

Recent Tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan: Manifestations, Causes and Developments

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Abstract

Review Article

The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan has been tense since mid-August 2021. There are two main reasons for this: first, the inherent contradictions between the two countries are sometimes eased, sometimes intensified, and interact with each other, so that the bilateral relations have always been in an unstable state of ups and downs, which has great inertia; Second, after the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict, great changes have taken place in the geopolitical pattern of the Caucasus, resulting in new contradictions between the two countries and intensifying the original contradictions. However, neither country is willing to continue to escalate tensions, which have shown several signs of easing since mid-October. In the long run, the bilateral relations will still maintain the characteristics of ups and downs, but Azerbaijan will be the responsible party for the tension between the two countries in more cases than before the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

Keywords: The second Nagorno Karabakh conflict; Iran; Azerbaijan; South Caucasus; Russia; Turkey.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan began to tense due to what Azerbaijan called the illegal transit of Iranian trucks. Later, the tension gradually escalated in the two sides' showing strength to each other, and even developed to the level of severe tension in early October. This has aroused widespread concern in the world. This paper will focus on the causes of the recent tension between Iran and Azerbaijan, as well as the current situation and prospects of development from the perspective of history and reality. First of all, a brief description of the recent tense relations between the two countries.

I. Manifestations of Tension

Recently, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have been strained, which has been demonstrated by a series of measures taken by the two countries against each other. These measures include restrictions imposed by Azerbaijan on trucks from Iran passing through newly recovered territory of Azerbaijan, as well as military exercises by both sides against each other.

(I) Azerbaijan's Transit Restrictions on Iranian Trucks

On August 11, 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan summoned Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mousavi and submitted to him a diplomatic note. During the talks, Mousavi was informed of the fact that Iranian trucks entered Karabakh illegally. The note to the Ambassador stated that Azerbaijan was dissatisfied with the fact that the friendly Islamic Republic of Iran regularly allowed its vehicles to enter and leave the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan for various purposes without the permission of Azerbaijani officials [1]. On 25 August, the Azerbaijani side blocked for 48 hours the Karmrakar-Shurnukh section of the Goris-Kapan road connecting Armenia and Iran [2]. The road passes through the Gubadli region, which was controlled by Azerbaijan after the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [3]. In September, Azerbaijan simply began to stop Iranian trucks from driving to Armenia and imposed tolls on drivers [4]. It also requires Iranian trucks to pass through this section of the road only during the day and not at night [5]. This has a significant impact because Iran is relatively geopolitically isolated from countries allied with the United States in the Middle East under the crackdown

by the United States and Europe. Armenia is a secure country where Iran can trade and enter the outside world. On September 12, Azerbaijan even arrested two Iranian truck drivers, accusing them of smuggling and illegally crossing the border [6]. This triggered a protest from Iran.

At the videoconference of the CIS Council of Heads of State held on 15 October, President Aliyev accused Iran and Armenia of long-standing plots to use the occupied territories of Azerbaijan to smuggle drugs into Europe without providing any evidence. Iran responded quickly, calling Aliyev's remarks "shocking". An Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said such remarks are only in Israel's interests and will damage relations between Tehran and Baku [7].

(II) The Two Countries Held Military Exercises against Each Other in Turn

While taking tough measures against Iran, Azerbaijan held a military exercise codenamed Three Brothers-2021 with Turkey and Pakistan in Baku from September 12 to 20 [8]. The exercise prompted representatives of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to warn "Don't play with the lion's tail". The Iranian infantry regiment also moved to the border area near Azerbaijan [9]. The Iranian army began conducting military exercises near the Azerbaijani border on October 1. The military exercise was named the conqueror of Khaybar, apparently referring to the Battle of Khaybar in 628 AD, when Muslims fought against Jews in present-day Saudi Arabia. Such a name clearly expresses Iran's dissatisfaction with Azerbaijan's close relations with Israel. President Aliyev of Azerbaijan criticized the exercise in advance in late September, telling Turkey's Andoru Agency, "Every country can conduct any military exercise on its own territory. This is their sovereignty. But why now? Why on our border?" [10]. He also pointed out that this is the first time that Iran has shown force so close to his national border since the collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago. The day before Iran began the exercise, while welcoming the new ambassador of Azerbaijan to Tehran, the Iranian foreign minister warned that Iran "will not tolerate the existence of the Zionist regime and activities that endanger Iran's national security, and will take all necessary measures in this regard" [11]. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on October 3, "Those who fantasize about relying on others and think that others can provide security know that they will soon be slapped in the face". This remark is aimed at the news that Azerbaijan will soon acquire a batch of Israeli-made missiles and other weapons [12].

