

## UNITED STATES-IRAN RELATIONS: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR ARMENIA AND BEYOND\*

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“Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent.”<sup>1</sup>

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This study is a comparative analysis of the United States - Iran relations and the resultant security and geo-economic implications on Armenia and beyond. It deals with the fundamentals of regional security and geopolitical and economic imperatives of the United States, Iran, and Armenia. Notwithstanding a solid rationale for mutually beneficial economic and political partnership, the Iranian nuclear issue and the relations of enmity between the United States and Iran have generated mutual mistrust making the reconciliation initiatives difficult. Hence, the paper takes into consideration the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The normalization of the US-Iran relations will fundamentally transform the regional security architecture. The issue is of crucial relevance for Armenia. The paper utilizes the materialist and constructivist framework of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, *par excellence* the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), to contextualize both the geostrategic ideas and practices. The empirical starting point for this study is the fact that Iran – with its vast energy reserves, huge export potential, and key geopolitical location in Eurasia – has the potential to become a regional stabilizer and significantly diminish the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges of the wider region opening a myriad of opportunities for Armenia as a transit route to Europe. Effectively this can happen with the US-Iran rapprochement. This comprehensive perspective allows us better understand the structure of regional security and prospects of stability *vis-à-vis* grand geopolitical designs.

**Keywords:** *United States, Iran, Armenia, geopolitics, regional security, RSCT theory, Caucasus*

### Introduction

Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the United States - Iran relations have undergone dramatic developments, characterized by a whole bunch of ups and downs. Notwithstanding a solid rationale for mutually beneficial eco-

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\* This [article/publication] was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

Սույն [հոդվածը/հրատարակությունը] ֆինանսավորվել է ԱՄՆ պետքարտուղարության դրամաշնորհի շրջանակում: Այստեղ արտահայտված են հեղինակ(ներ)ի դիրքորոշումները, որոնց համարնկնումը ԱՄՆ պետքարտուղարության դիրքորոշումներին պարտադիր չէ:

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), p. 41.

conomic and political partnership, the latter has faced mounting challenges, the bulk of which remain unaddressed. The normalization of the US-Iran relations will fundamentally transform the regional security architecture. The issue is of crucial relevance for Armenia. The empirical starting point for this study is the fact that Iran, with its vast energy reserves, huge export potential, and key geopolitical location in Eurasia, has the potential to become a regional stabilizer and significantly diminish the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges of the wider region opening a myriad of opportunities for Armenia as a transit route. Effectively this can happen with the US-Iran rapprochement, a possible process, which has been interrupted with the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The actuality of this topic is dictated by two main objectives: Firstly, there is a substantial gap in the existing literature relating to the economic and (geo)political dimensions of US-Iran relations in the context of security implications for Armenia. Namely, the academic discussions are missing an integrated (geo)political and (geo)economic approach to the potential Iran-Armenia-Georgia corridor in connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea, i.e. Indian Ocean with Europe, and Armenia's potential as a transit route for Iranian gas to Europe.

Secondly, there is a necessity to better understand what has prevented the US from rapprochement with Iran on the domestic and the international level. As the Iranian foreign and security policy in the South Caucasus has been based on *raison d'État*, rather than on ideological sentiments. While a variety of International Relations issues (the Iranian nuclear program,<sup>2</sup> the Islamic revolution<sup>3</sup>), and Armenia's foreign policy-related ones have occupied the minds of scholars from various disciplines, little to no attention has been devoted to the multidimensional analysis of underlying dynamics of US-Iran relations, rapprochement or deterioration, vis-à-vis Armenia. Hence, the paper is aimed at evaluating the US foreign policy towards Iran and its security implications for Armenia.

This study utilizes the framework of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, particularly the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The application of Regional Security Complex Theory enables us to get a better grasp of the US foreign and security policy towards the wider region. The RSCT differentiates between the system level interplay of the global powers, who have geographically transcendental power projection capabilities, and the subsystem level interplay of regional powers and small states, whose main security environment is their local region. The core idea of RSCT, mainly based on materialist and constructivist approaches, suggests that most threats travel more easily over short distances, security interdependence is patterned into regionally based security complexes. Historically, most states have been primarily concerned with the power capabilities and intentions of their neighbors. Therefore, the processes of securitization and the level of security interdependence are more strained and keen between the states within such complexes. The global powers are penetrating security complexes, nevertheless,

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<sup>2</sup> Donette Murray, *US Foreign Policy and Iran: American-Iranian Relations since the Islamic Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010);

<sup>3</sup> Fereydoon Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution* (London and Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

the regional dynamics of these complexes are substantially autonomous from the patterns superimposed by the global powers. On the materialist layer, RSCT takes aspects of territoriality and balance of power, i.e. it is substantially close to the neorealist perspective. On the constructivist layer, RSCT is based on the theory of securitization focusing on the political processes and ideas by which concepts of security are constituted. Hence, RSCT treats the distribution of power and amity/enmity patterns as substantially autonomous variables. This theory provides a conceptual framework for comparative studies in regional security.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the studies about Iran as an energy supplier use quantification as a forecasting tool and do not incorporate political change into these analyses.<sup>5</sup> Some authors predominantly focus on elite change in Iran assessing its implications for the US-Iran relations. The South Caucasus is under permanent international attention, and many of the recent publications cover all aspects of current affairs and developments in the region, focusing mostly on ethnic problems, and external powers' interests.<sup>6</sup> Buzan and Waever refer to the South Caucasian part of Eastern Europe as a mini-complex.<sup>7</sup> In essence, the South Caucasus mini-complex plus Iran is a vital security pivot for both the US and the EU, and Russia. According to Brzezinski, for the next several decades, the most dangerous region of the world with the potential to plunge the world into chaos will be the region surrounding Iran - the new "Global Balkans." The US with the EU can foster regional stability and transform Iran from a "regional ogre into a regional stabilizer." With such an alliance the US becomes Superpower Plus. Without the EU, the US is still predominant but not globally omnipotent.<sup>8</sup> This can build a prospect for the EU-Georgia-Armenia-Iran geo-economic and political corridor providing access to essential resources of Iran and Central Eurasia, and China's Silk Road economic zone.<sup>9</sup> It will enable Armenia to considerably diversify its security and energy supplies making it an actor of the North-South Transport Corridor.<sup>10</sup> Iran's geopolitical location in the Eurasian continent as a bridge between various regions (Europe-Iran-Middle East, Europe-Iran-Asia) makes it subject to volatile geopolitical processes. So, Armenia-Iran relations might be indicative of stable West-Iran relations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 91 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Gawdat Bahgat (ed.), *Energy Security: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Washington: Wiley, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethno political Conflict in the Caucasus* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis E-Library, 2005); Uwe Halbach, "Oil and the Great Game in the Caucasus: The "Caspian Region" as the Geopolitical Rediscovery of the 1990s." In: *IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2004* (Baden-Baden 2005), pp. 275-285.

<sup>7</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's New Silk Road Diplomacy," *Polish Institute of International Affairs*, Policy Paper No. 34 (82), December 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Tigran Yepremyan, "The Geopolitical Dimension of the Eastern Partnership: An Alternative to Solution." *European Studies Journal*, № 10, Eastern Partnership: Self-Determination and Geopolitics / Geoculture (II), 2017, pp. 89-108.

<sup>11</sup> Arman Gasparyan, "Iranian Energy Policy towards the South Caucasus from the Perspective of

Thus, after the 2020 44-day Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) war, the issues pertained to economic, political, geopolitical dimensions of US-Iran relations with a special emphasis on their security implications for Armenia have gained new relevance. Hence, the paper aims at exploring the underlying dynamics of economic and geopolitical dimensions of US-Iran relations with an emphasis on their security implications for Armenia.

### **The United States and the Structure of Regional Security: Theoretical Framework**

The United States had emerged from the Cold War as the only superpower. Many thought that America will successfully lead in bringing democracy from the west to the rest of the world. The US grand strategy has followed this basic prescription and analyses of optimist political thinkers, such as Fukuyama and Huntington, for the first two decades since the end of the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the policy results have not been successful including disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the destabilization of the wider Middle East caused by the resultant geopolitical vacuum. The US also has not been successful in solving one of its most important foreign-policy problems, the Iranian nuclear program, i.e. shutting down Iran's uranium-enrichment capability for fear that it might lead to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>13</sup>

The End of History was quickly followed by the return of history.<sup>14</sup> The profound optimism of the early 1990s has given way to a current pronounced pessimism, as the United States found itself as the world's lone superpower in an increasingly multipolar world. With increasingly difficult power projection possibilities, some realist thinkers see offshore balancing as an option with dealing with current and prospective geopolitical challenges. As John Mearsheimer puts it, "Offshore balancing, which was America's traditional grand strategy for most of its history, is but another option. Predicated on the belief that there are three regions of the world that are strategically important to the United States—Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf... This is to ensure that dangerous rivals in other regions are forced to concentrate their attention on great powers in their own backyards rather than be free to interfere in America's. The best way to achieve that end is to rely on local powers to counter aspiring regional hegemony..."<sup>15</sup> According to Mearsheimer's *selective engagement* approach, Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf are the only regions where America should consider permanently deploying its military for maintaining balance, peace, and stability. As the destabilization in these key regions will harm the American economy and will eventually cause a military engagement.<sup>16</sup>

According to the RSCT theory, there are four levels of analysis to look at

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Neo-Liberalism Theory," *Spectra*, 3(1) February 19, 2014. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v3i1.293>.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *The National Interest*, N. 111, January/February 2011, pp. 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Welsh, *The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century* (The CBC Massey Lectures: House of Anansi Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," p. 18.

