

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

IRANIAN RELATIONS WITH AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH IN THE CASE OF PRAGMATIST POLITICS

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AZERBAIJAN VE ERMENİSTAN İLE İRAN İLİŞKİLERİ: PRAGMATİST POLİTİKALAR ÇERÇEVESİNDE KARŞILAŞTIRMALI BİR YAKLAŞIM

Abstract

With the increase of the importance of the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional and global powers have tried to product new policies to have a relationship with the counties of the region. The regional countries such as Russia, Turkey and Iran have more advantageous than other states but the determination of the policies of these states are different from each other. For instance, Iran's approach is based on the pragmatist politics and the country to try to balance its policies in the region in terms of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The main aim of this article is to determine the different aspects of Iranian foreign policy preferences towards Azerbaijan and Armenia in the context of pragmatism.

Keywords: Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Pragmatist Politics, Nagorno-Karabakh.

Öz

Sovyetler Birliği'nin yıkılmasından sonra Güney Kafkasya'nın öneminin artmasıyla birlikte, bölgesel ve küresel güçler bölgedeki ülkelerle ilişki kurmak için yeni politikalar üretmeye çalışmışlardır. Rusya, Türkiye ve İran gibi bölgesel ülkeler diğer devletlerden daha avantajlıdır, ancak bu devletlerin bu bölgeye

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yönelik politikalarının belirlenmesi birbirlerinden farklıdır. Örneğin, İran'ın yaklaşımı pragmatist politikaya ve ülkeye bölgedeki politikalarını Ermenistan ve Azerbaycan açısından dengelemeye çalışmaktadır. Bu makalenin temel amacı, İran dış politikasının Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan'a yönelik pragmatizm bağlamında farklı yönlerini belirlemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Azerbaycan, Ermenistan, Pragmatist Politika, Dağlık Karabağ.

1. Introduction

The South Caucasus region has reached its geopolitical importance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, the new areas encouraged both regional and global powers to create new politics on these areas. As former Soviet countries in the region; Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia have become attractive destinations for regional and global powers in terms of their natural sources and locations, particularly in terms of energy sources and transportation projects. The regional powers such as Russia, Turkey and Iran determined and established their foreign policies to adopt beneficial relations with these newly independent countries.

Each of the regional powers has created different forms of relationship under the effect of several variables, such as cultural or historical background, same ethnicity etc. In addition to these factors, regional and ethnic conflicts played an important role to determine the bilateral and multilateral relations in the South Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia crisis in Georgia and the Russo-Georgian War became main conflict indicators. As a result of this situation, Turkey has successfully formed a close relationship with Azerbaijan and Georgia due to its cultural and regional togetherness, but the country didn't establish a similar kind of ties with Armenia because of the Armenian occupation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region which is belonging to Azerbaijan that is Turkey's strategic partner. On the other side, Russia has formed a successful relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia unlike with Georgia which suffered a destructive war with Russia in 2008 and lost 20% of its territories. Iran appears as another important example which produced a totally different way of a relationship. The country's relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia entirely base on a pragmatist approach. Iran has adopted an economically and politically beneficial way of relations with both countries, but as the Islamic Republic, it has various approaches towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At this point, there are some intervening factors which affect the Iranian policy towards Azerbaijan and Armenia. This situation

causes some concerns about Iranian intentions in the region, especially from the perspective of Azerbaijan when it comes to analysing Iran-Armenia relations.

Until the 19th century, Iran had ruled a big part of the region which is called the South Caucasus where today Azerbaijan and Armenia locates. Therefore, historical and cultural ties always become key factors when it comes to see the Iranian approaches towards to the regional countries. Additionally, economic and security benefits become major priorities and thus, Iran's Islamic Revolution rhetoric doesn't have any decisive role in regional politics. Moreover, it can be said that Iran has followed a pragmatist and security-oriented foreign policy approach towards those countries.

