

THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR: TURKEY'S SOUTH CAUCASUS POLICY AND IRAN'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

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Abstract

Turkey, through its neo-Ottomanism policy, has framed the South Caucasus as part of its ethnic and identity sphere, deepening political, economic, and security ties with Azerbaijan under the slogan “one nation, two states.” The security paradigm shift triggered by the 2020 Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia allowed Ankara to redefine its operational environment in the South Caucasus, transforming itself into a key regional actor. Turkey's assertive engagement during the Second Karabakh War and its unequivocal support for Baku have posed significant challenges to the Islamic Republic of Iran's national interests in the region. This study addresses the following question: *What are the dimensions of Turkey's foreign policy approach in the South Caucasus following the Second Karabakh War, and how will it impact Iran's geopolitical and geocultural interests in the region?* The hypothesis posits that Turkey's post-war foreign policy—anchored in the Ankara-Baku strategic alliance and driven by ethnic-identity narratives, economic-military integration, and geopolitical ambitions—will undermine Iran's security, geopolitical, and economic interests in the South Caucasus. Focusing on the period from 2020 to 2023, this research examines Turkey's regional strategy after the Second Karabakh War, analyzing its implications for Iran's strategic positioning.

Keywords: Second Karabakh War, South Caucasus Geopolitics, Pan-Turkism, Iran's Geopolitical Interests

Introduction

The power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union initiated two parallel developments in the Caucasus region. First, regional states sought to

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redefine their national identities. Second, the region witnessed intensified geopolitical competition among regional powers—Iran, Russia, and Turkey—alongside efforts by the United States and, to some extent, the European Union to expand their spheres of influence.

In the immediate post-Soviet period, Turkey, projecting a secular-democratic identity and free-market economic model, attempted to position itself—with Western support—as a paradigm for the newly independent states. Initially, Turkey's engagement in the South Caucasus and its relations with Russia were predominantly competitive. However, with the ascendancy of neo-Ottomanist discourse, the weakening of Western ties, and the growing Russia-West rivalry, Ankara's regional policy gradually assumed more cooperative dimensions.

The decline of Kemalist ideology and the rise of Islamists in 2002 marked a fundamental transformation in Turkey's foreign policy approach. The new strategy sought to establish a balanced relationship with both the West and Russia, incorporating cultural and economic considerations alongside security-focused priorities. Concurrent with the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power, key pillars of this policy included conflict resolution with neighboring states and an active, multi-vector diplomacy.

Owing to its geopolitical significance, the South Caucasus holds particular importance in Turkey's foreign policy calculus. Within this context, Azerbaijan has emerged as a focal point for Ankara due to its geopolitical, geo-economics, and geocultural attributes. Bilateral relations have expanded consistently since the Soviet collapse, with Turkey's "two states-one nation" policy significantly enhancing its influence in Azerbaijan [7: 98].

The escalation of this situation intensified with the renewed clashes in Karabakh in 2020, known as the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, achieved through comprehensive support from Ankara and the subsequent signing of the Shushi Declaration, elevated bilateral relations to a strategic level of alliance across various security-military, political, economic, and commercial domains. Given Turkey's ambitions in the South Caucasus and its efforts to position itself as the focal point of developments in this region and, more broadly, in Central Asia, this development will negatively impact the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran at various levels and across ethnic-security, transit-energy, and geopolitical dimensions.

Theoretical Framework: Offensive Realism

Offensive realism, like defensive realism, is considered a branch of neorealism. This theory was developed by Mearsheimer. From a structuralism perspective emphasizing the anarchic structure of the international system, offensive realism can be seen as sharing common features with defensive realism, though it differs in some aspects. The point of divergence between offensive and defensive realism stems from their differing views on the level of security desired by states. In offensive realism theory, security in the international system is scarce because achieving security requires acquiring as much power as possible relative to other states' tendency to maximize power brings offensive realism closer to Morgenthau's classical realism. Mearsheimer posits five fundamental assumptions in his offensive realism approach: (1) the international system is anarchic; (2) great powers inherently possess offensive capabilities and intentions; (3) states can never be certain about others' intentions, making mutual distrust a defining feature of interstate relations; (4) states prioritize survival; and (5) great powers are rational strategic actors [16: 30-31]. These principles collectively explain great power behavior and demonstrate that in Mearsheimer's framework, international politics essentially equates to analyzing great power foreign policies.

