



Azerbaijan, the Second Karabakh War, and Iran's Geopolitical Security: Challenges and Consequences

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Abstract

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal reconfiguration of geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus (Akhbari, 2020). The emergence of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan on Iran's northwestern border introduced a complex set of opportunities and challenges for the Islamic Republic. While historical, cultural, and religious ties—particularly shared Shia heritage—provided a potential foundation for robust partnership, the subsequent three decades have been characterized by persistent strategic friction rather than stable convergence (Pourahmadi & Feizollahi, 2023). This study investigates the critical juncture represented by the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, analyzing its role as a catalyst that has profoundly reshaped the security landscape for Iran and significantly reconfigured its bilateral relations with Azerbaijan (Salehi-Yaganeh & Raeesi-Nejad, 2023).

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative-documentary methodology, grounded in a constructivist-realist analytical framework that acknowledges both material power shifts and the role of identity politics. Data was systematically collected through an extensive review of primary and secondary sources. These include official government statements and strategic documents from Iran and Azerbaijan, reports from regional think tanks, analysis of treaties and agreements, and scholarly literature in Persian and English. Key academic works by Salehi-Yaganeh & Raeesi-Nejad (2023), Pourahmadi & Feizollahi (2023), and Akhbari (2020) provided

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foundational thematic analysis. Document analysis focused on identifying shifts in discourse, policy, and strategic posturing pre- and post-2020, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of evolving threats and responses.

Result and Discussion

The findings confirm the central hypothesis that the Second Karabakh War has acted as a powerful accelerant, exacerbating pre-existing tensions and introducing new, multidimensional threats to Iran's national security.

1. Economic Threats

The decisive Azerbaijani victory has revived and lent credibility to the "Zangezur Corridor" concept—a proposed extraterritorial transit route connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory. Iran perceives this as a direct strategic and economic challenge. This corridor, heavily promoted by Azerbaijan and Turkey, threatens to marginalize Iran's established North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and its crucial role as a regional transit hub. Such a bypass would diminish Tehran's economic leverage and geopolitical relevance in the Caucasus.

2. Security-Political Threats

The war has dramatically altered the regional military and political balance. Azerbaijan's military modernization, heavily supported by Turkey and Israel, has shifted power in Baku's favor. The deepening security partnership between Azerbaijan and Israel is of paramount concern for Tehran. This "northern front" collaboration, involving potential Israeli intelligence operations and advanced arms transfers, poses a direct challenge to Iran's regional deterrence posture and national security. Furthermore, the weakened position of Russia—the traditional security guarantor in the region—post-Ukraine invasion has created a power vacuum, emboldening Azerbaijan and Turkey while constraining Iran's options.

3. Socio-Cultural Threats

The ideological dimension remains potent. The war has been accompanied by a resurgence of Pan-Turkist rhetoric and ethno-nationalism in Azerbaijan, often framed in opposition to a Persian/Iranian "other." This ideology, championed by the Ankara-Baku axis, seeks to undermine the shared Shia identity that Tehran has historically relied upon as a soft-power tool. The secular, nationalist narrative from Baku intentionally downplays religious commonality in favor of ethnic-Turkic solidarity, creating a

societal rift that complicates diplomatic outreach and fuels mutual suspicion.

While pragmatic, transaction-based cooperation—particularly in energy and limited trade—persists, it is overshadowed by these structural tensions. The analysis suggests that the reported Azerbaijan-Armenia "Washington Agreement" of August 2025, likely formalizing Azerbaijani gains and regional realignment, will institutionalize the new status quo, further chilling Tehran-Baku relations and solidifying the threat matrix facing Iran.

Conclusion

The Second Karabakh War was not an isolated conflict but a transformative event that has significantly degraded Iran's geopolitical and security position in the South. It has amplified a pre-existing trajectory of competition into a more acute and multifaceted confrontation. The convergence of economic bypass strategies, military-political encirclement via Israeli-Azerbaijani ties, and ideologically-driven Pan-Turkist narratives presents a compounded challenge that transcends any single domain of statecraft. Iran's response has involved a cautious balancing act: reaffirming support for Armenian territorial integrity as a counterweight, seeking to maintain functional economic ties where possible, and reinforcing its own military posture along the northwestern border. The post-2020 era signifies a new, more volatile chapter in Iran-Azerbaijan relations, where managed rivalry, punctuated by episodes of crisis, is likely to be the enduring norm. The evolving dynamics underscore the intricate linkage between regional conflicts and core national security imperatives, demanding a sophisticated and multidimensional strategic response from Tehran.

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