Some independent and intervening variables can be listed which shape the Iranian policy towards Azerbaijan and Armenia. Here it is needed to calculate the main factors to understand the bilateral relations. In the domestic side; national security concerns due to the Azerbaijani population within the country and expected benefits from the economy, energy, and transportation projects stand as major factors. In the external side; confronting the Western hegemony and balancing Turkish and Russian power in the region are major factors.

2. Theoretical Background

Understanding the state behaviour and different type of internal/external factors which affect the state policy stands as one of the main questions of international relations theories. For having a comprehensive outlook in our research, the realist school can be accepted helpful with its self-interest definition. The international system is anarchic and all states need to follow their own interests, therefore realism's parameters have vital importance as statism, self-help and survival position, in the decision making process more interest-oriented. Today, in the case of nuclear issue and regional politics can be taken as an example to understand Iranian foreign political steps, as well. However, as a core element, national interest is the key factor which shapes the foreign policy choices.

According to Morgenthau, realism relies on the concept of interest which has a definition in terms of power. He argues that the system of international relations is a struggle for power and this is the main aim of states which are main actors of this system (Morgenthau, 2005: 29). So, the national interest as the main motivation for states to determine their preferences.

It is also important to take into account the Iranian engagement with the Islamic Revolution principles for our research. The country has developed the direction of the revolutionary pathway when it comes to making foreign policy. The revolution export to other countries became a concerning point for the world (Alarabiya, 2018). Therefore, it is automatically creating an expectation to see an Iranian support towards Azerbaijan, as another Muslim country and neighbour, in the case of regional conflicts but the country follows another way with pragmatist desires.

On the other hand, analysing the Iranian neighbourhood policy can give some arguments about dominancy motivation. The current relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are mostly viewed from the window of cooperation but, in the near history, Iranian reactions to some developments in Azerbaijan show us its hegemony desires. As Mearsheimer says, “States should maximize power, and their ultimate goal should be hegemony because that is the best way to guarantee survival” (Mearsheimer, 2006: 75; Toft, 2005: 391) Therefore, for a state, the survival is the primary aim and sometimes offensive capability needs to be increased frequently to become a hegemon (Pashakhanlou, 2013: 204).

At present, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and potency of nationalism in the East Azerbaijan province of Iran stand as main security concerns which affect the relations with Azerbaijan. Additionally, strong relations between Israel and Azerbaijan remain as another concern. Waltz describes this situation with a reasonable explanation: “To say that a country acts according to its national interest means that, having examined its security requirements, it tries to meet them” (Waltz, 1979: 134)

While security rises as a key element, the strategic partnership can be given as an example between Iran and Armenia to balance Azerbaijan. Surely, it doesn't mean Iran always adopts an offensive behaviour. Contrarily, the country has a type of cooperation in the region but it often remains limited due to the relative gain concerns. As Grieco explains, the relative gains may create a powerful potential adversary among the cooperating partners (1988: 500). Hence, expected utility with controllable and limited cooperation is much more advantageous than causing the creation of a powerful adversary in the anarchical system which contains full of uncertainties.

Accounting the criteria of the theoretical approach may help us to see which type of realist perspective is suitable for that kind of state policies.

As a state, having the national identity and institutional behaviours as dominant factors which shape the policy direction of the country, neoclassical realism might also become helpful. The rules of the distribution of power capabilities, systemic pressure, domestic variables, and institutional behaviour have been important factors in Iran which is the Islamic Republic and has a theocratic state system. However, as Rose claims that the lack of understanding the state behaviour without analysing details of the identity background may stand as the weak point of the neoclassical realist approach (Rose, 1998: 145), but here we can face a problem to finding a domestic effect which directly shapes the policy orientation towards Azerbaijan and Armenia. So, it is crucially important to follow the neorealist way with the outlooks of national interest and security concerns.

