Iran's Approach to the Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, based on the Model of Political Realism

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Abstract:

In recent years, stability in the security environment of Central Asia and the Caucasus has consistently faced increasing complexities and challenges. Nationalistic tendencies in this region, presence of crises, emergence of internal challenges, weaknesses in nation-building, and the entry of foreign powers have added complexity to the region's security environment. Considering the competition of regional and trans-regional powers and their pursuit of interests in the South Caucasus region, the events in Karabakh in 2020 will not be the last one in this region. This region is always prone to events and crises. Iran must play a role in resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus region by maintaining a neutral yet more active policy than in the past. By establishing an independent mechanism, Iran can pursue its national interests in this region by leveraging existing opportunities. This qualitative research article uses an explanatory method to evaluate Iran's foreign policy in the face of regional crises (such as the Karabakh war) based on the realism model of Morgenthau. It examines Iran's foreign policy approach to recent conflicts in the region and analyzes the role of influential regional and international factors, as well as geopolitical and geostrategic factors, shaping Iran's foreign policy.

Keywords: Foreign policy, South Caucasus, Geopolitics, Karabakh crisis, regional competitions

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Introduction

The Southern Caucasus region is one of the world's important and strategic areas, serving as a convergence point for various religions, cultures, and civilizations. It is the main route for the transfer of energy from the Caspian to Europe. Given its strategic position, this region has consistently been the focus of attention and competition among regional and extra-regional powers. These competitions have led to relatively stable crises and conflicts in the area.

The Southern Caucasus has experienced crises and conflicts for many years. The collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated direct communication with the countries in the Caucasus. After the formation of the countries in the Caucasus, Iran took steps to identify these countries and establish diplomatic relations with them. The Southern Caucasus has always been geopolitically significant, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and geopolitical changes in the region further increased the importance and influence of geopolitical factors in this area. Considering the historical and cultural proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran to this region, the geopolitical factors of the Southern Caucasus have an impact on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran due to the historical and cultural proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran to this region.

The role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Caucasus is important both in terms of contributing to the stability of the region and ensuring the security and interests of Iran. Since any instability in the Caucasus poses a threat to the national security of Iran, this region holds special importance for Iran.

Iran has always pursued a neutral policy regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in this region. While declaring this policy, Iran has endeavored to maintain a balance of power in the region through mediation between the parties involved and inviting both conflicting countries to negotiate, thus preserving its status of power politics.

Theoretical Framework

Realism is one of the most important and enduring theories of international relations, the unparalleled attraction of this theory is due to the proximity of the actions of statesmen in the international arena and its alignment with the conventional understanding of international politics. (Ataei, Rasouli Sani Abadi, 2010)

Realists define foreign policy goals based on national interests and define national interests in terms of power. They perceive states as the main actors. In realist theories, national interests serve as the guiding light for foreign policy. In realism, governments regulate their foreign policy based on the capabilities they possess and can deploy, striving to implement formulated policies gradually and step by step, using their capabilities to achieve long-term goals. Realists emphasize the distinction between the domestic and foreign policy domains.

According to realism, states exist in an anarchic international system where, ultimately, the pursuit of their national interests depends on their capabilities or power. The most crucial national interests are the survival of the political system and its territorial integrity. Realists believe that as long as the world is divided among states in a lawless environment, national interests will remain the essence of international politics. Some foreign political theorists find the core of realism within the paradigm because it believes in state-centricity and emphasizes interactions between states. (Shafiee, Zamanyan, 2011)

Political realism does not give much importance to the motives of statesmen and seeks to judge their performance based on actual achievements toward securing the national interests of their nations. National interests and national power are determining factors in foreign policy. Political realism is not completely opposed to political and ethical motivations in international relations. Still, it acknowledges their role while considering national interests and power as the primary determinants of all decisions and policies.

Morgenthau is one of the most influential thinkers of realism in international relations. He believes that all foreign policies tend to conform and reflect one of three activity patterns: maintaining power balance, imperialism, and power and prestige politics.

The six principles of Morgenthau's realism are as follows:

Politics is managed by objective laws rooted in human nature; national interests are defined in terms of national power; the policies and actions of a government are always guided by national interests; abstract ethical principles cannot be applied to politics; the difference between a nation's ethical ideals and global ethical principles and the autonomy of international politics. According to Morgenthau, the common denominator of international political actors is the pursuit of power, the preservation of power, and the display of power for the purpose of gaining international credibility and prestige. Therefore, such actors must constantly increase their power level in competition with other players. In Morgenthau's view, foreign policy goals must be defined based on national interests, and national interests are defined in terms of power. What is certain for Morgenthau is that power and national interests are two main and key concepts. According to Morgenthau's political realism, governments are the most important decision-making units in the international arena, and the nature of the domestic scene of countries is very different from the international scene. Internally, law and ethics can be enforced, while internationally ethics is illusory, and law is a consensus of the powerful. From Morgenthau's perspective, governments are the main actors in the international system, and he believes that as long as the world is politically divided into ruling governments, they will remain dominant actors in international politics. Morgenthau considers national power elements to include geography, natural resources, industrial power, military readiness, government quality, population, diplomatic quality, national character, and national spirit. Morgenthau does not believe in ideology as an independent factor in shaping foreign policy.

