

Azerbaijani-Iranian Tensions Will Have Far-Reaching Consequences for Eurasia

Their problems prove that the common cause of Eurasian integration is a lot more difficult to achieve than to discuss.

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Tensions recently spiked between Azerbaijan and Iran after the latter [commenced](#) military drills close to their border accompanied by harsh rhetoric from its officials. This includes Supreme Leader Khamenei’s Twitter account posting [such messages](#) as:

“The security of a country is the fundamental infrastructure for all activities for progress. Those who think that by relying on others they can ensure their security should know that they will soon be struck a blow for entrusting their security to foreigners.”

“The issues concerning Iran’s northwestern neighbors should be resolved wisely by relying on nations, through the cooperation of the armies of neighboring countries & by avoiding the presence of any foreign military forces.”

“In issues concerning the northwest of Iran, the Iranian Armed Forces act with authority & wisdom. It’s good for others to act wisely too & not permit the region to face problems. ‘Those who dig a hole for their brothers will be the first to fall into it.’”

Observers generally agree that four factors explain Iran’s recent moves:

- Azerbaijan’s continued de facto alliance with Iranian rival “[Israel](#)”
- The prospective Zangezur Corridor reducing the importance of Iran for facilitating Azerbaijani-Turkish trade
- Azerbaijan’s detainment of Iranian truckers transiting its newly liberated territory en route to Armenia
- Recent trilateral military drills in Azerbaijan with Pakistan and Turkey which Iran fears militarizes the region

What these factors have in common is that Iran is increasingly concerned that its national security interests are at stake. The Islamic Republic is now caught in a security dilemma

with Azerbaijan following the outcome of last year's [Karabakh War](#) in spite of politically supporting Baku during that conflict.

Azerbaijan perceives each of these four factors in the following way:

- It has the sovereign right to partner with whoever it wants and this isn't aimed against any third countries
- Azerbaijan aims to position itself at the crossroads of Eurasia's North-South and East-West trade routes
- Iranian truckers must comply with Azerbaijani law in the newly liberated territories
- Multilateral military drills are regionally stabilizing, predicated on peace, and Azerbaijan's sovereign right

From the Iranian viewpoint:

- "Israel" is using Azerbaijan as an intelligence springboard for destabilizing northern Iran
- Iran doesn't want the Zangezur Corridor fully replacing northern Iran's role along East-West trade routes
- Azerbaijan is arbitrarily detaining Iranian truckers due to zero-sum motivations vis-a-vis Armenia
- Iran should have been invited to participate in those drills in order to reassure it of those countries' intentions

In response, the Azerbaijani retort might be that:

- Iran is paranoid and thus possibly playing the "Israeli" card for self-serving domestic reasons
- It's not Baku's fault that the northern Iranian economy can't replace that East-West trade route's role
- Iran is sympathetic to Armenia and might be secretly arming it under the cover of regular trucking
- Iran wasn't invited because those three countries don't fully trust it for reasons that are solely Iran's fault.

The expected Iranian position would be that:

- "Israel" is a credible threat to Iran and Azerbaijan's close military cooperation with it raises serious suspicions
- Nobody predicted the Zangezur Corridor so Iran didn't have time to adapt to this new connectivity corridor
- Iran pursues a regionally balanced policy and politically supported Azerbaijan despite some domestic pressure
- Iran's ties with those three neighbors are complicated and it isn't entirely to blame for the resultant distrust

If these mutual suspicions persist, the following far-reaching consequences are expected for Eurasia:

- The North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) will become politically unviable

- The Astana peace process might be adversely affected if Iran believes that Turkey is emboldening Azerbaijan
- Iran might [stir up](#) anti-Taliban trouble in Afghanistan in order to spite Pakistan by proxy
- China and Russia's complementary Eurasian integration visions will struggle to be fulfilled

Azerbaijani-Iranian tensions aren't expected to recede due to the following reasons:

- Both sides believe they're acting within their sovereign rights in pursuit of their national security interests
- Their [preexisting and partially resolved](#) security dilemma has been revived due to recent events
- Both sides believe that the other is trying to pressure them and force concessions that'll lead to a loss of face
- External actors like "Israel" and the US might seek to fan the flames of distrust for divide-and-rule purposes

There is no realistic solution to these tensions because:

- Their actions are consistent with their geopolitical identity and the regional outlook of their leaderships
- Tensions and mutual distrust have been boiling for a while already and were bound to spill over eventually
- Each side has a need to look strong for their domestic audiences and not compromise on any issue right now
- These tensions are mostly manageable since neither side wants war as it won't achieve their objectives

To expand upon the last point, this is because:

- Formal hostilities will reinforce each side's negative perception of the other
- An Azerbaijani-Iranian conflict will likely result in Turkey and possibly even "Israel" directly supporting Baku
- The threat of a wider war is contradictory to all regional stakeholders' interests apart from "Israel's"
- Azerbaijan will only double down on the policies that Iran is so concerned about after any possible war ends

Presuming an indefinitely extended period of regional tensions, the following workarounds are possible:

- The NSTC can become more multimodal through trans-Caspian connectivity to cut out Azerbaijan
- China's [W-CPEC+ vision](#) can be replaced by the "[Persian Corridor](#)" to account for Iranian-Pakistani tensions
- Iran is mostly sidelined from Astana as it is and might even [be on its way out](#) of Syria in the coming future
- China can simultaneously manage complementary East-West corridors through Azerbaijan and Iran

In the meantime, it would be best if:

- Responsible regional stakeholders like China and Russia reaffirm their hopes that tensions can be managed
- Irresponsible stakeholders like “Israel” and the US avoid fanning the flames with divisive rhetoric
- Azerbaijani and Iranian officials tone down their rhetoric
- Both sides unofficially claim victory for domestic political reasons then avoid worsening tensions afterwards

Altogether, it’s clear that Azerbaijani-Iranian tensions will have far-reaching consequences for Eurasia, though they’ll hopefully remain manageable barring the unlikely scenario of a war by miscalculation. Their problems prove that the common cause of Eurasian integration is a lot more difficult to achieve than to discuss.

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