



**Geopolitical Explanation of the Iranian 11th government's Foreign Policy in the
South Caucasus**

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ABSTRACT

The strategic region of South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia is of considerable importance for Iran's foreign policy due to numerous reasons such as rich energy resources, neighborhood of the Russian Federation, which is known as a regional superpower, the presence of the USA and the Zionist regime, and active crises. Establishing effective relations with the countries of South Caucasus could play a decisive role in securing Iran's national interests. The present article sought to answer the fundamental question that how are the announced and implemented policies of the 11th government of the Islamic Republic of Iran headed by Hassan Rouhani in the South Caucasus could be explained based on the theory of geopolitics. It hypothesized that Iran is implementing its foreign policy in the region using geopolitical components of its own as well as those belonged to the countries of the South Caucasus and the relationship of these components to each other such as proximity, common interests in the Caspian Sea, routes of energy pipelines, common culture and the presence of rival trans-regional and regional powers. Speeches and agendas of bilateral meetings between the highest authorities of Iran and the regional Republics, Tehran's stance towards the Karabakh crisis, the legal regime of the Caspian Sea, attempts to take advantage of economic opportunities, stress on the need to promote friendly and cooperative relations with all the three countries are among of the most important evidence based on which the hypothesis was tested, and their consistency with the theory of Geopolitics was explained.

Keywords: foreign policy, the 11th government, geopolitics, South Caucasus



1. INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and declaration of independence of 15 new republics, the geopolitics of the central Eurasia was largely changed so that the neighboring countries and the entire international system were affected. The birth of these 15 republics, with an increase in the number of actors of the international system, increased the Islamic Republic of Iran's northern neighbors. While Iran only neighbored the Soviet Union before the collapse of the northern borders, and its relations with the autonomous republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus were defined following the relations with Moscow, was directly land-bordered with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the South Caucasus region in the beginning of the 21st century. In other words, the collapse of the Soviet Union, added three countries to Iran's direct neighbors and bordered Iran with areas that traditionally have had significance for Iran for several reasons. The Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia and Georgia are three countries located in the South Caucasus or Transcaucasia. The South Caucasus has had geopolitical and geostrategic importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran for several reasons and post-Cold War changes increased the political, security, economic and cultural importance of the region. This region was part of the territory of Iran in the far past, before the domination of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union and therefore it has common historical, cultural and religious commonalities with Iran, and this is especially true for Azerbaijan, the second Shiite country. Armenia and Georgia have also common historical records with Iran. The South Caucasus is the most crisis-prone regions of the world, and all the three countries have dealt with serious crises none of them have yet been fully resolved, and Iran's neighborhood of a region that has witnessed serious ethnic and religion conflicts could threaten Iran's national security. On the other hand, the proximity of the Azeri-speaking provinces in the north west of Iran to the republic of Azerbaijan and some sectarian statements and actions of Baku officials, which is one of the causes of tension in relations between the two countries, could also threaten the territorial integrity and national unity of Iran.

In addition, instability and internal crises in the South Caucasus have provided the ground for the presence and the influence of great regional powers such as the Russian Federation as well as the transregional ones such as the United States of America and the Zionist regime in the region. The interests of Washington and Tel Aviv are clearly in



conflict with the interests of Tehran and Russia, as the dominant power in Eurasia, does not allow any other nation to dominate the Kremlin's former backyard.

Moreover, both Iran and Azerbaijan have coasts and energy resources in the blue zone of the Caspian Sea, which in turn provides especial threats and opportunities for the two countries as well as the region potentially. Since the Soviet collapse, the five Caspian littoral states (Russia, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan) have failed to develop the legal regime of the Caspian Sea and Baku and Tehran's views often conflict with each other in many cases.

Meanwhile, having oil and gas resources in the Caspian region and being an energy exporter, Iran has a fair passageway position and because of enjoying infrastructures and skilled and efficient work force it could strengthen its own regional and international economic and political position, via attending the regional projects of transmission of power to world markets. The above factors that have provided Iran with a set of potential opportunities and threats after the collapse have led different governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran to put peaceful relations with the countries of South Caucasus on the agenda and attempt to secure Iran's national interests in the region through adopting different policies.

Since the inception of Hassan Rouhani's administration in 2013, the development of relations with neighbors of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the South Caucasus countries was set as priority. The set of outputs of Iran's foreign policy in this region since the inception of the government could be explained and analyzed by a variety of theoretical approaches. This article seeks to answer the fundamental questions that "how are the announced and implemented policies of the 11th government of the Islamic Republic of Iran headed by Hassan Rouhani in the South Caucasus could be explained based on the theory of geopolitics?"

The research hypothesis is that based on the geopolitical factors of Iran and those of the South Caucasus countries, the 11th government has attempted to use potential opportunities for securing and developing common interests, reduce current and potential restrictions and threats of regional and transregional rivals, and forward the process of acquiring political and economic power and influence as well as national security in this region. Meetings between the highest authorities of Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia as well as dialogues about promoting security, political and



economic cooperation, Tehran's stress on the need for a diplomatic resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the presence of Hassan Rouhani in key regional meetings including the summit of the special working group to draft the convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, meetings of Iranian authorities and those of the South Caucasus countries in capital cities of each other, meetings on the sidelines of international and regional summits, stressing the need to promote good and cooperative relations with the South Caucasus by the Iranian government, and finally efforts to develop trade, cultural and transportation relations with countries in the region are among the evidence supporting the hypothesis, the consistency of which have been explained by the theory of geopolitics.

This paper first discusses the theoretical framework in which the theory of geopolitics and its components are expressed. In the second section, Iran's policies during the 11th government in the South Caucasus will be discussed. In the third section, some of the announced and implemented policies of Iran's government corresponding to the elements of the theory of geopolitics are expressed. Finally, the conclusion is provided indicating that Iran is implementing its own foreign policies, according to some geopolitical component such as proximity, common history and culture, common interests in the Caspian Sea, threats due to active instability in the region etc.

- Theoretical framework

“Geo” refers to land that includes geography and “politics” means policy; thus, “Geopolitics” means the influence of geography and geographical space on policy. As far as the foreign policy decisions of countries in the field of international relations are concerned, taking geographical factors into account is very important, because all the political events of countries either domestic or foreign, occurs within the geographical space and decisions taken by international actors are affected by geographical factors (Hosseinpur Pouyan, 2013: 169). It should be noted that in some sources, the knowledge of “political geography” and the knowledge of geopolitics are viewed differently. These authors stress that political geography refers to the study of the relationship between geography and politics while geopolitics not only studies the relationship between geography and politics but also a third factor called “power” (Ghasemi, 2005: 129).



Many scholars have theorized geopolitics, such as “Alfred Thayer Mahan”, American theorist, who proposed the theory of “Sea Power”, where the position and influence of a country’s navy on its national power is explained and evaluated. “Halford John Mackinder”, Scottish theorist, offered the “Heartland Theory” and “Karl Ernst Haushofer” and “Friedrich Ratzel”, German theorists, in their theory of Geopolitics, compared the country to a living organism that needs vital space to survive and grow. “Rudolf Killen”, Swedish thinker, also examined the effect of environment on human physically and psychologically (Ghavam, 2007: 90-91). Among the above theories, the Mackinder’s Heartland Theory includes the South Caucasus too. He calls the region that begins from Eastern Europe, extends to Siberia, as the “Pivot Area”, which is strategically very important due to rich natural resources. He calls “Eurasia” the “Heartland” and uses the phrase “world island” to refer to the land where the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa are located in. He believes, “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.” (Mackinder, 1904: 150)

- Factors Affecting the Political Geography

Factors that affect the political geography, implementation, and operation of domestic or foreign policies and are concerned while assessing the strength of the countries are divided into two categories: fixed and variable factors. Fixed factor include:

- Geographical location: Activity of countries in the international system depends on their geographical location and how they communicate with their neighbors based on this geographical location. Geographical location, in turn, is classified variously. One of these classifications is as follows:

1. Marine location and access to water bodies, especially island and coastal position.
2. Land location and landlockedness.
3. Strategic location contributing to the implementation of the strategy.

Another form of classification of types of location is as follows:

1. Central location that provides states with security and power.
2. Marginal location where world collision occurs.
3. External location, which is important militarily.



4. Strategic location that important and prestigious for it allows the control of the world.
- Space: Geographical space is as a dynamic scene of geostrategic operations and affects geopolitical factors.
 - Territory: Territory does not have any value for a country in itself, but it could have a major impact on the country's politics in conjunction with other factors such as economic factors and human resources.
 - The form of the land: It is among the important geographical factors influencing the policy of a country. Different states may have different forms, including long, comet-like, ripped and finally nipped. The circular shape of the land provides the most suitable opportunities for the people, because in this way, the peripheries have the same distance from the center and this facilitates many access-related problems.
- Variable factors also have a role in implementing the policy of countries such as:
- Population: The effect of human on the political geography is important and effective qualitatively not quantitatively. Human must have highly objective and subjective skills to understand the current events and predict possible future events, and as much as possible prevent the occurrence of adverse events that put her interests at stake.
 - Natural resources: It refers to the ability of countries in having abundant natural resources with favorable quality, and more importantly, how to use it.
 - Political and social institutions: These institutions are founded based on the beliefs of the people, the history and the political regime and vary because of exposure to different geographical contexts (Hafeznia, 2014, 194-196).

Considering the geostrategic position of Iran in general, and proximity to the South Caucasus region in particular, which is in itself among the geostrategic area of the world, it could be stated that the theory of geopolitics is one of the existing theoretical frameworks that could be of help in theoretical explaining and analyzing of the performance of Iran's foreign policy in this area. In fact, it could be said geographical factors, especially being in an primarily geostrategic area and proximity to areas that have historically attracted the attention of major powers and been potentially prone to crisis, have had a key role in foreign actions and reactions of Iran, regardless of the type of government, foreign policy orientation and attitude of the ruling system to the foreign



policy in various periods of time. In other words, Iran's foreign policymakers have been always inevitable to consider geopolitical considerations in foreign relations as well as in definition of patterns for national interests as fundamental factors. Therefore, theories and approaches of geopolitics the basis of which could be regarded as realistic views could explain, analyze and anticipate changes in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran usefully and provide policymakers with patterns in order to help them appear more efficiently for securing national interests.

- **Geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus to Iran**

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a significant geopolitical developments in Central Eurasia and consequently in Iran and provided its own opportunities and threats in political, security, economic and cultural areas to Iran. The breakup of the East superpower in the north of Iran created a serious void of power in the South Caucasus and given common borders between Iran and Azerbaijan and Armenia, it led to threats to security of Iran. These factors resulted in the increasing attention to the South Caucasus, which has been long and geopolitically important for Iran.

In fact, the Caucasus is important for Iran from three aspects. First, there is a long historical and cultural relationship between the people of the region and Iranians, which if appropriately benefited from, could have a positive impact on securing Iran's political and economic interests. Second, the Caucasus has a key role for Iran's access to the North and East Europe in terms of communication paths, and if activated it will enhance Iran's position in bilateral trade relations with countries in Europe and North-East Europe as well as the countries of East and South Asia; European countries could bring their goods to the Persian Gulf and also will achieve an alternative way to connect with India, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The third aspect of the importance of the Caucasus to Iran is its geographical location as a buffer zone between Iran and other regional and trans-regional powers. Thus, any unrest and instability could threaten Iran's national security and instability and insecurity in Iran could also be extended to the area and threatens its security. Overall, security and stability in the Caucasus, especially the South Caucasus is a strategic goal for the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kazemi, 2005, 8-10). Special geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural features of the South Caucasus has made this area one of



the most complex areas in the territory of the former Soviet Union which has been of geostrategic importance for Iran.

- Aspects of geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus:

Active crisis in the South Caucasus:

One of the main features of this area is that it is crisis-prone. The ethnic crisis of "Nagorno-Karabakh" since 1989 has frayed relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Due to the long borders between Iran and Azerbaijan in the provinces of East and West Azerbaijan, shared linguistic and ethnicity of the people of the two provinces with Azerbaijan, provocative statements in Baku and the history of separatist movements in the two border provinces, the possibility of spreading the unrest due to the mentioned crisis and consequently creating instability in Iran is increasing. Independence tendencies in the autonomous regions "Abkhazia" and "South Ossetia" in Georgia has made internal conflicts and tensions in the country (ibid. 411-415).

The influence of regional and transregional powers in the South Caucasus:

The region has attracted regional and transregional actors' attention due to various political, economic, security and cultural reasons. In addition to Iran, Turkey, the United States of America, The Zionist regime, China and Europe are the major powers in the wake of their interests in the South Caucasus.

- Russia

The South Caucasus as part of the territory of the former Soviet Union is considered as the Russia's backyard. Moscow assumes the three countries and the five Central Asian republics as its "Near Abroad", and has understandable interests in the Caucasus. The Caucasus is the linking point of the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea and also the vital highway linking Russia to the Middle East and Europe. Russia has also security concerns in the region among which Moscow's dissatisfaction with the presence of NATO in the Caucasus and its expansion to the East and the Central Asia is most obvious. Russia is still Armenia's strategic partner and has military bases in the country (Atai, 2012). Therefore, Moscow's opposition and reaction follow any attempt by regional and transregional powers for presence and influence in the region. The official policy of the Kremlin as the dominant political, security and economic power is accompanied by requirements, limitations, and also special opportunities for Tehran's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus (Koolae, 2010).



- The United States of America:

The USA as the dominant international power, in present in the South Caucasus to accomplish several goals the major of which is to halt Russia and after the collapse, with the aim of ending the dependence on Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia to Russian especially in economic and security areas, the USA strengthened its ties with the three countries. The White House encourages democratization of and concerns about the human rights situation in Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan to protect its own nationals who reside in the South Caucasus. It supports Turkey, which is a member of NATO and also attempts to expand NATO to the East as a part of a policy aimed at limiting further Russian power, run through Turkish territory. In addition, the USA implementing the policy of “neither north nor south” in the energy sector, prevents the crossing of pipelines from Russia and Iran and supports oil and gas transport projects crossing from the territory of its allies, especially Turkey.

This was made more serious especially after America's presence in Central Asia after attack on Afghanistan. Bush's serious view to Caspian energy resources was reflected in report entitled “National Policy Energy” in May 2001. The report recommended the support of making “Baku - Tbilisi - Ceyhan” pipeline, since the transfer of oil from “Tengiz” field in Kazakhstan by this pipeline was also predicted (US department of energy, 2001). In fact, despite the obvious advantages and benefits of crossing the pipeline from Iran, Tehran was excluded from the project due to Washington's obvious pressure and influence.

Although it is unlikely that the USA is the customer of the area's oil and gas, it could meet its energy needs only through the Persian Gulf's resource. In addition, the Caspian oil resources exploitation development affects the oil price, thus the issue has been always considered by Washington. On the other hand, the South Caucasus and Central Asian oil and gas could help the White House expand those allies in Asia and Europe that already depend on the resources of the Middle East and Russia (Golshanpajouh & Kolahi, 2013: 310-312).

Political tendency and orientation of Georgia toward the West and Russia has also special geopolitical considerations for Iran. Georgia has a clear policy of anti-Russian and pro-Western and the White House aiming at strengthening this ally against the Kremlin openly supports Tbilisi politically and economically. Instances could be found



in economic and military aid of the USA to Georgia, the White House's stress that the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that declared independence from Georgia during the crisis in August 2008 due to the obvious involvement of Russian military, belong to Tbilisi, (Nichol, 2014). In fact, the USA is seeking to support Azerbaijan against Iran and Russia via political support of Georgia as a transit corridor of the Caspian energy to the West, in order to further isolate Iran and reduce Russia's influence in the Caspian energy area and global energy markets (Koolae, 2010).

On the other hand, Azerbaijan also could play a role in the realization of the goals of the USA's general policy toward the Middle East. The USA does not have a positive prestige in the Islamic world and thus it seeks to strengthen its ties with Azerbaijan, the second Shiite and at the same time secular state. However, Washington follows the same policy toward Turkey, and this relationship is of higher importance in the South Caucasus due to the competition between Iran and Turkey, but it could be used as a leverage against the religious and cultural influence of Iran in the region (Markedonov, 2014).

The above facts about the USA's presence in the South Caucasus stresses the importance of adopting active foreign policy by Iran in the region, because these three states are involved in many challenges and each are experiencing degrees of internal unrest or tensions with neighbors or both, and thus they anticipate foreign powers for survival, stability and development.

No one could deny the fact that the USA is the most influential transregional actor in the South Caucasus and its influence on Iran's relations with these countries could not be denied as well. Thus, Tehran is facing numerous remarkable obstacles to attend, influence on and secure its own interests in the area. Proactive performance based on geopolitical requirements, which are relatively stable despite permanent instability continued in the regional and the international conditions, could be one the tools to smooth out the obstacle.

- Turkey:

Turkey is a regional power that has close ties with the Republic of Azerbaijan due to cultural, racial and linguistic commonalities and alignment of its political orientation with Baku as westernization and proximity to the United States of America and the Zionist regime. Turkey used its territory as a transit route for pipelines of oil and gas



fields of Azerbaijan in the Caspian. It also exports goods and services to markets in the South Caucasus to secure its economic interests in the area so that it is among the major trade partners of Georgia and Azerbaijan and a large part of the commercial relations is focused on energy. In addition, Turkey is hardly attempting to propose its secular regime model to Azerbaijan as an Islamic secular-democratic system. It also hopes to create a Turk society by establishing close relations with post-Soviet Islamic republics in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

This conflicts in some respects to Iran's political and cultural interests and goals in the South Caucasus. Turkey and Armenia have had serious challenges over the killing of Armenians in the early twentieth century and Turkey's denial of responsibility for the event by Ankara. Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Ankara's support of Baku for alignment with Washington have further faded the relations between Turkey and Armenia. So far, the two countries have diplomatically attempted to relieve the tensions and improve the relations, but diplomacy has failed in this regard. In fact, Ankara has serious positive and negative political, security, cultural and economic relations and interactions with Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan, and taking into account the differences in approaches of Tehran and Ankara as two regional rivals in some of these policies, there is also a need to adopt a foreign policy fitting in this area (Golshanpajouh, Kardan & Kolahi, 2003: 287-292).

- The Republic of China:

China, as the second largest energy importer in the world and the second largest economy in the world after the USA, looks mainly to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea as well as markets in the region. It has adopted the general diplomacy to and has strengthened its educational ties with the region to meet its security interests in the South Caucasus, which are defined under economic interests. In fact, Beijing plans to strengthen and deepen its relations with countries in this region via the above dual path, while exploiting the significant economic potential for of the South Caucasus, and also countering extremism and spread of the ideas of "Pan-Turkism" in the autonomous region of "Xinjiang" in its own territory. The broad province of "Xinjiang", in West China, which borders Central Asia and experiences extremist and terrorist activity, is one of the concerns of Beijing's security. On the other hand, the three South Caucasus republics, consider China as a strong and trustworthy investor as well as a positive



security actor (Sanamyán, 2016). China's efforts to attend the South Caucasus as the first partner of the Russian military and intimacy of political orientation of Beijing and Moscow have also geopolitical opportunities and requirements for Iran. This demands a special and appropriate foreign policy, because geopolitically some of the interests of China in the region are in close proximity with Russia and Iran's interests and objectives (Babayán, 2014).

- The European Union:

The European Union is trying to strengthen relations with the countries of the South Caucasus, to achieve its own economic, political and security objectives in the region. Therefore, it uses various strategies and tools and many analysts believe that the EU has been successful in achieving its goals. The EU aids the three South Caucasus countries economically and technologically, and within the framework of political, economic and security plans such as "Initiative Eastern Partnership", "European Neighborhood Policy", "Black Sea Synergy" as well as "Partnership for Peace" opens up its way in this area. Europe is faced with security threats in the South Caucasus such as intensification of the process of migration to the Europe, the spread of organized crime such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, terrorism and the spread of ethnic conflicts and separatist movements on their borders. In addition, communicating with Central Asia through the South Caucasus and also access to the Caspian oil and gas could reduce Europe's dependence on Russia and the Middle East's energy (Gevorgyan, 2016).

On the other hand, after the crisis in Ukraine in the late 2014 and the consequent gloom of Europe's relationship with Russia as the main source of energy supply of the continent, Europe has intensified its multilateral efforts to achieve these goals. At the same time it has adopted the "Strategic Patience" approach and has paid more attention to proven facts and varied geopolitical trends in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia in the South Caucasus, and thus refuses any hasty action in this regard (Niculescu, 2014). It should be noted that all three South Caucasus countries are members of all the mentioned schemes as well as the "Council of Europe". On the other hand, The USA supports the increasing presence and influence of its European partners in the South Caucasus and also accompanied European powers and the major Euro members to boycott Russia and increase political pressure on Moscow during the Ukrainian crisis.



In addition, the each of the three South Caucasus countries is also trying to be in the process of convergence with the European Union (Chkhikvadze, 2016).

For the Islamic Republic of Iran that is trying to expand its relations with the South Caucasus and the European Union, it is important to pay attention to geopolitical objectives and interests of European countries in this region, because in this way it could establish due relationships to the transregional actors active in the South Caucasus, to ensure its interests.

- The Zionist regime:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Zionist regime actively worked to increase its influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Now, Tel Aviv is one of the active foreign actors in the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan and Georgia are among the priorities of this regime for collaboration and communication. In fact, the Zionist regime has increased its presence in the South Caucasus, especially in the Republic of Shiite Azerbaijan to contain and counter Iran's rising economic power, reduce its dependence on energy resources of the Middle East and recruitment of Muslim countries (Amler, 2017).

Zionists' economic, security, technical and cultural activities are very serious and extensive especially in Azerbaijan and Baku would benefit Israeli presence as well. Tel Aviv is also closely cooperating with Turkey and this might increase the potential threat to Iran's national security. Indeed, Azerbaijan is so close to Israel that many analysts describe their relationship as "strategic" (Bhattacharjee, 2017).

Recently, the Zionist regime's relations with Georgia's has become upward and positive, because Georgia has a coastal location on the Black Sea, passes Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and "Baku-Tbilisi- Erzurum" gas pipeline and seriously looks to the West. These have increased Tel Aviv's interest to this country in line with US policy in this regard. Citizens of both countries do not need visas to travel to each other and tourism relations between the two have been booming and growing (Tavberidze, 2017).

The Zionist regime's relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia is not as relations with Armenia, but Armenia has a powerful lobby in Washington and at the same time it is said that close contacts are seen between Armenian and Zionists' lobbies. Serious activities and effective influence of Zionist lobbies in Washington against Iran, is one of the other reasons that requires attention from Tehran to Yerevan in the South Caucasus.



On the other hand, the proximity of Iran and Armenia to each other given the conflict of interests between Iran and the Zionist regime and close relations of Azerbaijan with Tel Aviv would be a sign of a confrontation between Iran and Azerbaijan and provides potential tensions (Rahimov, 2017).

Given the inherent hostility between Iran and the Zionist regime, any kind of presence in the South Caucasus by the Zionist regime is considered a threat to Iran's interests, which demands special requirements for formulating Tehran's policies toward the South Caucasus. In fact, Tehran should take into account the existence of this threat and geopolitical implications that it has for the country, and then set up its relations with Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Russia, the USA, the EU, Turkey and China.

Lack of codification of the Caspian Sea legal regime:

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the legal regime of the Caspian Sea was implemented based on the conventions of 1921 and 1940 between Iran and the Soviet Union; but after the collapse, Iran and four Republics of Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, each owning a part of the shores of this water area raised considerable claims of the Caspian Sea. In addition, demands and claims of each of the five countries toward their rights in the Caspian Sea is not in line with each other and even there are conflicts over the fact that whether the Caspian is a sea or a lake. On the other hand, the Caspian oil and gas resources, which are known as an alternative to the Persian Gulf resource, have long attracted the interest of western companies. Among the countries of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan has partnered with western companies for the extraction and export of oil and gas of the Caspian and this was followed by serious opposition of Iran and Russia's foreign Ministry had in December 1991.

Moreover, the position of this country about the presence of foreign forces to secure the Caspian Sea conflicts with Iran and Russia's. The foregoing cases and other disparities over how to divide the seabed and the sea surface have also added the complexity in the development of the legal regime of this body of water; and despite multiple meetings on different formal levels, no certain legal regime acceptable to all five countries has not been developed yet. This could provide the ground for the interference of regional and transregional powers and consequently it could increase the potential for instability and serious tensions in the region (Nami, 2010: 44-50).



Given the orientation of Azerbaijan to west and close ties between Baku, Washington, Ankara and Tel Aviv as well as the potential for ethnic unrest between Iran and Azerbaijan, resolving the existing disagreements and more convergence positions could prevent tensions in the region and be effective in security problems. An example of such potential instabilities was seen on 23 July 2001 when the two countries were on the verge of a military confrontation in the Caspian Sea for the first time. Thus, the legal regime of the Caspian Sea has always been on the agenda of the Iranian foreign ministry has been in various governments. The presence of Rouhani as the head of the 11th government at the fourth summit of the Caspian littoral states in "Astrakhan", Russia on 29 September 2014 and talks about the development of the legal regime of the Caspian Sea suggest that Rouhani's administration has not neglected the importance of this issue as a geopolitical challenge to Iran and attempts to play a role in this regard.

Aspects of geoeconomic importance of the South Caucasus countries:

The Republic of Azerbaijan that assumes export of the Caspian energy resources as one of the ways to economic development and enhancement of political position and power in the international system is landlocked. Due to this geographical determinism, Baku has to engage and cooperate with neighboring countries to use their land to reach free waters and global energy markets. In addition, Baku needs to cooperate with foreign companies to operate its oil and gas resources. In this regard, Iran has the potential to cooperate with Baku, because it enjoys skilled workforce and technology in oil and gas. Moreover, Iran and the five Central Asian Republics are members of "Economic Cooperation Organization" (ECO) and this has provided the capacity for regional economic and trade cooperative for both countries.

Armenia is a small landlocked country, but its territory is important for diversifying Iran's access to Europe. In addition, although Georgia is heavily dependent on foreign oil and gas, it has a surplus of hydroelectric energy. 'Aras' river, which is located on the border between the two countries, is another potential for Tehran-Yerevan cooperation in the field of electrical energy. One of the ways of Armenia's communication with the outside world is a rail line through Georgia to Armenia borders and thus it could be so critical for Iran to play the role of a transit route for goods. In this regard, the development of "North-South Corridor", backed by Moscow, will facilitate the transit of goods from Russia through the South Caucasus and Iran to the Persian Gulf, Pakistan



and India. Thus, using its geopolitical position as a secure gateway, Iran could enhance its position in regional and international relations. Georgia is located in the energy routes to Europe and therefore Iran's relations with this country are very important (Atai, 2012).

Aspects of geocultural importance of the South Caucasus countries:

The people of the three countries of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have cultural, religious and historical links with Iranians. Azerbaijan is the second Shiite country and Azeri speakers in Iran and Azerbaijan speak the same language. Christians in Armenia have traditionally good relations with Iran and are now a significant minority in Iran and many of them live in Tehran, Isfahan and Tabriz. Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia was the center for Persian language in the Soviet Union. In addition to cultural ties between Iran and Georgia, the country's Muslim population is nearly a million. Residents of the autonomous region of "Ajaria" are Sunni, and Shiites live in the East of the country.

Despite cultural, religious and historical capacity, Iran has failed to use this advantage to develop relations and to secure its own interests. In fact, Iran's interests conflict with the obvious west orientation of Tbilisi and Baku and was one of the main reasons that Iran could not benefit from the geocultural characteristics of the regional.

In addition, serious crises in the South Caucasus, unorganized economic situation as well as the distorted image of Iran as an intervening and revolutionary actor in the region, have inhibited the potential of cultural action (Koolae, 2010). In fact, the regional geocultural characteristics could both serve Iran's foreign policy objectives in the South Caucasus, and as a destructive factor worsen the presence and influence of Iran in the region. This type of political behavior in the three countries along with other regional and international factors set up Tehran's cultural ability and success in this strategic area.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and major changes the geopolitical power of the South Caucasus as well as in the geographical environment of Iran, the foreign policy system of different governments of Tehran attempted to set up their strategies and tactics toward this geostrategic region in accordance with new political, security, economic and cultural coordinates, so that Iran's interests and objectives could be



secured in the most effective and efficient way possible. Many analysts believe that Tehran had an idealistic behavior toward the Caucasus in the early years after the collapse. However, Iran was not alone, since the behavior was seen in Central Eurasian countries and even the USA's policy. In fact, there is a consensus that the end of the Cold War induced a kind of idealism in actors' foreign policy; however, soon enough undeniable geopolitical realities marginalized this approach. In line with this change of attitude, Iran increased its attention to geopolitical factors in formulating and implementing its policy in the South Caucasus gradually (Koolae, 2010).

In this way, defense and welfare interests and attempts to establish a regional order were set among the prime priorities on the agenda of Tehran's foreign policy, and authorities tried to further benefit from of geographical elements and geopolitical and geoeconomic developments to provide this category of interests. Accordingly, Iran focused its regional policy in the South Caucasus on achieving the goals that include national security, territorial integrity and national unity, economic-political power and influence and economic-technological development. So far, different governments of Iran have used strategies of regional confidence building, stability making, peacemaking and peacekeeping, cooperation and integration to achieve the objectives with respect to the components of the regional geopolitics (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2013: 435-439).

One of the most important reasons of Iran's shift of priorities of objectives in the South Caucasus and gradual increase in the focus on geopolitical realities might be security threats on the northern borders. The Long crisis of Karabakh, internal stability of Georgia as well as fierce conflict in the "Autonomous Republic of Chechnya" in Russia are a few examples of these events. Meanwhile the bloody civil war in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the threat of the spread of extremism, terrorism and organized crime threatened Iran's security from regions like the South Caucasus.

It could be argued that the ethnic mosaic of the South Caucasus as one of the elements of instability and crisis of the geocultural characteristics in this region, provided numerous geostrategic requirements for Tehran to turn the establishment of lasting stability in the region as a strategic objective and also consider it among the fundamental tools for securing territorial integrity. On the other hand, although Iran has enormous Islamic Iranian heritage across Eurasia and the Caucasus, the effect of relations, which are based on power and competitiveness of large regional and transregional powers in



this geographical zone, has made Iran to not set up its shared culture and civilization in the region at the forefront of its foreign policy in the South Caucasus in the post-collapse era. In fact, with numerous and serious incidence of instability in the South Caucasus, Tehran that have viewed its national security under threats, it has preferred to not set its own geocultural coordinates as the main basis for designing and implementing its policy toward Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia (Sadegh-Zadeh, 2008, 35-41).

1. KARABAKH CRISIS AND GEOPOLITICAL PATTERN OF IRAN'S BEHAVIOR

The behavior of The Islamic Republic of Iran toward the Karabakh crisis indicates Tehran's attention to geopolitical factors and risks arising from geocultural risk factors in the South Caucasus region. Indeed, Tehran's mediation in the conflict between Yerevan and Baku followed several strategic objectives:

Iran aimed at putting off this ethnic conflict to stop the development of separatist tendencies and centrifugal movements in the Azeri-speaking provinces in the north west, because external excitation and independence-seeking desires due to consistency of language and race in Turkey, Azerbaijan and these provinces caused movements of this kind. For example, in June 1992, when "Abulfazl Elchibeygi", the leader of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, who had national tendencies, was elected as president, adopted strong pro-Western and pro-American stance emphasizing the Turkish features of the new nation. In addition, he spoke of "reunification" of "northern" and "southern" Azerbaijan as a serious warning to Tehran (Atai, 2012).

One of the images of the Islamic republic of Iran in the international arena is a revolutionary country that only seeks to export its revolution and ideology without any regard to its own and other countries pragmatic considerations and geopolitical situations. Such images together with idealistic effort and aspirations of Iran in some of the post-Soviet republics in the early post-collapse years, was one of the reasons that led Tehran fail use potential opportunities in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Thus, Tehran selected a mediating role in the Karabakh conflict and showed a new image of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a peace-seeking and pragmatic state which is not to export its revolution. Within this new behavior framework, Iran attempted to attract newly



independent states as well as Russia's trust and resolve their misunderstanding and concerns of foreign policy toward Tehran (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2013: 437).

In fact, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan in spite of religious, historical commonalities and enjoyment of common interests in the Caspian Sea have been faced with serious tensions and challenges of and this is despite the fact that Iran and Armenia long and even before the arrival of Islam to the region have had good relations with each other. On the other hand, the general policy of Russia in the South Caucasus is the continuance of military presence in Armenia and support of this country. Thus, Tehran, which did not want to challenge its relations with Moscow as the heir to the Soviet Union, practically advocated Armenia, as did Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict while highlighting the territorial integrity of both countries and the need to respect the end the conflict as soon as possible (Souleimanov, 2011).

It could be said that Iran's support for Armenia as a small Christian country against Azerbaijan as the second Shiite country in the world, represents the pragmatic approach adopted by Iran, based on the realistic geopolitical considerations, because if ideological considerations were held by Iran in the face of this crisis, Iran had to support Baku and act against Yerevan, but regional and international communities witnessed something against this hypothetical approach.

Karabakh conflict is still not resolved and Hassan Rouhani's administration in this regard is to take into account national interests and the need for settlement of this conflict. During Rouhani's journey to Central Asia and the Caucasus in December 2016, he met with "Serge Sarkisian", the Armenian president in the capital city of Yerevan. He stated, "The Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia are friends and we hope to witness sustainable peace in the south Caucasus. This will profit the whole region. Without a doubt the Karabakh conflict does not have a military solution, so we demand a peaceful solution to the conflict" (IRIB News Agency, 2016).

Another issue affecting Iran's foreign policy orientation in the area is the induction of the idea of "Pan-Turkism" in the South Caucasus, negation of Persian culture and language and separation between the Turkish-speaking people and other ethnicities. To prevent the spread of this thinking into the country, especially into the northwest where there are Azerbaijani and Turkish-speaking populations, Iran has taken the following policies: 1) strengthening religious principles and emphasizing the common ground of



belief; 2) fighting movements; 3) sharing various ethnic groups in running the affairs of the country and the government aimed at curbing centrifugal tendencies and absorbing into the pan-Turkism current; 4) establishment and development of diplomacy in the form of cultural activities; 5) using the media to spread national and cultural beliefs; and 6) supporting groups with anti-pan-Turkism ideas. In fact, to curb the rising influence of schismatic thoughts and movement to the South Caucasus countries, especially Azerbaijan, Iran adopted rapprochement and minimization of tensions with the three countries (Political Thought Base, no date). This behavior shows that Iran is to minimize the tensions through avoiding the stress on tensioning factors in order to neutralize the instability elements in the region.

Compared to Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia has not had relations with Iran after the independence and lack of common border between the two countries has been one of the geopolitical limitations of the relations between Tehran and Tbilisi. Since 1992, the two countries have emphasized on economic cooperation in energy, transportation, trade, establishment of bases in the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Black sea. However, the relations of Iran and Georgia have been always under sensitive opposition of the USA and the Zionist regime. The Zionist regime formally declared its opposition with Georgia's strategic relations with Iran in 2000. So far, Iran and Georgia have worked together in energy and commodity trading (Atai, 2012). However, Iran and Georgia have longstanding historical ties and cultural relations such that Iran cannot be ignored in the history of Georgia. The state University of Tbilisi has chairs for Iran and Islamic Studies and also holds classes of Persian language education with the help of organizations such as Iranian Cultural Consulting. Recently, the two countries have expanded their cultural relations and have encouraged researchers, artists, translators, through awards (Ramezani Bounesh, 2012). This behavior together with attempts to take advantage of the opportunities arising from geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural peculiarities has been followed in the 11th government, which will be covered up below.

The 11th government's behavior in the Foreign policy toward the South Caucasus Iran has a central geopolitical position and accordingly could establish effective relations from the north with Central Asia and the Caucasus to the south with the Persian Gulf. After winning the presidential election of June 2013, Hassan Rouhani, the



current president of Iran, in the first press conference with the media said that Iran wants to promote its relations with neighboring countries emphasizing the need to strengthen regional relations of the country. He said, "The government's foreign policy priorities, will include friendly and close relations with all neighbors, i.e. a very close relationship, good neighborliness, friendship and mutual relations based on mutual respect and resources with 15 neighbors" (IRIB News Network, 2013). During his journey to the Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2017, he talked about the importance of relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus: "close relations with neighbors is among the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran; this is important for us in terms of economy and national security. In the north of Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus, these three countries are our neighbors and all the three are corridors for Iran to the west or to east or north. It means that we could be connected to the Black Sea through Armenia and link to western and European countries. At the same time, we have a railway through Kazakhstan and we could transport to northern and western countries. Meanwhile, Chinese are to build a railway to Iran through Kyrgyzstan. So, each three countries play a corridor role for Iran to north, west and east. We hope that in this journey we could witness better economic, political and cultural relations, because Iran has common culture and civilization with each three countries and our cultural relations with these countries are very important" (Iranian diplomacy, 2017).

Rouhani as Iran's president clearly points to opportunities and threats arising from geostrategic position of Iran and the post-Soviet republics and stresses out the need for cooperation based on factors such as connection corridors and shared culture and civilization. This view shows Tehran's attention to the geostrategic context for promoting the national interest.

Iran-Azerbaijan relations in the 11th government

Tehran-Baku relations in the 11th government experienced drastic and important events. Hassan Rouhani, Iran's president and Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's president, have met each other several times since the onset of the 11th government. Some of the major meetings are as follows:

- 1) The 4th summit of the Caspian littoral states in Astrakhan, Russia, October 2014
- 2) The 4th Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, China, May 2014



- 3) meeting on the sidelines of the 44th World Economic Forum in “Davos”, Switzerland, January 2014
- 4) Aliyev's journey to Tehran, May 2014
- 5) Rouhani's journey to Baku, October 2014 (Iran newspaper website, 2014)
- 6) Meeting on the sidelines of the 13th summit of the heads of member states of the Co-Islamic Organization in Istanbul (April 2016), (Press TV, 2016)
- 7) Rouhani's journey to Baku, July 2016
- 8) Aliyev's journey to Tehran, 15 March 2017

A review of the content of speeches, agenda, results and reflections of the diplomatic efforts of Iran toward Azerbaijan indicates that Rouhani's team has tried to focus on geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural factors of the South Caucasus in general and Azerbaijan in particular, in order to strengthen existing opportunities and minimize potential threats for securing Iran's interests in the South Caucasus. For example, Aliyev and Rouhani's referred to cultural and religious commonalities between the two nations and the existence of suitable infrastructures to cooperate more during their bilateral meeting in Switzerland. They also talked about different regional issues, cultural relations and commonalities, the nuclear issue of Iran, development of trade and economic cooperation and also formally invited each other to the capitals (Central News Agency, 2013). After that, the president of Azerbaijan entered Tehran by the formal invitation by Rouhani. Azerbaijan's president's journey to Iran was the first since 2007, and the last bilateral journey of the presidents of the two country occurred in 2014 (Fararou website, 2014).

In a joint press conference with Aliyev, Rouhani stated Iran's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the legal regime of the Caspian Sea, terrorism and extremism, and development of bilateral cooperation for mutual interest. On Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Rouhani said, “In our view changing the geographic borders in the region is unacceptable” (Keyhan, 2014). Rouhani's first visit to Baku which was reflected seriously and broadly in international media, repeated the principle of the foreign policy of his government, i.e. enhancing relations with its neighbors and former Islamic Republic of Iran's positions of cooperation-seeking and peace-seeking once again (Vatanka, 2014). In April 2015, in a meeting with Aliyev on the sidelines of the 13th meeting of the heads of member states of the co-Islamic Organization in Istanbul, once



again Rouhani stressed out the need for a solution to regional disputes and problems through dialogue, prevention of involvement of foreign countries in the region. Especially about Karabakh, he said, "Efforts should focus on stability of ceasefire in Karabakh. All countries in the region should be together to fight terrorism, extremism and violence as a regional threat". Aliyev also emphasized Azerbaijan's commitment on the implementation of cooperation agreements and documents between Tehran and Baku (Press TV, 2016).

In line with government positions, other high-ranking officials in the government and the foreign policy system of Iran in and on top of them, "Mohammad Javad Zarif", the Iranian foreign minister have met counterparts and other authorities of Baku and have attempted negotiating to develop political, economic and security relations between the two countries. In February 2015, Zarif traveled to Baku and met Aliyev, "Oktai Asadov", the president of the national assembly and "Arthur Rasizade", the prime minister of Azerbaijan. In addition, in April 2014, "Zakir Hasanov" the defense minister of Azerbaijan, entered Tehran at the invitation of "Hossein Dehghan", the minister of defense and armed forces logistics of Iran for a two-day visit. At the meeting, the parties emphasized the growing risk of terrorism and extremism as a cause of instability and insecurity in the region. Pointing to the importance of the shared positions of Iran and Azerbaijan on important regional and international issues, Dehghan said, "The systematic policy of the 11th government, especially Mr. Rouhani's position is based on the development of bilateral cooperation with neighboring countries." This journey occurred while this year marks the tenth anniversary of coherent defense relations of Iran and Azerbaijan, and since 1992, the two countries have signed three security cooperation documents to fight organized crime, terrorism and drug (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2014).

During Aliyev's journey to Tehran in March 2017, at a meeting of the joint committee of top boards of the two countries, he emphasized that Iran highly believes in the development of relations with neighbors and Azerbaijan has a special position in this regard. He said, "The republic of Azerbaijan has been a gate for Iran to connect to the Caucasus and Europe and mutually Iran has also been a very good gate to link the Republic of Azerbaijan to south, the sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean. In the field of transport and transit we are witnessing good steps toward the development of



cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan and connection of Astara - Astara railway has been an important step that was operated". Rouhani also stressed out the need to develop cooperation at industry, agriculture, academic, tourism, health care, and banking sectors and particularly in the field of energy, electricity, drilling and extraction of oil. He said, "Today the power grids of the two countries are connected by and we exchange electricity. There are good relations in terms of investment in and facilities of oil and gas" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2016).

During the meeting, Rouhani addressed the issue of the Caspian Sea as well as the environmental pollution of this water area and emphasized that the Caspian Sea needs the consensus of the five littoral countries legally. He also talked about trilateral cooperation between Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia, Iran-Azerbaijan-Turkey and Iran-Azerbaijan-Georgia and also spoke of 'terrorism' as a common threat. He repeated Iran's consistent position regarding Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the war in Iraq and Syria: "Iran believes that the territorial integrity of states must be respected and regional problems must be solved through political dialogue. Islamic Republic of Iran believes that Karabakh problem could reach a solution only through dialogue" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017).

Regarding the above measures, it could be said that the foreign policy of Iran in the 11th government has tried to benefit from regional geoeconomic components and the positive neighborhood potentials with Azerbaijan for the development of economic interests. The instance could be seen in the development of railway cooperation and connection of Astara-Astara railway. Official statements of the countries' officials about the 70 percent growth of the bilateral trade volume could be another sign of efforts to use the geoeconomic capacity. In general, in bilateral meetings between Rouhani and Aliyev in the capital cities of the countries and also in other visits by officials of both countries at low levels, the higher rank boards have signed documents and cooperation in the field of construction and operation of hydroelectricity plants, communication and information technology, economic and technical cooperation, post cooperation, renewables and organization of border rivers (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017). Rouhani's emphasis on the issue of terrorism and extremism, and the need for joint fight with these issues by Iran and the South Caucasus countries could also be explained by some geocultural characteristics of the South Caucasus, which inherently lack stability



and pose crisis and also link the fate of the region with that of the strategic and crisis stricken region of the Middle East. Emphasizing the common geostrategic threat in the current period that Iraq and Syria are engaged in broad terrorist wars and terrorist groups from the Caucasus countries are fighting in these countries are especially significant.

In fact, the South Caucasus is an ethnic, racial and religious mosaic; building nation-state in this region has not finished after nearly three decades since the collapse. It also struggles with organized crime such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, unresolved border and territorial conflicts. People in this region suffer from poor economy and the intervention of big powers in the region is among major factors of instability. In fact, the inherent geographical coordinates of the area has affected and intensified the formation and escalation of unresolved crises (Bordbar, 2016: 238).

It could be said that the 11th government- knowing these geostrategic facts and their negative impact on the national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran- has tried to alert the threat of terrorism in its relations with the South Caucasus countries. It has also attempted to stress out the need to resolve the conflict of the Nagorno-Karabakh region as a source of instability with a potential of spread to other areas. Environmental pollution of the Caspian Sea is also a joint geopolitical threat for Iran and Azerbaijan. The Iranian government has stressed the need to resolve this issue in formal relations with Baku and has demanded the active cooperation of the other side. This also shows that Tehran has paid attention to the factor of geography and its effect policy-making.

1. IRAN-ARMENIA RELATIONS IN THE 11TH GOVERNMENT

From the beginning of the 11th government administration so far, Tehran and Yerevan have shaped their bilateral relations by political, economic and cultural meetings of the officials. A review on the content and results of these ties and relations it could be concluded that Rouhani's government has focused on geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural facts in its policy toward the South Caucasus in general and on Armenia in particular. In line with the declared policy of the 11th government to improve relations with neighbors, "Serge Sarkisian", the President of the Republic of Armenia, was invited to Rouhani's inauguration ceremony and "Hoviok Abrahamian", the prime minister of Armenia traveled to Tehran on September 2014, and met Rouhani.

Rouhani's remarks in the meeting, stressing the need for cooperation between Iran and



Armenia and all countries in the region to combat terrorism, reflects the 11th government's attention to threats followed by neighboring the crisis-prone region of the Caucasus as one of the components of the geopolitics of the region.

“Mohammad Javad Zarif,” Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Yerevan in March 2014 said, “Armenia is one of the Islamic Republic of Iran's neighbors and is in a very sensitive region. The Islamic Republic of Iran is has very extensive relations with all neighbors including Armenia. We need peace, stability and resolving the conflicts based on international laws and the principles” (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2014). Also in December, Abrahamyan accompanied by a delegation participated in the 12th meeting of the Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation between Armenia and Iran in Tehran. On the sidelines of the signing of the agreement between the 12th summit of the commission on economic cooperation of Iran and Armenia, Hamid Chitchian, the energy minister of Iran, stated that the two countries will work in various economic sectors, including construction of hydroelectric and wind power plants, transmission lines, environmental issues such the Aras river, Iran-Armenia railway construction, exploration and mining. In February 2015, Akbar Torkan, adviser to the president and the secretary of Iran's High Council of Free Zones and Special Economic Free Trade Area, announced the increases of Aras industrial site space on the border of Armenia (ibid.).

Rouhani's journey to Yerevan in 2017 and his remarks that could be known to be in line with Tehran's statements and policies about Azerbaijan and Georgia could provide another evidence of geopolitical orientation of his government in the South Caucasus and Armenia. In his meeting with Armenian officials, he spoke openly about issues arising from geostrategic requirements, opportunities and threats of Iran and Armenia. Cooperation in the field of railway and transit lines for connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea and the North-South corridor, common cultural and civilizational ties, and development of energy relations, e.g. increasing the export of gas from Iran to Armenia and construction of the third line of power transfer between the two countries, are some of the issues highlighted by Iran's president talks in Yerevan (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017). In 2017, Iran and Armenia agreed that Iran could benefit from special conditions in its business relations with members of Eurasia; could have free trade with these countries. The two countries agreed on increased interaction for Turkmenistan-



Armenia gas swap and the completion of the third transit line. The two countries also signed five documents of cooperation for mutual use of the Nordouz-Moghri border gateway, emergencies, cultural heritage, handcraft industry, tourism and economic development (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017).

The emphasis on the operation of the “Aras Free Zone” at the border of the two countries as an appropriate ground for the development of cooperation, the need for efforts to protect environmental conditions of the region, and stressing that “the Islamic Republic of Iran pursues the development of relations with countries of Eurasia targeted at free trade”, all could explain Tehran’s behavior Yerevan on the basis of the principles of the theory of geopolitics and realistic decision making in in the context of geography. Positions adopted by Mohammad Javad Zarif, the secretary of state and “Ali Shamkhani”, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran during the meeting with “Vigen Sarkisian”, the defense minister of Armenia on February 2017 could also explain the geopolitical bases of Iran’s relations with Armenia. During the meeting, Zarif pointed to the historic and institutionalized relations among the two countries and the threat of extremism in the region. He also stressed the need to work together to combat this common threat. In his meetings with the South Caucasus countries, like Rouhani, he believed that transit opportunities are available for cooperation between the two countries. Noting the widespread and growing cooperation between the two countries in areas different especially defensive and security areas, Shamkhani said, “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s policies toward its neighbors, has been always following the principles of good proximity, peaceful relations and using maximum exchangeable capacities” (Press TV, 2017).