In the realist perspective, Hans Morgenthau is the only one who has come close to providing a logical and internally consistent explanation of the behavior of national governments. In his view, governments in the international system are either government that are satisfied with the existing distribution of power, pursue a policy of preserving the status quo, or governments that are dissatisfied with the existing distribution of power and want to change the current situation.

In Morgenthau's realism, all policies, whether domestic or international, reflect three basic patterns; that is, each political policy aims to preserve power, increase power, or display power. A country whose foreign policy tends towards preserving power pursues a policy of maintaining the status quo; a country whose foreign policy aims for more power pursues imperialist policies, and a country that seeks to display power in its foreign policy follows prestige-oriented policies. According to Morgenthau, each specific political situation requires the formulation and implementation of a specific foreign policy, and the relationship between governments and international politics has a dynamic quality and changes with shifts in power.

From Morgenthau's point of view, the goal of preserving the status quo is to maintain the existing distribution of power and is somewhat conservative policy, but not necessarily opposed to any change; rather, it is opposed to

changes that may lead to a reversal of power relations between two or more countries.

Destabilizing or imperialistic policy is a policy in which efforts are made to change the existing distribution of power. In his book "Politics Among Nations," Morgenthau defines the triple goals of imperialism as global, continental, and local goals, and the methods used to serve imperialistic policies as military imperialism, economic imperialism, and cultural imperialism.

Morgenthau considers all these methods as tools for achieving one goal, which is the overthrow of the existing situation, that is, reversing the power relationship between the imperialist government and its future victims. Military, economic, and cultural methods alone or together serve this sustainable goal.

Political realism is, in fact, a realistic method of achieving the goal. Foreign policy goals must be defined based on national interests and supported by power.

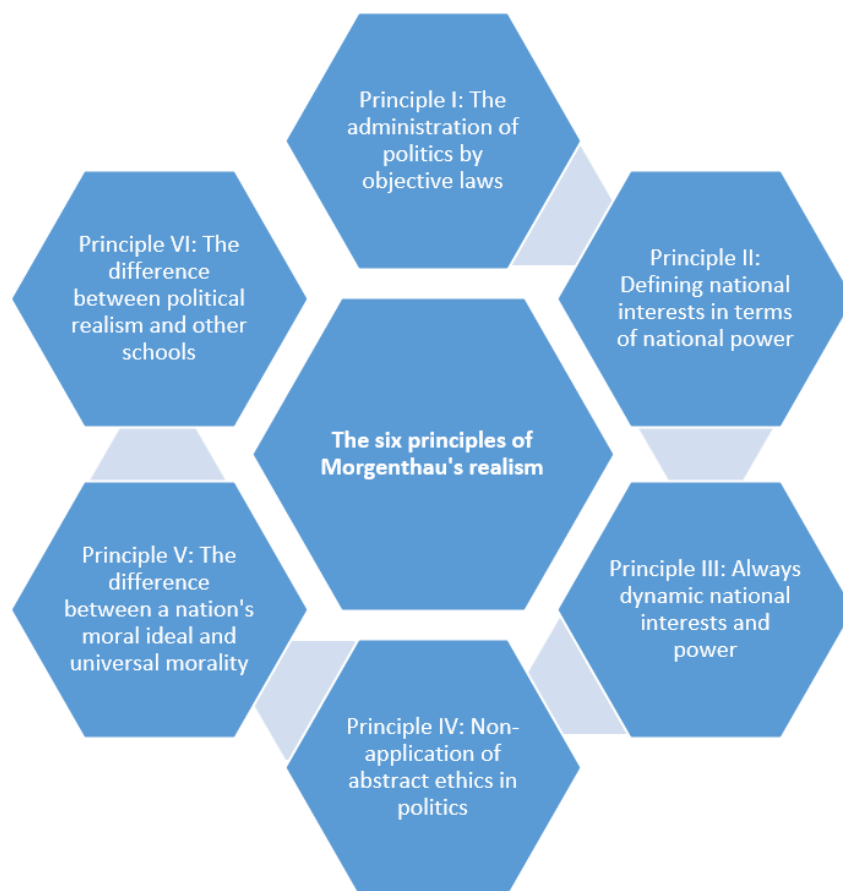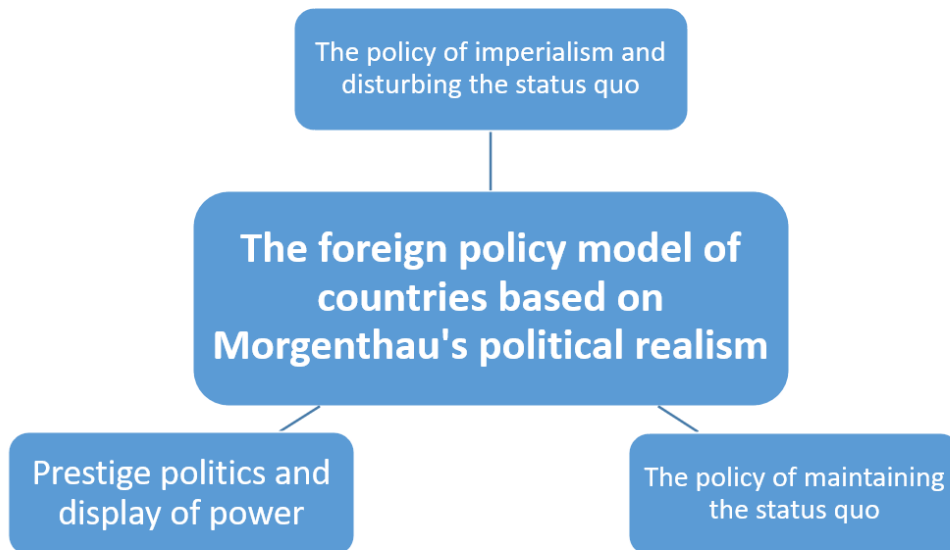Diagram 1: Political realism of Hans Morgenthau

Diagram 2: Foreign policy model

undertaken by decision-makers of a country

The policy of imperialism and disturbing the status quo

The foreign policy model of countries based on Morgenthau's political realism

Prestige politics and display of power

The policy of maintaining the status quo

The foreign policy concepts

Foreign policy is the set of principles and methods that a government adopts in dealing with affairs and issues outside the country to preserve sovereignty and defend its interests. In the process of foreign policy, various variables, including ideological foundations, geopolitical conditions, the structure and nature of the international system, the population and its composition, societal needs, culture, and the characteristics of key policymakers, influence the decisions. (Azghandi, 2002)

Foreign policy is related to a country's activities in the external environment and international conditions. It involves determining the implementation of a series of national goals and interests carried out on the international stage by governments. It can be the initiative of a government or its reaction to the actions of other governments. Foreign policy can be defined as a strategy or a plan of activities

against other countries or international entities to achieve the goals referred to as the national interests of that country. (Karimi, 2021)

National interests are always the guiding light of a country's foreign policy. The foreign policy of any country takes shape based on general and established rules. The main element of foreign policy for all political units can be seen as maximizing national power. (Mottaghi, 2010)

Foreign policy is the set of principles and methods that a government adopts in dealing with affairs and issues outside the country to preserve sovereignty, defend its existence, and pursue and achieve its interests. Understanding foreign policy is possible when we have precise knowledge of its components. One sign of strength in foreign policy is a combination of stability and authority. One of the important topics in foreign policy is the internal construction of countries. Foreign policy is a pre-planned strategy formulated by

government decision-makers to pursue national interests in the international environment.

The hardware and software components effective in the foreign policy decision-making process

Foreign policy is a tool for countries to pursue national interests, and in other words, it maximizes the behavior of all countries in the international system to maximize national interest, as Morgenthau states that all countries, whether ideological, traditional, modern, great powers or regional players, strive to maximize national interests. National interests are the guiding light for countries in the field of international politics. National interests have a stable nature, but each player employs specific tactics to achieve national interests, utilizing both hardware and software components available for upgrading and achieving national interests. Foreign policy is related to a country's activities in the external environment and international conditions, and it is a strategy carried out by decision-makers of a country against other countries or international entities to secure national interests.

The formulation and elaboration of foreign policy in any country are the results of various variables such as intellectual foundations, the nature of the international system, the characteristics and attitudes of the ruling elite, the country's capabilities, societal needs, geographical variables, and political culture. The principles, goals, and components of each country's foreign policy depend on tangible conditions (geographical and geopolitical situation, material power resources including population and territory, military power, and economic capabilities) and mental conditions

(political structure, personality, and mentality of leaders, ideology, and soft power resources such as culture and diplomacy). The political system governing each country, in proportion to these tangible factors and mental components, takes the initiative to formulate its principles and goals and determine the framework of its foreign policy, which is specific to that country. Therefore, the most important axis of foreign policy is the realization of national interests, relying on hardware components (military power, economic power) and the help of software components (diplomacy, negotiation, persuasion).

Effective and successful foreign policy is a policy that succeeds in combining a proportionate mix of hard power and soft power and generates smart power. Effective and successful foreign policy requires consensus at the national level and coherence in the governing system. Without consensus at the national level and without organizational coherence and harmony at the government level, achieving overarching goals and realizing national interests through the application of foreign policy tools is not possible.

Countries, to preserve their identity, security, and welfare, as well as to confront threats from other players, are inevitably forced to employ policies and strategies to increase their national capabilities and power. Strategies that enable a country to transform national resources and capabilities into tangible forms of power and capability have gained greater importance in the complex contemporary world.

The sources of power are constantly changing, and today, considering the increasing role of information and organizational power, the volume of available information has increased

even more, and organizational capacity for quick response and soft power will become a major source of power. Regarding the foreign policy of countries, attention should be paid to the SWOT equation, which represents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of countries. In the political and international sphere, there are signs of interaction, and each player possessing these capabilities can enhance their position and status.

South Caucasus Geopolitics

When the term geopolitics is mentioned, the connection between geography and politics is highlighted, emphasizing the natural advantages of locations and specific positions for the growth of countries. The Caucasus region, due to its strategic importance and the presence of rich resources, has always been recognized as a unique geopolitical unit in the world since ancient times. Overall, the region's sensitivity as a focal point of international attention has consistently made it the subject of foreign powers' ambitions throughout history. This attention, coupled with structural problems arising from diverse ethnicities, has led to tension and instability in the region (Nayebian, 2011).

The South Caucasus region extends from the north to the ranges of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, from the east to the Caspian Sea, from the south to Iran, from the southwest to Turkey, and from the west to the Black Sea. Currently, the South Caucasus is divided into three independent republics named Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Despite the natural and geographical continuity of the South Caucasus countries in the continent of Asia, politically, these countries are considered European at their request and acceptance by the

Council of Europe. This region, with its geographical features, accommodates various nations, ethnicities, and religions, placing it at the crossroads of civilizations. The Caucasus region falls within the cultural sphere of Iran and has been historically administered by Iran. Serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe, this aspect has added to the importance of the region. Due to its geographical and strategic position, the Caucasus region holds a special status in the international system. It has long been a focus of major powers and has played a crucial role in the security equations of regional and trans-regional actors.

Noteworthy conflicts include the self-determination of Abkhazia and South Ossetia against

Map 1: South Caucasus region map

Geopolitical map of the Caucasus Region (2008)

Throughout history, the Caucasus region has attracted the greedy eyes of great powers due to its natural benefits and special geographical advantages; And due to having a special communication position and connecting East to West and North to South, it plays an important role in the political equations of great powers in the world.

The formation of the Karabakh crisis and the role of regional and trans-regional actors in the regional crisis

The collapse of the Soviet Union, coupled with the emergence of independent countries such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, led to new borders facing challenges. The power vacuum resulting from the Soviet collapse caused the formation of an anarchic structure in the region. The diversity of ethnicities, religions, and languages in this region, along with imposed and incongruent borders, presented challenges to the process of regional state-building, resulting in recent decades of wars in the region.

the central government of Georgia and the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh crisis that began in 1988. The Karabakh crisis has regional and international dimensions. In 1988, the Armenians of Karabakh prepared a petition signed by 90,000 individuals addressed to the Supreme Soviet. In Armenia, the masses supported Karabakh's residents, and on June 13, 1988, the Karabakh Assembly unanimously voted for complete separation from Azerbaijan and joining Armenia (Rashidi Maleki, 2019). Since then, the region has been a constant source of dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The desire to establish Greater Armenia, the formation of a strong network of Armenian migrants in other countries (Diaspora), and the influence of these groups in Western countries and Russia led to the emergence of radical and left-wing elements among Armenian elites. The Karabakh crisis resulted in the loss of about 20% of Azerbaijani territory and the forced displacement of Azeri populations.

However, in recent conflicts, Azerbaijan has managed to reclaim parts of the lost lands.

In regions with diversity in religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and historical identities, tolerance and acceptance within a comprehensive framework are essential for resolving intra-regional crises and ensuring stable security. Emphasizing identity differences reproduces a culture of violence between two countries, leading to the expansion and non-compatibility of the security perspective on the disputed issue. The involvement of foreign actors and regional and transregional competitions deepens the conflict, fueling violent reactions.

According to Mackinder's Heartland Theory, the South Caucasus is a region of great importance due to its strategic location, attracting regional and transregional powers. The presence of these powers, their competition, and the lack of convergence among them have resulted in a situation of neither peace nor war in the region, perpetuating the crisis. The competition among these actors has led to divergence rather than convergence in the region.

As an international power pursuing its interests in the region, the United States, as one of the heads of the Minsk Group, has been involved in activities related to resolving the Karabakh crisis. Given the strategic position of the South Caucasus, the U.S. has adopted a policy of tolerance and accommodation to penetrate the region. The energy crisis in Europe, arising from Russian sanctions after the military intervention in Ukraine, has increased the importance of energy-exporting countries like Azerbaijan for the U.S. and the West. Therefore, efforts by the U.S. and the West to establish peace in Karabakh and between Armenia and Azerbaijan should intensify.

In the competition between regional and transregional actors in the Caucasus, undoubtedly, Russia is one of the main players seeking a dominant and decisive role in this crisis. Recent engagements have allowed Russia to effectively play this role, leading to the signing of a ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia aims to restore its historical dominance and hegemonic role in the South Caucasus region. Regarding Georgia, Russia has effectively challenged its NATO membership by supporting separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Overall, Russia has pursued interventionist policies in energy, attempting to influence both South Caucasus and Western countries, capitalizing on the managed instability in the region for its interests (Rashidi, Maleki, 2019). Despite Russia's involvement in Ukraine and the West's efforts for peace in the South Caucasus, Russia seeks to manipulate the peace process due to its geopolitical interests, maintaining its influence in the region.

Another influential actor in the South Caucasus is Turkey, consistently pursuing economic interests and exploiting economic opportunities in the region. Turkey has strong trade relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Recent developments reveal Turkey's inclination towards neo-Ottomanism, aligning with Azerbaijan against Armenia, and even utilizing Turkish-backed militant forces in Syria for Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia. Turkey's expanding influence in the South Caucasus poses a threat to both Iran's and Russia's interests, particularly as Turkey's energy exploration in the Black and Mediterranean Seas increases its importance in the region, aligning

with its goal to lead Turkic-speaking countries.

Israel, having good relations with Azerbaijan, pursues specific goals in the region, including economic interests and being the second-largest arms supplier to Azerbaijan. Israel also aims to exert political pressure on Iran by establishing a presence near Iran's northern borders, causing concern for Tehran due to Azerbaijan's utilization of Israeli expertise and equipment.

The second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is the first war in history that was won mainly by unmanned systems, and the Republic of Azerbaijan was able to strategically isolate Armenia with the support of Turkey and the technical support of Israel. By using Turkish drones and Israeli equipment, Azerbaijan provided the grounds for victory and mastery of the war. In the recent developments of this region, the triangle of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel was formed to create geopolitical changes to the detriment of Iran, and this issue created opportunities for these countries. In the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which led to the signing of an agreement between these two countries with Russia's activism, Turkey and Israel sided with Azerbaijan with military support and were able to strengthen their position in this region. Azerbaijan was able to win over Armenia with the help and support of Turkey and Israel and regain parts of its occupied lands. The geopolitical competition of regional and extra-regional players, along with the inflexible positions of the parties involved, namely the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia, have complicated and deepened the crisis in this region, and despite the efforts made to resolve this crisis, it has continued until now.

The consequences of the Karabakh crisis for Iran

The Karabakh crisis has created an unstable security situation along the northern borders of Iran, leading to a state of anarchy in the region due to the involvement of regional and extra-regional actors. The political and security repercussions of this situation affect the entire region, especially Iran. The Karabakh crisis, particularly the 2020 war, entails security and political consequences that will impact the security and national interests of Iran. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which was occupied by Armenia years ago and has always been a source of tension and conflict between the two countries, is considered one of the most important crises in the region. The involvement of regional and extra-regional actors in the crisis has further complicated it, taking on international dimensions. The 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, resulting in a ceasefire agreement and the liberation of the occupied territories by the Republic of Azerbaijan, had geopolitical, security, and political consequences for Iran.

Geopolitical consequences of the Karabakh crisis for Iran

Iran, with its unique geographical and geopolitical position, is influenced by its foreign policy, benefiting from its strategic maritime, land, and strait positions. Iran must leverage its special position to seize opportunities and enhance its role and position in regional developments while maintaining stability and security. Geopolitical changes in the region, with the strong presence of Turkey and the establishment of Israel near Iran's borders, will pose security threats to the surrounding environment. If geopolitical changes occur in the

region, it will be detrimental to Iran and result in missed opportunities in energy and transit discussions. Iran faces challenges such as U.S. containment policies in the region under the guise of a grand game, and serious competition with Turkey and Russia for dominance over energy export routes. Considering recent regional developments, any geopolitical shift in the region may exclude Iran from energy transfer discussions and lead to missed opportunities. Therefore, the active presence and strong diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this region, especially in the current sensitive conditions, can turn many existing threats into opportunities and alleviate existing concerns. (Akhbari, 2020)

Security Implications of the Karabakh Crisis for Iran

The geographical proximity of Iran to the countries involved in the Karabakh conflict and the shared border with the parties to the conflict have led to any developments, changes, instability, and insecurity in this region affecting Iran's security and stability, especially at its northern borders.

Factors such as the presence and interference of foreign actors in the region and internal conflicts can pose threats, including military and security threats, as well as national threats to Iran's national security. For example, Turkey's prominent role in the recent Karabakh conflict and its pursuit of Pan-Turkic policies may pose national and identity threats to the security of the northern provinces of Iran. Additionally, Israel's presence and the establishment of military bases near the northern borders will jeopardize Iran's security. The conflict and instability in the region will not only impact the regional countries but also involve Iran in negative economic consequences.

The presence and competition of regional and transregional players in the region's developments and crises will challenge the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. Instability at Iran's borders, due to the presence of Israel and NATO near Iran's borders, and Turkey's presence and competition in the region will disrupt the existing order and create new geopolitical changes, leading Iran to isolation, missing out on energy transit routes in the region, and losing economic opportunities.

Political Consequences of the Karabakh Crisis for Iran

Given that the crisis and conflict between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Karabakh region and at the northern borders of Iran have taken place, the continuation and intensification of this conflict will naturally challenge the political security of Iran. One of the effects of the escalation and persistence of the conflict will be the destabilization of the region, providing an opportunity for the penetration and intervention of trans-regional players. The competition of these players in the region to achieve their goals and interests may lead to the formation of alliances and coalitions in the region that can affect Iran's political security.

Instability and unrest in the region and at Iran's northern borders will undermine peace and tranquility and may lead to the emergence of extremist and threatening ideologies, endangering Iran's territorial integrity and national security. The continuation of this crisis and the intervention of regional and transregional players will have political and security consequences for Iran, including a reduction in Iran's regional influence, diplomatic isolation, Iran's exclusion from the management and energy projects in the region, and an increase in

separatism movements with nationalistic provocations. The growth of Azerbaijani nationalism can pose a significant challenge to Iran.

Another consequence of the ongoing crisis in the South Caucasus region between Armenia and Azerbaijan for Iran is the overflow of instability in the region, causing concern for Iran. Moreover, Israel's significant presence in the region and military assistance to Baku in this crisis is perceived as alarming by Iran, considering it an opportunity for Israel to gather military intelligence about Iran.

Iran's foreign policy approach towards the Second Karabakh War

The South Caucasus region holds strategic importance for Iran and falls within the cultural sphere of influence of Iran. Any changes in this area can have an impact on Iran's security, and recent developments have led to Armenians losing a significant portion of their border with Iran, allowing Israeli forces and equipment to be stationed near Iran's borders. If the crisis in this region continues, it may jeopardize the security of Iran's northwestern border, and Iran is concerned about the potential presence of Israel near its borders. The positive relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Israel are worrisome for Iranian authorities.

Foreign policy is a process involving specific goals, external factors tied to those goals, a country's capability to achieve desirable results, the development of a beneficial strategy, its execution, and the evaluation and control of it. The formulation and explanation of foreign policy in any country are influenced by various variables such as intellectual foundations, the nature of the international system, the characteristics and attitudes of the ruling authorities, the country's capabilities, tangible societal needs, geographical variables, and political culture. (Karimi, 2021)

Considering the proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the South Caucasus countries and the geopolitical situation of this region on the global stage, the situation of the South Caucasus countries in terms of political, security, economic, and cultural aspects is highly significant for Iran. Iran's active role in promoting peace, resolving regional disputes, and serious efforts to expand bilateral and regional cooperation are among the important goals and national interests of Iran. (Soraya: 1389)

Iran, perceiving instability in the South Caucasus as a threat to its national security, has played a role in crisis mediation initiatives to strengthen stability and security in the region. Efforts to resolve the Karabakh crisis are a clear example of this policy and contribute to the establishment of security and stability in the region. Emphasizing regional solutions has been the main approach of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. (Koolaei, 2010)

According to the realism model of Morgenthau, all foreign policies tend to align with and reflect one of three patterns of activity: maintaining the balance of power, imperialism and power politics, and prestige. In Morgenthau's view, the common goal of international political actors is the pursuit, maintenance, and display of power to gain international credibility and prestige. Therefore, such an actor must constantly increase his power in competition with other actors. According to Morgenthau, governments in the international system are either satisfied with the existing distribution of power, pursuing a policy of maintaining the status quo, or dissatisfied with the existing

power distribution and seeking to change it. In Morgenthau's realism model, all policies, whether domestic or international, fall into three fundamental patterns; that is, each political policy seeks to maintain power, increase power, or display power. A country whose foreign policy tends towards maintaining power pursues a policy of maintaining the existing situation, a country whose foreign policy seeks more power follows an imperialist policy, and a country that aims to display power in its foreign policy pursues a policy of prestige.

The foreign policy of Iran in this region has been shaped under the influence of geopolitical and geostrategic factors, as well as regional competition. According to the realist approach of Morgenthau in the events of 2020 in Karabakh, it can be said that Iran's foreign policy is influenced by geopolitical and geostrategic factors and is under the influence of regional and international factors based on maintaining prestige and the status quo. Geopolitical factors and competitions in the South Caucasus region, especially in the context of the developments in 2020, have had a significant impact on the formation of Iran's foreign policy.

Geopolitical theorists argue that geopolitical factors, especially the geographical location of each country, play a determining role in shaping its foreign policy. Geopolitics is an approach to foreign policy that explains and predicts the foreign policy behavior, military capabilities, and abilities of a country based on its physical and geographical environment.

The South Caucasus region has always been perceived as an important and strategic area due to its unique characteristics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its significance has increased twofold. Geopolitical factors in the region include being a connecting link between the continents of Europe and Asia, serving as a communication bridge between the north and south, east and west, the convergence of ancient civilizations and religions such as Islam and Christianity, and being one of the transit routes for oil and gas to Europe.

Effective geopolitical factors in the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran include ethnic conflicts and crises in the region, the strategic and geopolitical position of regional countries, cultural and ethnic commonalities among regional countries, the geographical situation of the actors in the Caucasus countries, the transit of Iranian gas to Europe through the Caucasus countries (energy debate), the gateway nature of the region, and the presence of neighboring countries at the northern borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran has consistently stated in its declarative policies that it does not accept any changes in the geopolitical and border arrangements of the region. Another influential factor is the competition and presence of regional and non-regional actors in the Karabakh crisis, especially in the events of 2020 (Second Karabakh War). In the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with Russian mediation leading to a ceasefire agreement, Turkey and Israel, with military support for Azerbaijan, positioned themselves alongside Azerbaijan and were able to strengthen their position in the region. With the help and support of Turkey and Israel, Azerbaijan emerged victorious in the conflict and reclaimed parts of its occupied territories.

Russia also considers the South Caucasus as the main successor to the Soviet Union geopolitically and geostrategically. In the competition among regional and non-regional players in the South Caucasus, Russia is undoubtedly one of the main players seeking to play a dominant and determining role in this crisis. Russia has been striving to regain its traditional dominance and hegemonic role in the South Caucasus.

Furthermore, in the events of 2020 in Karabakh, two countries, Turkey and Israel, intensified their presence in the South Caucasus through military and armament support to Azerbaijan, aligning themselves with Azerbaijan to advance their interests. Azerbaijan, with the assistance of Turkey and technical support from Israel, strategically isolated Armenia and, using Turkish drones and Israeli equipment, gained the upper hand in the war, creating conditions for victory.

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with military support for Azerbaijan, positioned themselves alongside Azerbaijan and were able to strengthen their position in the region. With the help and support of Turkey and Israel, Azerbaijan emerged victorious in the conflict and reclaimed parts of its occupied territories.

Russia also considers the South Caucasus as the main successor to the Soviet Union geopolitically and geostrategically. In the competition among regional and non-regional players in the South Caucasus, Russia is undoubtedly one of the main players seeking to play a dominant and determining role in this crisis. Russia has been striving to regain its traditional dominance and hegemonic role in the South Caucasus.

Furthermore, in the events of 2020 in Karabakh, two countries, Turkey and Israel, intensified their presence in the South Caucasus through military and armament support to Azerbaijan, aligning themselves with Azerbaijan to advance their interests. Azerbaijan, with the assistance of Turkey and technical support from Israel, strategically isolated Armenia and, using Turkish drones and Israeli equipment, gained the upper hand in the war, creating conditions for victory.

The foreign policy assessment of Iran from the perspective of political realism

According to political realism, all countries are always striving to gain power, maintain power, and demonstrate power to gain international credibility and prestige. Therefore, such actors must constantly increase their power in competition with other players. According to the model of political realism,

politicians and statesmen always think and act based on national interests and power, and the foreign policy of countries aims at survival, with the most certain goal being the preservation of survival in the face of conflicts with other countries.

Governments operating in a structure and system of international anarchy rely on their power and capabilities to advance their national interests, with the most important national interests, from the perspective of realists, being the survival of the government, political system, and territorial integrity. National interests are always guaranteed using national power, and every government and nation acts to secure national interests based on its power. According to the model of political realism, the foreign policy of countries always follows three patterns: changing the current situation, maintaining the current situation, and pursuing a policy to maintain power and status. A country that pursues the maintenance of the current situation in its foreign policy is essentially seeking to maintain the distribution of power as it exists in a specific historical period, and this does not mean it is opposed to any change forever. The policy of maintaining the current situation is not against change; rather, it opposes any change that leads to a reversal of power relations between two or more countries.

In Iran's approach to regional developments, especially the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the goal is to preserve the current situation. The Islamic Republic has sought to preserve the existing balance of power through initiatives like the 3+3 plan and the resolution of the crisis by regional countries. This aims to prevent interference and entry of non-regional powers into the recent crisis, which would naturally

pose a security challenge to Iran's surrounding environment.

Political realism defines national interests in terms of a country's power, and Iran's foreign policy goal, based on this model, is to secure and guarantee survival and security in the anarchic and self-help international system. Therefore, the goal of ensuring survival and security in the international system leads the Islamic Republic of Iran to formulate and implement a self-interested foreign policy, which, in the recent regional crisis, has focused on preventing engagement in war and maintaining the existing power balance, along with pursuing a policy to preserve prestige. In the framework of foreign policy, Iran seeks to maximize security and preserve the existing order. (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2011)

Given that any instability and insecurity in the South Caucasus region and on Iran's northern borders can threaten Iran's security and territorial integrity, and the negative consequences of conflicts in this region will affect Iran's political and economic security, Iran's foreign policy has moved towards realism to prevent such a situation and has endeavored to pragmatically deal with this crisis in the region. Iran's declaration of neutrality in the Nagorno-Karabakh War is a result of a policy aimed at keeping Iran out of the war for the benefit of one of the conflicting parties, preventing Iran from being involved in a proxy war. Therefore, by pursuing a policy of maintaining the current situation in recent developments, Iran has managed to prevent engagement in the war, although small changes have occurred in the power distribution. These minor adjustments do not create a significant change in the relative power positions of interested countries and are fully compatible with the policy of maintaining the current situation.

In recent developments in the region, despite Iran declaring its neutrality in its policies, despite having religious and cultural commonalities with the involved countries, and despite the public pressure from the Azerbaijani-speaking people in Azerbaijan, Iran did not support either side of the conflict. Iran consistently advocated for the resolution of conflicts and invited the conflicting countries to self-restraint and conflict resolution. However, Iran has not been indifferent to the changes and developments in the region, demonstrating its readiness to defend the country against any aggression through maneuvers in the northern part of the country. Iran declared that it does not tolerate any geopolitical changes along the existing borders of the region and, while pursuing a policy of preserving the status quo, showcased its power and position.

During the crisis between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran, acknowledging the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, sought to balance its policies to prevent any negative impact of the crisis on Iran's national security through mediation and diplomacy. Iran's positions, considering the significant Azerbaijani population in Iran and the presence of the Armenian minority living in Iran, have been sensitive to the feelings of both countries' populations. Thus, from the beginning of the conflicts, Iran has endeavored to mediate and maintain balance in its relations with both countries, although its efforts have faced challenges due to interventions by Russia and other regional actors.

If stability and security are established in the South Caucasus region, Iran's national interests in the area can be secured. Iran has

consistently worked towards this goal, recognizing the importance of relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite recent tensions, Iran has strived to develop bilateral relations with both conflicting parties while maintaining neutrality. Establishing relations with Armenia is strategically important for Iran due to political and security advantages, contributing to Iran's active presence in the South Caucasus region and maintaining a balance of power among regional actors. Armenia's strategic importance lies in connecting Iran to the Black Sea and Europe, allowing Iran to play a role in the region's transportation and energy equations.

Developing relations with Azerbaijan is also of great importance, as it can play a crucial role in enhancing Iran's political influence in the region. Strengthening ties with Azerbaijan provides an opportunity for Iran to participate in the region's energy transportation projects and prevents the expansion of influence by regional and non-regional powers, especially those opposing Iran in the region. The tensions between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran have intensified after the Second Karabakh War, with support from third-party actors, leading to increased tensions between the two nations.

Iran, with an innovative peace plan in the Karabakh conflict, seeks to gain regional influence while preserving the current situation. The initiative aims to achieve prestige as an influential regional power in this crisis and important regional issues. The formation of this group of intermediary countries, including Iran, Turkey, and Russia, alongside Azerbaijan and Armenia, can work alongside the Minsk Group (including Russia, the United States, and France) to advance the resolution of the conflict that they have been responsible for since 1994. This effort aims to move the conflict towards a stable peace.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, considering its regional interests, has acted responsibly in the recent Karabakh crisis. Iran has been proactive in seeking a resolution to the recent armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia without altering the regional power balance. Russia's involvement in the Ukraine war has somewhat weakened its traditional security hegemony in the region. Consequently, some countries, including Iran, Turkey, and China, are striving to increase their activities in the region.

Iran is working to take the lead in this peace initiative, creating opportunities for cooperation and convergence among regional countries. The goal is to preserve the current situation in the region while playing an effective role in the regional peace process, maintaining the country's prestige as a significant and influential regional power. The Islamic Republic of Iran, while pursuing a policy of maintaining the current situation regarding the crises in the region, opposes any changes that may lead to a power shift between two or more countries. Iran has consistently emphasized the preservation of the territorial integrity of regional countries and the maintenance of existing borders.

Therefore, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the recent developments in Karabakh (2020) is based on a realistic political approach influenced by geopolitical, geo-economics factors, and regional competitions, all aligned with a prestige-oriented policy aimed at preserving the current situation.

Conclusion

The transformation in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus region is a strategic move by three actors: The Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Israel, each holding its own diverse objectives. Firstly, Azerbaijan sought to recover its lost territories and overcome the defeat in the war with Armenia. Secondly, Turkey, under the neo-Ottoman policy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, aimed at establishing a broad government extending from China to Europe, pursuing this through linguistic ties with Azerbaijan and the ideal of Pan-Turkism, as well as cultural and economic initiatives. The major player in this recent geopolitical transformation in the region is Israel, enjoying its own primary goal of exerting pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran through its military presence near Iran's northern borders as well as exporting arms to Azerbaijan.

Recent developments in the vicinity of Iran's borders include the deployment of Turkish Takfiri-Salafi forces from Syria to the region near Iran's borders and the use of Israeli equipment and experts by Azerbaijan. Given that the South Caucasus is within Iran's cultural sphere and being geopolitically and strategically significant for Iran, any changes in this region can impact Iran's security. Iran can manifest itself as a regional power in connection with the South Caucasus, capitalize on existing opportunities in the region through operational planning, takes the initiative to form alliances with existing regional powers, believing that Western competition in the region has reduced Iran's ability to influencing the area while posing threats to Iran.

Based on geopolitical competition, the pursuit of foreign policy principles requires economic capability and an effective presence in the region. Considering the proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the South Caucasus countries and the geopolitical importance of this region on the global stage, the situation of South Caucasus countries from the political, security, economic, and cultural aspects is crucial for Iran. Iran's active role in promoting peace, resolving regional disputes, and serious efforts to expand bilateral and regional cooperation are considered important components of Iran's national goals and interests.

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia has always had an impact on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran due to its proximity to Iran's borders and the presence of Azeris and Armenian minorities in Iran. The South Caucasus, as a strategic neighboring region, holds high importance and priority in the security policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran, as a regional power with influence, clear interests, and goals in this geostrategic region, actively pursues its objectives in the South Caucasus.

Iran must strive to solve the Karabakh issue by emphasizing the security of national interests and relying on political collaborations to find a solution. The convergence in the South Caucasus region contributes to peace and stability, offering numerous opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Conversely, any discord in the region leads to instability and insecurity along Iran's northern borders, to its detriment.

Iran should actively maintain its impartial role, engaging more than ever in resolving disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. With the escalation of conflicts, there is a risk to regional security and Iran's border stability. Any geopolitical or geo-economic changes in the

region directly or indirectly impact Iran's political, military, and national security dimensions, posing threats and vulnerabilities.

Considering the regional and extra-regional power competition and pursuit of interests in the South Caucasus, the events in Karabakh in 2020 may not be the last. Iran must play a more active and impartial role in resolving conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan to safeguard regional security and Iran's border stability. By establishing an independent framework, Iran can pursue its national interests effectively in the region.

Iran should adopt a more diplomatic and science-based approach to foster greater convergence in the South Caucasus. Divergence leads to instability and insecurity along the Iran's northern borders, endangering Iran's security. Iran should view regional convergence as an opportunity; therefore, actively engage in conflict resolution, seeking political, cultural, and economic cooperation and stability among regional countries, and leveraging existing collaborations to neutralize efforts to isolate Iran in the region.

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