

# HEGEMONY OF IRAN IN THE CASPIAN-CENTRAL ASIA REGION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES

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## Abstract

At geostrategic level, the Caspian region is an area with significant events on the axes of Central Asia, Caucasus and India, which explains why the Soviet Union intensified its splayed dominance in the Caspian region and blocked any intervention of other countries during the Cold War. The aim of this paper is to investigate the geopolitical dimensions of Iran in the Caspian-Central Asia and how Iran's foreign relations can be influenced by its geopolitical position. The Caspian-Central Asia region is the place of living of over 50 ethnic and linguistic groups, representing the three great religions of Judaism, Islamism and Christianity. The Caspian-Central Asia or South Caspian-Central Asia, situated at the crossroads of Eurasia's major energy and transport corridors, continues to play a vital role in world's security affairs. The methodology of this research is descriptive-analytical, and it attempts to give a geopolitical answer to the question: how can Iran gain hegemony in the Caspian-Central Asia region? In accordance with the results of this paper, it seems that the geopolitical reality provides the most advantageous strategy to Iran.

Key words: *geopolitics, Caspian-Central Asia region, hegemony, Iran*

## INTRODUCTION

Currently, the most influential powers in the Caspian region are: America, Russia, Europe Union and China. Each of them pursues its own interests in the region, which sometimes are in competition and conflict with the interests of other powers. In this conflict, economic and military potential, politics will play a greater role. The Caspian-Central Asia is perhaps best described as a mosaic of ancient and modern peoples living in a complex, often inaccessible geography, a crossroads linking not only east and west but equally north and south. Historically,

the Caspian-Central Asia states - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia - have served as a trade corridor and arena for the competition between the Russian, Turkish and Iranian empire<sup>1</sup>. While Caspian-Central Asia states were not independent until the early 1990's, they have spent the last two decades establishing themselves as states, being more concerned with internal security and territorial sovereignty disputes than with broader regional struggles. The location of Southern Caspian-Central Asia has determined much of their states foreign strategies and policies of the two states. Situated at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, Iran and Russia, these states have been involved in great power struggles since the days of the Mongol expansion<sup>2</sup>. In the post-Soviet era, all these three states entangled conflicts. Armenia and Azerbaijan warred over Nagorno Karabakh, an autonomous oblast that had been located in Azerbaijan in Soviet times but was ethnically and predominantly Armenian. Between 1988 and 1994, the two states fought to a destructive stalemate, leaving Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding regions under Armenian control. The war left both economies exhausted and created significant numbers of displaced persons, to the point that both needed a decade to recover their pre-war GDP per capita. However, this region has a significant role in the universal power equations. Located at the peripheries of Persia, Turkey and Russia, it has been for centuries an arena for political, military, religious and cultural rivalries and expansionism; the resulting movements have influenced the ethnic composition of the population, which is extremely

complex and rich as to its customs, languages, economic activities, and patterns of land use. Collapse of the Soviet Union was the most important upheaval of the second half of the XXth century that opened up new dimensions for security and national interests for the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the end of the 1980'ies and early 90'ies, three important events helped Iran to develop relations with its South Caucasian neighbors. Simultaneously, ending of the "cold war" and the rise of New Independent States (NIS) changed Iran's geopolitical attitude towards the North. Besides, new security threats were just arising, such as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or escalation of internal territorial conflicts in Georgia. While political processes at Iran's western border limited its ability to conduct active policies, the situation at its northern border opened up not only opportunities but also threats. Under the enormous pressure of its young population for economic progress, and as a result of an increasing instability in the region, Iran focused on its northern neighbors<sup>3</sup>.

However, Iran has not been successful in gaining hegemony in the Caspian-Central Asia region. Partially, this is due to the influence of the West in the region, to the attraction westward of the three countries and an incorrect management of Iranian geopolitical potentialities in its foreign policy. The present paper attempts at studying Iran geopolitical potentialities and its congruency with three states of Caspian-Central Asia. Like other countries, Iran is seeking smart power and, for playing its role and for using the available opportunities, while considering the challenges and its power potentials, and tries to increase its power not only in terms of hard power but also smart power, so that it can be more effective in the middle east region. Iran possesses special geopolitical capacities, characteristics and advantages in smart power that on the basis of constructivism theory, identity being the most important geopolitical feature of smart power in Iran. It seems that, if Iran foreign policy considers the geopolitical potentiality, it can have a much higher influence in the region. Iran geopolitical potentialities include important and determining aspects in culture, linguistics, strategy, history and energy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

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The present study is a qualitative and applicative research, based on a descriptive-analytical method. The necessary information has been collected from library resources, including books, magazine articles, newspapers, Internet, etc.