and to interrelate: First, domestically generated vulnerabilities of the states of the region, their internal order, state-society relations, the kind of security fears; second, state-to-state relations that generate the security region; third, the region's interaction with neighboring regions - this level grows in significance during major changes in the patterns of security interdependence that determine RSCs and in situations of massive asymmetries a RSC without global powers that neighbors a complex with a global power might have solid interregional links; and forth, the role of global powers in the region and its interplay with regional security structures. These four levels together generate the security constellation.<sup>17</sup> The RSCT theory encompasses also the idea of sub-complexes, which is a 'half-level' within the RSC and has the same definition as RSCs. While a sub-complex has distinctive patterns of security interdependence, it is a component within and subject to a wider pattern of larger RSC. For instance, separate sub-complexes are observed in the Middle East such as the Gulf sub-complex comprising Iran, Iraq, GCC countries. In the Russia-centered post-Soviet complex, there are distinct security dynamics in the different areas - the western group of states, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The Caucasus is currently a sub-complex within the post-soviet RSC with the potential for becoming a mini-complex in the case of the South Caucasus.<sup>18</sup>

The distinctive feature of a regional subsystem, a space between the general trends of the global system and the unit-level inter-state interactions, is the geographical proximity of the constituent states. This situation provides unique dynamics to their interactions based on power relations, amity, and enmity forms. Hence, a regional subsystem is defined as a "security complex," which is an empirical phenomenon with historical and geographical roots, and results from the interaction between states. As security threats operate more effectively over short distances, security interactions with neighbors are a priority.<sup>19</sup> The Caucasus sub-complex is in many ways integrated closely into the Russia-centered security complex, especially in terms of military security, and in some respects, for Europe and Russia, it plays a role of an insulator towards the Middle East, China, Turkey, Iran, and South Asia.<sup>20</sup>

Despite efforts by Iran right after the disintegration of the Soviet Union to become a key player in the South Caucasus, it has not been able to consolidate its long-term geo-economic presence. In contrast, Turkey has succeeded geo-economically and geopolitically in engaging in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The ethnolinguistic factor reinforced by the ambitions of authoritarian rulers has cemented the Turkish-Azerbaijani geo-economic ties and military-political alliance. The Turkish-Azerbaijani geo-economic and geopolitical axis traverse Georgia and Nakhichevan. Turkey's economic presence in Georgia is also impressive. Hence, a ground is being prepared for expanding Turkey's power projection capability eastward. On the other side, Iran faces serious national secu-

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<sup>17</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 454- 455.

<sup>19</sup> Khatchik Derghoukassian, "Balance of Power, Democracy and Development: Armenia in the South Caucasian Regional Security Complex," *Universidad de San Andres (Argentina) and AIPRG*, Working Paper No. 06/10, January, 2006, pp. 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 454- 455.

rity challenges with the Turkish eastward expansion and has confrontational relations with the United States. Hence, Iran as a historically significant regional power aspires for the consolidation of its regional presence in the Middle East and the South Caucasus.<sup>21</sup>

The South Caucasus has historically been at the crossroads of West and East, North and South, an arena of clash and concert of different civilizations. Samuel Huntington highlighted the relevance of the civilizational paradigm to the emerging world by the international events such as Iran's call for alliances with China and India in order to influence the international processes. Moreover, many East Asian and South-East Asian nations, the Gulf Arabic states and, to a certain degree, Iran have become modern societies without becoming Western. Certainly, the Shah's efforts and, later after the 1979 revolution, the efforts of the governments of the Islamic Republic "generated an intense anti-Western but not anti-modern reaction."<sup>22</sup> Buzan's and Waever's view of regions and contemporary structure of international security contrasts Huntington's theory of the Clash of Civilizations. The two theoretical approaches are outwardly similar in emphasizing the importance of a distinct middle level between the global system and state. Huntington conceptualizes the clash of civilizations, such as Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Hindu, Sinic, etc., highlighting the emergence of dangerous conflicts at the fault lines of these macro-units.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, Buzan and Waever emphasize that the borders between security regions are zones of weak interaction and are usually determined by geography, and security regions are composed of subsystems in which most of the security interaction is internal. Thence, states fear their neighbors and ally with other regional actors. Huntington's specification of the frontiers of civilizations, which highlights cultural affinities, varies from Buzan's and Waever's borderlines of security regions as regional security complexes, although influenced by cultural factors, are defined by the actual political patterns of security practices.<sup>24</sup> For instance, according to the RSCT Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is internal to the regional security mini complex, and inter-civilizational per Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations. And Iran, although 'civilizationally' (religiously) linked with Azerbaijan, has closer relations and a 'strategic' partnership with Armenia.<sup>25</sup>

The South Caucasus mini RSC is established with lasting patterns of amity and enmity, which takes the shape of geographically logical patterns of security interdependence. It is affected by historical peculiarities, civilizational factors, and long-standing enmities, which are formed as a result of the interplay between the anarchic structure and its balance of power, and the strains of local geographical proximity. So, geographical adjacency generates more security interaction among neighbors than among states of different regions. Adjacency is fundamental for security for many threats travel more easily over short dis-

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<sup>21</sup> Derghoukassian, "Balance of Power, Democracy and Development," pp. 1-18.

<sup>22</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, pp. 38-39, 77.

<sup>23</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

<sup>24</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Julien Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran: Two (Not So) Strange Companions Geopolitical Stakes and Significance of a Special Relationship," *Iran and the Caucasus* 12 (2008), pp. 123-124.

tances and the effect of geographical proximity on security interaction is most durable. As insecurity is often associated with physical proximity, the global network of security interdependence is variable: anarchy, geography, and the distance effect together compose the pattern of this regionally-based cluster.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to regional powers and small states, the superpower like the United States, having accumulated wide-ranging interests and huge capabilities, transcend the logic of geography and adjacency in their security relationships and can engage their rivalries over the globe. While states with limited capabilities mostly constrain their security interests and policies to their neighbors. Thus, great powers incline to override the regional imperative, and regional powers to reinforce it. So, small states usually find themselves locked into a RSC with their neighbors, great powers usually penetrate several adjacent regions, and superpowers engage in the affairs of the whole planet. The global powers are being linked to the regional dynamics of RSCs through the mechanism of penetration, which happens when outside powers make security alignments with states within the security complex. The enmity between Armenia and Azerbaijan demands or provides opportunities for the great powers to penetrate the region. The logic of equilibrium and the need for balancing the powers in this anarchic system encourages the local states to seek the help of or alliance with regional and global powers, thus the local patterns of rivalry become linked to the global ones.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in conditions of the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis, Armenia is allied with Russia, ‘associated’ with Europe, and has good neighborly ties with Iran.<sup>28</sup> Albeit, the balancing and regionally stabilizing potential of Iran is not sufficiently utilized due to its enmity with the United States and uneasy relations with Europe.<sup>29</sup>

The RSCs are durable substructures with a strong geographical component and have both internal structures and external frontiers that are essential to monitor continuity and change and to distinguish significant change from less important events. Buzan and Waever outline three possible evolutions to a RSC in time: preservation of the status quo; internal transformation within the complex and changes to the anarchic structure or polarity on the grounds of regional integration or disintegration, conquest, or changes to the dominant patterns of amity/enmity because of ideological shifts and regime changes; and external transformation by expansion or shrinks of the outer boundary, changing the membership of the RSC and transforming its essential structure. This happens when two RSCs merge or two RSCs split out from one. The merger of two RSCs might happen if a geo-economically and geopolitically significant grand infrastructure be in place.<sup>30</sup> In the case of prospective North-South Transport Corridor connecting the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea and India to Europe through Iran-Armenia-Georgia, India and Iran will become

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<sup>26</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>27</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Tigran Yepremyan, “Armenia Within the Complex of ‘Overlapping Authority and Multiple Loyalty’: Security Challenges,” In: *The European Union and The Eastern Partnership: Security Challenges*. Ed. Vasile Cucerescu, Carlos E. Pacheco Amaral, Ioan Horga [et al.]. Supplement to *Eurolimes Journal*, 2018, pp. 227-241.

<sup>29</sup> Yepremyan, “The Geopolitical Dimension of the Eastern Partnership,” pp. 89-108.

<sup>30</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 53.

dramatically concerned with the processes in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Then, we might analyze the possibility of a potential *Indo-European supercomplex*, i.e. “a set of RSCs within which the presence of one or more great powers generates relatively high and consistent levels of interregional security dynamics.”<sup>31</sup>

Due to Iran’s and Turkey’s economic, security, and geopolitical interests and gradual engagement in the South Caucasus, external transformation by northward expansion of the Middle Eastern RSC / the Gulf sub-complex into the Caucasus can also be possible. As Turkey is increasingly abandoning its position as an insulator between the Middle East and European RSCs by engagement in Syria and Iraq, threatening the EU with opening the borders for refugees and attempting to violate the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus and Greece, also Turkey is being engaged in the post-soviet space. Particularly, Turkey intervened into the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war by its military, terrorist groups and mercenaries transferred from the Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, the main objectives in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus continue to be the control of current and prospective oil and gas pipelines, transportation routes, and East-West, North-South corridors. Here the interests of the US, the EU, Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Iran intersect. For America and Russia, it is also a way to gain influence or prevent others from doing so.<sup>33</sup> In the geostrategic context, the US supports Georgia, Turkey is highly linked with Azerbaijan, while Russia both with Armenia and Azerbaijan trying to gain benefits from both of them regarding its grand project of reintegration of post-soviet space through its Eurasian project. While Iran has more balanced positions and has good neighborly relations with Armenia. In spite of the incompleteness and a certain degree of mistrust in their relations, and Tehran’s often double-faced positions towards the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Iran and Armenia understand each other’s legitimate security concerns and limitations of their geostrategic links.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to America’s position in the EU-Europe, which is remarkable due to the high degree of institutionalization by the establishment of superregional blocks, its position in the post-soviet complex and the Middle East varies, as the post-soviet complex is not interlinked with the US close enough and it contains a traditional great power, Russia, while the Middle East is torn by proxy/civil wars, regime-changes, power competition, failed states and the geopolitical vacuum left by the unfinished US regional designs and unsuccessful policies. These explain the uncertainty and ambivalence in American–Russian relations and the enmity in American–Iranian relations beyond the nuclear issue. As Buzan and Waever put it, “Whichever of these futures lies ahead, the struc-

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<sup>31</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 492.