In response to the Iranian exercise, Azerbaijan and Turkey held a joint military exercise Unshakable Brotherhood from October 5 to 8 [13]. Azerbaijan closed a mosque linked to Iran's supreme leader without prior warning on the pretext of a "surge in

COVID-19 cases in multiple locations in Baku", Iran's Tasnim News Agency reported on October 5 [14]. In fact, this practice of Azerbaijan is a response to Iran's closure of its airspace to the Azerbaijani Air Force. This is a major initiative, as overflying Iranian airspace is the most direct route for the delivery of reinforcements and supplies from the mainland of Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The two Azerbaijani territories are separated by the Armenian province of Syunik, so Iran's route is needed. However, after Iran closed its airspace, Azerbaijan had to take an extended detour route over Georgia and Turkey in order to reach its exclave autonomous region. Iran's move has increased air travel time, which would be catastrophic if war broke out.

II. Inherent Contradictions between the Two Countries and Relations Unstable

Although Iran and Azerbaijan, two contiguous countries, do not regard each other as the main enemy and the economic and trade relations between the two countries are good [15], the overall development of bilateral relations is not smooth, often with good and bad situations alternately. The recent tension in relations between the two countries is a continuation and special manifestation of this unstable relationship. This unstable relationship is mainly driven by the following factors.

(I) Close Ties between the Two having Become a Double-edged Sword for the Development of Relations

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a close neighbor of Iran and has historically been the territory of Iran. Russia won the war with Persia in 1828 and forced Persia to cede the land to itself by signing the Treaty of Turkmenchay. In this way, the Azerbaijani people in Iran were divided into two parts, separated by the Aras River. At present, more than 20 million Azerbaijanis in Iran are about twice the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan [16].

The high identity of Azerbaijanis on both sides of the Aras River in blood, religion, culture and language and the close historical and geographical ties are not so much a positive factor in the development of bilateral relations as a negative factor, because such close ties will inevitably lead to the natural opposition of extreme nationalism between the two countries. The extreme nationalists of the Republic of Azerbaijan advocate that Azerbaijanis in Iran should also be incorporated into their own country to establish a greater Republic of Azerbaijan, while the extreme nationalists of Iran advocate that the Republic of Azerbaijan should return to Iran. The naturally opposing nationalism of the two countries, especially extreme nationalism, makes the two countries have to be cautious and vigilant in developing relations with each other. "It must be remembered that even during the

Karabakh crisis in the early 1990s, Tehran recognized Nagorny Karabakh and its surrounding areas as an integral part of Azerbaijan [17].” Iran is so verbally on the side of Azerbaijan, probably because it is concerned about the feelings of its own Azerbaijanis, but it has given a lot of real support to Armenia in the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This natural connection between the two countries has also become a tool for the two countries to expand their influence on each other. Shortly after Azerbaijan's independence, Iran's supreme leader Khamenei began to strive to improve Iran's influence in Azerbaijan. It mainly sent Azerbaijani religious students and religious missionaries trained by Iran to Azerbaijan. For many years, Iran has been trying to spread religious information through its television stations, such as Sahar TV, which is headquartered in Iran. This television station broadcasts religious, anti-secular and anti-Western programmes to the Republic of Azerbaijan in Azerbaijani. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, allows organizations calling for the independence of the provinces of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran to operate on its territory [18].

(II) Ideological Contradictions

When the Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence, its leaders were former Soviet Communist Party officials who were not positive about the role of religion in politics, so they rejected the Islamic model proposed by Khomeini and adopted the more secular Kemal model. Although Azerbaijan is considered to be a country with a Shiite Muslim majority, the country's system of government is based on the separation of religion and politics. Measures taken by the Azerbaijani authorities with regard to secularization include a ban on the wearing of veils in schools, universities and official administrative bodies, a ban on broadcasting prayer calls in mosques, banning students and young people from entering mosques, closing religious schools, threatening students studying in Iranian seminary, etc [19]. Iran, on the other hand, is a political system with the integration of politics and religion, and the core feature of its political system is that theocracy is superior to civil rights (the power of the supreme spiritual leader is higher than that of the democratically elected president). In 1989, Iran's supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini issued an Islamic decree to sentence Salman Rushdie, the British author of *The Satanic Verses*, to death on the grounds that the book had desecrated the God of Islam. But Azerbaijan is the only Muslim country that allows printing of *The Satanic Verses* [20]. This reflects the great ideological differences between the two countries.