## **THEORETICAL BASES OF THE STUDY**

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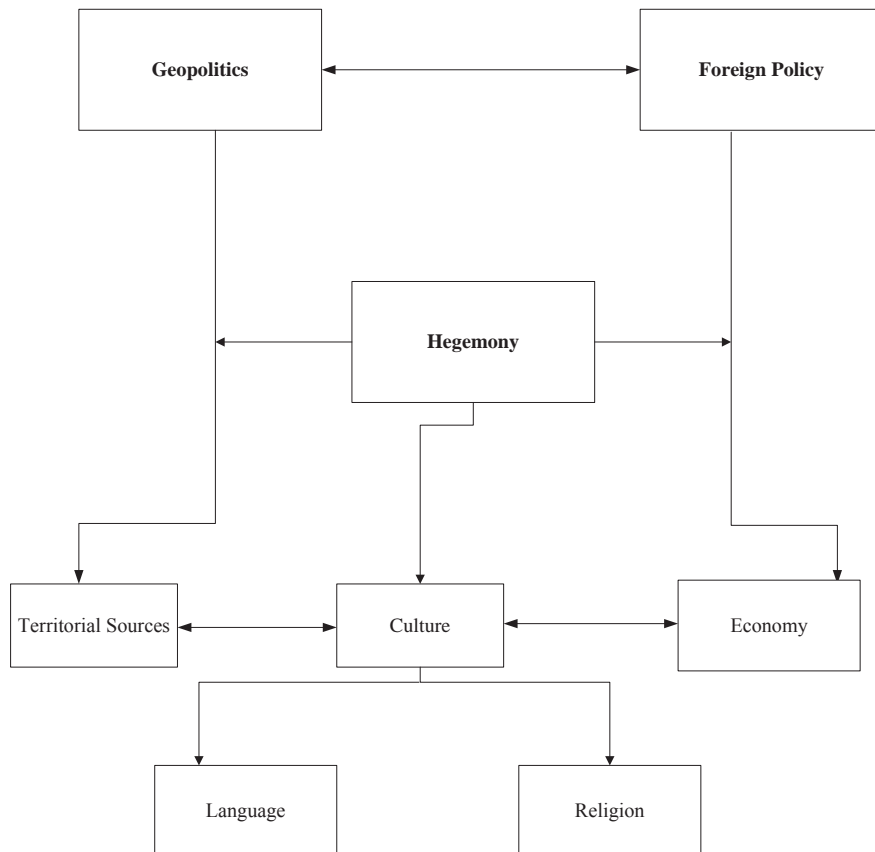
Geographically, Iran is located in South-West Asia, nearby Central Asia, the Caspian-Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, Persian Gulf and South Asia. Iran geopolitical capabilities are so large that they permit its becoming an influencing power in the Caspian-Central Asia region in the upcoming future. With its long and distinguished line of adherents and proponents, geopolitics ranks among the oldest and most recognizable bodies of written political theory. Yet, it has been atrophied in the modern era to such an extent that, while almost everyone is acquainted with the term, scarcely anyone uses it correctly and fewer can precisely define it. In the United States, for example, geopolitical events are popularly understood as issues and actions that take place overseas. The term 'geopolitical' is so broadly construed up to becoming meaningless. This lamentable conceptual degeneration is due almost entirely to the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II. Nazi misuse of geopolitical theory by the German school of *Geopolitik*, as a purposeful guide and moral justification for their particular brand of racist militarism, made post-war geopolitical studies – whatever perceived merits it may have once had – an academic taboo subject<sup>4</sup>. At this point, it seems that geopolitics can be defined by three interactive elements of power, politics and geography<sup>5</sup> hegemony, policy and heterogeneity. In other words, geopolitics based on the interaction of three elements –power, politics and geography- is an optimum scale for foreign policy planning and decision making. The consequence of these three types of geopolitics is that exploration of geopolitics and foreign policy can be located within a broader scaffolding of identity, state

sovereignty and territorial congruency. Therefore, hegemony gains in mutual relations of geopolitics and foreign policy; that is to say that potentialities of the (spatial-temporal) territory emerge with political power and, in this way, foreign policy acquires more interest and spheres of influence at national level.