A crucial implication is that these assumptions inevitably lead to state behavior characterized by revisionism, power maximization, and expansionism. Offensive realism emphasizes states' relentless pursuit of power maximization in foreign policy, whereas defensive realism prioritizes security maximization as states' primary objective under international anarchy. Consequently, defensive realism suggests that states focus more on maintaining their systemic position than on aggressive expansion or power accumulation. Such states essentially seek to preserve the status quo, with defensive realism paying limited attention to revisionist states in international politics.

The fundamental distinction in Mearsheimer's perspective lies in his interpretation of anarchy's consequences for states and their foreign policies, as reflected in the core assumptions of offensive realism. The anarchic nature of the international system breeds mutual distrust among states, which - combined with factors like states' offensive intentions and capabilities - drives them toward maximizing relative power. Offensive realism posits that states seek to accumulate maximum power until achieving hegemony within the system. Consequently, the only guaranteed path to security and survival becomes hegemony, implying that status-quo powers cannot exist unless one state dominates the entire system. Since

this rarely occurs, great powers persistently pursue revisionist foreign policies marked by expansionism and power accumulation.

Applied through offensive realism's lens, Turkey's direct involvement in the 2020 Karabakh conflict, comprehensive support for Azerbaijan, and subsequent elevation of bilateral relations to an alliance-level partnership (per the Shushi Declaration) across cultural, military, political and economic domains reflects its strategy for regional power maximization in the South Caucasus. While strengthening Turkey's pivotal regional role, this development simultaneously undermines Iran's geostrategic, geo-economics and geocultural interests across multiple dimensions in the South Caucasus.

Turkey's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus and Central Asia gained particular significance in Turkey's foreign policy. The power vacuum left by the USSR's dissolution created opportunities for Ankara's regional engagement. The geopolitical characteristics of the Caucasus—such as ethnic and linguistic diversity, landlocked geography, connectivity needs, and energy transit routes—enabled regional and extra-regional actors to address these structural constraints. While Central Asia partially receded from Turkey's foreign policy focus due to Russia's resurgence, the Caucasus retained Ankara's attention owing to its geographical proximity and energy resources. The South Caucasus holds critical importance for Turkey across economic, security, cultural, and neighborhood policy dimensions. Economically, Azerbaijan's energy reserves and the region's transit potential reinforce Turkey's role as an East-West energy and trade corridor. The South Caucasus remains a pivotal zone in Russia's near abroad, representing a strategic intersection between Moscow and NATO's southwestern flank—a point of security friction given Turkey's NATO membership. Moreover, the protracted Karabakh conflict and its destabilizing effects pose challenges to Turkey's security strategy in the region. Culturally, Ankara's neo-Ottomanist policies and Turkic integration efforts, exemplified by the Organization of Turkic States, underscore its ambitions. President Erdogan's re-election has reinforced Turkey's pursuit of global and regional influence, with Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's appointment reflecting this vision. Fidan's regionalist outlook, shaped during his tenure at the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), suggests continued focus on the South Caucasus as a strategic priority [2].

The Second Karabakh War and the Intensification of Turkey's Engagement in the South Caucasus

The Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan concluded on November 10, 2020, with a ceasefire agreement. Analysts identify Turkey's supportive role as the decisive factor in Azerbaijan's military victory. Ankara's backing of Baku - spanning military-security, economic, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions - facilitated Azerbaijan's battlefield success while expanding Turkey's regional influence in the South Caucasus. Post-war relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, formalized through the Shushi Declaration, elevated bilateral ties to an alliance-level partnership encompassing political, military-security, cultural, and economic-commercial cooperation. This development significantly strengthened Ankara's regional role in the South Caucasus [10].

Turkey's Military Assistance to Azerbaijan

The modernization of Azerbaijan's armed forces proved instrumental in its 2020 victory over Armenia, with Turkey playing a pivotal role through both arms sales and military advisory support. However, Turkey's contribution extended beyond immediate wartime assistance, encompassing three decades of systematic military capacity-building. Following independence in 1992, Azerbaijan faced a strategic choice between maintaining Soviet-era military structures or adopting Western standards - opting decisively for the latter.

