

Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy toward South Caucasus in the Post-JCPOA Era

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Abstract

The motivation and expression of the theme: The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 once again turned the South Caucasus into a great game of regional and trans-regional powers. Russia, Iran, Turkey and Europe as well as other actors such as the United States and China, and even the Zionist regime, are competing to gain access to strategic resources and transportation routes in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, Iran has witnessed the events occurring in the South Caucasus and Central Asia during the past 25 years, what she has not been able to do a lot about. Yet, Tehran has to some extent succeeded in maintaining her historical role and position in this region due to adopting some pragmatic policies towards former Soviet republics.

Today, Iran's political and economic presence in the region is expected to increase as Iran releases from chapter 7 of the charter of the United States and with the end of the sanctions by UN Security Council against Iran. The conclusion of a nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5 + 1, called JCPOA, on July 14, 2015, and its implementation on January 17, 2016, despite of the withdrawal of Washington on May 8, 2018, and the ongoing talks on the cost-benefit of continuing this agreement without the presence of the United States, have provided an opportunity to improve political and trade relations between Iran and other countries. In this situation, the diplomatic apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran can enhance the country's national interests by taking advantage of the potential opportunities and reducing the existing challenges in strengthening relations with the republics of the South Caucasus. However, in addition to the geostrategic importance, geographical proximity and historical and cultural ties of Iran with the South Caucasus, the most pragmatic approach of Iranian foreign policy has been toward the republics of this region (along with the Central Asian republics). In another word, although Iran's relationship with the three republics of the South Caucasus has had ups and downs since their independence, it has been less involved with idealistic/ideological

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considerations than Tehran's relations with its other neighbors as well as other countries in the world and geopolitical and objective interests are more evident.

Purpose, Question and Hypothesis: The purpose of this study is to assess the opportunities and challenges facing the Islamic Republic of Iran in relations with the South Caucasian republics in the post-war arena in case of continuation and strengthening of a pragmatic approach in Tehran's foreign policy in this region. Therefore, the question this study is seeking to answer is how Iran's pragmatic foreign policy in the post- JCPOA Era affects opportunities and threats Iran may face. The initial answer to this question (hypothesis) is that "the continuation and strengthening of Iran's pragmatic foreign policy towards the South Caucasian republics could allow Tehran to take advantage of the opportunities ahead in this region and to avoiding its challenges".

Methodology: The method used in this research is descriptive-analytical (qualitative). We also use the inferential methodology, along with utilizing the ability to understand the dynamics of the pragmatic foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in South Caucasian republics, as well as relying on the existing evidences and facts. **Findings:** for Iran the South Caucasus is both a source of opportunity and a source of the threat. From the perspective of the political elites, the South Caucasus is considered to be the continuation of the historical and cultural sphere of influence of Iran. Thus, even when developing Iranian foreign policy was slowed down by international sanctions due to the nuclear program, Tehran remained an important actor in the South Caucasus. Now, along with the continuation and strengthening of the pragmatism approach in foreign policy, JCPOA can, in addition to accelerating the process of normalization of Iran's relations with other countries, may have a significant impact on the regional role of Iran, the changing of the balance of regional power in favor of Tehran and improving its regional status, both economically and politically. However, Iran's policy towards the South Caucasus has been inherently pragmatic from the outset and has been shaped by practical politics, historical experiences, and balance-of-power calculations. Therefore, although Tehran may have religious aspirations and desires regarding this region, she can at the same time be able to recognize the limitations of its ability and external challenges, and therefore, her regional policy in the South Caucasus has relatively been Cautious and balanced.

The main goals and interests of Iran in the South Caucasus can be divided into four general categories. First, the decline in the influence of outside powers, in particular the European Union, NATO, the United States and the Zionist regime is seen as a security threat. Implementing this will reduce Iran's security concerns and gives Tehran more room to increase its cooperation with the three Republics of the region. First, although unlike Russia and Turkey, Iran is not a weapon dealer to the South Caucasian

states, the mere use of Tehran's nuclear program can be viewed as a security threat for the countries of the region, which, of course, signing of the JCPOA and the endorsement of the international community of the peaceful enjoyment of Iran's nuclear capability will partly diminish such concerns in the future. Second, the continuation of the neutralization of possible security threats the instability in the South Caucasus, which could affect the northern borders of Iran. Third, to gain a better position through the expansion of political, cultural and economic relations with the republics of the region. Fourth, to determine a legal regime of the Caspian Sea corresponding to the fair share of Iran.

Finally, the findings show that the lifting of international sanctions against Iran and normalization of the west-Iran relations changes the balance of power in the South Caucasus in favor of Iran and challenges the other regional powers including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the occupier regime of Israel. To benefit from returning to South Caucasus in the post-JCPOA Era, Tehran needs to take advantage of a Strategic policy-making based on pragmatic approaches. The most efficient way of increasing power and presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region and the world is to adopt a pragmatic foreign policy with features such as refraining from unproductive confrontation, de-ideologizing relations with other states, tactical flexibility, prioritizing objective interests over subjective interests.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Iran, JCPOA, Pragmatism, South Caucasus.