<sup>32</sup> Tigran Yepremyan, “Why Europe should care about Nagorno-Karabakh: A Civilisational and Geopolitical Perspective,” *New Eastern Europe - A bimonthly magazine dedicated to Central and Eastern European Affairs*, November 3, 2020. Accessible at: [https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/03/why-europe-should-care-about-nagornokarabakh-a-civilisational-and-geopolitical-perspective/?fbclid=IwAR2DVCvc9du\\_HZ0UFh5RlXHZrUXhy9A4pn5ycnlS2aFEPDfSujgw8bW7yE](https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/03/why-europe-should-care-about-nagornokarabakh-a-civilisational-and-geopolitical-perspective/?fbclid=IwAR2DVCvc9du_HZ0UFh5RlXHZrUXhy9A4pn5ycnlS2aFEPDfSujgw8bW7yE).

<sup>33</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 422.

<sup>34</sup> Alla Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West: Between History and Geopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 131.



ture of international security will be defined by the interplay of regions and powers.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, there is a strong interregional level of security dynamics in the South Caucasus, which arise from the great power spillover into the mini complex and the extremes of national and global security interplay at the regional level. At the interregional level, the US and the EU interact with Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The constructivist basis of the RSC theory is concerned with the formation and operation of RSCs, as regional systems are not just a mechanical reflection of the distribution of power, but are subjects of interpretations, ideas, and actions of actor states. Therefore, both the US and Iran are confronting not each other's power but the threats of power. So, the evolution of perceptions of each other's powers reinforced by commercial ties and institutional obligations can create more cooperative relations contributing to the de-securitization and regional stability.

### **America and Iran: Relations and Geopolitical Imperatives**

Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, America has confronted distinct crises, each drawing it into deeper engagement in the Middle East. These crises have reshaped the Middle East and the United States' role in it. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran was transformed from a US ally into one of its most uncompliant opponents in the region and beyond, while the relations of enmity between the United States and Iran in 40 years have accumulated a long list of grievances, making the reconciliation initiatives difficult. In Iran, for some segments of the political and religious elite, enmity with America has become an issue of legitimacy, which is intertwined with intra-regime ideological and power competition. Accordingly, for the past 40 years, neither most of the Iranian governments have looked at the relations with America in light of realism and Iran's national interests, nor the United States. The memories related to the hostage crisis of 1979–1980, other incidents and crises in the Middle East, where the two countries took opposing sides, have limited America's ability to deal with Iran rationally. Hence, opportunities have been missed that could lead to some form of accommodation if not complete reconciliation.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1980s, the United States under Reagan's administration utilized an offshore-balancing strategy in the Middle East relying on Iraq to contain Iran. President Clinton utilized a policy of dual containment by checking both Iraq and Iran instead of relying on them for the regional balance.<sup>37</sup> Post-Soviet systemic developments, and then the effects of 9/11, in spite of episodes of informal cooperation, such as after the US invasion in Afghanistan, caused the amplification of the US pressure on Iran under the administrations of Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and George W. Bush (2001-2009), with the aims of regime-change in Iran. President Bush's administration was even considering a military option to achieve this objective.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Buzan and Waeber, *Regions and Powers*, p. 460.

<sup>36</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger - An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2010), p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," pp. 32-33. Sasan Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran: Sanctions, Wars, and the Policy of Dual Containment* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 33.

As Mearsheimer has observed, the US grand strategy of global dominance adopted during the first two decades since the end of the Cold war, aimed at maintaining American primacy via assertive military means ensuring hegemony in the international system and making the world over in America's image by spreading democracy, has failed and caused major foreign policy troubles. As this "imperial" grand strategy has been prioritizing the regime changes, rather than the US geostrategic interests.<sup>39</sup> The confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States is complex. From the US perspective, the major dimensions of enmity include Iran's provoking policies in the Middle East and its nuclear program. From the Iranian perspective, the major issues are the humiliating approach toward the Islamic Republic and the American denial of Iran's role as a regional power and its legitimate security interests in the region.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of its economic shortcomings and military constraints, Iran has always been a regional power. Hence, the great powers engaged in the region, such as the British and the Russian Empires, and then the Soviet Union adopted a policy of putting geopolitical constraints upon Iran throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to WWII. The dynamics of the Cold War and the need for Iran in the Persian Gulf encouraged the United States to closely cooperate with Iran in military, political, and energy spheres. The tensions between America and Iran arose when the Shah started to pursue its ambitions of Iran far beyond the Persian Gulf. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's aspirations for Iran's role geographically far exceeded the Middle East, as the Shah sought to establish Iran as the Indian Ocean preeminent naval power. The Islamic Republic has gradually limited its aspirations redefining its national security environment and including in it its immediate neighborhood the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the more serious tensions in American-Iranian relations arose after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The disintegration of the Soviet Union reduced the United States' need for Iran as a buffer against the opposing superpower. These factors together with the Middle Eastern processes impacted the formulation of current US policy toward Iran.<sup>42</sup> Hence, a new American foreign policy approach towards Iran, that accommodates Iran's legitimate security interests and status of regional power in exchange for concessions on regional and international issues and acceptance of America's global leadership, will strengthen the stability of the wider region.<sup>43</sup> As American interests with respect to Iran go beyond their differences.<sup>44</sup>

Remarkably, after 9/11 President Khatami of Iran condemned the terrorist attacks and expressed condolences to the American nation. The following US

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<sup>39</sup> Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," pp. 18-19.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: the Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven And London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 280.

<sup>42</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, p. 280.

<sup>44</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert M. Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach. Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), p. 8.

invasion of Afghanistan presented an opportunity for American-Iranian cooperation and rapprochement. Moreover, the Islamic Republic has considerable cooperation moments with the US including the provision of active intelligence and logistical support during the 2003 war in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld admitted Iran's had legitimate security interests in Afghanistan stating that American and Iranian military advisors were fighting side-by-side. The prospects of American-Iranian cooperation were straightened, when Iran assisted the United States by brokering the agreement on the future Afghan government at the Bonn Conference in 2001.<sup>46</sup>

It may be argued Iran has benefited from the US policies in the Middle East since September 11, 2001, as the Taliban rule was toppled down in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. However, the new regional landscape carried with it profound uncertainties due to new geographic proximity with the United States and the instability caused by the geopolitical vacuum. Nevertheless, Iran has played a certain constructive role in the US-led efforts to establish stability and institutions of the central government in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from the principal concerns about the nuclear issue, the American-Iranian rapprochement initiatives have been hindered also by other factors including the US Arab allies and Israel.<sup>48</sup> Israel has been perceiving the Islamic Republic as an advocate of the Palestinian state and an existential threat to the Jewish state. On January 4, 2002, General Shaul Mofaz, the Israeli chief of general staff, announced the capture of the Palestinian ship Karine-A in the Red Sea, because it was carrying Iranian weapons. The Karine-A incident succeeded in deteriorating the improving relations between the United States and Iran.<sup>49</sup> Soon after on January 29, 2002, President Bush in his State of the Union address, condemning the regional policies of the Islamic Republic and its nuclear program, placed Iran together with North Korea and Iraq in the 'axis of evil' stating that "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger".<sup>50</sup> Thus, Bush's State of the Union Address officially expanded the war on terrorism, identifying Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as key security threats.<sup>51</sup> The deterioration was reinforced with the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president in 2004, as the Iranian reformists lost in presidential elections. President Ahmadinejad declared his intention of restoring the values of the early period of the Islamic Revolution. On the foreign pol-

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<sup>45</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Shahir ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 263.

<sup>46</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>47</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>50</sup> "Text of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address," Jan. 29, 2002, *The Washington Post*, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), pp. 100-101, 144-145.

icy front, this meant more confrontational relations with Israel and America.<sup>52</sup> The placement of the Islamic Republic in the ‘axis of evil’ was a proclamation of regime-change necessity and a clear rejection of the extension of security guarantees to Iran.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Iran’s nuclear program has become a major issue in US–Iran relations since 2002. The United States advocated for strict measures against Iran in the context of the IAEA, which eventually led to the referral of Iran’s nuclear program to the UNSC and the imposition of severe economic sanctions.<sup>54</sup> However, the strategy of global dominance and big-stick diplomacy, especially under the Bush administration, has negatively affected the nuclear ambitions of opposing regional powers. This has been the case with the Iranian nuclear program. As with placing Iran on the ‘axis of evil’ and threatening it with military intervention and regime change, the US gave Iran a strong incentive for a nuclear deterrent.<sup>55</sup>

As a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US army has been positioned along the Iranian borders, making America and Iran prudent geostrategic competitors in the shared neighborhood. Despite multiple differences, America and Iran have mastered some overlapping interests and policies. In 2004, the Independent Task Force chaired by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert Gates in its report concluded that the lack of sustained engagement with Iran harms American national interests in this critical region of the world, and political dialogue with Iran should not be procrastinated until the resolution of critical differences over regional conflicts and Iranian nuclear program. The Task Force suggested an approach of selective political engagement with Iran as an effective path for addressing the differences and exploring the areas, where their interests converge while continuing to contest objectionable policies.<sup>56</sup>

Since the 1979 revolution, the United States has sought to contain the Iranian threat via a bunch of policies, including sanctions, military threat, and diplomacy, “relying increasingly on a set of economic sanctions that were at first comprehensive in scope but unilateral in application”.<sup>57</sup>

Some serious rapprochement initiatives were taken under Barack Obama’s administration. He took the office in 2009 when America was facing another crisis, Iran’s nuclear problem, with the potential to undo Obama’s ambitions on foreign policy. As there were reasons to worry, that Israel will launch a preventive strike aimed at destroying Iranian nuclear infrastructure and thereby expanding the zone of instability in the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama had suggested offering Iran talks without preconditions. President Obama’s “new emphasis on being willing to talk” was reinforced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, p. 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>55</sup> Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” pp. 29-30.