Thus here the question can be asked as *What are the main motivations of Iran to make a different type of foreign political tools towards Armenia and Azerbaijan?*

In this research, several sources are included to get sufficient information on bilateral and multilateral relations in the region. These sources are especially helpful to understand Iranian pragmatist approaches and its positions from the early 1990s till today in the conflict issues. Additionally, various media and online sources are included to cover a wide range of analysis.

3. Iranian Concept of Revolution Export

Iran had become the Islamic Republic after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The country has changed its paths from the Western-oriented one to self-interest and pragmatist structure. That period became an important case study for prominent scholars to understand the Iranian balancing behaviour between the US and the Soviet Union. After this period, the concept of Revolution Export defines the liberation of Muslim and non-Muslim countries from the pivot of big powers which are tyrants (Country Studies, 2018).

Taking the case of the overthrown Shah, the US and the Soviet Union remained the main examples for this concept. Thus, Iran sought to apply its own revolutionary method to other countries, beginning from its neighbourhood. From the period of Ayatollah Khomeini, this became an important principle of the Iranian foreign policy (The New York Times, 1981).

It has been stressed that Iran doesn't have an interest to interfere the internal affairs of any country for having ideal type of diplomatic

relations, but in real, domestic dynamics have been used as an opportunity to export revolution with the principles of Islamism (Gonabad *et.al.*, 2017: 839). Discussing the Iranian policy towards South Caucasus in the case of Azerbaijan and Armenia, this method wasn't used and this Muslim country's approaches to Azerbaijan have become main source of questions. The ongoing conflict in the region between Muslim Azerbaijan and Christian Armenia has been calculated differently by Iran which supported Christian Armenia rather than Muslim Azerbaijan with its various types of politics (Mammadov, 2016: 1).

It will be showed that Iran is using a various type of foreign policy approach which is a pragmatist view. Thus the cases of Azerbaijan and Armenia have big importance to understand this view.

4. Iran-Azerbaijan Relations: Hesitant Ties

The diplomatic relations between Iran and Azerbaijan started in 1992. The two countries share a 765km length border and both of them are littoral states of the Caspian Sea. Iran, as the Islamic Republic, has similarities and differences with Azerbaijan in the case of historical, cultural and contemporary values and common grounds. Both of the countries are home to a large Muslim Shia population while Azerbaijan has a secular state mechanism unlikely Iran's theocracy. This causes a notable difference than similarity in the case of political systems. Thereof Iran has a tendency to support religious groups in Azerbaijan while Baku administration suppresses the emergence of religious extremism and takes this factor as one of the most important national security concerns.

The period of Abulfaz Elchibey, the second president of Azerbaijan, Pan-Turkic political rhetoric has played a decisive role to shape the Iranian concerns about this country (Mammadov, 2016: 1). Some analysts argue that Iran, for the first time, has chosen a strong partnership with Armenia to prevent possible threats from Azerbaijan because nationalist approaches could have created a diffusion effect with the huge Azerbaijani population in Iran. Consequently, this population became a concerning point for the national security and causal effect of the pragmatist policies of Iran. Conversely, during the Heydar Aliyev's period, his balance policy caused a decrease in tension for building confidence although some other factors negatively altered the ties.

In addition to their normal type of bilateral relations, the main dynamics of the relations is separated into several subtitles. Positively; both countries follow a sustainable way of economic interaction and transportation projects. Negatively; rejection of Iranian participation to

Azerbaijani oil projects, 2001 Caspian Sea crisis, Iranian soft power over the Talysh ethnics in Azerbaijan and continuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. These factors generally shape the bilateral relations and this situation creates one of the main pillars of the Iranian foreign policy towards the South Caucasus region.