The foundational 1992 military education cooperation agreement (ratified by Turkey in 1993) established training programs for Azerbaijani officers at Turkish military academies. This partnership reached its zenith with the 2010 Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support Agreement, enabling:

- Joint military exercises
- Reciprocal defense visits
- Annual training for hundreds of Azerbaijani personnel under the 2018 Medical-Military Cooperation Agreement [4].

Turkey's military modernization program for Azerbaijan aligned with NATO's partnership policies. Azerbaijan's NATO engagement, beginning with 1992 North Atlantic Cooperation Council membership, included:

- Participation in Turkey-led Kosovo operations (late 1990s)
- Contribution to Turkish-commanded ISAF forces in Afghanistan

Turkey's assistance constituted the critical differentiator between Azerbaijan's 1990s defeat and 2020 victory - transforming Soviet-legacy forces into Western-standard military capabilities. This achievement demonstrates both Turkey's military capacity-building expertise and its potential value as a NATO security provider [28].

Military Relations Between Turkey and Azerbaijan Over the Past Decade

Over the past decade, military relations between Turkey and oil-and-gas-rich Azerbaijan have significantly expanded as Baku has invested heavily in achieving military superiority over its neighbor Armenia. Currently, alongside Israel, Turkey ranks among Azerbaijan's largest arms suppliers. Key military cooperation includes:

- Procurement of SOM cruise missiles with 250km range
- Sales of various reconnaissance and combat drones
- Joint drone production in Baku
- Collaboration on developing the fifth-generation KAAN fighter between Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry and Turkey's TUSAS
- The Nakhchivan military factory equipment project under an agreement between Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry and Turkey's ASFAT defense company [23].

Post-Karabakh Conflict Military Presence

Following the 2020 war, Turkey's joint monitoring center with Russia for ceasefire observation represented another dimension of Ankara's active military partnership with Baku. The pinnacle of this military cooperation was the Shushi Declaration, which:

- Emphasized defense cooperation and joint military efforts against external threats
- Committed to joint efforts for armed forces modernization and reconstruction [29].

The Declaration affirmed mutual commitment to act jointly against any threats to independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, or security of internationally recognized borders [18].

Ethnic-Cultural Ties

The shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity between Turkey and Azerbaijan has formed the foundation of bilateral relations since Azerbaijan's independence. The “one nation, two states” principle articulated by former President

Heydar Aliyev symbolizes the nationalist logic governing these relations [12]. Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence in 1991.

In the early 1990s, Turkey positioned itself as an “elder brother” to newly independent Turkic states, supporting Azerbaijan against Armenia. This continued during the 2020 Karabakh War under the “one nation, two states” framework. President Erdoğan's post-victory visit to Azerbaijan, where he recited poetry lamenting “divided Azeris across the Aras River”, reflected this [15]. However, this perspective contradicts Iran's national security and territorial integrity, as Iran remains the core while its “hand” (Azerbaijanis) were separated across the river.

Erdoğan's symbolic visit to Azerbaijan after his 2023 re-election demonstrated Turkey's strengthened geopolitical ambitions in the Caucasus post-war [6]. While Turkey promotes pan-Turkic identity, concerns exist in Azerbaijan about losing local identity to this assertive Turkish identity, though high-level cooperation prevents open expression of these sensitivities.

Religious and Educational Cooperation

Turkey has sought to promote its model of Islamic liberalism in secular Azerbaijan through:

- NGOs like the Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen network
- Charity organizations and cultural programs
- Government programs including satellite broadcasting, news distribution, Turkish-language books, schools, and promoting Turkish-style Latin script [13: 219-220]

Educational cooperation includes plans for a joint Turkey-Azerbaijan university to enhance scientific and technological collaboration [26], with about 35,000 Azerbaijani students currently studying in Turkish institutions [24].

Economic Interests

Beyond constructed ethnic and linguistic ties, Azerbaijan holds significant economic and geopolitical importance for Ankara. Turkey's economy is primarily focused on services and industry. Limited domestic energy resources on one hand and rapid industrial growth—and consequently, rising energy demand—on the other have made Turkey dependent on hydrocarbon imports. Turkey's ambitious economic and industrial export programs necessitate securing energy supply security and diversifying supplier markets. Azerbaijan, with its proven energy reserves, is a key country in this regard, playing an effective role in supplying and diversifying Turkey's hydrocarbon imports and transforming Turkey into an energy hub after Russia. Energy projects and other economic initiatives have taken bilateral relations

beyond emotional ties, fostering pragmatic, win-win cooperation between the two regional actors [14].

