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Minilateralism in Eurasia: A Flexible Approach to Regional Challenges

Jalil Bayat[1]

Research Problem

Despite the existence of multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Commonwealth of Independent States in Eurasia, states in the region have in recent years increasingly turned to smaller and more flexible mechanisms. The continued emergence and expansion of minilateral pacts alongside existing multilateral institutions raises the question of why Eurasian states, despite their membership in and participation in multilateral institutions, continue to turn to minilateralism. The importance of this issue stems from the fact that the expansion of such pacts can affect patterns of regional cooperation and the distribution and exercise of power in Eurasia.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The main research question is: Why do minilateral pacts emerge in Eurasia? The research hypothesis is that these pacts emerge primarily as complementary mechanisms to multilateral institutions in response to their limitations and sluggishness, as states seek faster, more targeted, and less costly ways of responding to regional threats and opportunities. Therefore, the study explains their emergence not as a complete replacement for multilateralism, but as a flexible response to its limitations.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study is based on the distinction between multilateralism and minilateralism. Multilateralism is based on general principles, broad membership, and a degree of reciprocity among states, whereas minilateralism emphasizes specific issue areas, small and relatively exclusive membership, a functional and results-oriented nature, predominantly voluntary commitments, and flexibility in membership and the continuation of cooperation. These pacts follow the logic of a “critical mass,” bringing together actors with a more direct connection to the issue at hand and the greatest potential to address it. Consequently, reducing the number of members and the level of institutionalization can reduce friction, bargaining costs, and conflicts of interest, thereby enabling a more rapid response. At the same time, minilateralism is not regarded as a complete replacement for existing institutions; rather, it can function alongside them as a complementary mechanism.

Research Method

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This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, with data collected through a review of documents and library sources, including relevant scholarly articles and research reports. To explain why minilateral pacts emerge, the study examines three sets of factors: structural and institutional factors, security and geopolitical considerations, and economic and functional factors. The characteristics of these pacts are then compared with those of multilateral institutions across four dimensions: membership, institutional flexibility, speed of decision-making, and operational focus.

Findings

The findings show that the emergence of minilateral pacts in Eurasia results from a combination of factors. At the structural and institutional level, consensus-based decision-making, conflicts of interest among members, and weaknesses in some implementation mechanisms increase the incentive to establish smaller and more targeted pacts. In the security and geopolitical domain, terrorist threats, urgent crises, shifts in the balance of power, and great-power competition drive states toward limited and specialized cooperation. These pacts enable smaller countries to maintain their participation in multilateral institutions while choosing specific partners to advance their security and geopolitical objectives and reduce their dependence on a single great power. In the economic and functional domain, bureaucratic complexity, differences in members' levels of development, and the lack of rapid implementation mechanisms also limit the capacity of some multilateral institutions to manage urgent and specialized projects. In contrast, smaller and more flexible pacts enable faster and more targeted coordination in areas such as energy, transit, trade, and infrastructure. Comparison with multilateral institutions shows that four characteristics—limited membership, institutional flexibility, speed of decision-making, and operational focus—most clearly distinguish these pacts. Accordingly, minilateral pacts have greater capacity for effective and flexible coordination among states, particularly under conditions of institutional gridlock and for specific, short-term objectives.

Research Innovation

The main innovation of this study is that, for the first time, it examines minilateralism as a regional cooperation framework across Eurasia. It explains the structural and institutional, security and geopolitical, and economic and functional factors shaping these pacts and identifies four key characteristics—limited membership, institutional flexibility, speed of decision-making, and operational focus—by comparing them with multilateral institutions.

From "Just War" to "Existential Threat": Frameworks of Russian Media in Covering the War against Ukraine

Danyal Rezapour[1]

1. Introduction

Russia's current policy toward Ukraine exemplifies regionalism and re-territorialization based on geopolitical considerations and the redefinition of regional identities. In this framework, the Kremlin employs media as a discursive tool to produce, represent, and consolidate its desired narrative of the conflict. This article analyzes the role of Russian media in creating and disseminating the Kremlin's official narratives as a means of legitimizing the war against Ukraine and influencing public opinion in both Russian and Ukrainian societies. The central question is: How were legitimation strategies employed in Russian media discourse in 2022 to justify the "Special Military Operation" against Ukraine, and what is the relationship among them? The hypothesis posits that Russian media, by simultaneously employing strategies of moral evaluation/altruism, authority/voice of experts, hypothetical future, mythopoesis, and rationalization, have legitimized the war discourse, with moral evaluation—centered on the "Just War" myth and Russia's image as "savior"—being the most frequent and dominant pattern. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach using qualitative methodology, with data gathered from documentary, library, and credible online sources.

2. Theoretical Framework

Legitimation is a fundamental concept in political discourse analysis—a field focused on the reproduction and contestation of political power through discourse. Legitimation can be defined as justifying a mental or practical behavior; an attempt to convince public opinion of why and how something should be done. This process is achieved by providing arguments that explain actions, ideas, and statements, always aimed at gaining the audience's support. One of the most renowned frameworks for analyzing legitimation discourses is the model proposed by Theo van Leeuwen (2007), which serves as the basis for this study. According to him, language is the central tool of legitimation, though images and music can also reinforce it. Van Leeuwen, along with Antonio Reyes (2011)—who expanded his

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framework—enumerates several legitimation strategies: moral evaluation/altruism (justifying actions through the well-being of others, reminiscent of George Lakoff's "Just War" myth); authority/voice of experts (legitimation through reference to authorities, politicians, experts, or laws); hypothetical future (a potential future threat requiring immediate action); mythopoesis (storytelling, idealization of a hero's actions, or warning narratives); and rationalization (presenting something as logical and "the right thing to do"). Emotions are considered an inseparable part of all these strategies, as they create dichotomies of "us" versus "them" and "good" versus "evil."

3. Russian Media Landscape

Despite the expansion of internet use in Russia, television remains the most important mass medium. Polls show that about 60% of Russians consider television their main source of news. Since Putin's 2000 election, television has been under direct Kremlin control, and public trust in television information has even strengthened with the war. Two main channels—Channel One and Russia 1—dominate the media space. Russian state television, by turning politics into a spectacle and employing entertainment elements and moral dichotomies, has succeeded in representing politics in an attractive and emotional manner. With the start of the "Special Military Operation," the volume of news and political talk shows increased unprecedentedly; some programs reached six hours daily. However, round-the-clock war coverage led to a decrease in audiences by July 2022, explaining the gradual return of entertainment programs. Another important development was the shutdown of the last independent domestic media after the war began. In March 2022, a law criminalized the publication of "misleading information" about the armed forces, leading to the exit of media such as Echo of Moscow, Novaya Gazeta, and Dozhd TV. In print media, newspapers such as Izvestia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Kommersant, and The Moscow Times show diverse relationships with political power. RT plays a particularly important role as the Kremlin's cross-border media tool, producing and distributing news aligned with Kremlin interests. Overall, the Russian media system shows that mass communication is not merely an information tool but a strategic weapon in domestic and foreign policy.

4. Legitimation Strategies in the 2022 Special Military Operation

4.1. Moral Evaluation/Altruism

The most frequent strategy was representing Russia's military action not as aggression but as a moral, humanitarian, and necessary action to save victims.

Official media formulated the operation as a "moral duty" and "rescue intervention," with Russia playing the hero and savior. It was repeatedly claimed that Russia's goal was to protect the Russian-speaking population of Donbass from "genocide" by the "Kyiv regime." Putin's speeches emphasized "protecting the people of Donbass," presenting Russia as a liberating force. Using the "Just War" myth, media tried to convince audiences that the Russian hero was defeating absolute evil and liberating victims. This rescue narrative was linked with claims of "improving conditions" and "peace enforcement." Concepts such as "denazification" and "demilitarization" were redefined; one guest equated "denazification" with "democratizing Ukraine." Propaganda further elevated to a metaphysical level, employing Christian concepts such as "hatred of evil" and "de-Satanization." The demonization of Ukrainian forces intensified, with labels such as "nationalist" and "neo-Nazi." Language acted as a key tool, using emotionally charged vocabulary and selective reporting to legitimize the military operation.

4.2. Authority/Voice of Experts

Legitimacy was extracted not through rational argument but from the authoritative position of political and symbolic actors. Statements of the type "because I say so" sufficed. Authority was primarily transmitted through President Putin, whose words were represented as definitive and unquestionable. Program guests stated that citizens must support the president because they lack access to his information. This logic turned unconditional trust in the leader into a civic duty. The president's image as an "unparalleled leader" was established through state media, the Orthodox Church, and cultural elites. This authority-oriented logic also entered the educational system; teachers were instructed to describe events in Ukraine as an "illegal coup" and the operation as a "special peacekeeping operation." Officials such as Medinsky and Peskov emphasized the "inevitability of victory," and media cited polls to claim "consensual" public support. The narrative of "saving" Ukrainians was established as a key component, with increasing statistics on "rescued" people presented as evidence of Russia's humanitarian role.

4.3. Hypothetical Future

At the beginning of the war, reference to a future danger requiring immediate action was frequent. Putin claimed that military presence in neighboring countries would create an unbearable threat, presenting the attack not as a political choice but as the only possible option. State media repeatedly stated that there was no alternative. This argument was linked with moral evaluations and the proverb "if you want peace,

prepare for war." The narrative of "Russia's war with the United States and the West" became dominant; media introduced the US as the main cause of the crisis and predicted the decline of US power. Western weapons and mercenaries were described as "driving Kyiv to bloodshed." Officials such as Ryabkov and Lavrov warned of consequences. Complementary framings included "the operation proceeds according to plan" and "the Ukrainian government is a Western puppet regime." This "hypothetical future" is a discursive-persuasive strategy, not a scientific scenario-building method.

4.4. Mythopoesis

Myth-making around the heroism of Russian soldiers intensified after the autumn 2022 mobilization. Soldiers were portrayed as "heroic" and "brave," with praise words such as "honorable" and "praiseworthy." Presenters traveled to war zones, showing soldiers firing and resisting. Emotional music and real war sounds gave narratives a sense of realism. Even military equipment was personified; one soldier named his grenade launcher after his wife. The program then showed his grave, multiplying the emotional impact. Such programs humanized war and increased public support. Some guests claimed that "defending the homeland is not a job but a mission." Media narratives about "justice" and "punishing the enemy" reinforced the myth. The selection of Gadzhimagomedov as the first war hero was not accidental; his biography was presented to construct historical continuity of heroism. Negative information, such as the sinking of the cruiser "Moskva," was minimized. Overall, mythopoesis made military actions appear legitimate and marginalized the possibility of imagining violence by these "honorable men."

4.5. Rationalization

Rationalization made military action appear logical, necessary, and based on common sense. The slogan "Our cause is just – victory will be ours!" linked military action with historical legitimacy. Another form was justifying violence as "self-defense" against "existential threats." Solovyov and Krylov claimed that Ukraine was preparing to attack Russia, so Russia acted preemptively. Rationalization also relied on "obvious truth"; Russia considered the Ukraine crisis the most serious arena of geopolitical competition with the West. Putin viewed new Ukraine as a creation of Russia and believed he was reclaiming the motherland. Media portrayed the war as a war against "the West" that "has existed for hundreds of years." Phrases such as "Russia cannot allow Ukraine to become a dagger held over our heads" denied any alternative solution. Kommersant and The Moscow Times argued that Russia, due

to its energy power and nuclear position, could contain all opponents. The conflict was interpreted as an initial step to restore Russia's past greatness.

5. Conclusion

Findings show that Russian state media systematically employed various legitimation patterns to represent military action as "liberation," "saving people," and "defending the other," placing Russia in the role of a moral and heroic actor forced to act. All five legitimation strategies were present simultaneously and with high frequency, indicating that legitimation is an inseparable part of political persuasion and government propaganda. However, this research is based on qualitative analysis of media discourse, and the generalizability of its findings to other levels of analysis is limited. The "moral evaluation" strategy, identified as the most frequent pattern, merely reflects the way war is represented in Russian state media and cannot alone explain geopolitical complexities. Future research can combine these findings with hard and soft power indicators.

Keywords: Legitimation, Media Discourse, Just War, Special Military Operation, Russia and Ukraine

The Prospects for Dispute Resolution Between the United States and China: Perspectives from International Law

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1. Methodological Introduction

(Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study) In the twenty-first century, the relations between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China constitute the pivotal axis around which the nascent international order is forged, serving as the foremost determinant in sustaining global peace, security, and economic stability. The structural transition of power away from Western-centric hegemony toward an emerging multipolar constellation, coupled with China's ascendance as the world's second-largest economy, has engendered profound and multifaceted strata of geopolitical, hegemonic, technological, and juridical rivalry between the two titans. This study is undertaken to scrutinize the intrinsic nature of these disputes and to evaluate the legal and institutional horizons governing their management and peaceful resolution.

Research Methodology:

- Research Typology and Method: This investigation is founded upon a descriptive-analytical methodology, executed through a normative-prescriptive approach. Within the descriptive phase, the historical antecedents and empirical trajectories of bilateral discords are delineated; in the analytical phase, the normative efficacy and institutional capacity of public international law in de-escalating tensions are rigorously appraised.
- Data Collection Techniques: Data generation is conducted via desk-based documentary research, drawing upon bilateral and multilateral conventions, official records of international organizations (most notably the United Nations and the World Trade Organization), international judicial rulings and arbitral awards, as well as authoritative scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed treatises.
- Theoretical Framework (The English School of International Relations): The study is grounded in the theoretical edifice of the English School, drawing upon the foundational concepts of seminal theorists such as Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, Barry Buzan, and Robert Jackson. The English School situates international relations between the stark antipodes of pure Realism (an international system predicated solely on anarchy and power) and unmitigated Idealism (a universal world society), postulating instead the conception of an "International Society." This society comprises sovereign states that, notwithstanding their contestation for power and preponderance, acknowledge common interests and conceive

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themselves bound by a shared structure of rules, norms, and institutions—principally international law, the balance of power, diplomacy, and great-power management. Within this analytical rubric, international law operates not merely as an instrument of statecraft and coercion, but as an indispensable guarantor of systemic order and peaceful coexistence among rival powers.