4.1. Negative Side of the Relations

First of all, Azerbaijan had concerns about the potential danger of the revolution export attempts of Iran, which created mutual distrust (Fuller, 2013). Iran's national security concern also affects the policy-making process towards Azerbaijan. So, here Armenia appears as an alternative partner to decrease Azerbaijan's possible threats against Iran. From the perspective of Iran, Azerbaijan is an important historical and cultural neighbour but at the same time, this country is a potential source of destabilization and concern of security issues, because today Iran is home to a large ethnic Azerbaijani population in the East Azerbaijan province, up to twenty million people who live near to the border of Azerbaijan (Khalil, 2015: 161-167). These people have taken important positions in the state affairs and economic sphere during decades. One more negative factor on the issue occurred in the early 1990s when nationalist discourse among Azerbaijanis was spreading in the case of Azerbaijani unification (Lorusso, 2016). This is an implicit concern for Tehran and bilateral relations rise on this reality as well as Iranian supports to the Shia movements in Azerbaijan. (Jackson, 2017)

As an official speech, Iranian leader Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani should be mentioned in this context. He emphasized the potential danger of an Azerbaijani nationalism as an equal threat of the former communist presence in the region. He clearly stated that Iran wouldn't allow any kind of nationalist movement even they have an Islamic motivation (Cornell, 1997). At this point, national security concerns or fear became a core element for Iran-Azerbaijan relations, which affects the regional peace as well (Monique *et.al.*, 2013: 35).

As another negative effect, Azerbaijan has rejected the Iranian participation to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Project, which has another name as "Contract of the Century" with the pressure of the US in 1994. After this year, the bilateral relations have worsened (Shaffer, 2003: 19). In that time, Azerbaijan had nothing to do in this case because of the pressure from the US, and the country tried to restore ties and gain confidence with Iran in the coming years. This caused the exclusion of Iran from the Western-oriented energy projects in the region. Therewithal, Iran has adopted a regional policy which has a theme with anti-Western

rhetoric that includes anti-US and anti-Israel as well as competition against Turkey. Thus, Azerbaijan's strong relations especially on security and military with Israel has become another concerning point for Iran (Weiss *et.al.*, 2017: 4-6). Iran frequently accused Azerbaijan due to this partnership and allowing Israel to be part of the regional context. (Avdaliani, 2017).

The Caspian Sea remains as another negative point in the bilateral relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, littoral states of the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan) had debated the division of the sea to manage natural resources and deployment of security forces. Iran and Azerbaijan maintain different methods on the division of the sea to use hydrocarbon sources in favour of their interests. Azerbaijan accepts a national coastline solution for each state and supports the median line principle of the sea which all littoral states may have the benefits of the all resources as well as navigation activities without having a discussion in terms of sea and lake by determining its own property rights (Abilov, 2013: 131). But Iran has offered the condominium principle and preferred to have a marginal position in the Caspian Sea discussions. Later, the country changed the proposal with a new offer. As accepting this, Caspian should be divided into equal pieces by ownership of 20% shares respectively for each country to use seabed and surface commonly (Amineh, 1999: 155). The two countries had a serious encounter in 1998 and 2001 due to the use of this sea. Firstly, National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed an agreement worth \$19.8 million with Royal Dutch/Shell and British Lasmco, for research and development of the oil fields in the south part of the Caspian Sea (Abilov, 2013: 137). However, Azerbaijan warned Iran with an official note. Secondly, for energy exploration activities in the Alov-Araz-Sharg field, Azerbaijan and British Petroleum signed an agreement. This initiative caused a big crisis and Iran sent naval vessels and prepared aircraft to stop the researches of Azerbaijani ships in 2001 (Ogan, 2005). Herewith, the US and Turkey reacted to the Iranian antagonistic attempts and this incident became a major indicator for the language of threat (Djalili, 2002: 50).

The last negative point is about Iranian intention to influence the Talysh population in Azerbaijan. Total number of the Talysh people is given by official sources around 85,000 (The World Factbook, 2018), but which is actually over than 100,000 or 200.000 according to multiple sources. They live near to the southern part of Azerbaijan and reportedly and they are under the influence of Iran (Meydan TV, 2018).