In this context, at the 29th Caspian International Oil and Gas Exhibition during Baku Energy Week, a natural gas supply and exchange agreement was signed between Turkey's BOTAŞ, Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR, and Azerbaijan's gas distribution company. Turkey's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Alparslan Bayraktar, and Azerbaijan's Economy Minister, Mikayil Jabbarov, extended the natural gas exchange agreement, originally set to conclude by the end of 2024, until 2030. Azerbaijan's Energy Minister, Parviz Shahbazov, stated during a meeting with a Turkish delegation that the two countries cooperate in many areas, from oil and natural gas to renewable energy and electricity interconnections. Azerbaijan exports its natural gas to Europe via Turkey and will increase gas exports to Europe through Turkey in the future. Bayraktar, Turkey's energy minister, emphasized the importance of energy security and strong regional cooperation to achieve it in his post-agreement speech. He added that through cooperation and synergy, resources can be used more efficiently, ensuring benefits are widely shared [25].

Alparslan Bayraktar noted that, based on a joint Ankara-Baku decision, supplying natural gas to Nakhchivan via Turkey's Iğdır province is feasible. According to the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, the natural gas for Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is supplied through Turkey via the Iğdır-Nakhchivan pipeline. Azerbaijan and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding on the Iğdır-Nakhchivan gas pipeline on December 15, 2020. The Iğdır-Nakhchivan pipeline diversifies Nakhchivan's gas supply, eliminating its dependence on a single source. This project is among the priority initiatives included in the state program for the socio-economic development of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for 2023-2027. The pipeline can transport 2 million cubic meters of gas per day and 730 million cubic meters annually, fully meeting Nakhchivan's gas demand [1]. With the opening of this pipeline, Nakhchivan no longer relies on Iranian gas, dealing an economic blow to Iran's interests in the region.

Geopolitical Interests

In the realm of geopolitical competition, Azerbaijan holds paramount importance for Turkey in the Caucasus. It can be considered the focal point and heart of Turkey's foreign policy in the region. Understanding Turkey's geopolitical ambitions in the region and Azerbaijan's role in achieving these objectives is essential to comprehending Ankara's foreign policy approach. Turkey's expansion

of influence in the Caucasus and its extension toward the Caspian Sea hinge on Azerbaijan's transformation into a key regional actor. Baku enables Turkey's penetration into a broader geographical sphere. Thus, following the Soviet Union's collapse, Turkey sought to establish its foothold in the Caucasus by supporting Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict, filling the power vacuum left by the USSR's dissolution.

Since 2015, nationalist figures in Turkey have gained prominence, advocating for Azerbaijan and prioritizing the geopolitics of European alliances and the Black Sea. Meanwhile, the Justice and Development Party's foreign policy has shifted from the early Erdogan-era "zero problems with neighbors" soft-power approach to unequivocal support for Baku in the Karabakh conflict. Given these realities, Turkey's foreign policy in the Caucasus and its relations with Armenia cannot be separated from its ties with Azerbaijan. Consequently, Ankara has consistently voiced support for Azerbaijan's positions, and its backing of Baku during the Karabakh crisis deepened tensions and hostility between Armenia and Turkey [7: 5-8].

Over the past decade, Turkey's regional activities have increasingly aligned with the militarization of its foreign policy strategy under President Erdogan's ideological influence. Its military-diplomatic intervention in the Second Karabakh War was an extension of its engagements in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Relying on military force in its South Caucasus operations, Turkey has moved away from a "no war, no peace" approach to resolving the Karabakh conflict. In recent years, Ankara and Baku have deepened their strategic relations under the "one nation, two states" concept, becoming a critical factor in regional power redistribution.

