

# The Corridor Dividing Russia and Iran

by Kamran Bokhari - September 12, 2024

The Ukraine war has brought Russia and Iran closer, but the full scope of their evolving relationship is more complicated. Until last year, Tehran was the junior partner. But as Moscow's reliance on Iranian drones and missiles for the war against its neighbor has grown, so has Iran's leverage. A strategic divergence is now emerging: Iran needs to negotiate with the United States, while Russia's policy in the **South Caucasus conflicts** with Iran's interests.

## Strategic Divergence

When the U.S. accused Iran this week of sending Russia short-range ballistic missiles to use against Ukraine, it obscured a far more significant development in Russian-Iranian relations. Recently, several senior Iranian officials have publicly criticized Russia for **supporting Azerbaijan's plan** to establish a corridor in Armenia along the border with Iran. Iran's new foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, described the so-called Zangezur corridor as a "redrawing of boundaries" and said it was "totally unacceptable and a red line for Iran." Earlier, the head of the ministry's Eurasia Directorate warned the Russian ambassador to Iran not to encourage a conflict on its borders. Additionally, Maj. Gen. Mohsen Rezaei, the secretary of Iran's Expediency Council and formerly the longest-serving head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, said Russia's behavior stood in "clear contradiction" to its professed friendship with Iran.

Iran's concerns over its northern border have increased since Azerbaijan's 2020 victory over Armenia, an Iranian ally, in the second war for Nagorno-Karabakh. Administered by Armenia since their first war in 1994, the region's fall to Azerbaijan significantly extended the Azerbaijani-Iranian border. Azerbaijan's push to secure the Zangezur corridor, connecting it with its Nakhchivan exclave, threatens to create a contiguous Turkic belt along Iran's northwestern border. This is a major security threat for Tehran, compounded by the country's enormous ethnic Azeri population (which constitutes almost a quarter of the total population and is concentrated in the country's northwest), its ongoing **domestic political transition** and its **high-risk campaign to expand its influence in the Middle East**.

## Iran-Russia Borderlands



For years, Iran felt secure because Armenia had the upper hand over Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus was firmly under Russian influence. Over the past four years, however, the region has undergone a strategic shift. For starters, massive Turkish support enabled Azerbaijani forces to overwhelm their Armenian rivals to capture Nagorno-Karabakh, overturning the balance of power that had existed since the Soviet Union's implosion in 1991. Despite their alliance under the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Moscow failed to come to Yerevan's aid, prompting Armenia to threaten openly to leave the security pact and **pursue partnerships** with the likes of France and the United States. Meanwhile, over the past two and a half years Turkey has exploited Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine to expand its influence in the region even more and strengthen its

connectivity with Central Asia.

With **Turkey challenging its monopoly** around the Caspian and Azerbaijan emerging as the top power in the South Caucasus, the Kremlin had no choice but to extend a hand to Baku, whose **relationship with the West is still chilly**. To secure a seat at the table where Turkey and Azerbaijan were redrawing the region's security and economic order, Russia needed to endorse the Zangezur corridor. However, this put Moscow at odds with Tehran, which fears that such changes will sever Iran's access to its **landbridge to Eurasia**.

## Turning Point

Since the early 16th century, the Persians controlled much of the South Caucasus and large parts of the North Caucasus (including Dagestan and parts of Chechnya). Starting in 1801, however, czarist Russia began capturing these territories from the Qajar Empire. In 1813, under the Treaty of Gulistan, the Persians ceded Dagestan, eastern Georgia, most of Azerbaijan and parts of northern Armenia to the Russians. Qajar Iran retained much of Armenia, Nakhchivan and southern Azerbaijan until the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which established Iran's current northwestern border along the Aras River. Moscow controlled the South Caucasus until the Soviet Union's breakup, when Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan gained their independence, though the Russian Federation continued to enjoy unchallenged influence in the region. From Iran's perspective, not much had changed about the status quo that had existed for well over a century and a half, except that history and ethnicity made a sovereign Armenia a natural ally of the Iranians.

Newly independent Armenia controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, a 1,700-square-mile (4,400-square-kilometer) area inside Azerbaijan, for nearly three decades – which suited Iran just fine. Through an aggressive foreign policy in the Arab world, Iran had succeeded in **blocking Turkey**, which no Persian power had accomplished since the rise of Islam in the seventh century. However, the 2020 Azerbaijani-Armenian war was a turning point. Turkey, which had never controlled the bulk of the South Caucasus, even at the height of the Ottoman Empire, now had a strong presence on Iran's northern border. This was a major affront to Iran, whose heavy focus on dominating the northern rim of the Middle East had made Turkey's advances possible. And with Russia joining Turkey in aligning with Azerbaijan, Iran is further constrained.

What's more, Iran recognizes that with Russia in long-term decline, Turkey is **best positioned** to fill the vacuum. Turkey enjoys ethnic ties not only with Azerbaijan but also with most Central Asian states east of the **Caspian**. Historically, Persian empires, particularly since the fall of the Timurid Empire in the early 16th century, controlled large parts of what is now Turkmenistan, with influence

extending into present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Iran's current border with Turkmenistan was established by the 1881 Treaty of Akhal, which saw the Qajar Empire lose its Central Asian territories to Russia.

In the 19th century, as Iran lost control of large parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia to Russia, its historical rival, the Ottoman Empire, was losing the Middle East to the British and French. Effectively cut off from the north by Russia's conquest of much of Eurasia, Iran reoriented its strategic focus westward and southward. Meanwhile, the discovery of oil in the Middle East, the rise of Arab states and the Cold War's onset forced Iran to concentrate on new regional dynamics.

The Iranian monarchy aligned with the West to counter Soviet influence in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. But then the 1979 revolution brought an anti-U.S. regime to power with imperial ambitions, particularly in the Arab world. The 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran sparked an eight-year war, resulting in a million deaths and billions of dollars in economic damage, further cementing Iran's geopolitical orientation toward its western and southern frontiers.

The Gulf War in early 1991 and the Soviet Union's collapse later that year set the stage for closer Russian-Iranian relations. This relationship deepened after the 9/11 attacks, with Iran relying on Russia for support against the United States. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings further solidified their alliance as both backed the Assad regime in Syria, with Iran leading ground operations and Russia providing air support. Thus, by the time Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Moscow and Tehran had an established model for cooperation. The Ukraine conflict also made Russia more and more reliant on Iranian weaponry, particularly drones.

Iran will maintain its relationship with Russia, but it recognizes Russia's declining geopolitical power. After the Ukraine war, Moscow will likely remain preoccupied with its European front. Meanwhile, Iran faces **growing tensions with Israel** and needs to consolidate its influence in the Arab world, which requires some form of understanding with the United States. This need for a rapprochement with the West helps to explain why the regime **permitted the election of the pragmatist candidate**, Masoud Pezeshkian, in Iran's recent elections.

Given these trajectories, Iran will see diminishing returns from its relationship with Russia. A weakened Russia, grappling with the fallout from its Ukraine invasion, is likely to grow more dependent on Iran, which could lead to conflicts, as seen in the South Caucasus. And as Russia's position weakens, **Turkey's ambitions** in Eurasia will become increasingly significant.

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