Baku administration estimates that Armenia and Iran has a dominant role

to encourage separatist policies for the Talysh people to use them as a threatening tool against Azerbaijan (Souleimanov *et.al.*, 2007). For instance, an organization of the Talysh conference which was firstly held in Armenia in 2005 under the Iranian Studies Department of Yerevan State University is referred to as an example of this claim because of some obvious statements in the Armenian media (Lragir.am, 2018). It is also expressed that Iran has no any Islamic motive while having the Talysh policy in the region (Lragir.am, 2018).

On the other hand, television and radio activities which are sponsored by outside actors are also disturbing Azerbaijan (Goble, 2014). This kind of initiatives creates a new type of concerns for the other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan such as Lezgi, Avar and Tat. The country has faced a turbulent political situation due to the attempts of autonomous establishments of separatists in the early 1990s and war in Nagorno-Karabakh (Clifton *et.al.*, 2018: 155).

4.2. Positive Side of the Relations

These two countries have to cooperate because of their geostrategic positions in the means of economy and transportation. They have remarkable oil and natural gas resources and need to transfer this energy to other countries via their territories. In 2004, they agreed to create a gas swap deal which provides a supply of the Iranian natural gas to Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan Autonomous Region, separated from the mainland of Azerbaijan with the Armenian invasion in Nagorno-Karabakh region. According to the deal, Azerbaijan also guaranteed to provide gas to the northern territories of Iran (Mehrnews, 2018).

Azerbaijan prefer to develop non-oil sector which created the necessity to obtain new alternative routes for strengthening its economic interests. At this point, Iran, a powerful neighbour, emerged as an important partner. Taking this into account that the bilateral relations improved after the Iranian president Hasan Rouhani's visit to Baku after 2013 (Paul, 2015: 57).

Similarly, The North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) project provides some benefits for both countries to be a pioneer in the case of international transport and transfer activities (Azernews, 2018). This project is important in terms of working in partnership towards to same aim and they can improve their economies and be a partner with big-geo-economic players and therefore this project will decrease the tension in the region. (Shepard, 2018). The main aim is to create a transport connection by rail, ship, and roadways from India to Europe via Caucasus territories. Russia, Iran, and India signed the agreement in 2002.

Azerbaijan appears as a significant station which connects Iran and Russia. The annual aim is to carry 1.5 million passengers and 5 million tons of cargo. NSTC is expected to provide opportunities to Azerbaijan and Iran as the transit routes between Europe and India. Therefore, Tehran and Baku collaborate to finish their parts for realizing the project.

On the other side, the sanctions which are implemented against Iran by the West negatively affected the ideal economic relations among the countries. Thus, the trade turnover has become always changeable and reached its peak only in 2007 with the total amount of \$672 million. The amount was \$265 million between 2015-2016 right before the sanctions lifted. After this process, the trade volume reached \$404 million in the period of 2016-2017.

Finally, Iran has always been interested in the energy projects of Azerbaijan. The country currently holds %10 joint-venture participation in the Shah Sea gas field (Weiss *et.al.*, 2017: 5).

5. Iran-Armenia Relations: Solid Ties

Armenia remains as the only regional country which Iran doesn't have any problem in both political and cultural issues. These two countries have a different ground of state structure, but similar way of a beneficial relationship. The Islamic Republic of Iran involves in better ties with Armenia which holds the position of the first nation that adopted Christianity in the world.

Iran hosts a big Armenian community that is around 150.000 people but it has a decreasing tendency every year. This provides a convenient facility to Iran for making effective promotion in front of the world to show the quality of human rights and democracy in the country. It is one of the main motivations which affect the bilateral relations between Iran and Armenia (Monique *et.al.*, 2013: 5).