**Hegemony**

Hegemony is a system in which an individual or a group exercises a powerful, unofficial leadership over everyone else, with the consent of the weaker parties. In this paper, the concept of Hegemony is not exactly based on the Antonio Gramsci perspective, according to whom the dominant class who owns the agents of production has no guarantee to rule. For leadership and for ruling, the dominant class tries to get the support of the other social classes. Besides, the dominant class knows that, by

misinforming the subordinate classes, they cannot provide support, so that they compromise the subordinate classes. Hegemony is not a rule based on force and repression. The foundation of hegemonic society should be considered, as it is based not only on capital and cash resources, but also on moral, cultural, ideological surroundings, which build up states' historical background and the social content of political fight. But, what we conceptualize in relation with term hegemony is the idea of multitude, as its operative capacity of political category, conceived both as a limit to state power and as the locus of democratic practice<sup>6</sup>. Such a concept does not only disavow politics itself as the space of antagonism and struggle for Antonio Gramsci's hegemony, but also recognizes a mutual understanding for interactive relations. Model 1 explains the framework of this research.



**Fig. 1. Mutual relation of geopolitics and foreign policy in the scaffold of hegemony<sup>7</sup>**

## AREA OF STUDY

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Caspian-Central Asia, a densely populated region southward the Caspian-Central Asia Mountains, includes three independent states: Georgia, in the north, Azerbaijan in the east, and Armenia, situated largely on a high mountainous plateau south of Georgia and west of Azerbaijan (britannica.com). Together, these countries have an area of about 71,850 square miles (186,100 square kilometers). Caspian-Central Asia, also known as Greater Caucasia, neighbours to the north Russia, to the east - the Caspian Sea, to the south - Iran and Turkey, and to the west - the Black Sea.

## ANALYSIS

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Geographically, Iran is located in South-West Asia, nearby Central Asia, Caspian-Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, Persian Gulf and South Asia. As an important country in the region, Iran has special geopolitical potentialities; for example, in comparison with the other countries and especially with Russia, it can obtain hegemony and penetration in the Caspian-Central Asia region. Iran's geopolitical potentialities include important and determining aspects of culture, linguistics, strategy, history and energy. Three states of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have a geopolitical congruency with Iran, so that it can be referred to as a foundation for foreign policy. In the following, the geopolitical potentialities and contingencies of Iran with each of these three states of the Caspian-Central Asia region will be analyzed from the perspective of hegemony in foreign policy.

**Iran-Russia:** In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, however Russia, due to its worldwide influence, especially in Central Asia and in the Caucasus, did not disappear. As the largest and most advanced industrial country in the Caspian Sea, Russia has a special position as, through the Black and the Baltic Seas, it has access to the Pacific Ocean and to Siberia and, accordingly, to its oil and gas resources in Siberia and to the export pipeline system, basically less dependent on the Caspian Sea. The discovery of energy resources has provided American and Western

investments in this region, which was a serious threat for Russia, as these investments brought about important economic changes in these countries, undermining Russian strategy. Consequently, Russia tried to undermine Western countries influence by its foreign policy in the countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Caspian Basin.

While the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union still depend on Russia, the leaders of the Caspian Basin countries consider the development of its hydrocarbon resources as a foundation for economic prosperity. However, these countries have to transport their oil and natural gas at considerable distances, through a pipeline which crosses several international boundaries. The pipeline pathways in the Caspian region were designed to link the internal regions of the former Soviet Union. Russia has tried to preserve the traditional pathways of energy transferring them away from these territories, for preventing the influence of the West, particularly of America, in the Caspian basin (Dabiri: 1999, 87). Of course, Russia did not intend to conflict with the West in any way, rather it is trying to cooperate with the West for achieving its interests. In fact, Russia regarded the West as an opportunity, using its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus for obtaining advantages (Karami: 2005, 64). Russia has aligned its interests to those of the West after the Soviet collapse for various reasons, such as:

1. Russian weakness in economy against the economic power of the West
2. Need of investments from Western companies in the region
3. Similar European cultural background and intellectual history
4. Confronting with terrorism and attempting at avoiding the influence of Islamic fundamentalists in the region

**Iran-Azerbaijan:** Azerbaijan is one of the most strategic points in the Caspian-Central Asia region, with deep roots in Iranian culture, a geographical continuation of Azerbaijan Providences in Iran, and its assimilation and deep history links with Iran are obvious<sup>8</sup>. Iran was one of the first countries to establish full diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan. Following the declaration of the Parliament of Azerbaijan

to restore independence of Azerbaijan Republic on October 18, 1991, in December the same year, the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Baku, where he signed a number of agreements on political, economic, and cultural cooperation and pledged to support Azerbaijan's membership to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation<sup>9</sup>. The most significant aspect of these countries is their contingency in geo-culture and geopolitics of linguistics. Cultural commonalities, especially in the border areas, have a growing importance for the establishment of the infrastructure required. Human beings with culture connections create nations with a common mentality, derived from the same culture.

Ideology overshadowed identity during the Cold War, as the left-right tensions have driven both the world and domestic politics. The end of the Cold War was associated with an increase in identity-related politics at both international and domestic level. Samuel Huntington published his widely circulated "Clash of Civilizations" article, arguing that post-Cold War international conflicts would be driven by civilizational identities, the most important being that of Islam and of the West. Ethnic conflicts and genocides from the Balkans to Africa confirmed the idea that identity, manifested as either ethnicity or religion, would be the main source of conflicts in this new era. The September 11 terrorist attacks, with their roots in radical Islamist ideology, further reinforced Huntington's culture-based theory of conflict along 'Islam *versus* the West' lines. In terms of cultural geography, the Greater Iran covers the whole Iran Plateau, parts of Central Asia, Balkh and Hindu Kush Mountains along the North-East, Afghanistan and West of Pakistan to the south and West Iraq, and to the north - the Caspian-Central Asia. Among the states of the Caspian-Central Asia, Azerbaijan has a long historical and homogeneous culture and proximity with Iran.

Language is a spatial-temporal phenomenon that provides mutual perception and internal consistency. This, in itself, creates a nation that will have gradual access to political consciousness and will form a geographical territory for both state and government. The people of Azerbaijan speak Turkish.

Iran can utilize this by spreading of and officially researching on the relative hegemony of Iran's Azeri culture, and penetrate these countries with its own geopolitical advantages. Turkey, the major geopolitical rival of Iran for hegemony in Azerbaijan, emerged as a crucial country in the post-Cold War environment, as it connects East and West, not only geographically but also culturally. It is the only successful democratic, secular and Western-oriented country with a Muslim population. Its moderate understanding of Islam, as well as its religious parties - like the AKP - or the religious schools and orders that develop a more moderate view of Islam, comparatively with their counterparts in other countries, could play a key role in Middle East and Central Asia<sup>10</sup>. Turkey is also a NATO ally, debunking the "Christian club" image of the organization. Thus, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of Islamist politics as an international force increased Turkey's importance in the region. Moreover, several Turkish countries (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) gained their independence in the end of the Cold War. Using its historical, cultural and ethnic bonds, Turkey could play an important role in integrating these countries in Western politics, economics and culture, especially if considering Iran as an alternative to Turkey in providing guidance to them.

**Iran-Armenia:** two elements of geo-economy and geo-culture are tiding these countries to each other. For more than 20 years, Iran has appeared as the main and most reliable ally of the Republic of Armenia. Since Iran recognized Armenia's independence on December 25, 1991, the two countries have strengthened their political relationship on many occasions and have decided to realize numerous common projects in the economic field. Within the region, Armenia has the closest ties with Iran<sup>11</sup>. These relations, mostly based on the two states' isolation, are conditioned by geographical as well as by economic and political realities: Armenia has only two open borders, one of which with Iran (the other with Georgia), and Iran is eager to develop relations. Strong cultural ties also underlie the bond, as some 90,000 ethnic Armenians live in Iranian cities: Uremia, Tabriz and Jolfa. In Tehran view,

the special relationship with Armenia offers a way to evade international sanctions and pursue its nuclear ambitions. It is aimed at struggling against the largely imagined Azeri “irredentism” and at weakening Azerbaijan in the competition for Caspian Sea’s hydrocarbon resources. Taking a position in Caspian-Central Asia allows Iran to oppose the involvement of the United States and of the European Union in the region, and to respond to the strategic ambitions of its traditional foes: Turkey and Israel<sup>12</sup>.

