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# Iran Called On To Join New Format On South Caucasus. Tehran Adopts Wait-And-See Position

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## **Five-way cooperation**

The galvanization of Turkey's and Russia's policy in the South Caucasus has heralded the beginning of a new stage in the struggle for high stakes in the "great game" for geopolitical influence in the region. A new negotiating format with the participation of Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia is gradually becoming highlighted within the framework of the Platform of Stability and Security in the Caucasus proposed by Ankara. However, the format of this platform, despite the lack of prospects in this regard, might expand in the near future for a number of reasons: it could be extended to five-way cooperation by including Iran. Thus, in the opinion of Armen Rustamyan, representative of the supreme body of the Armenian ARFD [Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutyun] and chairman of the permanent parliamentary assembly for foreign relations, Teheran's involvement in the settlement of the conflicts in the South Caucasus could partially mitigate tensions in relations between Russia and Iran which appeared as a result of Moscow's inconsistent position vis-a-vis the Iranian nuclear programme.

Given the intensifying confrontation with the countries of the West, Russia cannot afford losing an ally as important as Iran.

[Passage omitted on Armenia's strong interest in involving Iran]

Currently, there is a number of disagreements between Armenia and Russia which prevent Yerevan from fully "trusting" the Kremlin in the issue of regional security. The Russian leadership keeps a distance from and shows virtually no interest in the processes unfolding on the territory of Armenia which could lead to the loss of influence in this region in the long run. In turn, the Armenian leadership, unsure if it could pin hopes on Russia's support should the events unfold in such a manner, is compelled to conduct a two-way policy, manoeuvring and trying to maintain friendly relations with the representatives of Russia and Turkey respectively. Russia's indistinct position in the South Caucasus and the likelihood that it does not have a strategy of bilateral relations with Armenia create a considerable risk of a political crisis taking shape in the future.

According to experts, however, Iran is not an influential enough player in the Caucasus and the peace process in the region is unlikely to "blow up" without its participation. "Tehran's foreign policy is based on the Caucasus being the zone of the Russian Federation's interests, this is why it does not lay claims on any critical influence here. Its activeness in the region was and will be minimal," Racab Safarov, director of the Centre of Modern Iranian Studies, told RBK daily.

Of course, Iran's inclusion in the five-way format of the Platform of Stability and Security in the Caucasus could partially tone down the tensions in relations between Moscow and Tehran which appeared after the UN Security Council passed three anti-Iranian resolution on this country's nuclear programme with Russia's approval. Now Russia has a chance of rectifying everything by starting from a demonstration of its interest in settling problems in the Caucasus that are vital for it with Iran's participation.

## **Russian-Iranian relations**

It is worth reminding that the contours of the Russian policy vis-a-vis Iran started to become clearly highlighted at the most recent session of the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]. President Ahmadinezhad failed to convince Moscow and its partners to provide guarantees of security to Iran or to receive Russia's support in switching the trade in oil from dollars to euros. Russia once again called on Iran to show flexibility and engage in reserved negotiations on the issue of its nuclear programme. Nevertheless, Moscow also expressed support to Iran's actions directed at the development of the nuclear energy for civilian use.

On the other hand, Safarov believes that further pressure on the part of NATO and the West will inevitably push Russia towards Iran. In the expert's opinion, a military-political alliance of Russia and Iran is one of the most effective ways of delivering a blow to the interests of the West and making it adjust its aggressive policy vis-a-vis Moscow and Tehran.

The Russian-Iranian alliance will become a powerful player in the conditions of rapid changes of the balance of powers in the international arena which were prompted by the war in South Ossetia. The expansion of military-technical cooperation between the two countries could lead to the stationing of Russian military bases on Iranian territory. In Safarov's opinion, East Azarbayjan [province] and Qeshm Island [in Hormuzgan Province] in the Persian Gulf are the most promising centres of the Russian Federation's military presence here. "A base in East Azarbayjan would allow Russia to take control over the situation in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey while its presence in the Persian Gulf would give Moscow an unprecedented opportunity to control the actions of the United States and NATO in the zone of the Persian Gulf, Iraq and other Arab states," the expert said.

The struggle for control over energy carriers of the South Caucasus and Central Asia is becoming fiercer. Since the energy route from Central Asia to Europe, due to a number of reasons, can only go through the South Caucasus, those who control the Caucasian energy corridor can count on the successful completion of [the project of] the Central Asian gas transportation to the West in the future. Therefore, military and political domination in the South Caucasus will play a decisive role in the determination of the conflicting sides' energy policy.

>From this viewpoint and given that Iran remains a zone of potential risk in the medium term, the participation of this country in any security system carries a risk first and foremost for the countries-participants in this system.

#### **Dividends from conflict**

On the other hand, the Iranian leadership has not yet shown any interest in participating in the platform and has assumed a wait-and-see position. Iran has already received certain dividends from the conflict in the South Caucasus. First, it is very likely that the positions of the SCO and Iran will be further harmonized, which will allow Tehran establish special, possibly military relations with this organization.

Second, the prospects of crafting a military-strategic alliance directly with Russia are already in place for Iran. Third, Iran now has greater chances of exporting Iranian energy carriers to Europe and Tehran is already taking steps to develop alternative routes for their delivery.

And finally, the military-political situation in the South Caucasus without any platform will adjust Russian-Iranian relations in terms of the elaboration of a common position vis-a-vis the region. Every time the political situation in the region changes, it delivers a blow on the existing route of oil transportation from Azerbaijan to Europe, which will help Iran become established as an alternative supplier of energy resources.

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