The border with Iran allows Armenia to reach the outer world because the country is landlocked and blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaijan due to the Armenian occupation in Nagorno-Karabakh (Therme, 2018). The routes via Iran and Georgia are accepted as breathing tube of Armenia when it comes to considering the economy and energy needs of the country. Becoming a conflicted side in the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, Armenia is by-passed in numerous regional projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Project. Thus, Iran is figured as an important chance to find alternative ways to meet the country's necessities. Therefore, Iran becomes one of the leading trade partners because it provides opportunities for involving in small-scale of projects in the region.

The bilateral relations improved during the presidency of Robert Kocharian in 1998 and turned into a strategic partnership during the Serzh Sargsyan's leadership after 2008.

The establishment of the Aras Free Zone which is located in North-western Iran and close to the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic consolidated the economic relationship among countries after 2003 (Ganeei, 2013: 114-122). This became an important step to take attention of foreign investments, especially for Armenia. On the other side, the establishment of the Meghri Free Economic Zone is another important economic facility between the countries. Iran has taken the advantage of having economic partnership with the Eurasian Economic Union with the help of Armenia. (he Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2017).

The US sanctions against Iran and differences of economic systems created several obstacles for commercial activities. Having more liberal economic mechanism made Armenia hesitant to involve in trade affairs with Iran because this country faced heavy sanctions from the West and its state-controlled economy couldn't have established a safe economic environment in the region. This directly threatened the welfare of Armenia and the country needed to be more sensitive to find alternatives. Russia stands here as an opposite actor and only country to provide energy to Armenia because Moscow keeps this country to guarantee Russian security needs. This situation affects the Armenian decision-making process to improve relations with Iran and other countries. So, we can say that energy relations with Iran remain limited although some projects finalized. As an example, the opening of Iran-Armenia natural gas pipeline in 2006, was designed for the Armenian energy needs. The constructed pipeline from Iran to Armenia uses distribution links to provide gas. The pipeline project officially started in 2007 after the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's meeting with his counterpart Robert Kocharian (Tehran Times (2008). Even the media outlets named this initiative Iranian big contribution to Armenian welfare (Therme, 2018).

But sooner, Russian Gazprom which has a big share in Armenia pressured this country to reduce the limit of gas. Here, only concern appears about Iranian dominant role in the region against Russian military presence. In 2009, some explosions damaged the pipeline and Iran became more careful about the energy politics in the region. Additionally, the country accepted the reduced diameter of the pipeline after the Russian request (Tehran Times, 2009). On the other side, the construction of a hydroelectric plant and a high voltage transmission line on the border

area aims to meet electricity necessities (Payvand Iran News, 2018).

In the case of transportation, both of the countries realize the importance of the creation of significant projects such as the 470-km long railway and the 556-km long North-South highway which are in the development process (Monique *et.al.*, 2013: 8).

The trade volume has reached to \$300 million a year although the current potential is around \$1 billion (Weiss *et.al.*, 2017: 3). Even though Armenia is a smaller country compared to Iran, there are three main targets which can be indicated to understand the Iranian intention to improve relations with this country. Firstly, Iran wants to find alternative ways to reach other regions for energy and transportation issues to guarantee its own interests. Secondly, balancing Azerbaijan is important for the national security, and finally, the country aims to become a dominant regional power at the expense of struggle against the Western powers and stabilize the Russian influence.

Iran always mentions the deep cultural and historical ties rather than recognizing the so-called Armenian genocide by taking the relations with Turkey into consideration. On the contrary, the country always points out the importance of Armenia for each type of projects which can shape the regional dynamics.

