muslims as the overwhelming majority religious group, tries to promote its own religious model in Azerbaijan in part to counter Iran's influence. This model of more liberal Islam has been welcomed by the political elites in Azerbaijan despite the fact that the majority of Azeri population are Shiite. Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Noorchi group, particularly the transnational Fethullah Gülen movement try to gain influence in Azerbaijan by promoting their own version of Islam. Hence, a network of charitable and cultural organizations alongside other NGOs have been active in Azerbaijan (International Crisis Group, 2008).

The Turkish government has invested in various social-cultural projects including building schools, sending books in Turkish language, and launching satellite TV channels for news broadcasting in Azerbaijan. Due to a lack of common ethno-cultural attributes, Ankara does not have any cultural projects for Yerevan (Asatryan, 2002: 24).

Iran's Cultural Ties with the South Caucasus

The cultural linkages between Iran and the South Caucasian states are substantial. Sufi tendencies in the region which have Iranian origin, have contributed to the prevalence of the Persian language in the classical literature of the regional countries. Sufism has had a profound effect on these societies in many areas including social behaviors, life style of families, traditions, art and so forth. These propensities have subsequently created common identity which is also evident in Iranian society (Taheri and Hashemi Nasab, 2010: 202-211). Due to the common cultural heritage, the Iranians prefer to interact with their neighbors to the north. For example, Azerbaijan and Iran share traditions in celebrating Nowruz (the Persian New Year) and thousands of Iranian tourists visit Baku during the holidays (Valiyev, 2012: 1).

The Republic of Azerbaijan is considered within the boundaries of the Persian/Iranian civilization that is known as one of the major continuous world civilizations. Despite having common historical, cultural and religious characteristics, the people of Azerbaijan has been kept separated from the Iranian domains. Some analysts have asserted that given the similarity between Turkish language and Azerbaijani as the official language of Azerbaijan, Turkish culture exerts a significant influence on the Azeri population (Mojtahedzadeh, 2008: 217). Iran recognizes the territorial integrity and political independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, but the critical geopolitics does not see power as an imposed hierarchical order. Some Iranians perceive Azerbaijan as a part of the Greater Iran which lies on the other side of the Aras River and separated from today's Iran because of the colonial treaties. In 1990, tens of thousands of Azeri nationals signed a petition and demanded a quick return of the Caucasus to Iran as its homeland (Souleimanov, 2011).

Historically, the claims of having an independent national history made by the Republic of Azerbaijan and other regional countries was rejected by Iran (Herzig, 1995: 73). A source of concern for the government officials of Azerbaijan was that the Azeri minority in Iran outnumbered their own population. They were worried about their citizens' feeling of kinship and devotion to Iran (Cornell, 2000: 308). Although the common language and religion should not basically be a negative point in any inter-state relationship, but it might have an adverse impact when the countries are involved in a political dispute.

Both sides are afraid that their citizens might try to align with the members of their own ethnic group across country borders. Due to these misgivings, Iran had been accused of supporting the anti-government Islamist groups in Azerbaijan where most of the inhabitants are Shiites. However, the communality of religious belief does not provide adequate evidence of Iranian links to these groups because the nature of the relationship between state and religion in these two countries are different. Unlike Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan does not call itself an Islamic Republic (Hunter, 2010: 171), and the religious practices and experiences of the two peoples are different.

There are more visible cultural linkages in the Iranian-Armenian relations. The Iranian Armenians constitute one of the largest and most vibrant religious minorities in Iran; and the lack of a shared official religion does not play a diverging role in Tehran-Yerevan relations (Novikon, 2000: 62). The Iranian-Armenian cultural relations date back to almost 28 centuries ago. The Armenians' ancient names are the same as the original names used in the era of the Achaemenid and the Arsacid dynasties. The two nations share common celebrations which are 2700 years old. There are numerous Armenian churches in Iran. Armenian monasteries and churches in Iran have been designated as the UNESCO World Heritage sites including the ancient Saint Thaddeus Monastery near the town of Maku in West Azerbaijan province and the Monastery of Saint Stepanos in East Azerbaijan province of Iran. The Christian Armenians have been pleased with the Iranian government's decision to allocate budget for the restoration of their churches in recent years (Koolae, 2010: 86). Nevertheless, there are no proper and careful planning for the expansion of the Iranian-Armenian cultural relations.