The push for the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" (or "Turan Corridor") following Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War is set to significantly alter regional geopolitics in favor of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Ankara aims to control Eurasian transit geopolitics by sidelining Russia and Iran through this corridor, framed as the "Middle Corridor." This route connects China to Kazakhstan, then via the Aktau and Kuryk ports in the northeastern Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, extending further through Georgia to Turkey. By establishing the "Zangezur route" through Armenia's Syunik province, Turkey could directly access the Caspian Sea and Central Asia via Azerbaijani territory without transiting Georgia. The war in Ukraine has amplified the geostrategic importance of the Middle Corridor as the third Eurasian transit vector linking Asia and Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and Turkey, presenting Ankara with a unique opportunity [9].

The Implications of Turkey's New Foreign Policy Approach on the National Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus

With the rise of Erdogan's government, Turkey adopted a policy of expanding neighborhood influence. In this context, the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan, given their shared ethnic and linguistic identity as well as transit and transportation potential, became a focal point for Ankara. Following the outbreak of the 2020 Karabakh conflict, Turkey intensified its efforts to expand influence in the South Caucasus through comprehensive support for Azerbaijan. Turkey's foreign policy in the region, based on military, economic, cultural, and geopolitical factors, has threatened Iran's national interests in three key areas:

- 1) Ethnic-Security (promoting pan-Turkic ideologies)
- 2) Geopolitical (altering regional geography through the "Zangezur Corridor")
- 3) Economic (seeking to become a transit and energy hub for Central Asia and the South Caucasus)

The Spread of Pan-Turkic Ideology in the South Caucasus

Ankara's strategy to strengthen ties with Baku and expand influence in the South Caucasus heavily relies on pan-Turkic messaging. This approach seeks to capitalize on Turkic language, history, and culture, imposing it across a vast region from northwestern Iran to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and China. Iranian officials and analysts are deeply concerned about this trend, particularly Turkey's potential to incite Iranian Azeris amid rising tensions between Tehran and Ankara. Iran has grown increasingly wary of Turkey's pan-Turkic agenda in the South Caucasus and Central Asia due to its potential repercussions on Iran's Azeri-populated regions [3].

According to Iranian officials, the Turkey-Azerbaijan alignment in promoting pan-Turkism against Iran is notably supported by Israel. Amid Russia's involvement in Ukraine, some in Tehran anticipate that Ankara and Baku will further advance pan-Turkic rhetoric, inevitably leading to confrontation with Iran [27]. Discussions on uniting Turkic states have increasingly included references to "all Azeri people," including those in Iran. For instance, at the 2022 Summit of Turkic States in Samarkand, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized strengthening ties between so-called "North Azerbaijan" (Azerbaijan) and "South Azerbaijan" (Iranian Azeris), implicitly endorsing the idea of a unified Azerbaijan [11].

In line with this aggressive rhetoric, Turkish President Erdogan, during his December 2020 visit to Baku, recited a poem lamenting the separation of Azeri-speaking populations by the Aras River [15]. Iran perceived this as a direct affront

to its territorial integrity. Tehran is particularly concerned that recent geopolitical gains by the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis could fuel ethno-political demands for a “Greater Azerbaijan.” Iran views Turkey’s pan-Turkic maneuvers in the South Caucasus as part of Ankara’s broader strategy to revive a “Turkic world” bloc.

Iran fears that Turkey’s growing geopolitical influence among Azeris could destabilize its northern provinces and threaten territorial integrity. After Azerbaijan’s victory in the 2020 Karabakh War, President Aliyev adopted an unprecedented aggressive tone toward Iran. At the Ninth Summit of Turkic States, he indirectly referenced Iran’s Azeri minority, stating: “The Turkic world is not limited to independent Turkic states; its geographical boundaries are much wider.” Aliyev’s remarks were interpreted as a direct challenge to Iran’s sovereignty, as he declared: “We will do everything to protect Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, including those living in Iran. They are part of our nation.”

While Iran does not view Baku’s claims as an immediate security threat, it remains deeply troubled by the rising pan-Turkic sentiment leveraged by regional rivals—Turkey and Israel. Tehran’s greater concern is that Azerbaijan could serve as a tool for hostile powers to expand influence in northwestern Iran. The rise of Turkic nationalism in Erdogan’s Eurasian activism and its growing sway in Azerbaijan has heightened Iranian anxieties, particularly as Erdogan positions himself as the staunch protector of the entire Turkic world, including Azeris on both sides of the Aras River [9].

