

Tehran Is Also Looking Towards The Caucasus And Central Asia.

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From a European perspective, it's insignificant or underestimated.

Overshadowed by the dangerous and media scrutinised nuclear dossier, Iranian policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia is, however, decisive.

If only because it represents two of the five directions of the regional policy developed by Iran. The three others are related to the Persian Gulf, the Arab Middle East and the Indian sub-continent.

So much so that attention paid by the Islamic Republic to its neighbours in the Caucasus and Central Asia conceals key economic and security stakes. For instance, it is tricky to approach Iranian policy in Central Asia if one ignores Tehran's interest in developing its relations with China. The same is true as regards the cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan if one were to disregard Iranian fears vis-a-vis the axis between Washington, Ankara and Baku.

Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Iran specialist and professor at the Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales in Geneva explains the situation below.

Do the radical positions held by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad impact the Islamic Republic's Caucasian and central Asian policy?

Such a radical policy contributes to isolating Iran on the international arena and more specifically complicates its bilateral relations with Moscow, as we have seen these past few days on the nuclear issue. Iranian policy as regards the Caucasus and Central Asia is based on constant collaboration with Moscow and this context contributes to blur the delicate nature of cooperation, even more so than in the past. This fact could not leave neighbouring countries indifferent.

On the other hand the radical and populist rhetoric of Ahmadinejad enjoys a relatively positive reaction among Muslim populations in the Caucasus or in Central Asia, especially its anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism.

In Azerbaijan however, anti-American rhetoric is not quite so popular...

That's true but in Central Asia, anti-Americanism remains very prevalent among a certain segment of the population, and even within certain states. I am thinking here of the shift in policy in Uzbekistan and of the relatively positive reaction in that country towards Ahmadinejad's speech.

Last November, Ali Larijani, Secretary of the High Council for national security, declared that, "Iranian national security relies on stability, independence, progress and development in Central Asia and the Caucasus". What are these interactions or even interdependent security factors which link Iran to the Caucasus?

If zones of conflict develop in these neighbouring countries, as

was the case between Armenia and Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh, there could be obvious consequences for Iran. Its security dependence is linked to the fact that Iran believes itself to be surrounded by countries which have special links to powers hostile to Iran such as the United States or Israel.

>>From a practical viewpoint, to what degree does stability in Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan influence Iranian security?

In the case of Kazakhstan, I don't think one can come to that conclusion. But Iran is obviously very sensitive to the security of neighbouring states where populations might be displaced if a conflict were to break out. Take the case of Afghanistan: Iran has given shelter for several years to several million Afghan refugees.

The stability of Iran's neighbours is a prerequisite of its own national stability.

Should one therefore deduce that Iran pays particular attention to the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict?

Of course. In any case, at least officially, Iranians are in favour of a solution to the conflict. Although nobody has paid them much heed, they have requested that Tehran participate actively in the process of conflict resolution, as it did in Tajikistan, for example.

Iran, Russia and the United Nations in effect collaborated to achieve a modus vivendi on the Tajik conflict. However, since it is not a member of the OSCE, Iran has not been approached to help resolve the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh.

This dossier has, however, been followed closely by the Caucasus section of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as by several research institutes in Iran, such as the Institute of International Relations or the Institute of Caspian Studies.

What is Iran's position on another key dossier in the South Caucasus, that of frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Of course, Iran's interest in Georgia's frozen conflicts is less acute than its interest for neighbouring Nagorno Karabakh. In any case, Iranians have no desire to take adopt positions on Abkhazia and South Ossetia which may not please Moscow. They have limited room for manoeuvre and keep a low profile; this is also the case as regards the Chechen conflict. Iranians show no enthusiasm for this North Caucasian Muslim population. They have clearly opted for close cooperation with Moscow. There had even been a joint declaration between Tehran and Moscow's orthodox episcopate to condemn Chechen terrorism.

Up to what point does the policy developed by Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus reflect its desire to limit American influence in the region?

I am not saying that Iran's policy should be read solely through this prism but anti-Americanism is a taboo which is invariably present in the Islamic Republic's rhetoric since Khomeini.

On the other hand, Iranians are particularly fearful of the axis created by the United States, Turkey and Azerbaijan, which they are seeking to counterbalance. To this end, they have got closer to Russia and Armenia. Tehran has also undertaken steps to improve its relationship with Athens. This active policy has been translated into numerous bilateral meetings between Tehran and Athens, Moscow

or Yerevan, which has permitted the creation of a 'network' between these four countries.

In Central Asia, Iran has seen the opening of several new perspectives, notably the first attempt at rapprochement between Tehran and Tashkent against the background of a cooling in the cooperation between the US and Uzbekistan. Although to my knowledge there have not been steps in this direction recently, the situation indicates that the bilateral relations between Iran and Uzbekistan, which have remained somewhat poor since Uzbekistan's independence, could improve. A sense of improvement can already be seen in the speeches given by the Iranian diplomacy, but also in the way in which the press has covered the breakdown in relations between US-Uzbek relations.