6. The Nagorno-Karabakh Problem: A Litmus Paper

Armenia and Azerbaijan, as former Soviet countries, had a bloody ethnic and territorial conflict between 1988 and 1994. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan where the demographics consisted of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, had become a desire of Armenian nationalists' as being an integrated part of their country. A referendum was held in the region and majority voted in favour of unification with Armenia. Azerbaijani people in the region and the Azerbaijani government didn't recognize this initiative and the conflict turned into bloody clashes. Until 1994, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces fought and Armenian army occupied big areas of the region as well as adjacent territories with ethnic-cleansing to keep the security of the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh (Council of Foreign Relations, 2018). In 1994, both sides signed a ceasefire, and Azerbaijan declared the Armenian presence in the region is unlawful and the country received international support with the United Nations resolutions which name Armenia as an occupier. Although the conflict between these two countries has remained largely frozen since the cease-fire was signed, the potential for renewed conflict is growing gradually.

Regional and global actors have shown a tendency to support the position of Azerbaijan and all of them recognize the territorial integrity of this country (Wall, 2005). Iran, as the common neighbour of both countries, has tried to be mediator from the first years of this problem but its policy has remained unclear so far because of lack of the confidence building among the parties. Iran had tried to make a temporary ceasefire to avoid devastations of war and become a pioneer for the peace talks but this method didn't work and Iranian approaches changed. At this point, the Tehran Declaration has an importance when it comes to discuss the peace initiatives for the conflict. (Ramezanzadeh, 1996)

Although Azerbaijan and the Western countries agreed to by-pass Armenia from the major regional energy and economic projects due to the current occupation in the Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran has followed another way to support Armenia with alternative projects. Azerbaijan hasn't welcomed, and this became the main concern in the bilateral relations. As the Islamic Republic, we can expect that Iran should support Azerbaijan in this conflict and should impose an embargo against Armenia. Starting from the security and national interest concerns there are several factors which shape the behaviour of Iran in favour of Armenia. One of them is about a nationalist awakening of the Azerbaijani population within the borders and second one is about to make Armenia as a unique market to Iran without influence of Turkey and, indirectly, other western countries due to the unresolved conflict and the closed borders as its outcome. (Abushev, 2005)

The possibility of a spill over effect of the conflict remains as the main concern for the national security. The conflict zone locates near to the Iranian border which shares the neighbourhood of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and it can directly affect the security. But if this conflict continues frozen and unresolved, Iran can get benefits of preventing possible power advantages of Azerbaijan with supports of the Azerbaijani population against Iran. Therefore, the power balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be kept. (Mahmudlu and Abilov, 2017) Additionally, in case of a military threat from the conflict zone, Iran might be able to use force to gain new opportunities for the regional dominance. On the other side, although the region is unstable, Iran has developed different methods on economic cooperation with these countries separately and joins various kinds of economic initiatives with the advantages of Armenia's pro-Russian and Azerbaijan's balanced policies as we see from the examples of Meghri Free Economic Zone and NSTC project. Thus, Iran has a tendency to support the status-quo rather than having revisionist approaches for the Nagorno-Karabakh.

This approach slightly changed in time, especially after the US involvement in energy and economy projects in the region around 1994. With this motivation, Iran concerned with the existence of the Western powers in the region and supported Armenia which is a close ally of Russia. Therefore, some can argue that Iran created a policy to make a balance between two blocks and stabilize possible threats from Azerbaijan. Shortly, for Tehran, this conflict is an opportunity to prevent Azerbaijan's potential adversary position against Iran and make Armenia a reliable partner in the region.

7. Main Outcomes of Iranian Pragmatism

It can be listed the main consequences to understand why Iran prefers Armenia as a strategic partner rather than Azerbaijan under the lights of neorealism.

Firstly, the existence of twenty-million Azerbaijani people in Iran is the major concern for national security. According to Tehran, East Azerbaijan province of Iran can become a scene of similar a secessionist movement like in Nagorno-Karabakh which is under the occupation by Armenians. Some argue that Iran has this attitude because of possible instability and the country is worried about the Western-oriented activities here, and it causes a proper behaviour to have a good relationship with Armenia but not to have bad ties with Azerbaijan. It is also beneficial for Iran not to touch the Nagorno-Karabakh problem which Azerbaijan puts great effort and focus on after spending money for defence (Shaffer, 2003: 19).