Iran is well aware that this is not merely Baku’s game—Illham Aliyev is but a minor player in a much older geopolitical struggle dating back to World War I. Many of the powers that once sought to partition Iran have since faded from history, disintegrated, or retreated within their borders. Iran’s national identity is not based on ethnicity; rather, all ethnic groups, regardless of language or religion, identify as Iranian and unite under a shared national identity. Nevertheless, Iran remains vigilant against the destabilizing actions of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The “Zangezur Corridor” Initiative

The Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly stated since the beginning of the Second Karabakh War that it is “opposed to any changes in borders” in the region [17]. The issue of border changes, the closure of Iran-Armenia land borders, and the land swap proposal between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not unprecedented. Paul Goble first proposed this idea in 1992, followed by Turkey’s “twin corridors” concept the same year. A few years later, Azerbaijani and Armenian officials negotiated a “land swap” plan under this framework, which failed due to domestic

opposition in both countries.

Iran's 42-kilometer border with Armenia has become one of the most strategically critical land routes. An analysis of Iranian media and scholarly reactions to the proposed "Turan Corridor" ("Zangezur Corridor") reveals that the primary concern revolves around potential changes to national borders, particularly the risk of severing the Iran-Armenia land connection [15]. In 2022, Iran deployed approximately 50,000 troops along the border to signal to Turkey and Azerbaijan that it would not tolerate any alteration of internationally recognized borders and that Armenia's territorial integrity must be preserved. The reopening of Iran's consulate in Syunik in August 2022 was widely interpreted by regional analysts as a clear demonstration of Iran's commitment to Armenia's sovereignty [19].

Former Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian emphasized during the consulate's inauguration in Kapan (Syunik's regional capital) that Iran would not allow the blocking of its transit route with Armenia. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei explicitly warned Putin and Erdogan in July 2022 that any plan disrupting Iran's historic border with Armenia would be unacceptable [9].

Kamal Kharrazi, head of Iran's Foreign Policy Strategic Council and former foreign minister, warned in an article titled "The Plot to Create NATO's Turan Corridor" that completing the Zangezur Corridor would have significant geopolitical consequences for Iran, Russia, and China. Kharrazi argued that the "NATO Turan Corridor" could directly bring NATO to Iran's northern border, Russia's southern frontier, and China's Xinjiang region, completing an encirclement strategy aimed at fragmenting these states. NATO's presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia complements Russia's containment via the Black Sea, China's through the South China Sea, and Iran's via the Persian Gulf [21].

The proposed "Zangezur Corridor" threatens Iran's interests in multiple ways:

1. Loss of Iran's monopoly over connectivity between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan.
2. Increased dependence on Azerbaijan for trade/transit with Armenia, subordinating Iran's South Caucasus access to Turkish-Azerbaijani political will.
3. Diminished role in East-West transit routes, as the corridor could integrate with China's Belt and Road Initiative via Turkey, bypassing Iran.

The security implications are equally critical, as the corridor would:

- Reinforce pan-Turkist ideologies near Iran's borders.
- Facilitate NATO's southward expansion into the South Caucasus.

Given post-Ukraine war dynamics in the Black Sea and Turkey's revived strategic value to NATO, Ankara's involvement signals the alliance's geopolitical footprint in reshaping the South Caucasus [9]. Tehran's concerns are compounded by Erdogan's post-election policies, which Iran views as excessively ambitious if not expansionist—extending beyond the Caucasus to competitive theaters like Iraq and Syria [3].

Transit and Energy

The competition between Iran and Turkey extends beyond cultural and geopolitical dimensions to include economic aspects. The uneasy rivalry between Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus also carries geoeconomic implications. Tehran views Ankara as its primary geoeconomic competitor in the South Caucasus, seeking to marginalize Iran from key transit and energy routes. Due to its unique geographical position, Iran serves as a transit bridge connecting West Asia to Europe and East Asia. However, powers such as the United States oppose Iran's effective involvement in transregional projects that could bring it economic benefits. Meanwhile, Turkey aims to replace Iran's role as a regional hub for trade and transit.

Turkey's efforts, including initiatives to connect with Central Asia via the Caspian Sea through the Middle Corridor, pose a direct challenge to Iran's interests. This corridor links Turkey to the Caucasus through Georgia and Azerbaijan and further extends via a maritime route across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia and China. A subsidiary component of this strategy is the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan Transit Corridor Agreement, also known as the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. This project seeks to develop a transit route from Central Asia and Afghanistan to the Black and Mediterranean Seas, bypassing Iran's transport networks and jeopardizing its trade relations with Afghanistan and Central Asian countries [27].