Iran supported Armenia in the 1992 war over Nagorno-Karabakh – a semi- autonomous region that is *de facto* administered by Armenia – and the two states have always had a significant arms trade as well as a visa facilitation and liberalisation scheme<sup>13</sup>. Nagorno-Karabakh has its own financial and economic infrastructure and could be a future outlet for Iranian investments and illicit trading. It is in Iran’s interest that Nagorno-Karabakh remains stable, without further fighting or displacement of people. Instability in the region might upset the large Azeri and Armenian populations living in Iran, or create a refugee crisis that would put further strain on the Iranian economy. In 2002, Armenia’s then-Foreign Minister, Vartan Oskanian, said, ‘Iran is the guarantor of stability in the Karabakh region<sup>14</sup>. The two countries have established close ties in all spheres and promoted “effective cooperation” in the fields of energy, sport, nature protection, healthcare, agriculture, education, science, culture, as well as in interprovincial relations<sup>15</sup>. Armenia is neither a producer of oil nor of natural gas, so it is highly dependent on imported hydrocarbons. The main suppliers are Russia and Iran, yet the fuel produced from oil is also imported from Bulgaria, Romania and other Middle East countries. Russia owns about 80% of the Armenian generating capacities and therefore Armenia is extremely dependent on Russia. The Argel Gyumush (Sevan-Hrazdan Cascade) hydroelectric power plant and the Hrazdan thermal power plant (the largest in South Caspian-Central Asia) were given to Russia as partial payment of the national debt<sup>16</sup>.

Besides economy, the culture of Armenia is influenced by the ancient Persian culture in such a way that many Persian loan words or words

with Persian roots can be found in Armenian language. Furthermore, the whole Armenian culture is influenced by the culture of ancient Iran, especially by Zoroastrianism religion<sup>17</sup>. Armenians have been part of numerous empires of Iran from the Achaemenid period, being strongly influenced by the Iranian culture. Indeed, the culture of Armenia is a combination of indigenous, Persian and Hellenistic/Christian cultures<sup>18</sup>.



**Fig. 2 - Map of Greater Iran. Geographically and culturally, Greater Iran is generally acknowledged to include the entire Iranian plateau and its bordering plains, extending from Mesopotamia and Caspian-Central Asia westward, to the Indus River eastward, and from the Oxus River northward to the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman southward<sup>19</sup>**

**Iran-Georgia:** the geopolitics of culture and economy between Iran and Georgia is so striking that can be framed as a pattern for foreign policy. The eastern Georgian regions of Kartli and Kakheti were Persian Provinces in Sassanid times. Some members of the Georgian elite were involved in the Safavid government, and Amin al-Sultan, Prime Minister of Iran, had a Georgian father<sup>20</sup>. Eastern Georgia was under the influence of Persia until 1783. Persia officially gave up claim to parts of Georgia by the Gulistan and Turkmenchay Treaties.

Economically, while the new Georgian government has extended its diplomatic influence upon Iran – and upon all countries in the region – it is not as simple pro-Iranian as some western rhetoric suggests. Partially, Georgia’s approach is also a response to the policy of the previous government, which adopted a western approach,

limiting the relations with some regional partners and focusing intensely on western contacts. Georgia's position is ambiguous: on the one hand, interested to join both NATO and the EU, on the other, pursuing relatively amicable relations with Iran. This amicable relationship is not a geographical imperative: the two countries do not share a border, although they may operate a joint parliamentary 'friendship group' proposed by Georgia's new government to enhance trade relations and bilateral diplomacy under the current Intergovernmental Joint Economic Commission.