The Economic Relations of Iran and Turkey with the South Caucasus

The excessive dependency of the South Caucasian countries on Russia led them to search for new economic and commercial partners. With its privileged geographical location and abundant energy resources, the Republic of Azerbaijan has more opportunities for rapid economic growth and development in the short term. Armenia has the least advantageous geographical location among the three South Caucasian republics and does not lamentably possess strategic natural resources (Hayrapetyan, 2011: 10). After the collapse of the USSR, Armenia

changed its economic policy by converting its Soviet-era defense industry to the industries for the production of non-military commodities. Because of the previously-mentioned political obstacles and the closure of their common borders, Armenia has not established notable trade ties with Turkey. In contrast, Iran and Armenia have invested in strategic economic programs for the construction of railroads, gas pipelines, high-voltage power transmission lines, a hydroelectric power station on the Aras River and a free economic zone on the Armenia-Iran border.

The role of Islam in Turkish foreign policy and its Pan-Islamist tradition has resulted in Turkey's efforts to introduce this country as a democratic model in the Muslim world (Balcer, 2011: 372). In the regional context, Ankara's approach to foreign policy has emphasized Islam and economics. Some scholars have used the term "Econo-Islamist" to refer to the foreign policy orientation of the ruling party (Cagaptay, 2009: 3). The proposals for the construction of the oil and gas transmission pipelines via Turkey's territory have been motivated greatly by the political goal of increasing Turkey's regional influence and to a lesser degree by economic justifications. The Iranian scholars have contended that the construction of these pipelines going through Turkey's territories cost three times more for the South Caucasus countries and would take more time to complete compared to the planned Iran's routes (Dehghan Tarzjani, 2000: 57). Energy diplomacy with its economic importance is tied to national and regional security and can be used as an instrument of foreign policy. Due to the hostile nature of Iran-U.S. relations since 1979 and the continued U.S. imposed sanctions on Iran's oil and gas sector, Tehran has not been able to take advantage of energy diplomacy in its relations with the South Caucasus (Lenczowski, 1997: 113).

Iran and Turkey along with France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States are among the top trading partners of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Alipour et al., 2009: 596). Trade statistics show that Iran's volume of trade with Armenia is higher than its trade volume with Azerbaijan. Like Russia, Iran has been a major trading partner of Armenia in recent years. Turkey's trade data indicate quite the opposite trend. Turkey is among the top 5 trading partners of Azerbaijan on the basis of percentage share of exports.

Conclusion

In the South Caucasus, a web of multilateral and bilateral arrangements has constituted cultural, economic and political linkages between the three regional states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) and the four key extra-regional actors (Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States). The Iranian-Turkish rivalry in the South Caucasus in cultural, economic and politico-security areas was examined. Iran has adopted a more independent stance in its relations with the countries in this region, and at the same time it is trying to limit the power and influence of the U.S. in its peripheral area. Following a different course of action, Turkey has shown its preference for a multilateral approach in collaboration with the West. Trying to gain a foothold in the region, both countries formulate and implement foreign policies aimed at expanding their political and economic interactions with the countries of the South Caucasus.

Relying on the U.S. influence, Ankara has expanded its economic and cultural ties with the regional actors. Iran's foreign policy towards the region which is moderately influenced by Russia's policies has resulted in a weak performance in its economic competition with Turkey because of the U.S. antagonistic attitude towards Iran. Washington has been able to use the competition between Tehran and Ankara in the South Caucasus as an instrument of its own foreign policy. It follows that any meaningful change in the U.S-Iran bilateral relations will change the dynamics of Tehran-Ankara's regional rivalry.

In general, Turkey has had a better performance in achieving its national interests in the region. The relative position of Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus has not been a function of their actual national capabilities. This is partly due to the involvement of the U.S. which has acted as an obstacle for Iran and a helping hand for Turkey. However, there is the possibility of establishing future inter-state relations in this region based on goodwill and mutual interest, with the goal of taking advantage of economic opportunities in an equitable and efficient manner.

Author's Statement: The author declares that he has fully observed all ethical issues including plagiarism, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, data fabrication and/or falsification, informed consent, misconduct, etc.

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