Iran's primary transit advantage lies in its position along the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). To fully leverage this, Iran has pursued projects such as developing the Chabahar Port in cooperation with India and expanding transit links with Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, the activation of the Middle Corridor—which requires the construction of the Zangezur segment—significantly diminishes Iran's competitive edge in international transit [15]. Turkey seeks to establish “route dependency” in its relations with neighboring countries and regions, positioning itself at the heart of East-West energy and transit corridors. Achieving this goal requires Turkey's active presence in areas where China-Europe

transit routes are planned, making the South Caucasus crucial. Iran, with its ability to offer alternative routes, is seen as an obstacle that must be circumvented.

The Middle Corridor is designed to connect China to Kazakhstan and then, via the Aktau and Kuryk ports in the northeastern Caspian Sea, to Azerbaijan. Currently, this route extends through Georgia to Turkey. However, if the southern Zangezur route through Armenia's Syunik Province is operationalized, Turkey could gain direct access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia via Azerbaijan, bypassing Georgia. The Ukraine war has amplified the geostrategic significance of the Middle Corridor as the third vector of Eurasian transit, linking Asia and Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and Turkey [5].

From Turkey's strategic perspective, the Middle Corridor is highly attractive not only for establishing direct connectivity with Eurasia but also for reducing the dependence of Turkic-speaking countries on Russia and Iran. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the ongoing Ukraine conflict have shifted regional power dynamics, creating unprecedented opportunities for Turkey to strengthen its strategic partnerships with Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan through multilateral initiatives like the Trans-Caspian International Route and the Organization of Turkic States. Deepening ties between Turkey and Central Asian republics—coupled with their desire to rely less on Russia and China—provide Turkey with greater leverage to expand its foothold in East-West corridor dynamics.

Turkey also shares geoeconomic interests with the European Union in developing the Middle Corridor, as the EU seeks to diversify energy sources and enhance supply chain resilience. Unsurprisingly, the Middle Corridor's establishment would diminish Russian and Iranian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia while boosting Turkey's and the EU's role in shaping Eurasia's geoeconomic landscape.

Growing concerns in Tehran over Turkey-backed transit projects—particularly the Trans-Caspian Corridor—have prompted Iran to advance the INSTC via Armenia. The INSTC is a multimodal network of shipping, rail, and road routes linking the Persian Gulf and Indian ports to Russia. Tehran and Moscow, alongside India and recently Armenia, have taken practical steps to implement this corridor. Beyond its numerous geoeconomic benefits, the Ukraine conflict and subsequent Western sanctions against Russia have been the strongest drivers in accelerating this transit route [9].

Conclusion

Ankara has been one of the key regional actors in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The country's regional policy gained momentum with the rise of Islamist parties, particularly the Justice and Development Party, transforming Turkey into an influential player in the region. The strengthening of Azerbaijan's position in the political and security dynamics of the Caucasus—and, consequently, the increase in its geopolitical weight—can be seen as an extension of Turkey's influence not only in the South Caucasus but also in Central Asia.

Initially, by enhancing cultural, political, and economic ties with Azerbaijan, Turkey managed to expand its influence in the country while laying the groundwork for deeper security and military cooperation. Before the outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey's role in the South Caucasus was limited due to Russia's dominance in the region. However, Ankara's strategy of aligning with Baku under the "One Nation, Two States" framework, its active role in Azerbaijan's victory in Karabakh, and the elevation of bilateral relations to an alliance through the Shushi Declaration have significantly bolstered Turkey's standing in the South Caucasus. This development, coupled with the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's preoccupation with managing the conflict after the 2020 hostilities, has provided Ankara with additional opportunities.