As known from the history, due to the convenient geographic location of Georgia, Iran has always had interests in this South Caucasian country. Gaining control over Georgia permitted Persia to establish contacts with Muslim Khanates of North Caspian-Central Asia, to exercise its influence in a country, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and where main trade links were crossing the territory of different Georgian Kingdoms and Principalities. Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have signed 47 bilateral documents,<sup>7</sup> including:

1. Air Transport Agreement between the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the government of the Republic of Georgia;
2. Agreement on Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments between the government of the Republic of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran;
3. Agreement between the government of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and Prevention of Fiscal Evasion regarding taxes on income and capital;
4. Agreed Minutes on Economic, Trade, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Republic of Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran;
5. Agreement on Trade Cooperation between the government of Georgia and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, after abolition of the visa regime between Iran and Georgia in 2010, Iranian investments in Georgian economy have increased in the fields of property, trade, tourism, transport and restaurant businesses, and different joint ventures have been established. In the first

quarter of 2012, investments of 247 thousand US dollars have been implemented. According to the National Statistical Service of Georgia, in the first quarter of 2012, about 13,600 citizens of Iran visited Georgia, which exceeds the records of the previous years by 91<sup>21</sup>.

According to official statistics, the trade volume between Georgia and Iran in January – April 2012 exceeded 22,6 million dollars, the exports from Georgia – 1,6 million dollars, and the imports – 21 million dollars. In 2011, the export volume from Georgia was 16,2 million US dollars, imports – 64,8 million US dollars.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup>

What has been neglected in the relationship between Iran and Georgia is the cultural dimension of the two countries. It appears that Iran should combine economy and culture simultaneously to gain hegemony in Georgia.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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Iran, as an important country in the region, has special geopolitical potentialities. Comparatively with the other mentioned countries, especially Russia, Iran can obtain hegemony and penetration in the Caspian and Trans-Caspian region. At present, Russia is the major power in the Caspian and Trans-Caspian region. Iran's geopolitical potentialities include significant and definite aspects in culture, linguistics, strategy, history and energy. Therefore, Iranian foreign policy should act for finding out the spheres of influence in the countries of the region. Iran, among all countries of the region, has a more prominent geopolitical importance and potentiality, including significant and definite aspects of culture, linguistics, strategy, history and energy. Therefore, Iranian foreign policy should act for finding out the spheres of influence in the countries of the region. Iran, among all the other countries of the region, has a more prominent geopolitical position and potentiality, so that it can penetrate even more than Russia the Caspian and Caspian-Central Asia region, even if on long term. Speaking about Iran's interests in Caspian-Central Asia, Tehran has repeatedly offered its services for settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as Iran is willing to act as a mediator in this area. Also, Iran develops

quite a cautious, non-hostile policy towards Armenia, which could be expected in terms of the good-neighbour Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. Moreover, Iran trades with Armenia, supplying gas and building railways together with transport monopoly Russian Railways. Iran is one of Georgia's most important trading partners and the Intergovernmental Joint Economic Commission operates in the two countries. The geographical location and the major resources of oil and gas assure the strategic importance of the region, whereas the environmental and geographic factors, as well as the political and economic ones have made the region one of the competition places for the international and regional powers. On the other hand, the existence of rich energy sources in the region explains the political competitions and games characterizing the political, economic and environmental future by an aura of ambiguity. On that account, Russia has been successfully implementing its vision of multi-polarism, in spite of its close relations with the Atlantic block within the framework of its multi-polaristic vision. Therefore, Russia, led by Eurasianism, considers itself as a pivot area, heartland, global power, which unites a unique civilization with its own identity, culture, history. However, Iran has not been successful in gaining hegemony in the Caspian-Central Asia region. Partially, this is due to the influence of the West in the region and to the attraction for the West of the three countries of Caspian-Central Asia, as well as to the geopolitical potentialities of Iranian foreign policy. Therefore, the foreign policy of Iran in Caspian-Central Asia shows that Iran relies on an one-dimensional relation with three states in the region. Moreover, this relation is not based on geopolitical potentialities and is not mutual and interactive. It seems that, if Iranian foreign policy considers its geopolitical potentiality, the country can have more influence in the region. Iran geopolitical potentialities include important and determining aspects in culture (with all three states), linguistics (Armenia and Azerbaijan), economy (all three states) and religion (Azerbaijan, partially Armenia). These geopolitical elements should act in Iran foreign policy in close interaction with other factors.

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