In general, a review of the history of the 11th government in terms of political and economic relations with Armenia indicates that Tehran is trying to set up its ties to the smallest state in the South Caucasus with respect to geopolitical and geoeconomic elements.

2. IRAN-GEORGIA RELATIONS IN THE 11TH GOVERNMENT

Rouhani’s meetings with “Irakli Irakli Garibashvili” the prime minister of Georgia and “David Usupashvili”, the head of the parliament of Georgia on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly as well as in Tehran was the first significant diplomatic event of the 11th government with Tbilisi. In October 2014, Rouhani met the prime minister of



Georgia in New York and emphasized the need to preserve the territorial integrity of Georgia. He said, "Stability, security and development of Georgia is demanded by Iran and the two countries could have appropriate cooperation in this context". Rouhani also noted that the project connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea is among the common interests of the two countries that should be operational by the will of the parties and Iran is ready for cooperation in the field of energy, gas, water and transportation with Georgia" (Fars News Agency, 2014). Rouhani's talks to David Usupashvili in 2014 were also based on the emphasis on the need for regional stability and cooperation in the economic and cultural development. Rouhani said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran calls for closer ties between the two countries and this visit may be a turning point and a good start to instigate the relations between Tehran and Tbilisi. Despite the vast potential and capability of Iran and Georgia, economic relations are limited and we must further expand our relations in all fields through encouraging the private sector's investment and strengthening the activities of chambers of commerce." The president assumed the energy area as one of the areas for partnership between the two countries and said, "Georgia could be one of the routs to export Iranian gas to Europe and on the other hand be a corridor from north to south, and railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran can connect the ports of Georgia to the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea". Rouhani also stressed that tensions between the neighboring countries are to the detriment of all, as well as to the stability and security of the region. He said, "The solution to peace and stability is that all the geographic boundaries are respected and if there are problems it could be resolved through dialogue" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2015). In March 2016, the Office of Exchange of Technology and Investment of Iran and Georgia was inaugurated in the science and technology park of Yazd and Iranian officials declared the aim as to pave the way for Iran for multilateral international scientific cooperation and special cooperation with the EU (Isan, 2016). Issues raised during the above meetings such as official positions of Iran in diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia reflects the focus of Rouhani's administration on the South Caucasus countries' geopolitical and geoeconomic peculiarities and capacities in the foreign policy toward the region. Once again, Rouhani noted Iran's strategies that establishment of lasting stability in the South Caucasus, which is consistent with features of geopolitical view. In addition, discussions over the potential for business



cooperation of soil, ports and railways suggest the focus of Tehran's policy on geoeconomic elements in this region.

Moreover, it could be said that Iran has noticed the geoeconomic importance of Georgia's territory for the development of Iran's energy exports to Europe and improving its position in the energy markets worldwide. In this regard, in July 2016 "Amir Vakilzadeh", director of export and import of the Iranian oil products distribution company announced that negotiations with Armenia and Georgia to export oil products are a priority in this year. He also announced the beginning of negotiations with Armenia to enter Georgia's market. Pointing out that negotiations with Georgia were positive and the country is now seeking to buy oil from Iran, He said Georgia is a good market and track for access to the market of Europe. In fact, after the crisis in Ukraine and more serious attention of Europe to the need to diversify energy supplies, attempts to take advantage of this opportunity could have an effective role in economic development of Iran (IOPDC website, 2016). Although there are serious obstacles such as severe dependence of Georgia on America and sanctions on the Iranian economy and banking, the policy of the government in this regard signs the geoeconomic approach of Tehran toward Tbilisi.

In February 2017, during the 7th summit of the committee on international road transport of goods and passenger, that was held with the presence of "Davoud Keshavarzian", the deputy minister of urbanism and the head of the toll and road transport and "David Khotshiovaly", the deputy minister of sustainable economy and of development of Georgia in Tbilisi, the parties talked about the issue of road transportation of goods and passengers, cooperation at transit and regional corridors, lack of appropriate and efficient insurance coverage for Iranian trucks passing through the territory of Georgia. They focused on the need for development of transportation between the two countries and promoting bi/multilateral cooperation for the development of transport and transit relations. The increase in the exchange of in the toll-free licenses was among the achievements of this summit, which increased significantly compared to that of last years. The parties also agreed that given the importance of establishing the Persian Gulf-The black Sea six-party corridor, hold an expert meeting for finalizing the document. In addition, a 15-article memorandum for



starting up transportation lines from the ports of Poti and Batumi was signed (IRIB News Agency, 2016).

3. CONCLUSION

The South Caucasus has been always under Iran's focus due to specific geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic characteristics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence of fifteen new countries in the territory of the former Soviet Union, the number of Iran's neighbors came to fifteen countries. In the meantime, Azerbaijan and Armenia came to have common borders with Iran and Georgia entered the list of countries neighboring Iran. Since 1991, the South Caucasus and each of the countries have created a set of fixed and variable opportunities and threats separately or along with regional and transregional connections in different periods. Good management of these opportunities and threats has required an active foreign policy. Hassan Rohani, Iran's 11th president has also pursued securing Iran's interests outside the country through establishing and developing good relations with neighbors, including Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan. The foreign policy behavior of Rouhani's administration in these countries shows that the 11th government's signaled and practiced policies in the South Caucasus, have been founded on geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural facts and components of the region. Government officials, especially Hassan Rouhani meeting senior officials of all the three countries has stressed that Iran's main priority in its foreign policy is to develop relations with neighbors; and focusing on fixed and variable geographic realities of the South Caucasus, opportunities, threats, political, economic and cultural interests created for every four countries, Iran seeks to establish good relations with these countries and achieve sustainable stability and development for the South Caucasus.

Policy enforcement and achievements so far obtained in the relationship with all three South Caucasus countries multilaterally or bilaterally also confirm that there has been a realistic look in the context of geographical realities in economic, political, security and cultural aspects as the basis of the action-oriented behavior of the 11th government in the South Caucasus. Tehran has sought to identify shared geostrategic opportunities and threats and take action with respectivity. Emphasizing the necessity of joint cooperation against terrorism and extremism as a common expandable geostrategic threat, the necessity for cooperation for environmental protection of the Caspian Sea and



preserving this common geographic opportunity, the need to achieve a consensus on the legal regime of the Caspian Sea, taking advantage of opportunities available for transit and trade with the South Caucasus countries such as Aras free zone in Armenia, and achievements such as Astara-Astara railway with Azerbaijan and negotiations with Armenia and Georgia to export oil products, are samples of the 11th government's foreign policy behavior in the South Caucasus that can be said to be based on geopolitical realities of Iran, the South Caucasus and obligations arising from the interaction of these with each other.

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