

Iran's Foreign Policy in South Caucasus, Offensive or Defensive?

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Abstract

Iran and Caucasus have a common history. Cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and geographical cohesion of Caucasus with Iran are obvious factors that engage Tehran in the issues of this region. This area has been part of the Iranian territory in different eras and at periods of times the Russians and Turks have ruled this region. Iran's foreign policy attitude in the region confirms that Geopolitical motives and pragmatist policies have been the basis of Tehran's orientation in the region. The main purpose of this article is assessing the foreign policy of Iran in the framework of Robert Jervis's theory on Perception and misperception. Therefore present article tries to address the questions, whether Iran's Foreign policy is offensive or defensive in Caucasia? How the Caucasian states' perception from the Iran's foreign policy has been formulated? The authors believe that Iran's behavior in South Caucasus is completely defensive. But the dominant conception on Iran's foreign policy is offensive towards the region by the interested players. So the rival actors in South Caucasus pursue cautious and sometimes negative approach towards Iran. The authors use the following factors to assess Iran's offensive or defensive behavior in the South Caucasus:

- Ideological or geopolitical behavior in the Caucasus
- Security strategies in the Caucasus
- The alliance and coalition policy in Caucasus
- Bilateral interactions in Caucasus

Ideological or geopolitical behavior in the Caucasus

By the time of the USSR collapse, the Islamic Revolution of Iran had a history of more than 10 years. Incumbent president Hashemi Rafsanjani had pursued a pragmatic foreign policy in order to rebuild the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war. Therefore, Iran pursued a less ideologically driven foreign policy, especially in regard to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Despite the strong influence of the Islamic ideology on Iranian foreign policy, the foundational relationship with the Caucasian countries was based on

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geopolitical and realistic motives. It is important to point out that ideological foreign policy is usually accompanied by offensive behaviors, While the geopolitical attitude is more consistent with reality-based as well as status qua decision-making. Therefore, Iran's foreign policy in the Caucasus has had a more defensive rather than an offensive nature.

Security strategies in the Caucasus

The worst security situation in any region is the “neither, nor war” status. This situation shows a frozen crisis. The unresolved Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazian and South Ossetia crises are undoubtedly the main pressing problems in the South Caucasus. According to the fragile security situation in the region, influential countries have special outlooks and strategies for the Caucasus. These outlooks show the offensive or defensive nature of countries’ behaviors in the region. Unlike the other competing countries, Iran has introduced the most comprehensive security model for the Caucasus. Iran's Security model (3+3) contains the participation of all neighboring countries and prevents the interference of trans-regional powers.

The alliance and coalition policy in Caucasus

The increased cooperation between Russia, Iran and Armenia has led to speculation regarding an emerging set of regional alignments. Iran's position in the de facto alliance system in South Caucasus is not based on Tehran's identical proactive motives. The impact of high level of approaching of Azerbaijan to Israel and also the rising influence of USA, Israel and Turkey in South Caucasus have caused to much closer relationships of Iran with Armenia in context of Russia-Armenia-Iran axis. In other words, coalition between Baku-Ankara-Tel Aviv has caused more cooperation between Iran with Russia as well as Armenia. Therefore, the orientation of Iran toward the north-south axis is a reactive action with a defensive function.

Bilateral interactions in Caucasus

Despite the fundamental contradiction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, Tehran has tried to build constructive relationships with the Western-oriented countries in south Caucasus. Iran is the only neighbor of the region that has embassies in all three South Caucasus states, while Russia and Turkey have closed their embassies respectively in Georgia and Armenia.

Conclusion

The regional states’ perception of the Iran foreign policy in South Caucasus is not in direction with which Iran practically has followed in the region. They do not evaluate the Iranian behavior without considering the Iran orientations in the Middle East. Conception of the Iranian Foreign Policy in

South Caucasus has created in the light of dominant discourse of Iranian foreign policy in other regions and world politics. In system theory, different regions, especially neighboring regions, have an impact on each other. But these areas have not the same significance and effectiveness. Accordingly, the Middle Eastern developments have significant effects in the Caucasus. Tehran's behavior in the Middle East has caused the US denial of the Iran role in many issues of the Caucasus like as energy transmission pipelines, militarization of the Caspian Sea and the desire to join NATO by the neighboring states. In addition, USA by pursuing "everything without Iran in Caucasus" tries to eliminate Iran's role in different projects in the region. This strategy is not due to Iran's "geopolitical defensive approach" in the Caucasus, rather it is rooted in Iran's offensive foreign policy against Israel as a strategic ally of Washington in the Middle East. Iran's deprivation from regional interests by the US in the Caucasus shows that the Caucasian neighbors did not perceive Iranian pragmatist actions as positive behaviors. Iranian attitude in South Caucasus is less assertive than Turkey, Russia, Israel and USA, but the existing facts shows that Caucasian neighbor are cautious in expanding relations with Iran given to misperception of Tehran policy towards other regions.

Keywords: Alliance and Coalition, Caucasus, Defensive Policy, Iran, Offensive Policy, Robert Jervis.