Does Tehran view the Caucasus countries as natural allies?

I believe that there is a sense of closeness, both historically, culturally and even religiously speaking with these regions, but I don't think that at present these countries are considered as natural allies of Iran. The relations that have developed over the last fifteen years or so are relatively limited. Iranian thought that there would be constant interaction but, for political and international geopolitical reasons, interaction has been limited.

Iranian foreign policy suffers from a blatant lack of legibility.

Some put this down to the difficulties experienced by the authorities in explaining their aims, while others believe it is due to the multiplicity of those in power. Is this last point observed in the policies that are carried out in the Caucasus and Central Asia?

The Iranian political system is relatively multi-faceted in its conception of foreign policy. However, on the important issues, the policy to be carried out is based on the guidelines given by the Revolution Guide.

However, it is true that the different factions that make up the system can have different political sensibilities. For example, the factions that have links with the Khorasan region are more interested in what happens in Afghanistan and Central Asia. On the other hand, factions that have more stable relations with Tabriz follow the events in Azerbaijan more closely.

There are therefore underlying conflicting interests although these don't really show in the public arena. For example, in Mashad, pressure was exerted in order to develop economic relations and communication with Central Asia - this was in the material interests of this border region. The same is true of Tabriz or Ourumieh where development of exchange, trade and the facilitation of border crossings were demanded by local populations.

Tehran's policies cannot completely ignore regional demands which have an international dimension. It is clear that the major peripheral Iranian regions with international borders have interests that they try to defend within the central authorities through various figures and MPs. For example, the Caspian provinces, such as Gilan, Mazandaran or Golestan, are obviously interested in the ecological future of the Caspian, solving the problem of maritime boundaries or fishing issues. Through their members of both parliament and the clergy which are from these regions, they try to make their demands heard in Tehran.

With the fall of the USSR, Iran tried to act as a transit country, especially for commerce between the Indian Ocean, Central Asia and

the Caucasian republics. What is its position today?

Iran is a natural transit country with its fifteen neighbouring countries sharing terrestrial and maritime frontiers. The development of railways, roads and air routes in the past few years has proved a real advance in this sense by connecting the Iranian railway to the Turkmen network, developing a new route that reduces by hundreds of kilometres the distance between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf or even building roads. Air routes have also gone through and unprecedented development. During the Soviet era, in order to reach Ashkhabad from Tehran, which is located at about 40km from the Iranian frontier, one had to fly to Moscow and then to Ashkhabad.

That is no longer necessary nowadays. Concerning current projects, the building of tunnels and bridges will soon improve transportation to China, through Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

But petrol and gas transit remains a fundamental issue. It has come under strong pressure from the United States and American companies, who wish to shape the Iranian territory. In this sense, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) is a considerable disadvantage for Iran. Today, it is an obvious fact: Iranians did not manage to make their voices heard in the oil and gas pipeline issue.

For all that, is Iran in a deadlock over this issue?

Yes, it is a deadlock and a failure so far. This situation might evolve, but only relatively. Because even with a miracle and political changes in Tehran, investments were made in the BTC and it is necessary to make a profit on it now... More than ever, Iran's strategic position is not a fixed fact in this area. The layout of BTC is a great failure. It is one of the Iranian government's anti-American prizes.

Baku-Tehran's relations essentially cover energy issues. And beyond that?

There are other things to be considered. Especially a legal -and essential - issue on the sharing of the Caspian Sea, but other aspects as well, such as the gradual abandonment of the Pan Azeri and Pan Turkish discourse which raises the hope of a marked improvement between Baku and Tehran.

Under the economic aspect, Iranians can equally play a considerable role in international trade with Azerbaijan.

Iranians still have to fear the closeness between Baku and Washington, between NATO and Azerbaijan and between Israel and Azerbaijan. But if this fear turns out to be unfounded, I think that conditions to bring Tehran and Baku together exist. There is good potential and there are no communication, language or even religious problems since the majority is Shiite.

When will finally Ilham Aliyev meet Mahmoud Ahamadinejad?

For now, Ahmadinejad has other concerns, especially the Iraqi issue.

But it is impossible to set up a meeting in the near future.

Concerning its relations with South Caucasus, Tehran chose a careful and pragmatic approach from the beginning, leaving ideological worries that are inherent to the revolutionary and religious nature of its power behind. Could this choice evolve?

It is true that slowly but surely, Tehran established a discreet, but no less important relation with certain Azeri movements and religious personalities and even beyond Azerbaijan, including the Azeri communities in Georgia. There are some clerical Shiite networks that work together - see the very interesting work by Bayram Balci. Iran expects to develop its contacts, but this politics are theoretically dissociated from the politics of the State.

The last question concerns the way South Caucasian countries look at their Iranian neighbour. In the end, are they not suspicious about it?

Yes, this feeling of mistrust does exist and it is due to a basic reason. Caucasian societies are fundamentally secular -even more than Turkish ones, in my opinion -and in this perspective, a theocracy which is globally led by Mullahs means an important halt in positive evolution, at least in the expanding of relations between South Caucasus and Tehran.

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