As ideology, the ideological superstructure, is related to the cost of a country's political rule and the stability of the state power, Azerbaijan has always been wary of Iran's religious influence on its country, and is

very worried about the Iranian regime's manipulation of its Shiite Muslims. The Azerbaijani government has repeatedly accused Iran of organizing and supporting opposition political parties, especially Islamic organizations, in order to increase their influence and undermine national security and stability, although the root cause of the country's political problems lies in its own country.

(III) Contradictions in the Development of Relations with Third Parties

Since the end of the first Nagorno Karabakh war in 1994, Azerbaijan has regarded Armenia as its sworn enemy, but Iran has maintained friendly relations with Armenia and recognized the Republic of Armenia three months after its declaration of independence. Considering that Armenia is a Christian country and Iran is an Islamic country, the cooperation between Armenia and Iran is very remarkable. In fact, the two countries have mutual needs: Iran considers Armenia as a key gateway to countries in the South Caucasus and Europe, and hopes that its close ties with Armenia will lay the foundation for its more effective and broader role in the region. On the other hand, due to the lack of natural energy, lack of access to open waters and deep historical and ethnic disputes with its eastern and western neighbors, namely Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia had to move closer to Iran. Iran provides arms to Armenia and is an important energy importer and trading partner of Armenia. Azerbaijan regards Iran Armenia close relations as a manifestation of hostility, which has always cast a shadow over bilateral relations.

Iran and Israel are extremely hostile countries and regard each other as their main enemies. However, the Republic of Azerbaijan has maintained a long-term low-key friendly relationship with Israel. It is not only a major buyer of advanced Israeli weapons [21], but also takes measures in favor of Israel and detrimental to Iran in the construction of energy pipelines. Israel imports a large amount of oil from Azerbaijan every year through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. In addition, Azerbaijan also facilitates Israel's surveillance and destruction of Iran's nuclear activities. For example, in the 1990s, Azerbaijan began to cooperate with Israel to establish electronic intelligence collection stations along the border between Azerbaijan and Iran. In 2011, Israel began to provide Azerbaijan with unmanned aerial vehicles to monitor the border [22]. At the same time, Azerbaijan relies to some extent on Israel to counter potential domestic security or other threats from Iran, some of which involve intelligence, early warning, cyber security, high-tech equipment and training. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev once said, “The relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel is much deeper than it seems, like an iceberg, most of which are hidden under the eyes of spies” [23]. His remarks were included in a telegram sent by the U.S. Embassy in Baku to Washington and became widely known after

being released by WikiLeaks. During Holocaust Remembrance activities, Al Quds day rallies are prohibited in Azerbaijan. Another expectation of Azerbaijan is that its close relationship with Israel will improve its image among Americans and help to promote its policies and obtain its support in the United States. Of course, Azerbaijan's development of relations with Israel is mainly to deal with Armenia. Azerbaijan has long said that if the diplomatic negotiations to resolve the dispute are unsuccessful, it does not rule out the possibility of resuming violent conflicts. It has been preparing for such conflicts, in part through relations with Israel [24]. However, there is no doubt that the close relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel also makes Iran feel threatened and has a negative impact on Iran's relations with Azerbaijan. For Iran, the main purpose of establishing close relations between the Israeli authorities and the Republic of Azerbaijan is to directly enter the Iranian border, and the Iranian authorities have repeatedly expressed this concern to the Azerbaijani authorities. For example, during President Peres' visit to Azerbaijan in May 2009, the chief of general staff of the Iranian military said that the visit was "a step in the wrong direction", adding that the visit was considered an unfriendly act in Azerbaijan Iran relations [25].

The close relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey have also had a negative impact on its relations with Iran. Of all the other independent countries, Azerbaijan is closest to Turkey in terms of language, culture and race. Driven by the concept of new Ottoman, Turkey implements pan-Turkism in its foreign policy, plays the card of family affection in its relations with Azerbaijan, and emphasizes "one people, two countries" to reflect the intimacy between the two countries. "One people" is often used by "pan-Turkism" to express the unity of all Turkic language users. In addition to Turkey, the language is widely used in Central Asia, as well as Azerbaijan and northwest Iran. For Turkey, the Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan, is the entrance to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Azerbaijan's oil pipeline and energy are the main contents of the competition between Turkey and Iran. This geopolitical and economic competition is obvious in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and energy transmission route. Iran opposes the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, while Turkey makes every effort to establish this direction as the main energy transit route. Azerbaijan refused to transport oil and gas from its and other Central Asian republics through pipelines through Iranian territory and granted privileges to Turkey. This has left a negative impact on the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

(IV) Contradictions on the Delimitation of the Caspian Sea and Other Issues

The legal system of the Caspian Sea and its share in each country, as well as differences on energy

and its transmission, are other issues that have caused some disputes between the two countries. On July 23, 2001, Iran and Azerbaijan had their first military confrontation in the Caspian Sea. 150 kilometers southeast of Baku, an Iranian warship intercepted and forcibly expelled a ship carrying out exploration operations for BP under the authorization of the Azerbaijani government. Before any military intervention, Tehran issued a warning to the British oil ship and sent an Iranian military aircraft over it. Baku firmly condemns these actions as violations of its airspace and territorial waters [26]. Azerbaijan is one of the most important oil producing countries in the world. In addition, the fact that Azerbaijan does not belong to OPEC makes it more attractive to foreign investors. Azerbaijan is one of Iran's most important competitors in the field of energy.

For these reasons, the development of bilateral relations has been unstable. The above contradictions affect each other. The intensification or alleviation of each contradiction at a certain time will have a negative or positive impact on the bilateral relations as a whole, resulting in ups and downs in the bilateral relations. This tense relationship between the two countries is a prominent manifestation of this unstable relationship in a special period. This special period refers to the new changes in the geopolitical pattern of the south Caucasus caused by the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict in 2020.

III. New Changes in the Geopolitical Pattern of the Caucasus

Although the recent tension between Iran and Azerbaijan is driven by strong historical inertia as analyzed above, the new geopolitical pattern formed in the Caucasus after the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict is the direct reason for the tension between the two countries. This new geopolitical pattern provides a new impetus for Azerbaijan to harm Iran's interests.

(I) Improvement of Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Influence

The enclave dispute between Armenians and Azerbaijanis for hundreds of years last appeared in the last few years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. In 1988, Nagorny Karabakh, located in Azerbaijan and mainly inhabited by Armenians, announced its secession from Azerbaijan and its intention to join Armenia. This led to the first Nagorno Karabakh conflict. By the end of the conflict in 1994, Armenia had completely occupied the Nagorno Karabakh enclave and some other territories of Azerbaijan around it.

25 years of talks led by the United States, France and Russia under the auspices of the OSCE failed to produce a peace treaty. Compared with other ways of freezing conflicts, the unique feature of the

freezing of the first Nagorno Karabakh conflict is that there were no peacekeepers present. This makes it more likely that the conflict will be resolved by military rather than diplomatic means. Azerbaijan is committed to recapturing its territory, so it has been in constant military friction with Armenia. On September 27, 2020, the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict finally broke out. The conflict lasted 44 days. On November 9, 2020, the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a statement announcing a complete ceasefire from 0:00 Moscow time on the 10th.

Azerbaijan's military superiority in this war, especially in terms of UAVs, has left the Armenian government with no choice but to agree to return all internationally recognized territories around Nagorno Karabakh to the other side. Armenia also agreed to return most of the southern part of the enclave, including the ancient city Shusha, the second largest city in the enclave. In other words, Azerbaijan has regained control of three quarters of the territory lost in 1994. Armenia only retains control over the northern and central Nagorno Karabakh and the Lachin corridor connecting this enclave and the Armenian mainland. The security of the corridor will be guaranteed by Russian peacekeepers. What Armenia is trying to preserve is only most (but not all) Armenian settlements in Karabakh. In exchange for the Lachin corridor, Azerbaijan also has free access to its Nakhichevan enclave (Establishment of a land transport corridor across Armenia between the Azerbaijani mainland and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan), which is separated from the main part of the Azerbaijani land by Armenian territory. Another major achievement of Baku is that the Republic of Artsakh, a self declared vassal quasi state of Armenia that has not been internationally recognized, no longer exists [27].

(II) Russia and Turkey Increased Their Influence in the Caucasus

Generally speaking, Russia is a big beneficiary of the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict. So far, the Nagorno Karabakh dispute is the only dispute in the Soviet Union in which Russia has not participated directly in any way. After the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Russia became the guarantor of the ceasefire agreement, and the armed forces entered the Nagorno Karabakh region, improving its geopolitical status in the region. The duration of Russian troops in Karabakh is at least five years. However, it will be automatically extended unless either Azerbaijan or Armenia requests the withdrawal of Russian troops six months before the expiration of the five-year period. This could lead to an indefinite Russian military presence in Karabakh. After the ceasefire, Armenia became more dependent on Russia for security, and its practice of alienating Russia before the conflict came to an end at least for the time being. However, the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict is also likely to make

Armenia resent Russia and alienate it psychologically rather than in action, because Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which has the nature of external collective defense similar to NATO. However, Russia did not intervene in the conflict as soon as possible (indirectly indicating that Russia does not recognize that Nagorno Karabakh and its surrounding areas belong to Armenian territory), resulting in a lot of deprivation of Armenia's interests. At the same time, Azerbaijan will not be grateful to Russia for its slow intervention, because it knows that its interests depend largely on Turkey's support. The fact that the Karabakh region controlled by Armenians retains its administration and armed forces, and the Azerbaijani army cannot reach this region due to the presence of the Russian army, gives Russia considerable influence over Azerbaijan. In the event of serious differences between the two countries in the future, Russia will be able to choose to support the Armenians of Karabakh diplomatically and militarily. Russia can even encourage them to take action against the Azerbaijani army and others near the line of contact.

Turkey was also a clear geopolitical beneficiary after the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey encouraged Azerbaijan to launch an offensive to restore its territory and gave Azerbaijan tremendous military and political support. More importantly, with the support of Turkey, Azerbaijan won and achieved its goals to a large extent, even fully, because Aliyev claimed that the conflict between the two countries had been "resolved" once and for all [28]. This victory has undoubtedly enhanced Turkey's position in the region. The Turkish army was able to gain access to the monitoring centres in the recovered areas of Azerbaijan, becoming the direct guardian of the interests of Azerbaijan and further strengthening its relations with Azerbaijan. Turkey has also obtained a strategic transport corridor to Azerbaijan for further access to Central Asia. Turkey has close historical and cultural ties with Central Asia. In other words, Turkey entered the region not only as an important stakeholder, but also as a game changer in geopolitics.

(III) Iran's Influence in the Caucasus Relatively Weakened

Iran remained generally neutral in the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Its diplomatic mediation has not received a positive response from the parties to the conflict, and it has also been excluded from Russia and Turkey in the post-conflict political arrangements. Armenia, which is friendly with Iran, has suffered heavy losses and relies more on Russia for security. Therefore, the effect of Iran restricting Azerbaijan through developing relations with Armenia is weakened. As Azerbaijan has won and recovered most of its lost territories in the conflict, and Armenia's strength has been seriously weakened in the conflict, coupled with the maintenance of peace by the Russian

army, the intensity of its confrontation with Armenia has been correspondingly weakened. Therefore, Azerbaijan will less place its relations with Iran in the context of its antagonistic relationship with Armenia. In short, Iran's influence in the South Caucasus weakened after the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

A statement issued by the Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan tripartite brokered by Moscow on 9 November 2020 ended the hostilities and provided for the smooth flow of transport communications between mainland Azerbaijan and its exclave Nachevan, and the establishment of a land corridor through Armenia all the way to Turkey. However, Azerbaijan claimed that the narrow strip of Armenia through which the corridor was supposed to pass was its "ancestral land", thus undermining the prospect of such a situation and raising fears of its annexation. This concern is common not only in Armenia, but also in Iran, as annexation would deprive it of its links with the Armenian border and establish a "Turkic belt" on its northern border [29].

(IV) New Geopolitical Pattern in the Caucasus Region Promotes Azerbaijan to Harm Interests of Iran

Geopolitical victories have reinforced Turkey's regional ambitions, such as integrating relations between Turkic-speaking countries (Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan). In order to realize its regional ambitions, Turkey is bound to consolidate and develop its relations with Azerbaijan, especially when the Turkish army exists in the newly recovered territory of Azerbaijan. One of its means of consolidating this relationship is to encourage Azerbaijan to effectively exercise sovereignty over its newly recovered territory (there is nothing wrong with Azerbaijan to do so). In this way, it is inevitable for Azerbaijan to collect tolls for Iranian trucks bound for Armenia through the newly recovered areas.

Before the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan also relied on Iran to provide access to Nahchwan, so it did not want to offend Iran too much in its foreign relations. Nahchiwan is the exclave of Azerbaijan and the birthplace of the Aliyev tribe. After the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan's demand for Iran decreased, but at the same time, contradictions increased, so Azerbaijan's scruples about Iran in developing relations with Iran's arch-enemy Israel have also diminished. On 29 July 2021, Azerbaijan opened a trade and tourism representative office in Tel Aviv, Israel. This is the first official mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Israel since it established diplomatic relations with the country in 1992 [30]. At a time when the Iranian nuclear issue is heating up and the contradiction between Iran and Israel is increasing, Israel has also seized the opportunity to actively develop relations with Azerbaijan, which

undoubtedly makes Iran feel more threatened and thus arouses dissatisfaction with Azerbaijan.

IV. Present Situation and Prospect of the Development of the Tense Relations

After describing and analyzing the performance and causes of the recent tense relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, the author will examine the current situation and prospects of the tense relations.

(I) Neither of the Two willing to Continue to Escalate Tensions

Despite recent high tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, the two countries will not escalate the tension into armed conflict. As far as Iran is concerned, under the tremendous pressure of sanctions from the United States and the fierce struggle with the West on the nuclear issue, it is unwilling to escalate tensions with Azerbaijan so that hostile forces can take advantage of it and weaken its fighting strength on the Iranian nuclear issue. Moreover, if an armed conflict breaks out between Iran and Azerbaijan, Turkey, the patron of Azerbaijan, will certainly not stand idly by, and Israel and other countries will certainly provide all kinds of assistance to Azerbaijan, so Iran has no chance of winning. Therefore, in order to curb the further development of tension, Iran will compromise with Azerbaijan and promise to pay truck tolls. At the same time, in order to avoid being subject to Azerbaijan, Iran will cooperate with Armenia and actively start building a new route to Armenia bypassing Azerbaijan. In fact, that's what Iran did. According to related reports on October 4, 2021, Iran's Deputy Minister of Transport travelled to Armenia to announce Iran's financial and technical support for a transit road project. The project will allow goods from Iran and other countries to bypass Azerbaijan on their way to Russia and Europe. This is a 400 km long transit road connecting Iranian border crossing of Nordooz to the Armenian capital Yerevan. This road will replace the current transit road between Iran and Russia that passes through Armenia and extends about 20 kilometres to the newly recovered territory of Azerbaijan [31].

From the perspective of Azerbaijan, under the condition that Iran has made concessions, it is also unwilling to escalate tensions into armed conflict and make itself a tool used by Israel. Therefore, in developing relations with Israel, it will strive to grasp the degree and avoid over stimulating Iran and making itself a victim of Iran's struggle with Israel. At the same time, if the political relations between the two countries break down, the existing economic relations between them will also be damaged, which Azerbaijan does not want to see. In 2015, negotiations between the central banks of Iran and Azerbaijan were concluded and a joint bank was finally established to open branches in the two countries. In 2016, Iran's largest automobile manufacturer cooperated with Azerbaijani

companies to open an automobile factory in Azerbaijan. The annual production capacity is about 10000 vehicles and the business is booming. Energy cooperation is also bearing fruit. In December 2020, the ministers of Azerbaijan and Iran agreed to build a hydropower station at Khoda Afarin Dam. According to Caspian news, Mahmoud Vaezi, head of Iran's presidential palace, told the media that the joint venture would start the development of more joint projects, such as railway lines and power stations. All these achievements will be in jeopardy if hostilities intensify [32]. For its own benefit, Azerbaijan will continue to balance opposing regional and global players: Israel and Iran, the United States and Russia, even if the conflict is won. It will not fully align with any of them, so that no one will be excessively angered, and all the above-mentioned countries will maintain their interest in cooperation with Azerbaijan.

(II) Tense Relations between the Two Countries Tended to Ease

In a telephone conversation on 13 October, Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov stressed that the recent problems between Baku and Tehran need to be resolved through dialogue and cooperation. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan called for "Resolving the issue through dialogue and in a calm and intimate atmosphere", suggesting that customs officials of the two countries hold talks to end the issue of the export of Iranian goods through the territory of Azerbaijan, and promised to pursue the case and release the two Iranian drivers arrested last month [33]. On 23 October, Azerbaijan released two Iranian truck drivers who had been arrested. The Iranian foreign minister hailed the release of the drivers as "a constructive step to pave the way for the elimination of misunderstandings" [34]. Azerbaijani Foreign Minister told reporters on November 4 that Iran has been sending positive messages in recent weeks, which Azerbaijan highly appreciates. "In an official appeal issued by the relevant departments of Iran's Ministry of Urban Development and Transport, Iranian trucks were warned to stop these illegal entry into Azerbaijani territory," he said [35].

On November 6, the foreign ministers of the two countries spoke by telephone again to discuss issues of common interest. The two sides stressed that misunderstandings should be eliminated as soon as possible and any disputes should be settled amicably. The two foreign ministers also discussed bilateral trade relations and the appointment of representatives to the Joint Economic Commission. The Iranian foreign minister also said that Iran supports the 3+3 format to solve regional problems [36]. On November 8, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Khatibzadeh said at a press conference that Iran congratulated Azerbaijan on the first anniversary of its victory in the second Karabakh war. He also said, "We hope that bilateral

relations will be further developed, and this misunderstanding will not happen again. We hope to see the exchange of diplomatic visits between the two countries in the near future [37]."

(III) Development Prospects of Bilateral Relations

Although the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have eased after dozens of days of tension, due to the existence of the inherent contradictions in the relations between the two countries mentioned above, with the continuous changes in the regional and international situation, as well as the continuous changes in the internal situation of the two countries, in the long run, the relations between the two countries will continue the previous state of historical development, that is, the unstable state of ups and downs.

However, the future ups and downs of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan will have different characteristics than before. Unlike the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, after the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russian troops existed in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and became defenders of peace, which weakened the impulse of Azerbaijan and Armenia to take military action in the future to change the status quo. As a result, the intensity of the conflict between the two south Caucasus countries will diminish, resulting in a reduction of Iran's weight in Azerbaijan's foreign relations. At the same time, the result of the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict extended the common border between Azerbaijan and Iran, which not only objectively increased the geopolitical contradictions between Azerbaijan and Iran, but also made Azerbaijan more favored by some anti-Iran countries. Although after the second Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan all support the establishment of a 3+3 format in the Caucasus (including the three Caucasian countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as their three "big neighbors" Russia, Turkey and Iran) to solve problems of security, smooth economic and transportation links, Georgia and Armenia have taken a negative attitude towards this [38]. Without the active participation of Armenia and Georgia, especially Armenia, it would be impossible to solve the problems in the region in terms of security, connectivity, and so on. The new problems arising from the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan are also correspondingly difficult to resolve. Therefore, in the long run, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran will continue the ups and downs of the past, but in this unstable relationship, Azerbaijan will be the main responsible party for the cold of bilateral relations in more cases.

CONCLUSION

The recent tense relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are driven not only by a variety of

traditional contradictions between the two countries, but also by the changes in the geopolitical pattern of the Caucasus region after the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The latter factor plays a more important role in promoting this tension. In the new power pattern in the Caucasus, the status of Azerbaijan has risen significantly, while the status of Iran has declined relatively, which prompted Azerbaijan to take the initiative to take actions detrimental to Iran's interests, which in turn triggered a limited backlash from Iran, resulting in tensions. This fact confirms a main point of neo-realism: a country's foreign policy is determined by its position in the international pattern.

The recent tense relations between Iran and Azerbaijan and their development also have certain implications for China. One of the main manifestations of the change in the geopolitical pattern of the Caucasus is that Azerbaijan has recovered about 3/4 of its lost territory, which has had a number of positive effects on Azerbaijan. It is more difficult for other countries to use its fierce territorial conflicts with Armenia to put pressure on it. Its geopolitical influence has increased, so has the incentive for other countries to cooperate with it, and although the effective exercise of sovereignty in its newly recovered territory is detrimental to Iran's interests, there is nothing Iran can do about it. As a result, the author thinks that if China successfully realizes the reunification of the motherland, it will have a similar impact on China. Other countries will lose an important bargaining chip to put pressure on China, and our country will have less scruples and more self-confidence and autonomy when dealing with other countries, thus greatly reduce the cost of our foreign relations. China's geopolitical influence will be significantly enhanced, and so will the motivation for other countries to cooperate with China. Although the reunification of China (especially by force) may lead to a malicious backlash from hostile countries, they will soon face the reality and accept it.

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