<sup>56</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon, *The Sixth Crisis: Iran, Israel, America and the Rumors of War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Murray, *US Foreign Policy and Iran*, p. 158.

On March 20, 2009, President Obama had delivered a New Year's greetings to the Iranian people and the government without challenging the legitimacy of the domestic order of the Islamic Republic of Iran and hoping to negotiate a settlement of the nuclear dispute. Obama administration was also restraining from criticizing the Iranian internal affairs during the initial period of mass protests after President Ahmadinejad's reelection. This position was criticized by the Republican opposition and senator John McCain, "for positioning the United States on the wrong side of history."<sup>60</sup> As the United States faced difficulties in its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, since 2009 the Obama administration initially took a policy of engagement with Iran through negotiations. Iran reciprocated these initiatives. The US-Iranian negotiations continued in October 2009, in Geneva in the context of nuclear talks between Iran and the so-called 5+1 representatives. President Ahmadinejad was quite positive for nuclear cooperation with the West and proposed a phased swap of enriched uranium, but this proposal was rejected by the US and the Europeans. In Spring 2010, the United States per its new nuclear strategy shifted its policy towards imposing severe sanctions on Iran, while keeping the military option on the table. The response of Iran was severe criticism.<sup>61</sup> While a strategy with greater restraint could be more beneficial for both the United States and for regional stability.<sup>62</sup>

Several scenarios on the solution of Iran's nuclear issue have been proposed in the US that could also lead to improved relations between the Islamic Republic and the United States. Other issues such as Iran's support for Hamas, Hezbollah, are considered secondary and they eventually will be resolved, if the parties solve their differences on the major problem. Scenarios include - Invasion of Iran aimed at destroying Iran's nuclear weapons program and installing a new "friendly" regime; American airstrikes aimed at destroying the Iranian nuclear weapons program facilities and the infrastructure; Israeli airstrikes, that will not involve the US; Persuasion and Engagement by the US jointly with the EU, backed by Russia and China to halt its nuclear weapons program with some sort of *quid pro quo*; Containment of Iran, a policy doctrine the US used during the Cold War to 'contain' the USSR; or Velvet Revolution for regime change.<sup>63</sup>

Hypothetically, a US invasion or strikes to Iran and the collapse of the current system may cause the country's descent into chaos, similar to the experiences in other parts of the region, such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan, further destabilizing the entire region affecting and disrupting its neighbors, and unpredictably affecting oil prices and its regional supply lines.<sup>64</sup> Either because of internal strains or external factors the destabilization of Iran will greatly reduce its stabilizing role within this volcanic region. Such developments will in turn adversely affect the American-dominated security of the Persian Gulf region. In this case, both the United States, the EU, and the international commu-

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<sup>60</sup> Allin and Simon, *The Sixth Crisis*, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," pp. 16-34.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph J. St. Marie and Shahdad Naghshpour, *Revolutionary Iran and the United States Low-intensity Conflict in the Persian Gulf* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 183-196.

<sup>64</sup> Mousavian and ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States*, p. 269.

nity at large will face mounting challenges. According to Brzezinski, this possibility will challenge the American primacy in the wider region.<sup>65</sup>

As Fukuyama points out, neither preventive war can be instrumental in dealing with nuclear proliferation, nor regime change is a good option for democratization and nonproliferation. In case, if Washington seeks to use both precision airstrikes and regime change to prevent nuclear proliferation, it has to be successful in managing the regime change, as there are serious dangers of the political damage that such an option might carry. Most probably, this kind of action would reunite the Iranian people or might bring liberal but more nationalistic government disposed against the United States, which might seek nuclear weapons.<sup>66</sup> While liberalism and democracy usually go together, there are both historical and current examples of countries being liberal without being a democracy and vice versa. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a contemporary example of non-liberal democracy, which has regular elections that have been “reasonably fair by Third World standards”, making Iran more democratic than it was under the Shah’s government.<sup>67</sup> In many respects, Iran has one of the more democratic regimes in the Islamic world.<sup>68</sup>

The US regime change rhetoric is perceived by the entire Iranian political spectrum, to be the primary factor that contributes to the extremely high level of mistrust toward the US. The mistrust and enmity attitudes are reinforced by paralyzing economic sanctions and policies aimed at intervening in Iranian domestic affairs. President Obama’s assertion that he would keep the military option on the table, and the hard sanctions his administration imposed, also contributed to the existing mistrust. Only in 2013, major changes in the Iranian and the American foreign policy strategies engendered hope of “a crack in the wall of mistrust” and rapprochement.<sup>69</sup> Contrary to the commonly held American and Israeli perceptions, sanctions only contributed to the rise in Tehran’s nuclear capability, as Iran sought to demonstrate that it would not surrender to pressure.<sup>70</sup>

Due to Iran’s economic challenges, the most effective policy tools for Washington to engage Tehran would be economic measures. The economic impulses could enhance America’s leverage vis-à-vis Iran.<sup>71</sup> A tangible *quid pro quo* approach may include OPEC finding a formula for Iran to increase its oil production and increase revenues and consenting to Iran’s accession to the World Trade Organization, or providing Western assistance for Iran’s technological development in the fields of energy reserves, increasing oil and gas export including pipeline projects to western markets, such as Iran-Europe oil and gas pipelines. For Iran, this would be such a bargain, that would not undermine the regime’s legitimacy, while also being an offer that would be difficult to

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<sup>65</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books 1997), p. 52-53.

<sup>66</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 91-92.

<sup>67</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>68</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, p. 198.

<sup>69</sup> Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>70</sup> Mousavian and ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States*, p. 265.

<sup>71</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 42.

refuse.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, by abandoning the regime-change rhetoric and focusing on commercial diplomacy in dealing with Iran, the United States could archive much more in resolving the differences and achieving rapprochement.<sup>73</sup>

During the 2013 Iranian presidential election, President Hassan Rouhani campaigned against “securitization of the country.” Peace between Iran and America is the rational choice, the rewards of which would be remarkable for both states. The end of US policy aimed at “regime change” will be the foremost reward for Tehran, as it would mean resolving the biggest security concern of the Islamic Republic.<sup>74</sup>

On one hand, the impetus to the rapprochement efforts was conditioned by the political will of Iran’s new moderate administration. On the other hand, it was possible due to the change of the US approach toward the Iranian nuclear program from “no enrichment of uranium” to “no nuclear bomb.” On November 24, 2013, by the Geneva interim agreement on the Joint Plan of Action between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany together with the EU), the Iranian side ensured that it would not lead its nuclear program towards weaponization. If Washington chooses to go back to the approach of “zero enrichment” or “no enrichment in Iran,” it would be improbable to revive the deal on the nuclear issue.<sup>75</sup>

The ultimate objective of the Joint Plan of Action, relating to Iran’s nuclear dossier was to reach a *quid pro quo*, lasting and comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, ensuring that it would be an exclusively peaceful program per the NPT. To this aim, Iran agreed to stop enriching uranium beyond 5 percent, neutralize its uranium stockpile enriched beyond its domestic needs and grant the IAEA greater access to its nuclear facilities, as well as abandon the reprocessing and further development of the heavy water facility in Arak. In exchange, the P5+1 powers would not impose new sanctions and would lift certain existing sanctions.<sup>76</sup>

On July 14, 2015, the landmark deal between the E3/EU+3<sup>77</sup> and Iran was achieved in Vienna in the form of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This Plan of Action marked a fundamental step towards the US-Iran rapprochement. The JCPOA came to ensure that Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful. One year after the conclusion of the deal the IAEA verified and the High Representative on behalf of the EU and the US Secretary of State confirmed that the JCPOA was being implemented by Iran, and the US and the EU lifted nuclear-related sanctions.<sup>78</sup> Both President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry emphasized the verification mechanisms placed in the JCPOA as a reliable path for reconciliation. The EU also reaffirmed its com-

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<sup>72</sup> St. Marie and Naghshpour, *Revolutionary Iran and the United States Low-intensity Conflict*, pp. 188-190.

<sup>73</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Mousavian and ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States*, p. 269.

<sup>75</sup> Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, p. 8-10.

<sup>76</sup> Mousavian and ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States*, p. 266.

<sup>77</sup> The E3/EU+3 includes the European 3: France, the United Kingdom, Germany together with the European Union (EU) plus the United States, Russia, and China.

<sup>78</sup> “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” Vienna, 14 July 2015, *The U.S. State Department*, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/index.htm> .

mitment to help make an improved regional situation a reality.<sup>79</sup> This comprehensive and constructive approach has also opened new prospects for the EU's regional engagement and an opportunity for a cooperative regional environment.

However, this path has been interrupted, when on May 8, 2018, President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA.<sup>80</sup> The US re-imposition of sanctions together with the covid-19 pandemic hardly harmed the Iranian economy. These factors contributed to the defeat of Iranian reformists and the victory of conservative politician Ebrahim Raisi in the 2021 Iranian presidential election. In addition, this makes the economy, as well as the engagement with Biden's administration to restore full effectiveness of the JCPOA, one of Raisi's priorities. With President Joe Biden's willingness to re-join the JCPOA, Iran's engagement with America is likely to follow, despite Raisi's background as a hardliner.<sup>81</sup>

Remarkably, since the revolution of 1979, the Iranian foreign policy has considerably moderated in meaningful ways. If initially the Islamic Republic could be considered deconstructive power regarding the prevailing norms of the international system, during the recent decades the Iranian leadership has abandoned the ideas of exporting the revolution and changing the region's political order based on intensives of ideology. The Islamic Republic currently appears as a constructive power regarding regional security and approaches international relations primarily based on national interests and the principles of realism.<sup>82</sup> The Iranian policies challenging the American hegemony in the Middle East and changing the regional equilibrium might be viewed in the context of defensive structural realism, as the US with a huge military presence in the region has continuously declared about keeping "all options are on the table" in relation to Iran. Besides Iran continues aspiring to revive its historical position of regional power.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, for Iranian leadership, the preservation of a viable nuclear program strengthens Iran's bargaining position with the United States. In contrast to Iran's other provocative policies, the nuclear program dates back to the prerevolutionary period, when the Shah's government started the process of developing nuclear capabilities.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, Iran with its estimated fourth-largest oil reserves and second-largest gas reserves after Russia, and its key geopolitical location in the Eurasian continent has a strategic geo-economic value not only for the adjacent re-

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<sup>79</sup> "Iran: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the one year anniversary of the JCPOA," *Council of the EU*, 14/07/2016, Press release 436/16, Foreign affairs & international relations, accessed May 31, 2021, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/14-hr-declaration-year-anniversary-jcpoa/> .