Turkey's post-Second Karabakh War foreign policy, rooted in the theory of offensive realism, seeks to maximize its presence and power in the South Caucasus, reflecting an expansionist foreign policy approach. A key tenet of offensive realism is the pursuit of hegemony in regional and global affairs vis-à-vis rival powers. In this context, Turkey's recent foreign policy maneuvers in the South Caucasus—particularly its engagement with Azerbaijan—demonstrate its ambition to become the central actor in regional developments, spanning transit, energy, geopolitics, and security. This shift negatively impacts the interests of other regional players, including the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the realm of transit and energy, Ankara's push to develop the Middle Corridor aims to weaken and eliminate competing routes, particularly those involving Iran and Russia. Turkey's geopolitical ambitions, manifested in the Zangezur Corridor initiative and direct access to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, pose a significant threat to Iran's interests by altering the South Caucasus' geopolitical landscape.

In terms of regional security, Turkey's growing presence threatens Tehran's interests on multiple levels. First, as a NATO member, Turkey's expanding military-

security role in the region equates to NATO's creeping influence in the South Caucasus and along Iran's northwestern borders. Second, Ankara and Baku's promotion of pan-Turkist ideologies—including the fabricated concepts of "Greater Azerbaijan" and "South Azerbaijan"—poses an existential threat to Iran's territorial integrity.

In summary, following the Second Karabakh War and leveraging Russia's entanglement in Ukraine, Turkey has pursued an expansionist agenda in the South Caucasus across political, military, and economic dimensions. This approach jeopardizes Iran's national interests in the region, including regional security (through pan-Turkist narratives and potential NATO encroachment), exclusion from transit and energy routes, and shifts in regional geopolitics (via the "Zangezur Corridor").

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ԵՐԿՐՈՐԴ ՂԱՐԱՔԱՂՅԱՆ ՊԱՏԵՐԱԶՄԸ. ԹՈՒՐՔԻԱՅԻ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՀԱՐԱՎԱՅԻՆ ԿՈՎԿԱՍՈՒՄ ԵՎ ԻՐԱՆԻ ՌԱԶՄԱՎԱՐԱԿԱՆ ՇԱՀԵՐԸ

Մոհամմադ Աֆրասիյաբ

Հիմնաբառեր – Երկրորդ ղարաբաղյան պատերազմ, հարավկովկասյան աշխարհաքաղաքականություն, պանթուրքականություն, Իրանի աշխարհաքաղաքական շահեր

Ամփոփում

Նեո-օսմանյան քաղաքականության համատեքստում Թուրքիան Հարավային Կովկասը դիտարկում է որպես իր էնթիկ և ինքնութենական տարածքի մաս՝ խորացնելով քաղաքական, տնտեսական և անվտանգային կապերն Ադրբեջանի հետ՝ «մեկ ազգ, երկու պետություն» կարգախոսի ներքո: Ադրբեջանի և Հայաստանի միջև 2020 թվականի հակամարտության հետևանքով անվտանգային հարացույցի փոփոխությունը հնարավորություն է տվել Անկարային վերափոխել իր գործառնական միջավայրը Հարավային Կովկասում՝ վերածվելով տարածաշրջանային դերակատարի: Երկրորդ ղարաբաղյան պատերազմում Թուրքիայի հաստատական ներգրավվածությունը և աներկբա աջակցությունը Բաքվին լրջագույն մարտահրավերներ են առաջացրել տարածաշրջանում Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետության ազգային շահերի համար: Այս հետազոտությունն արծարծում է հետևյալ հարցը՝ *որո՞նք են Թուրքիայի արտաքին քաղաքականության մոտեցման չափումները Հարավային Կովկասում Երկրորդ ղարաբաղյան պատերազմից հետո, և ինչպես այն կանդրադառնա Իրանի աշխարհաքաղաքական և աշխարհամշակութային շահերի վրա տարածաշրջանում*: Համաձայն ներկայացված հիպոթեզի՝ Թուրքիայի հետպատերազմյան արտաքին քաղաքականությունը՝ հիմնված Անկարա-Բաքու ռազմավարական դաշինքի, էթնիկ-ինքնութենական նարատիվների, տնտեսական-ռազմական ինտեգրացիայի վրա, հարվածի տակ է դնելու Իրանի անվտանգային, աշխարհաքաղա-

քական և տնտեսական շահերը Հարավային Կովկասում: Ուսումնասիրությունը, ընդգրկելով 2020–2023 թվականները, վերլուծում է Թուրքիայի ռազմավարությունը տարածաշրջանում և դրա հետևանքները Իրանի ռազմավարական դիրքի համար: