

Regional Stability for National Survival: Iran's Foreign Policy Towards the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia in the Post-Soviet Era*

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This paper focuses on Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia regions in the post-Soviet Union era, using a theoretical approach which stresses the importance of historical and geographical contextualization for the analysis of foreign policy. The article's main argument is that Iranian foreign policy towards these regions in the last 25 years, although the result of a complex and multi-layered decision-making process, has been led by two unifying long-term objectives: regional stability and national security. In order to demonstrate this argument, the article undertakes a factual analysis focusing on the role Iran played during the main regional conflicts that have occurred since the Soviet Union's collapse in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as the diplomatic re-engagement Iran has been building with the countries of these two regions after the end of the Iran nuclear deal. Standard interpretations of Iran's foreign policy define it as a player with hegemonic ambitions whose foreign policy is mainly led by ideological factors. This paper assumes that foreign policy's analysis needs time and space contextualization. Once historical and geographical factors are taken into account—of which the most important are Iran's proximity to Russia and Afghanistan along with its international diplomatic isolation due to nuclear sanctions—then Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus appears to be that of a regional power interested in maintaining the existing *status quo*. Stability and territorial integrity in these two regions in fact are seen by Teheran as necessary conditions for Iran's own territorial integrity and internal security. The paper is based on both secondary and primary sources, most of them official statements, all in the public domain.

Keywords: Iranian foreign policy, Iran nuclear deal, Central Asia's and Caucasus' geopolitics

Contextualizing Iran's Foreign Policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus During the Post-Soviet Era

A common claim in the literature devoted to Iranian foreign policy is about its ideological feature, related in particular to Iran's supposed will of exporting its peculiar Islamist model of government (Maloney, 2002). More precisely, Iran's foreign behaviour is seen as led by regional hegemonic ambitions dictated by its role as leader of the global Shia' community (Paunic, 2016). However, from a different point of view, some authors

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have tried to demonstrate how, since the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iranian foreign policy has increasingly been characterized by a “prudent pragmatism” (Byman, Chubin, Ehteshami, & Green, 2001, p. 3; Shaffer, 2006; Milani, 1996; Hunter, 2003) instead of ideological and religious stances. Others explain the geopolitical factors’ growing importance in Iran’s foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the ideological ones (Kayhan, 2009). According to Rezaei, Iranian foreign policy can’t be explained by any particular theory (2008), meanwhile, Akbarzadeh (2014) significantly points to the “contradictions and the difficulties in adopting a unique conceptual framework to make sense of Iranian foreign policy thinking and behavior” (p. 67). This paper tries to make sense of Iran’s foreign policy assuming that it should be analysed by taking into account the peculiar geographical and historical contexts of the different areas it is addressed to¹.

The significance of spatial and historical contextualization in the case of Iranian foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus arises from some basic facts. First of all, its geographical position: Iran is the terminal of the Central Asia corridor and, at the same time, a neighbor of instable and insecure countries as Afghanistan and Pakistan with which Iran shares long and porous borders. Afghanistan in particular represents a growing threat to Iran in terms of the spread of human-trafficking and narco-trafficking, terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism into Iranian territory. Secondly, Iran has direct (with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan) and indirect (with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) proximity to post-Soviet republics, belonging to what Russia strategically defines its “near abroad”. Historically, the key factors which framed Iran’s approach to Central Asia and the Caucasus in the considered period were, firstly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of many independent states. Indeed, the Soviet Union’s disappearance represented a unique opportunity for Iran to constructively engage in that area for creating a sort of “buffer zone” between its borders and Russia, the only neighbouring country from which Iran has suffered invasions and territorial losses in the recent past. Secondly, the persistence of Iran’s international isolation, which, although starting in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution and the related U.S. hostages’ crisis, magnified between 2002 and July 2015 by the nuclear dispute with the United Nations (UN) and Western countries, in particular the United States². Isolation and increasing damaging economic sanctions (which were responsible for Iran’s prolonged financial isolation, deep currency devaluation, and economic stagnation) urged Iran to, firstly, avoid “political meddling” in order to build economic and commercial relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia states to which it could offer its huge resources as well as its strategic location (Kazman & Nichol, 2001, p. 2). Secondly, to maintain a stable and reliable relationship with Russia, which, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council could have diplomatically supported—and actually did support—Iran during that long contention.

Once the events are framed within such a context, Iranian behaviour in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the post-Soviet era appears more clearly to be led by imperative objectives of national security (in terms of territorial integrity and regime survival) and regional stability. In other words, since the fall of the Soviet Union, geopolitical factors have backed the Iranian approach to those regions more than ideological ones. Akbarzadeh (2014, p. 66) notes that, even in those cases when the two collided (as during the Russia’s war in Chechnya, the

¹ According to Tilly (2006) “[n]ot only do all political processes occur in history and therefore call for knowledge of their historical context, but also where and when political processes occur influence how they occur”. On space’s significance in political processes see also R. Bin Wong (2006).

² Such a dispute has been commonly referred to as the “Iran nuclear deal”. It was a process of negotiations which lasted from 2002 to 2015 involving a variable number of countries in addition to the main contenders, Iran and the US and whose target was the Iranian nuclear infrastructure.

Tajikistan civil war and the Nagorno-Karabach conflict), Iran privileged material objectives over the cultural and religious determinants of its state identity and, supposedly, of its foreign policy (Islamic solidarity, the defense and leadership of Shi'ism, Persian cultural heritage) (Akbarzadeh, Shahram, & Barry, 2016). Diplomatic caution and respect for territorial integrity and non-interference principles have been the main features of Iranian stances in an attempt to build an equidistance from Russia—whose support during the nuclear deal was essential—and Central Asian and Caucasus states, for which secularism represented a non-negotiable value in their state-building process.

The signature on July 15, 2015 of the Joint Common Plan of Action (JCPOA) by Iran, Russia, China, the United States, France, Germany, and the European Union marked the official end of the nuclear deal and the gradual—although as yet incomplete—lifting of sanctions. In such a changed international environment, security and stability returned to represent not only conditions for the Islamic Republic's survival, but also the basic pre-conditions for its economic recovery. In fact, the industrial, infrastructural and trade development that Iran is pursuing with an increasing number of foreign state and non-state partners would be put in danger by (re-)emerging regional conflicts. Moreover, Iran's other main concern for its survival, i.e. the threat of terrorism and its recent growth due to the military success of the so-called Islamic State, has to be taken into account. Terrorism—belonging to the Mojhaedin-e Khalq (MEK) (Abrahamian, 1992; Khodabandeh & Singleton, 2011; Tabatabai, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Rubin, 2003)³ or to Salafist radical Jihadism (previously mainly represented by Al-Qaida, and more recently by the Islamic State)—has always represented an existential menace for the Islamic Republic and has influenced Iranian internal and external security policy (Tabatabai, 2017). A brief but not exhaustive summary of the main terrorist attacks Iran suffered since its birth includes: a long sequence of assassination attacks against members of parliament in 1981 by the MEK; a truck full of explosive material which exploded in the center of Iran in 1992; an explosion in 1994 within Imam Reza's sanctuary in Mashad in 1994, credited to the MEK or the Taliban; a sequence of attacks and kidnappings against governmental forces in the Sistan-e Baluchistan region in 2006; a Jundullah⁴ suicide attack which killed 35 among Pasdarans and tribal leaders in 2009; a sequence of explosions within mosques claimed by Jundullah in the Sistan-e Baluchistan region in 2010; 20 Iranian soldiers killed by Kurdish militia (presumably the Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK, a nationalist Kurd movement founded in 2004 by members of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the Iranian Kurdistan in 2015; finally, three attacks in the political and religious center of Tehran on June 07, 2017 claimed by ISIS⁵ (although some analysts argue that the MEK could be involved (Erdbrink & Mashal, 2017; Deutsche Welle, 2017)). A proof of how important the fight against terrorism is for Iran's foreign policy and to what extent it is ready to engage in it is represented by, among others, the details of the deals Tehran offered in 2003 to the United States and in 2005 to Germany, France, and the UK to diplomatically solve the nuclear dispute. In fact, in those documents Iran was committing itself to fully cooperating with the United States against Al Qaida (in the 2003 offer) and

³ Founded in 1965, the Mojhaedin-e Khalq is a Marxist-Islamist armed group that, after its participation in Raza Pahlavi's removal and 1979 revolution, turned to opposition and committed many attacks against Iranians, both civilians and military forces, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war. The MEK has previously been listed as a terrorist organization by the European Union (until 2009) and the United States (until 2012).

⁴ Jundullah is a separatist Sunni group, active in Pakistan and Iran which after 2010 split into different sub-groups of whom the most active is JaishAl-Adl operating in the Sistan-e Baluchistan. Another Sunni Jihadist group is active in the same region, the Ansar Furqan.

⁵ Source: "Terrorismo in Iran: attacchi senza precedent?" ("Terrorism in Iran: no previous attacks?") Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), Milan, Italy, June 2017.

establishing a Joint Counter-Terrorism Task Force with the EU/Germany, France, and the UK (according to the 2005 offer) (Rocca, 2017; BBC News, 2015; Rezaian & Gearan, 2014; O'Connor, 2017)⁶. In other words, the fight against terrorism represents for the Islamic Republic an additional and impellent reason to constructively engage with Central Asian and Caucasus countries for stabilising the two regions and therefore increasing its internal security.

Iran and Regional Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Era

Requested by both the contenders, i.e. Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Islamic Republic acted as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from its beginning in 1992. Ramezanzadeh (1996) notes that Teheran could play consistently that role in a way both the contenders appreciated because its neutrality was ensured by its own national interest. In other words, Tehran intervened with the imperative to defuse a conflict which would have had enormous consequences for Iran itself in terms of refugee flows and threat of Azerbaijani irredentism in Iran. Drawing on a speech by the then Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati on March 1992 devoted to the consequences of the Soviet Union's fall for Third World Countries, Ramezanzadeh argued that to counter-balance Russia's, Turkey's, and Saudi Arabia's influence in the region, the Iranian political authorities believed Tehran's interests could have been better pursued through peaceful means and having regional stability as a final objective. By quoting the then Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki, he writes also that "[I]ran's policy makers want to preserve the *status quo* on its northern borders. For the first time in three centuries, several independent states form a buffer zone between Iran and Russia, and maintaining the *status quo* implies preserving their economic and political sovereignty" (p. 322). Finally, he points out that although Iranian efforts didn't get the definitive resolution of the conflict, the positive role Tehran played was nevertheless acknowledged by the UN's Secretary General, the Islamic Cooperation Organization, and the Economic Cooperation Organization (p. 329). The pragmatism Iran demonstrated throughout the whole mediation process has been outlined also by other authors. Gresh (2006), in particular, mentions that, already during the outbreak of fighting in 1988, Iranian public opinion urged its government to support the Azeri side. However, as happened during the Chechen conflict and, later on, the Chinese reactions to Xinjiang's revolts, the government denied to side with any of the contenders by referring to higher national security reasons (p. 4). In other words, Tehran sacrificed Shi'ism's protection and risked the Iranian ethnic-Azeris' protests for the imperative objective of maintaining security and stability in the region (ARMENPRESS Armenian News Agency, 2017)⁷.

Iran's stance during the Georgian-Russian conflict in 2008 is particularly revealing. Tehran, in fact, instead of siding with Moscow, remained neutral during the conflict, reiterating on many occasions the importance of respecting norms and agreements by all the members of the international community and urged

⁶ About Iran's will to cooperate with the West for fighting IS, it is worth to note that since April 2015 Iran is collaborating with Australia by sharing intelligence data. Shortly after concluding the "unofficial agreement" with Iran's President Rouhani, Australia's Foreign Minister said "I believe that Iran has information that we would seek and they were very agreeable to share that information with us". Moreover, Iran was ready to cooperate with the US against ISIS in Iraq already in June 2014 (i.e. one year before the end of the nuclear deal) and it seems that Iran and the US are currently undertaking an informal and peculiar kind of cooperation against ISIS in Lebanon were their "allies are unofficially fighting together against the Islamic State militant group".

⁷ In this regard, it is interesting to note the straightforward appreciation Armenian President Sargsyan had of Iran's role in the conflict during an interview on August 1, 2017. He said that "[t]he Islamic Republic has always advocated exclusively peaceful and negotiated settlement of regional conflicts and disputes. In this context we highly appreciate the balanced and principled stance of Iran on Karabakh conflict settlement based on international right".

Russia and Georgia to peacefully solve the conflict (Milani, 2016, p. 15). From the very beginning, Tehran supported the territorial integrity principle and therefore did not recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia. This choice not only improved Iran's prestige and influence in the region (Kakachia, 2011)⁸ but also made clear how important the maintenance of the territorial *status quo* is for Tehran. On this occasion Iran gave further proof of what Milani (1992) defines its "active neutrality" strategy which allowed Tehran to enhance its interests in the region while avoiding to remain trapped in complex relationships with one of the contenders. A positive consequence of this strategy could be the fact that, after the conflict's end, Georgia started to think towards Iran for its energy security. Moreover, in 2012 Georgia invited an Iranian defense *attaché* to the joint American-Georgian military exercises (Corso, 2012), a signal of how Iran's role is still positively perceived by Georgian political authorities. Even more significant is what the Georgian Parliament's deputy spokesperson, Gubaz Sanikidze, said in the aftermath of the nuclear deal's end: "Iran may turn into a stabilizing factor in the Middle East. Georgia has a chance to play an important role in relations between Iran and the West. This agreement may also play a positive role for Georgia in terms of security as well, so we should pay more attention to developments in the South, because soon these events may also determine our issues in respect of our relations on the Northern direction [referring to Russia]" (Civil Georgia, 2015).

Iran played a complex role in the Tajiki civil war (Iji, 2001; 2005)⁹, divided only in its opening stage between Iran's support for the Islamic opposition and a stance of noninterference in affairs that Russia considered too relevant for its national and strategic interests—given their geographical proximity and the fact of the war occurring in one of the former Soviet Republics. Clark (2012) observes that the Iranian support to Islamist groups was limited and lasted only for the initial stage of the war (p. 1)¹⁰. After that, Teheran was engaged on many occasions with Moscow and focused its efforts on the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Iranian Foreign Minister cooperated with his Russian counterpart and the UN's special envoy to facilitate the dialogue between the government and the opposition groups. Clark (2012) concisely states that "as the civil war dragged on, Iranian political elites displayed overwhelming pragmatism and sought to play a key role, along with Russia, in negotiating peace between the warring factions" (p. 2). The peace general agreement was signed in Moscow, but it was prepared during long talks in Teheran (Hiro, 1997; Hay, 2001, p. 40) where many opposition leaders had been granted political asylum and maintained political offices (Hay, 2001, p. 40). In June 1997, after the G-8 meeting in Denver, a document was issued which, among other issues, praised Iran for the role it played in the negotiation process "in conjunction with the United Nations and other regional parties"¹¹.

An analysis of Iran's role during and after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan can also shed new light on its foreign policy determinants. Since the rise of the Taliban in Kabul, Afghanistan has represented for

⁸ Kornely K. Kakachia points out also that, significantly, in 2006—when Russia cut its gas supply to Georgia—Iran had offered Tbilisi low cost gas representing a potential alternative energy source (pp. 3-4).

⁹ A detailed analysis of Iran's role in the Tajiki civil war is Benton Clark "Iran and the civil war in Tajikistan" (2014).

On the negotiations process in particular, see Elena Rigacci Hay (2001) (who was a direct witness of such negotiations) "Methodology of the inter-Tajik negotiation process", where she notes, in particular, that "[t]he direct involvement of Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati facilitated the signing of the Protocol on Refugees in January 1997" (p. 40).

¹⁰ Tim Epkenhans (2016), in his detailed reconstructions of the narratives on the beginnings of the war, states clearly that "the influence of external actors in the conflict is indisputable and Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan had an impact on the course of the conflict from 1993 on. However, the immediate outbreak of the civil war in May 1992 was neither a "plot" nor a conspiracy by foreign powers designed to private the Tajikis of their statehood and independence, but triggered by local actors" (p. 11).

¹¹ See the *G-8 Denver Communiqué*. Available at <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/1997denver/g8final.htm>

Tehran a great concern, due not only to the increasing refugee flow into its territory¹², but also to drug-trafficking and the spread of fundamental Islamism. As reported by US diplomats involved in the state-building process, beyond the rhetorical narratives of unsolvable contrast manufactured by both the countries, Tehran cooperated with the United States not only militarily, but also politically for the stabilization of Afghanistan (Dobbins, 2008; 2010; 2016)¹³. Moreover, according to Mohammed Ayoob (2017), in 2001, at the Rome conference Iran collaborated with the United States to install Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president. Indeed, even before the end of the nuclear deal, some US Central Intelligence Agency's and National Security Council's officers referred to Iran's role in Afghanistan and its support offered to U.S.' military operations as a positive precedent to take into consideration for a change in the US' approach towards Iran (Leverett, 2006, pp. 11-12; Leverett & Leverett, 2016)¹⁴. Koepcke, in a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) defines Iran's policy on Afghanistan over three decades as "broadly constructive and often generous, albeit not consistently transparent" adding that, in the last 20 years, Tehran's strategic approach "embedded in early post-revolutionary ideals, has begun to crystallize in the form of a pragmatic interest in supporting a democratic and multi-ethnic Afghanistan". Finally, it underlines that "President Rouhani is in a strong position to cooperate constructively with the international community, and especially the USA, on the stabilization of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. Indeed, it could act as a political springboard for engagement with the international community on a number of broader political issues of mutual concern" (Koepcke, 2013; Hooper & Toscano, 2014). The European Union too has recently acknowledged the importance of Iran's role for solving Afghanistan's unstable situation (European Parliament, 2016).

Recently, and especially after the end of the nuclear deal, Iran has been revitalising its mediator role for enhancing regional stability and therefore national security. Since 1991, Teheran has been working for a settlement of the dispute concerning the Caspian Sea's legal status. The new littoral states—Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan—from their independence, started challenging the existing agreements previously signed by the Soviet Union and Iran. Although so far, a deal has not yet been reached, Iran is nevertheless actively working for a comprehensive solution and its role is positively perceived by other actors involved (Press TV, 2016)¹⁵. In April 2016, few days after the restart of tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the unsettled Nagorno-Karabach dispute, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif told his Armenian and

¹² According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in Iran there are one million registered refugees and at least another two million living in the country either unregistered or with Afghan passports. See <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/539ab62a9/solutions-strategy-afghan-refugees-islamic-republic-iran-20152016.html?query=afghani%20refugees%20in%20iran>; and <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/57641f414/afghan-refugee-iran-feels-lucky-training-course.html>

¹³ In this regard, see Barnett Rubin (2015), former advisor to Ambassador Brahimi (special UN representative to Afghanistan) from 1997 to 1999 and from 2001 to 2004, in "The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy gone awry". In "U.S. and Iranian Policy in Afghanistan" in *Iran and Its Neighbours*, SWP, Berlino, Luglio 2003, Rubin writes that "European countries (...) have emphasized the positive Iranian contributions to the stabilization of Afghanistan and have shown some skepticism toward US charges of Iranian subversion" (p. 30).

¹⁴ See also the 2004 report *Iran: time for a New Approach*, written by an independent task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and chaired by former Security Advisor Z. Brzezinsky and Robert Gates (later Central Intelligence Agency's Director and Secretary of Defense). For a very rare admission of public domain by the Iranian side about the support given to US military operations in Afghanistan, see the interview made by Barbara Slavin to Mohsen Rezaie, former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and candidate to the Iranian 2005 presidential elections: "Rezaie sees president as 'supporter', seeks warmer relations with US" and "Iran helped overthrow Taliban, candidate says". For a recent overview of Iran's role in Afghanistan and its significance for a possible US troops' withdraw, see Alireza Nader et al. (2014).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that during that meeting, Iranian Foreign Minister said "We consider no ceiling for the expansion of relations with regional countries whether in the Caucasus or in Central Asia".

Azeri counterparts that Iran was ready to play the role of mediator for the settlement of the crisis (Iran Front Page, 2016)¹⁶. Later, on August 07, 2017, Iranian foreign ministry's spokesperson Bahram Qassemi told reporters in Tehran that Iran urges both the contenders to settle the Nagorno-Karabach conflict through dialogue and negotiations. He said also that "[w]e have constantly negotiated with the two countries, exchanged views, and we hope diplomacy and dialogue will eventually lead to other approaches and methods", adding the important note that "[w]e carefully follow the developments in the region, especially in our border parts. We follow our borders and will not allow the conflict to cause damage to our people of bordering regions" (ARMENPRESS Armenian News Agency, 2017). Finally, on September 28, 2016, during a talk which also covered the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the Iranian Ambassador to Islamabad said that Iran is seeking stability in the region and is ready to help towards the settlement of regional conflicts (Iranian Republic News Agency, 2016). One year later, on August 07, 2017, during a meeting with Pakistan's senate chairman in Tehran, Iranian President Rouhani significantly said that security is currently the most important issue in the region, making clear that the Islamic Republic regards Pakistan's security as extension of its own (Press TV, 2017).