<sup>80</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," May 8, 2018, *The New York Times*, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html> .

<sup>81</sup> Emil Avdaliani, "New Iranian Government and South Caucasus," *The Caucasus Watch*, 29 Jun 2021, accessed June 31, 2021, <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/3906.html> .

<sup>82</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, pp. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Mousavian and ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States*, p. 261. John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations*, Vol. 23/2 (2009): 242-243.

<sup>84</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, pp. 22-23.



gions but for the global economy.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, commercial considerations have a prominent role in the realignment of Iranian foreign policy. Iran has been abandoning confrontational tactics in favor of international integration and accommodation by broadening international trade, the attraction of foreign investments, regulation, and coordination of its oil policies with other leading producers. The Iranian foreign policy doctrine has experienced an evolution in the implementation of detente with its Persian Gulf neighbors and its pragmatic approach to its northern neighbors in the South Caucasus, and in its close rapprochement with a range of regional actors such as India, China, Russia, Japan, and the EU. While the US-Iran relations have remained largely untouched by this general trend.<sup>86</sup>

A major uncertainty in the large and geopolitically fluid space of Central Eurasia, as Brzezinski characterized in his fundamental work *The Grand Chessboard* back in the 1990s, is now being filled with competing geopolitical projects, Russia's Eurasian integration project, Chinses New Silk Road economic zone and India's South-North initiative. Presently the geopolitical and geo-economic visage of Eurasia is undergoing an accelerating and fundamental transformation. For the first time since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the single largest concentration of global economic power will be found neither in Europe nor in the Americas, but Asia. Leading Singaporean intellectual Kishore Mahbubani calls Asia's rise as an "irresistible shift of global power to the East" which will transform the world.<sup>87</sup>

Since the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US influence has been declining, meanwhile, in China, India, Iran, and Southeast Asia, there has been more optimism and a sense of the beginning of history. This sense of optimism among Asian and Eurasian powers was about the rise of Eastern civilizations when the West, America, and Europe will have to stand in line and relate themselves on a more equal basis. Such perceptions have been institutionalized through regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the East Asia Summit.<sup>88</sup>

In conditions of the deceleration of the Western world and the accelerating rise of the East, Mahbubani puts the dilemma for the Western leaders to be "careful and pragmatic in their foreign policies," replacing the concept of power politics with more nuanced policies, "In this regard, the best test case for the West to demonstrate a capacity to master complexity would be to begin a thought experiment with the Iranian challenge. Can the West conceive of the possibility that the best way to engender change in Iran is to slip Iran into the story of the great convergence...? ...Can a nation like Iran ignore the logic of the great convergence of the world if it is plunged into this global maelstrom of human history?"<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "Oil Reserves by Country," *Worldometer*, accessed June 31, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-reserves-by-country/>; "Natural Gas Reserves by Country," *Worldometer*, <https://www.worldometers.info/gas/#gas-reserves>.

<sup>86</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, pp. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere*.

<sup>88</sup> William H. Overholt, *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 42.

<sup>89</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), p. 143.

In contrast, Iran's involvement with emerging powers and with the global political and financial order puts constraints on the efficacy of US punitive policies. Withal, the enmity between the Islamic Republic and America declines the convergence of their interests in particular spheres and undermines shared interests, and wastes the potential benefits of cooperation in specific areas. The strategic imperatives of the US and Iran intersect in significant ways concerning the stabilization of Iran's surrounding region, particularly of the South Caucasus.<sup>90</sup>

In conditions of rising multipolarity, sanctions hindering Iran's engagement with international financial institutions are inherently counterproductive.<sup>91</sup> The United States and Israel can best decrease Iran's political leverage of projection of influence in the Levant through reaching an agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While an American military action against Iran would provide China and Turkey with a major geopolitical advantage, that is not in the US interests. The diplomatic solutions, as JCPOA has shown, are possible, which will be reinforced by the desire of the Iranian people to join the march to modernity. The methods of sanctions and isolation, as validated by history and the cases of Cuba, Iran, and North Korea, rarely work. Hence, the United States needs a new approach towards Iran, a slower but sustained outreach and engagement will bring a more productive and irresistible transformation of Iran.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, it has become clear that comprehensive sanctions have not succeeded in altering the Iranian policy and have deprived the United States of greater leverage transforming Iran from foe to friend. Due to the increasingly considerable role of economic interests in configuration Iran's external and internal policies, the prospect of commercial relations with America and initiatives for geo-economic connections with Europe could be a powerful policy asset in the US arsenal. President Obama understood, that the suggestions of punishing Iran with isolation and sanctions, which cannot be a universal approach in this multipolar world, cannot prevent the nuclear program and the pursuit of a military deterrent unless there is a convincing plan to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. So, the Obama administration preferred engagement with the Islamic Republic based on concrete verification mechanisms and trying to integrate Iran into the international community through formal institutional obligations. Although it is not clear if Iran is currently pursuing nuclear weapons, nevertheless, declarations of possible strikes from the US under the Trump administration and Israel, made the government of the Islamic Republic to rethink about a strong deterrent.

#### **Armenia and Iran: America vis-à-vis Fundamentals of Regional Security**

The region including the South Caucasus and Iran, torn by ethnic, religious, and geopolitical tensions, constitutes a possible conjunction point of three extremely strategic greater regions – Europe, the Eurasian heartland, and the Middle East.<sup>93</sup> Iran-Armenia relationship also profoundly highlights the intersection between the global and local.<sup>94</sup> While Iran is being perceived as a

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<sup>90</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence*, p. 187.

<sup>93</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," pp. 123-124.

<sup>94</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 130.

Middle Eastern country, it is also a Eurasian player and is close to Asia and especially Central and South Asia, as well as to the European Eastern neighborhood, especially the South Caucasus. Iran is also close to Russia-led EAEU and maintains good relations with Russia. Iran has always considered the South Caucasus as a zone of its legitimate security interests.<sup>95</sup>

The US-Iranian enmity and Armenia's precaution against distancing itself from the United States have been one of the main barriers for the development of transit geo-economic projects and commercial ties, as well as for the realization of Iran's potential balancing role between Armenia and the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis. The relative western alienation of Iran and the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia brings them together, meanwhile structurally hindering their strategic partnership. At the same time, there is mutual comprehension and respect for each other's limitations. The Armenian-Iranian good-neighborly relations is among one of few topics upon which the opinions in the entire Armenian political spectrum converge. Although the tensions in America-Iran relations place Armenia in an equivocal position, Armenia has made it clear that its relations with each of them do not come at the expense of its relations with the US, Europe, or Russia. At the same time, Iran is not the core of the Armenian strategic thinking and foreign policy choices, as Russia and Europe, and is not the identity-defining 'other,' as Turkey. In the current regional geopolitical conjuncture, Iran is Armenia's one of two open windows to the outer world, Asian and Middle Eastern markets and is an outlet for Armenia's energy deficit, hence, as Alla Mirzoyan defines, a "permanent alternative" for its blocked western and eastern borders.<sup>96</sup>

Remarkably, Iran's foreign, security and energy policy in the Caucasus has been based on realism, material considerations rather than ideological sentiments.<sup>97</sup> Due to Iran's historic rivalry with Russia and Turkey for influence in the South Caucasus, its tense relations with Azerbaijan over its close relations with Turkey and Israel, the potential secessionist issue in northwestern Iran inhabited by Azeris, Iran has developed closer relations with Armenia. Approximately, 20 million Azeris live in northwestern Iran, i.e. twice as many as in Azerbaijan. This ratio makes Iran concerned about possible separatism among its Turko-Lingual large minority, which potentially might be supported by external forces, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Hence, this state of possible affairs makes Iran quite ambivalent regarding Azerbaijan, despite their shared Shia Islamic faith.<sup>98</sup>

The relations between Iran and Turkey and the Turkic world have historically been mistrustful and uneasy. This parameter is also important to comprehend the Iranian-Armenian special relations. And it is not coincidental, that after the independence of the Soviet republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, most of them have established closer relations with Turkey, and not with Iran, despite its many initiatives. Azerbaijan with prevailing nationalist

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<sup>95</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," p. 126.

<sup>96</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 108.

<sup>97</sup> Gasparyan, "Iranian Energy Policy towards the South Caucasus from the Perspective of Neoliberal IR Theory."