Secondly, Iran wants to balance the dominance of Turkey and other Western countries after supporting Armenia in economy and energy areas. The desire of becoming dominant power motivates Iran to choose Armenia as a strategic partner which is blockaded by Turkey and has no chance to have a direct connection to Europe. The case of Russia is also important for Iran in a long-term process because Russia is the only arbiter which protects Armenia from external dangers with its powerful military base in the country. Iran carefully approaches to Armenia by using the rhetoric of beneficial ties which just mean economy and energy cooperation.

Thirdly, Iran doesn't welcome the strong relationship of Azerbaijan and Israel as well as other Western countries including Turkey. As an important weapon provider to Azerbaijan, Israel has been a vital danger for the Iranian national security. It makes Iran uncomfortable and judgmental against foreign policy posture of Azerbaijan. As an alternative, Armenia stands as a potential rival to be supported against

Azerbaijan. Shortly, Iran has adopted a policy to support Yerevan-Moscow axis against to Ankara-Tel Aviv-Baku axis during the 1990s and 2000s. In addition, Tehran initiated for the formation of Tehran-Yerevan-Athens defence cooperation in late 1990s as well. (Abrahamyan, 2018)

Lastly, Iran wants to get the advantage of the Armenian diaspora which has a big influence all around the world, especially in the US and France. Diaspora can help to restore the image of Iran in the Western countries and this might generate positive outcomes for Iran (Djalili, 2002: 54).

8. Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has created a unique motivation in the foreign policy approach towards the regional countries. The concept of Revolution Export has worked as a tool towards some countries but not for all of them. Iranian relations with the South Caucasus countries such as Azerbaijan and Armenia give us an important view of highly pragmatist policy of Iran. The country has followed to improve relations with both countries but becomes hesitant to involve in the regional conflict of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

The prevention of the Azerbaijani nationalist awakening in the early 1990s with the high-level authority interventions and the reinforcement activities of Iran towards the Shia movements in Azerbaijan shaped the mistrust nature of the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. The Iranian leadership explicitly announced they don't allow any nationalist movements even if they have Islamist motives with the concerns of national security. On the other hand, Shia movements and the Talysh people in Azerbaijan had received supports from Iran. As a result, this rhetoric didn't become functional in the case of other aspects of the bilateral relations with Azerbaijan so far.

Currently, the Nagorno-Karabakh problem continues between Muslim Azerbaijan and Christian Armenia. Normally it is expected that Iran should support Azerbaijan because of cultural and religious ties and the necessity of the foreign policy concept. But the country has followed a different way and had various interests in the region by choosing Armenia as a strategic partner which is a unique market for Iran with the absence of Turkey and, indirectly, other Western countries. It doesn't mean that Azerbaijan has lost its importance for Iran but some variables negatively affected the bilateral relations such as Iranian national security concern, the Western hegemony in the region and Azerbaijan's strong ties with Israel. On the other side, Iran is highly interested in Armenia to use this country as energy and transportation destination and scene for balancing

the other powers. Here, the example of North Korea can help to clearly understand the situation. China or Russia are currently owning a good relationship with North Korea. They also express their wishes in the conflict resolution and denuclearization issue. But at the same time, this conflict is beneficial for them to make North Korea as their market in which the US cannot access. On the other side, South Korea is also another important market for them. Similarly, supporting Armenia generates same benefits for Iran which easily see the two neighbours as a good market and regional balance regulation scenes.

In the last decade, Iran has focused on improving relations with both countries in the region with the tools of economic projects which we call as pragmatist approach. With the requirements of security and necessities of national interests, the foreign policy approaches have shown neorealist motivation. Thus the country is a regional power which aims to maximize its power as a pragmatist state rather than religion-first policy applier. The cases of Azerbaijan and Armenia indicate several factors which show the real political desire of Iran.

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