

## Armenian Iranian Alliance Just Part Of Complex Equation.

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The steadily warming relationship between Armenia and Iran is a revealing, but not surprising, result of the perceived isolation both have felt, in different ways and for different reasons, from the West. Yet what the affiliation will mean for a peaceful solution to the region's frozen conflicts following any American strike on the latter is something much less clear.

Complementary Objectives Although it might at first seem strange that Christian Armenia and the Islamic Republic could seek to move closer together, the underlying complexities of their respective situations indicate precisely why they are forging closer ties.

For Iran, currently under immense international pressure over its nuclear program, making itself indispensable to neighboring states is smart policy.

Recognizing energy-starved Armenia's need for natural gas, Tehran is seeking to develop pipeline and perhaps railway infrastructure to its western neighbor.

It recognizes that the more critical infrastructure it can provide to its neighbors, the more clout it will have on the international political scene.

For Armenia, the key issues involve securing a dependable energy supply and developing the nation's economic prospective. The poor state of the economy has led since the downfall of the USSR to widespread emigration, something which is threatening its future. Another crucial issue is the unresolved state of Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous area theoretically part of Azerbaijan but ruled de facto by the ethnically Armenian majority following a brief war in the early 1990's. Negotiations continue under the guidance of the OSCE's Minsk Group, an entity led by today's Great Powers, including the US, France and Russia.

In his official visit to Armenia this week, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stated that the two countries are "...building multi-faceted relations... [and] trying to ensure that they have a regional significance," reported Emil Danielyan for ArmeniaLiberty.org. His Armenian counterpart Vartan Oskanian added, "...our bilateral relations with Iran are developing pretty fast, becoming more comprehensive and deeper... they are transcending the bilateral framework and taking on a regional significance."

Claiming that the two countries' improved relations possessed a "regional significance" the emissaries spoke of a common focus on constructing a natural gas pipeline to bring Iranian natural gas to Armenia, as well as a possible railway, a project that "...would require hundreds of millions of dollars in funding."

America is uneasy about the budding friendship. While he was careful to state that the pipeline initiative did not represent a transgression of US sanctions on the Islamic Republic, US Ambassador to Armenia John Evans disclosed that he has warned Armenian officials "...to be sure

that they are watching this question so as not to bring the American legislation [against Iran] into effect," according to Danielyan's report. The foreign ministers' press conference was also attended by a US embassy official.

The energy cooperation was not however disconcerting only for the US.

According to UPI, "...there were some initial Russian worries that the nearly 100-mile pipeline could undercut its control of Armenia's energy supply."

The mysterious Jan. 22 pipeline blast in North Ossetia wreaked havoc on energy supply in the region and for some seemed to warn against depending too heavily on Russian gas transiting the volatile North Caucasus (though American ally Georgia, at least, seems to have weaned itself of its temporary Iranian habit rather quickly).

Iran the Peacemaker?

Contrary to its current reputation as a belligerent, Tehran also sees itself as a potential peacemaker in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. It has the advantage of religious solidarity with the majority Shiite Muslim Azeri population, and friendly ties with Armenia. Officials have stated that Iran would like to play a part in securing a peaceful settlement to the thorny issue. Yet this will only complicate matters in terms of relations with Turkey, traditional supporter of the Azeris and rival of Armenia, as well as with the EU, which has its own aspirations for peacemaking glory.

The Turkish-Armenian border has been closed since 1991 as a form of protest by the former over the Nagorno-Karabakh occupation and the Armenian Genocide claims. This blockade has been crippling for the landlocked nation. An Armenian diplomat reiterated this week for the EUobserver that "...we just want to open our road and rail route with Turkey. It is our main link to the outside world and it is blocked."

The EU is increasingly interested in resolving the frozen crises of the Caucasus, including Abkhazia and Ossetia in Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh one, as it considers a peaceful region key to a stable energy supply, the report adds. This week, the bloc dispatched its external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, for an official visit to the region. Azeri EU envoy Aris Mamedov stated that "...there is a lot of European interest in trans-Caspian oil pipelines. This is something for the European agenda in the future."

Nevertheless, as UPI's Martin Walker put it, the optimistic mission is fraught with peril: "...the European Union is heading daringly back into the minefield of Caucasus politics, driven by its new concerns about reliable and diversified energy supplies after the sudden interruptions caused by the row over natural gas supplies and pipelines between Russia and Ukraine."

However, "...as Russia's biggest customer for energy, and also as Russia's main supplier of foreign investment, the EU countries have mixed feelings about pursuing too aggressive a policy in the Caucasus."

Indeed, while the Europeans may redouble diplomatic efforts out of a desire to secure their energy future, this does not mean that their influence in conflict resolution will also increase. There is nothing to suggest that going down the usual diplomatic avenues will yield up any significant new developments. A Feb. 10 summit in Rambouillet, France held under the auspices of the Minsk Group resulted in no breakthroughs. The dialogue will shift to Washington early next month,

though no one is expecting the intractable 18-year dispute to be resolved then. Indeed, as a Russian analyst recently quipped, "...

believe me, we will not in our living days see anybody getting a Nobel Prize for making peace in Karabakh."

So perhaps it is time to inject some fresh blood into the process. But with the US, EU and their allies struggling to come up with a "common position" on Iran's nuclear program - in other words, to find a way to shut the country out of all international relevance - is it even likely that Tehran would be allowed to participate in brokering an Armenian-Azeri rapprochement?

Even in the most pessimistic case, Iran doesn't actually need to do anything to present itself as a positive force for regional development. Simply by raising the possibility of its cooperation, Tehran invites further serious contemplation. Any military assault on the country by the US would negatively impact on the region in manifold ways. It would hamper the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, and escalate the "Kurdish question," while intensifying internal pressures and anti-Americanism in neighboring Turkey. It would throw vital issues of energy control and international demarcation of the Caspian Sea into doubt, and would actually increase Russia's control over Caucasus energy supplies, should Iran be crippled by war and thus unable to meet its international obligations.

These are merely the regional dangers posed by military action- the effect on the Iraq insurgency, Israel and the wider Muslim world go without saying. In the end, Iran may not be the most vital key to peace in the Caucasus, but if the EU and US think they reach it without its input, they are deluded.

This is part of the reason why Russia, which has numerous interests in the region - its own backyard, after all - has taken the pragmatic approach of engaging Iran rather than alienating it. Iran, which also must live with or at least close to the source of the problems, also has a vested interest in peace.

The West, on the other hand, merely seeks to keep its citizens warm in the winter. It is situated far from the region whose citizens are directly affected by any outbreak of violence. If it were possible to keep its citizens warm in the winter without having to thaw the region's frozen conflicts at the same time, the West would surely spare itself the trouble- democracy and human rights be damned.

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