<sup>98</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, p. 129.

sentiments has developed an alliance with Turkey. Furthermore, a part of the Azerbaijani nationalists is also Pan-Turkist, viewing the inclusion of Iranian Azerbaijan as a necessary step for geographically uniting the Turkic world.<sup>99</sup>

Soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the heads of states of the Turkic-speaking former soviet republics started dialogs with Ankara to get Turkish support. To coordinate and consolidate these relations Turkey crated the Turkish World department in its Foreign Ministry and intensified its ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asian republics to develop bilateral and multilateral partnerships frameworks. A strong impetus has been given to the rhetoric of Pan-Turkism, especially in Turkey and Azerbaijan. Hence, the national interests of Armenia and Iran in fencing against Turkey's growing influence and power projection capability in the South Caucasus overlap.<sup>100</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, with a majority Shia and Turkic speaking population, became an area of Turkish-Iranian rivalry. Turkey has been supporting pan-Turkist elements in Azerbaijan both officially and through ultranationalist groups such as the Grey Wolves. The ideas of the Azeri-irredentism and Pan-Turkist movement started to emerge as early as 1992, during the rule of Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey, who had strong anti-Iranian sentiments.<sup>101</sup> The rise of nationalist and irredentist sentiments among Iran's Azeri community led to the creation of the National Liberation Movement of South Azerbaijan. Iran was accusing Azerbaijan of promoting this secessionist movement and in its turn, Baku was blaming Tehran for prosecuting the members of this movement.<sup>102</sup> Turkey has also been trying to encourage separatist elements and support pan-Turkist ideas in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan.<sup>103</sup>

Presently, the Pan-Turkist discourse continues to spark tensions with Iran. On December 10, 2020, during his visit to Baku, to attend a victory parade celebrating the victory of Azerbaijan in the recent 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey read parts of a controversial poem, which is considered a symbol of the doctrine of Pan-Turkism and laments how Turkic-speaking people have been 'separated in Azerbaijan and Iran' and seeks unification of the Turkic-speaking peoples.<sup>104</sup> In the same speech, Erdogan repeated the long-praised Pan-Turkist formula calling Turkey and Azerbaijan "one nation, two states." Iran's Foreign Ministry summoned the Turkish ambassador in Tehran over Erdogan's poem on territorial integrity, expressing strong protest and demanding an immediate explanation.<sup>105</sup> Foreign

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<sup>99</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," pp. 123-152, 147-151.

<sup>100</sup> Claude Moniquet and William Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship: Strategic Implication for Security in the South Caucasus Region* (European Strategic Intelligence & Security Center (ESISC), January 2013), pp. 30-31.

<sup>101</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 87.

<sup>102</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 35-37.

<sup>103</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 162.

<sup>104</sup> Maziar Motamedi, "Why did President Erdogan's poem infuriate Iranians?" *Al Jazeera*, 13 Dec 2020, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/13/why-did-erdogans-poem-infuriate-iranians>.

<sup>105</sup> "Iran summons Turkish ambassador over Erdogan's poem on territorial integrity," *The Tehran Times*, December 11, 2020, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455644/Iran-summons-Turkish-ambassador-over-Erdogan-s-poem-on-territorial>.

Minister Javad Zarif of Iran responded that “Pres. Erdogan was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas north of Aras from Iranian motherland.”<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, the Turkish involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war was surely not limited to the protection of Azerbaijani interests but had far-reaching geostrategic objectives in line with the ideology of Pan-Turkism. Turkey sees itself as the leader of the Turkic-Speaking countries with Neo-Ottoman aspirations. In this regard, the territory of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (sharing a 17 km border with Turkey) has a central geopolitical significance. And it is not a coincidence that the founding summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States took place there in 2009. Hence, the countries between them are seen as a wedge towards the geographical continuity of the Turkish world.<sup>107</sup>

To this context, at the beginning of the 2000s, Iran was extremely concerned about any settlement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involving possible changes in its immediate neighborhood via territorial exchanges near its borders such as Key West talks (April 2001) on transferring Meghri district, Armenia’s southernmost part, to Azerbaijan, which would geographically cut Iran from Armenia. While both Armenia and Iran are often calling their relations ‘strategic’, there is still no formal agreement or strategic treaty. This hesitation on the Iranian side has been the perception of Armenia as a state with a pro-Western orientation, and readiness to pursue closer relations with the United in exchange for security guarantees.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, as geostrategic players Turkey and Iran are engaged in projecting a certain degree of influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asian regions, filling in the reduction of Russian power. Hence, they are geopolitical rivals intending to limit each other’s influence. For instance, regarding Turkey’s influential role in Azerbaijan, the position of Iran, which is concerned with the possible Azeri secessionism within its northwestern province, has stabilizing significance. In addition, Iran is a primarily important geopolitical pivot, which has a stabilizing role for the surrounding security regions including the Persian Gulf and the South Caucasus. Despite Iran’s current hostile position toward the United States, its independent position serves as a barrier towards any essential penetration of other great powers into this critical security region of the world. In this regard the Iranian and the United States interests do overlap.<sup>109</sup>

The regional security priorities for Iran dramatically changed after the 9/11 attacks. Iran began to view Armenia not only as a neighboring country but as a considerable regional geopolitical pivot in the context of rivalry between Russia, Europe, and the United States. For Armenia, in the conditions of its blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Iran is important for economic security, energy needs, and its strategic role of balancer vis-à-vis Turkey. In its entirety, Arme-

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<sup>106</sup> “Erdogan’s Remarks In Baku Provoke Strong Reaction From Iran,” *Iran International*, 11 Dec 2020, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/erdogans-remarks-baku-provoke-strong-reaction-iran>.

<sup>107</sup> Yepremyan, “Why Europe should care about Nagorno-Karabakh: A Civilisational and Geopolitical Perspective.”

<sup>108</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 125.

<sup>109</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, p. 47.

nia's relations with Iran are important from the geostrategic standpoint of its' economic security as a guarantee of alternative links with the outer world.<sup>110</sup>

Therefore, in the perspective of regional geopolitics, Christian Armenia is seen as the most reliable neighbor of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>111</sup> To this objective, leaders of both Iran and Armenia are constantly signifying the historic ties between the two ancient nations that span more than two and a half millennia. The oldest surviving written record of the very exonym Armenia (*Armina*) is found in the ancient Persian Behistun Inscription (520 BC) created under King Darius the Great (522–486 BC) of the Achaemenid Empire. The well-organized and historically substantial Armenian community of Iran (some 150,000 strong), which has a distinguished position and two permanent seats in the Iranian Parliament, comes to strengthen these relations. Moreover, the Armenian community in Iran is the country's largest Christian minority and the Armenian Apostolic Church is the most important Christian church in Iran with more than 200 churches across the country.<sup>112</sup> Monuments of Armenian historical, cultural, and religious heritage in Iran are maintained and restored as in no other neighboring country. In its entirety, all this provides a solid social and intellectual ground for amicable cooperation and facilitates the education of a well-trained diplomatic corps that are communicated to each other's way of life. These soft factors, solidified by the bilateral political interactions, are important.<sup>113</sup>

Although not an energy producer, Armenia has been present in the omnipresent energy geopolitics of the South Caucasus in a way that has been intentionally bypassed by transit pipeline initiatives. In this context, the unfavorable relationship of the US and the EU with Iran played a certain role in Armenia's geostrategic isolation and suspension of geo-economic initiatives involving Iran. Besides, the construction of the Iran-Europe pipeline via Armenia has been hindered by Russia, given the Russian geostrategic imperatives vis-a-vis energy geopolitics and then Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Nevertheless, the construction of energy transit and transport infrastructure between Armenia and Iran is considered a guarantee of Armenia's economic security.<sup>114</sup>

Over the years, some infrastructure projects enabled the two neighbors to overcome each other's isolation in the context of an extremely troubled regional security complex. Since 2008, there have been declarations for intentions from both the Armenian and Iranian sides to build a railway connection.<sup>115</sup> In October 2008, the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline has become operational. This 142-kilometer pipeline has a delivery capacity of 2.3 billion cubic meters per year. After the completion of the Yerevan Thermal Power Plant in April 2010, gas deliveries were increased. The Iranian gas is mostly used for the Hrazdan Thermal Power Plant, and the electricity produced there is exported back to

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<sup>110</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 127.

<sup>111</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 4-60.

<sup>112</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 4-7.

<sup>113</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 109.

<sup>114</sup> Anthony Rinna, "Yerevan's Choice: Armenia and its Integration into the Eurasian Customs Union," *Iran and the Caucasus* 18 (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2014), pp. 399-400.

<sup>115</sup> Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 177.

Iran. In addition, there have also been talks of constructing a 365-kilometer oil pipeline from the Iranian city of Tabriz to Yeraskh in Armenia, capable of transporting 1.5 million liters of gasoline and diesel daily. In 2012, a free trade area and a trade center were established on the Iranian-Armenian border. This cooperation has helped Armenia from strangling at the height of the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh and enabled Armenian goods and services access to the warm seas route, the Middle East, and Russia via the Caspian Sea.<sup>116</sup>

In the context of sanctions against Iran, the United States demonstrated a fair amount of tolerance towards Armenia considering the heavy conditions of its blockade, although from time to time has expressed its concerns with Armenia's close economic relations with Iran. Even so, Armenia faced significant geopolitical constraints from both the US and Russian sides concerning the construction of the Armenian-Iranian gas pipeline.<sup>117</sup> In March 2002, John Ordway, the US ambassador to Armenia had expressed concerns stating: "We understand Armenia's economic difficulties, but at the same time we don't support any investment in the construction of the gas pipeline through Iran."<sup>118</sup> The US and Russian interests were overlapping in this regard. Accordingly, the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline's diameter was reduced from 1,420 to 700 millimeters under Russian pressure. Gazprom acquired most of the Armenian section of the pipeline through its subsidiary in Armenia.<sup>119</sup> The pipeline, if it had been built at its initial diameter, would have a great transit significance and would have enabled the export of Iranian gas to Europe, thus, reducing Europe's energy dependence on Russia.<sup>120</sup> So, the foreign investors had little interest in financing a small pipeline, while the prospects of extending its transit potential were low. The project would have a greater regional geo-economic significance considering the potential of the Iran-Armenia-Georgia-Europe route. The project was suspended under the pressure of the United States and also, to a greater extent, of Russia, which has been sensitive towards any pipeline initiative to Europe, especially towards those bypassing its territory.<sup>121</sup>

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war highlighted the fragility of the northern energy corridor to Armenia and the importance of its strategic objective of maintaining a balanced, complementary relationship with Iran, Russia, and the United States. In this geopolitical landscape, Armenia had to embrace its position of strategic restraint and consolidate its relations with Russia and Iran. Simultaneously, this reinforced Iran's geostrategic choice: being close to Armenia is to be close to Russia. In conditions of the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia and the instability of the Russian-Georgian border for economic goods and energy supplies from Russia to Armenia, the Iran-Armenia pipeline is the

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<sup>116</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 12-15, 58.