Conclusion

By analysing the role Iran played during the regional conflicts which arose after the fall of the Soviet Union in Caucasus and Central Asia, this paper has tried to demonstrate how regional stability and security have represented the main objectives of Iranian foreign policy. Ideological factors, like Islam, Persianism, and Shi'ism (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016)—although present in Iran's foreign policy approach—were rather underexploited. In some cases, as was the case during both the Tajikistan civil war and the Nagorno-Karabach conflict, a religious determinant (Islamic solidarity) has been put aside by geopolitical considerations, i.e. regional stability and the acceptance of Russia's "near abroad" strategical relevance. This peculiar stance, already enlightened by Katzman and Nichol in 2001, has been reinforced since then by the growth of both the terroristic threat and the isolation due to the nuclear deal. Moreover, it has remained the same throughout seven different both "conservative" and "reformist" governments and four presidents (A. H. Rafsanjani, M. Kathami, M. Ahmadinejad, H. Rouhani).

Pressed by its need of economic and industrial recovery after the 13 year-long nuclear deal, Iran is currently re-engaging with most of Central Asian and Southern Caucasus countries. In particular, it is proposing itself as mediator for the resolution of the conflicts afflicting the two regions, revitalising the role it already played in the past. Behind this activism—realised mainly through bilateral relations—Iran's main goal is that of creating conditions of stability which can support its economic strategies and counter-terrorism efforts. Regarding security regional multilateral cooperation's schemes, in March 2016, Iran—which has only enjoyed the status of observer since 2005—applied for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s full

¹⁶ President Rouhani also, meeting the Azerbaijani President, on the sidelines of the Organization of Islamic Countries summit in Istanbul on April 2016, said that every effort should be focused on sustaining the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. See <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/462127>. It is interesting to note that on those same days the Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) organised in Tbilisi a meeting for exploring new trends in Caucasus' conflicts. During these meetings, it was outlined that "[a]ny intensification of violence in the South Caucasus, for example over Nagorno-Karabach, would have important riperussions for Iran in terms of border security, refugee flows and damage to energy infrastructure it has constructed together with Armenia", a statement which represents signals of how Iran's potential role for stability in the Caucasus region is currently perceived by external actors. For a summary of the works see <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/shifting-conflict-and-security-dynamics-caucasus-role-regional-powers>

membership, previously denied to it due to the then undergoing sanctions. At the 2016 annual summit of the SCO, although apparently Russia supported the application (Reuters News Agency, 2016; Russia Today, 2017)¹⁷, members failed to reach an agreement on initiating the accession process for Iran. In April 2017, the Russian Foreign Minister stated that Iran “settled the problem of the UN Security Council sanctions and hence fully meets the SCO membership criteria” (Russia Today, 2017) and later, China too declared its support to Iran’s full membership (Press TV, 2017). Nevertheless, at the SCO’s meeting in Astana in June 2017, Iran was again denied full membership. Some authors argue that the Central Asian Republics are against full Iranian SCO membership because of its theocratic form of government (Akbarzadeh, 2015). If this explanation holds true, it shows how ideological features represent for Iran a competitive disadvantage which makes it to be perceived as a foe instead of a partner by states for which secularism represents a constitutional pillar.

To conclude, within the historical and spatial context of the post-Soviet Central Asian and Southern Caucasus states, Iran’s approach towards regional conflicts as well as its post-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)’s signature diplomatic engagement confirms an interpretation of Iran as a status seeker state whose foreign policy is pragmatically aimed at preserving the existing international order. In other words, Iran plays the role of conflicts’ mediator and defender of non-interference and the principle of territorial integrity, not because it is a “benevolent actor”, but because these are convenient for its own national interest. Such foreign behavior appears as though it has remained rather constant over time, despite changes in governments and supposed internal struggles between so called “conservatives” and “reformists”. It appears also to be led more by peculiar geopolitical factors than by ideological ones which may be perceived by the Central Asian and Caucasus players as potentially dangerous or threatening to their national secular identities. These findings call for caution in analyzing and labelling Iran’s foreign policy without carefully differentiating it.

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¹⁷ In view of the next SCO Council of Foreign Ministers’ meeting scheduled for July 2017 in Astana, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov publically endorsed Iran’s full membership application.

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