<sup>117</sup> Tatul Hakobyan, "Iran and Armenia Are Disappointed with Russia: Manouchehr Motaki's Unplanned Visit to Yerevan," *HETQ.am* 20 Feb 2006, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://hetq.am/en/article/10031>.

<sup>118</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 128.

<sup>119</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," pp. 134-135.

<sup>120</sup> Richard Giragosian, "Armenia as a bridge to Iran? Russia won't like it," *Al Jazeera*, 30 Aug 2015, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/30/armenia-as-a-bridge-to-iran-russia-wont-like-it>.

<sup>121</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 124.

guarantee of Armenia's energy security.<sup>122</sup> Yet, even in its economic decisions, the Armenian leadership has been exercising some precaution and restraint given the ambiguity over how it would affect its relationship with the United States.<sup>123</sup>

Nevertheless, the development of close relations with Iran wasn't without risks for Armenia. The rising tensions in the US-Iran relations over the Iranian nuclear program and the increasing importance of the Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources have changed the US regional policy priorities.<sup>124</sup> Consequently, in 2013, the US decreased its economic aid to Armenia. Aram Hamparian, the Director of the Armenian National Committee of America, expressed regrets on President Obama's proposal to cut the aid.<sup>125</sup>

Apart from the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline, the implemented projects in energy cooperation include two Armenia-Iran high-voltage power transmission lines. The completion of the third Electricity Transmission Line will significantly increase the volume of gas and electricity sales and exchanges. Currently, gas-electricity exchange amounts to 1 million m<sup>3</sup> / gas per day, which is planned to expand up to 2 million m<sup>3</sup> / per day. The parties are working to enlarge their bilateral economic cooperation by increasing the Iranian gas supply to Armenia and transit to Georgia, expanding the North-South (Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, a memorandum was signed in 2015) energy system, constructing wind power stations in Armenia, establishing free economic zones, as well as developing infrastructure for the Persian Gulf - Black Sea route through Armenia. Since 2017, Meghri Free Economic Zone in southernmost Armenia has been in a stage of implementation. Iran and Armenia are negotiating on the construction of a hydroelectric power station on Arax River, which constitutes the border between them. Most importantly, Iran and Armenia are discussing the initiatives of activating multimodal transit transportations through the territory of Armenia and Iran establishing the Persian Gulf - Black Sea Corridor.<sup>126</sup> Currently, the volume of trade between Iran and Armenia amounts to 300 million USD, which as Iranian Finance Minister Farhad Dejpasand announced in Yerevan on January 26, 2021, can raise to 1 billion USD a year.<sup>127</sup> However, the potential of the Armenian-Iranian trade and economic relations is far from being fully realized. Despite being a neighboring country with a large market, Iran is only in 6<sup>th</sup> place among Armenia's foreign trade partners.<sup>128</sup>

On many occasions, Iran and Armenia have announced their intentions for the building of a 470-kilometer railroad across their common border ensuring access for Iranian goods towards the Black Sea and Armenia towards the Per-

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<sup>122</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp.13, 29.

<sup>123</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 113.

<sup>124</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 25.

<sup>125</sup> "President Obama calls for 19% cut in economic aid to Armenia," *NEWS.am* 14.02.2012, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://news.am/eng/news/93192.html>.

<sup>126</sup> "Iran-Armenia Bilateral Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/ir>.

<sup>127</sup> "Trade between Iran, Armenia can reach \$1b annually: Minister," *IRNA*, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84200385/Trade-between-Iran-Armenia-can-reach-1b-annually-Minister>.

<sup>128</sup> "Iran-Armenia Bilateral Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*.



sian Gulf.<sup>129</sup> Potentially, these projects can eventually be extended to Europe through Georgia.<sup>130</sup> In May 2018, Armenia was instrumental in the signing of the EAEU-Iran Agreement on the Creation of a Free Economic Zone between the EAEU Member States and the Islamic Republic. The agreement is in the phase of ratification.<sup>131</sup>

Remarkably, in March 2021, the Indian Ambassador to Iran Gaddam Dharmendra announced that India's intention of connecting the Indian Ocean with Europe and Russia through Iranian Chabahar port and Armenia, establishing an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The main geopolitical and geo-economic objective behind India's geostrategic ambition and Eurasian vision is to bypass its rival Pakistan and, accordingly, the Pakistan-Azerbaijan-Turkey axis. Hence, Armenia, a member of EAEU that has a land border with Iran, can potentially become a key channel in the INSTC.<sup>132</sup>

Synchronically, Armenia has undertaken steps to foster close relations with the United States. Armenia has deployed peacekeeping military personals within NATO contingents in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Lebanon. On January 14, 2009, President Bush sent a letter to President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenian, expressing "deep gratitude of the United States" for the peacekeeping contribution as part of the American-led Multi-National Force in Iraq. Armenia is in NATO's Partnership for Peace program and is a member of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and Individual Partnership Action Plans. The American-Armenian amicable relations are reinforced by the Armenian community of America, estimated to be over 1.5 million.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly, the Armenian-Iranian good-neighborly relations do not pose any security threat to the United States or its allies and do not affect any strategic balance. Even though the economic significance of its relations is still minimal on the scale of international trade, Armenia perceives its relations with Iran as a political constant with strategic significance.<sup>134</sup>

What makes the South Caucasus, an 'Intermarium' between the Black and Caspian seas, a strategically key region to the United States is the very point of access to Central Eurasia, the very location which makes the access sea powers to it difficult. Due to the current regional alignments, the American road into the Caspian Sea and Central Asia passes through the Black Sea, Turkey, and the South Caucasus. Hence, Washington pushed for the creation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. From the Iranian perspective, the problem of oil and gas pipelines to Europe becomes crucially important for overcoming its isolation and economic development. From the Armenian perspective, the involve-

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<sup>129</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>130</sup> Harout Harry Semerdjian, "Christian Armenia and Islamic Iran: An Unusual Partnership Explained," *THE HILL* 01/14/13, Washington DC: Capitol Hill Publishing Corp., accessed May 31, 2021, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/276961-christian-armenia-and-islamic-iran-an-unusual-partnership-explained>.

<sup>131</sup> "Iran-Armenia Bilateral Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*.

<sup>132</sup> Yeghia Tashjian, "Armenia and India's Vision of 'North-South Corridor': A Strategy or a 'Pipe Dream'?" *The Armenian Weekly*, March 24, 2021, accessed June 30, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/03/24/armenia-and-indias-vision-of-north-south-corridor-a-strategy-or-a-pipe-dream/>.

<sup>133</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>134</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 107.

ment in international transit infrastructure and pipeline projects is crucially important to safeguard its sovereignty and economic security.<sup>135</sup>

Due to the aforementioned context, the Iranian policies toward the South Caucasus region have been based on pragmatism and realism. The Islamic Republic has been distinguishing itself as a *status quo* power with special emphasis on the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, an assertion, which has been in a contrast with its internationally perceived role in other directions of its foreign policy. The Iranian and Armenian regional pursuits, entrenched in their regional insecurity perception and isolation, have converged in a remarkable partnership.<sup>136</sup>

In conditions of the blockade of some eighty percent of its borders by two of its four neighbors, Armenia's 44 km southern border with Iran is often termed as a "lifeline".<sup>137</sup> Therefore, Iran's domestic stability and territorial integrity are of high-security importance for Armenia. While its destabilization is a threat to the security of Armenia. Hence, the preservation of the current political regime is more benevolent for Armenia than a possible rise of nationalism along internal ethnic lines. The scenario of the US military action and regime change is in sharp contrast to Armenia's national security concerns, as the destabilization of Iran and the rise of interethnic conflicts can create serious tension on Iran's northern border and can potentially destabilize the entire region. For these reasons, Iran has been sensitive about Armenia's ties with the United States and the West. Even more, Iran has been concerned with Israel-Azerbaijan, the US-Azerbaijan, and Turkey-Azerbaijan ties, because of the possible use of Azerbaijan's territory for airstrikes on Iran or Azeri irredentism to destabilize Iran internally.<sup>138</sup>

On many occasions, Iranian and Armenian leaders have described their relations as 'strategic' and constructive in the context of regional affairs. Iran, having land or sea borders with fifteen states, is surrounded by current or potential conflict zones. As Julien Zarifian classifies, the Iranian foreign policy might be viewed in three main layers: its strained relations with America and European powers, its relations to Russia and emerging Asian giants such as China and India, and its relations with its neighbors. Apparently, these three categories of actors are interdependent, and Iran's relations with any of these countries are partially influenced by the others.<sup>139</sup>

The Armenian-Iranian relations have been signified as an exemplary intercivilizational dialogue. The officials of both sides used civilizational discourse and rhetoric to characterize their relationship and to indicate the potential for broader political dialogue between the East and the West. Besides, for the Armenian side, the civilizational discourse elevates Armenia from a shady small nation to a symbolically equal status, a country representing a civilization, that shares a border with a different civilization. Armenia, a contemporary to An-

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<sup>135</sup> Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, p. 379.

<sup>136</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 116.

<sup>137</sup> Harout Harry Semerdjian, "Christian Armenia and Islamic Iran: An Unusual Partnership Explained," *Foreign Policy Journal*, Jan 19, 2013, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/01/19/christian-armenia-and-islamic-iran-an-unusual-partnership-explained/>.

<sup>138</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 129.

<sup>139</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," pp. 144-145.

cient Persia with close cultural links, stood at the origins of Christendom and the European civilization.<sup>140</sup> The Armenian-Iranian partnership and good neighborly cooperation do not implicate any military alliance but highlight special relations with strategic components based on mutual trust.<sup>141</sup>

Due to the US-Iran enmity and the existential threat from Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia's freedom of movement is limited and it is forced into isolation from wider regional transit projects and has to rely only on its alliance with Russia.<sup>142</sup> As Mirzoyan puts the regional dynamics around Armenia together, "Europe and Iran are the "ideational" others, the partners that most strongly speak to Armenia's normative pursuit in the contemporary world. Russia and the United States, on the other hand, represent the powerful structural forces that define the regional security complex, in which Armenia operates."<sup>143</sup>

Thus, the special relations with Iran allow Armenia to diversify its energy supplies and to position itself as a potential cluster in prospective North-South geo-economic corridor that would both unfold the warm seas route to Russia-EAEU and the European markets for Iran and India.<sup>144</sup> The absence of a common border and fragile transport connection with Russia, make Armenia vulnerable in force majeure situations. As predicted by Mackinder, railways will continue to emerge as a key factor in contemporary Eurasian geopolitics and geo-economics. In this regard, a prospective Iranian-Armenian railroad has a huge potential of not only connecting the Russia-EAEU with the Middle East but also linking the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea and providing an alternative and shorter way of connecting India with Europe. This railway traversing Armenia will end its geographic isolation by connecting the EAEU with the Middle East and India with Europe.<sup>145</sup> Hence, possible US-Iran rapprochement and Iran-Armenia-Europe corridor ranging in a South-North direction will enable Armenia to overcome its insecurity and will create a more stabilizing alignment for this crucial region.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, within the framework of RSCT theory, the security constellation of the geopolitical region comprising Iran and Armenia is generated by the interplay of the role of the United States' global power in the security of the wider region including Europe, Georgia, and the Persian Gulf; Iran's domestically generated vulnerabilities and securitization processes concerned with security fears of internal destabilization threats by external intervention and the perception of a viable nuclear program as a back-up deterrent against the threat of power, military option and regime change rhetoric from the United States; Armenia's regionally generated existential threats and economic blockade from the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis; Iran's geopolitical rivalry with Turkey's growing regional ambitions and the American dominated Gulf security region; as well as solid interregional links between Iran, Armenia-Russia (or EAEU), and India's

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<sup>140</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 132-133.

<sup>141</sup> Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran," p. 131.

<sup>142</sup> Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, p. 381.

<sup>143</sup> Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West*, p. 177.

<sup>144</sup> Moniquet and Racimora (ed.), *The Armenia-Iran Relationship*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>145</sup> Rinna, "Yerevan's Choice," pp. 395-404, 400.

emerging power. Hence, there is a noticeable interregional level of security dynamics in the South Caucasus, which arise from the great power spillover into this sub-complex and the extremes of national and global security interplay at the regional level.

Moreover, in the context of the competing alternatives of the Eurasian geopolitics, including the Russia-led EAEU and the Chinese New Silk Road geo-economic zone (Belt and Road Initiative), greater engagement from India with its North-South Transport Corridor initiative has the potential to be a game-changer in Eurasia. For a small landlocked state like Armenia, blocked by its neighbors and faced with critical security deficits, effective simultaneous partnership with the US's superpower, Iran's regional power and emergent power like India can help to offset these vulnerabilities through transit geo-economic and interregional engagement. The Iran-Armenia-Georgia-Europe geo-economic corridor can effectively happen with the US-Iran rapprochement.

Whether the US-Iran rapprochement will change the wider regional security architecture, is conditioned on how significant will be the infrastructure of the prospective North-South Transport Corridor connecting the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea and India to Europe through Iran-Armenia-Georgia. If the future corridor is geo-economically and geopolitically grand enough, India and Iran will become dramatically concerned with the processes in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Then, perhaps, one might analyze the possibility of a potential Indo-European supercomplex.

The constructivist dimension of the RSC theory is concerned with the formation and operation of security complexes, as they are not just a mechanical reflection of the distribution of power, but are subjects of interpretations, ideas, and actions of the actors. Therefore, both the US and Iran are confronting not each other's power but the threats of power. The transformation of perceptions of each other's powers reinforced by commercial ties and institutional obligations can create more cooperative relations contributing to the de-securitization and regional stability. Moreover, Iran's geopolitical location in the Eurasian continent as a pivot and a bridge between various regions (Europe-Iran-Middle East, Europe-Iran-Asia), can effectively complement the US strategy of offshore balancing towards current and prospective geopolitical challenges coming from other regional great powers. Due to the increasing role of economic interests in configuration Iran's external and internal policies, the prospect of commercial relations with America and initiatives for geo-economic connections with Europe could provide a powerful policy asset and greater leverage to the United States in transforming Iran from foe to friend.

Armenia's engagement with Iran is driven by the common ancient historical experience and the necessity of neighborhood, and by the law of neighborhood, it cannot be superficial. Iran's current system with supranational identity has been a guarantee of not only its internal but regional stability. The Iran-Armenia relationship profoundly highlights the intersection between the global and local. The scenario of external intervention and regime change in Iran will most probably have opposite effects by stimulating either general nationalist sentiments or tensions along the internal ethnic lines, which will damage the US national interests, Armenia's security and will be a geopolitical gift to Turkey.

As the recent history of regime changes in the Middle East has shown, those processes were short ways to instability and insecurity.

Iran is Armenia's window to Asia, while Georgia to Europe. Iran and Georgia are Armenian's most ancient immediate neighbors. The history of the neighborhood comprising these ancient nations spans three millennia with minimal conflicts and profound cooperative and harmonious relationships and civilizational ties. Huntington's theory of the Clash of Civilizations approach is not valid in grasping the equilibriums of this complex region of the world. Contrariwise, the Armenian-Iranian solid partnership and good neighborly relations demonstrate an exemplary paradigm of cohabitation and historical convergence of the interests of two civilizations. Thence, it can be indicative of broader and harmonious Western-Iranian relations.

**ՏԻԳՐԱՆ ԵՓՐԵՄՅԱՆ – ԱՄՆ-Իրան հարաբերությունները. անվտանգային ազդեցություններն առ Հայաստան և անդին** – Մույն հոդվածում կատարվել է համեմատական վերլուծություն ԱՄՆ-Իրան հարաբերությունների և Հայաստանի վրա դրանց անվտանգային և աշխարհատնտեսական ազդեցությունների վերաբերյալ: Հոդվածում քննության են առնվում տարածաշրջանային անվտանգության հիմունքներն ու Միացյալ Նահանգների, Իրանի և Հայաստանի աշխարհաքաղաքական ու տնտեսական հրամայականները: ԱՄՆ-Իրան հարաբերությունների կարգավորումը կարող է հիմնովին փոխել տարածաշրջանային անվտանգության ճարտարապետությունը: Խնդիրը հույժ կարևոր է Հայաստանի համար: Դիտարկում է նաև «Համատեղ համապարփակ գործողությունների ծրագիրը»: Սակայն տնտեսական և քաղաքական փոխշահավետ գործընկերության փոխարեն Իրանի միջուկային խնդիրը, ինչպես նաև Միացյալ Նահանգների և Իրանի միջև թշնամական հարաբերությունները խորացրել են փոխադարձ անվստահությունը՝ դժվարացնելով հաշտեցման նախաձեռնությունները: Կոպենհագենյան դպրոցի անվտանգայնացման տեսության մատերիալիստական և կոնստրուկտիվիստական հենքի և, մասնավորապես, տարածաշրջանային անվտանգության համալիրների տեսության հիման վրա ներկայացվում են աշխարհառազմավարական գաղափարների, քաղաքականությունների և գործընթացների համատեքստային ըմբռնման հնարավորությունները: Իրանը իր ահռելի էներգետիկ պաշարներով, արտահանման հսկայական ներուժով և Եվրասիա մայրցամաքում առանցքային աշխարհաքաղաքական դիրքով տարածաշրջանային կայունացուցիչ դառնալու և տարածաշրջանի աշխարհաքաղաքական ու աշխարհատնտեսական մարտահրավերներն էապես նվազեցնելու մեծ ներուժ ունի, ինչը բազմաթիվ հնարավորություններ է բացում Հայաստանի համար՝ որպես տարանցիկ ճանապարհի դեպի Եվրոպա աշխարհամաս: Ընդամին, սրան կարող է էապես նպաստել ԱՄՆ-Իրան հնարավոր մերձեցումը:

**Բանալի բառեր** - ԱՄՆ, Իրան, Հայաստան, աշխարհաքաղաքականություն, տարածաշրջանային անվտանգություն, Կոպենհագենյան դպրոցի տեսություն, Կովկաս

**ТИГРАН ЕПРЕМЯН – Отношения США и Ирана: Воздействие на безопасность в Армении и за ее пределами.** – Это исследование представляет

собой сравнительный анализ американо-иранских отношений и вытекающих из этого последствий для безопасности и геэкономических отношений в Армении и за ее пределами. Он касается основ региональной безопасности и геополитических и экономических императивов США, Ирана и Армении. Несмотря на веские основания для взаимовыгодного экономического и политического партнерства, иранская ядерная проблема и враждебные отношения между Соединенными Штатами и Ираном породили взаимное недоверие, что затрудняет инициативы по примирению. Таким образом, в документе учитывается Совместный всеобъемлющий план действий. Нормализация американо-иранских отношений коренным образом изменит архитектуру региональной безопасности. Вопрос имеет принципиальное значение для Армении. В документе используются материалистические и конструктивистские рамки Копенгагенской школы исследований в области безопасности, прежде всего Теория комплекса региональной безопасности, для контекстуализации как геостратегических идей, так и практик. Эмпирической отправной точкой для данного исследования является тот факт, что Иран — с его огромными запасами энергоносителей, огромным экспортным потенциалом и ключевым геополитическим положением в Евразии — может стать региональным стабилизатором и значительно уменьшить геополитические и геэкономические вызовы более широкий регион, открывающий множество возможностей для Армении как транзитного пути в Европу. Фактически это может произойти при сближении США и Ирана. Эта всесторонняя перспектива позволяет нам лучше понять структуру региональной безопасности и перспективы стабильности в условиях масштабных геополитических замыслов.

**Ключевые слова:** *США, Иран, Армения, геополитика, региональная безопасность, теория копенгагенской школы, Кавказ*