2. Synoptic Overview of Detailed Research Findings

The empirical and theoretical findings of this research are articulated across four substantive pillars:

A) Historical Trajectory: The Shift from Equilibrium-Seeking Engagement to Strategic Containment

The historical arc of Sino-American relations demonstrates that, following the ideological estrangement of the Maoist era and the crucible of the Korean War, bilateral ties embarked upon a phase of tactical coexistence aimed at counterbalancing the Soviet Union, catalyzed by the ping-pong diplomacy and the historic Nixon–Kissinger détente of 1972. Under Deng Xiaoping's stewardship and the rubric of the Reform and Opening-up policy, deep structural economic interdependence took root, culminating in China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Nevertheless, China's consolidation as the globe's second-largest economic power, allied with its assertive execution of monumental geoeconomic projects—foremost among them the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—and the entrenchment of state-directed structuralism, impelled Washington to recalibrate its grand strategy from "constructive engagement" toward "deterrent containment." Originating under the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia," this strategic posture metastasized under the Trump and Biden administrations into an overt, multidimensional confrontation.

B) Epicenters of Conflict and Foundational Divergence of Interests

The inquiry elucidates that Sino-American discord is concentrated across four acute fronts:

2. Geopolitics and Maritime Security: Beijing's sweeping historic entitlements across the South China Sea and its formal repudiation of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration award stand in direct collision with Washington's assertive Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). This friction is compounded by the perennial flashpoint of Taiwan—perceived by Beijing as an inviolable sovereign core interest, and by Washington as an indispensable geostrategic redoubt anchored within the First Island Chain.
3. Trade War, Protectionism, and Intellectual Property Rights: The systemic imposition of retaliatory tariff regimes, massive state subsidies channeled by Beijing into domestic strategic champions, asymmetries in financial market access, alongside chronic disputes concerning intellectual property expropriation and mandatory technology transfer.
4. Technological Supremacy and Digital Geoeconomics: A zero-sum struggle over critical global supply chains in advanced semiconductors and microelectronics, generative artificial intelligence, and next-generation telecommunications infrastructure (5G), underscored by Washington's recourse to export controls and punitive blacklisting of Chinese corporate conglomerates under the mantle of national security.
5. Normative Clashes and Global Governance Architectures: A profound discursive schism pitting the Western order—anchored in liberal-democratic governance, the universalist conception of human rights, and the international rule of law—against a Sino-centric paradigm founded upon absolute Westphalian sovereignty, strict non-interference in

domestic jurisdictions, and human rights characterized by localized, sovereign particularities.

C) Appraisal of International Legal Mechanisms and Dispute Settlement

A granular assessment of available legal mechanisms reveals that conventional modalities of international dispute settlement are confronted with severe structural impasses in the Sino-American matrix:

- Judicial and Arbitral Avenues: These fora are paralyzed by jurisdictional jurisdictional obstacles; invoking vital sovereign prerogatives and national security exceptions, both Washington and Beijing routinely demur from the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), while China regards international arbitral verdicts pertaining to the South China Sea as legally destitute of merit (*non-binding and void*).
- WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism: Due to the persistent United States blockade against the reappointment and vetting of judges to the Appellate Body, this forum has been functionally crippled, depriving multilateral trade jurisprudence of its quintessential enforcement safeguard in high-stakes disputes.
- Primacy of Diplomatic Modalities: In consequence, peaceful dispute resolution remains viable almost exclusively through direct bilateral negotiations, specialized joint technical commissions, Track II diplomacy, and granular, issue-specific plurilateral understandings.

D) Future Horizons: Beyond the Thucydides Trap Toward Codified Competitive Coexistence

The insights of this study indicate that the deterministic and fatalistic premise of the "Thucydides Trap"—the posited inevitability of catastrophic war between a prevailing hegemon and an emergent challenger—is by no means an inescapable destiny. Deep structural economic interdependence, intertwined value chains, and mutual nuclear deterrence present formidable systemic impediments against unfettered military escalation. Viewed through the prism of the English School, the most viable and prudent trajectory for bilateral ties resides in the institutionalization of "Competitive Coexistence." Under this paradigm, both powers—abjuring both total systemic assimilation and unrestrained, existential conflict—craft durable, rules-based compacts that delineate zones of imperative global cooperation (e.g., climate change mitigation, global public health management, nuclear non-proliferation, and systemic macroeconomic stability) from arenas of bounded, strategic competition, while erecting institutional and operational guardrails to avert catastrophic military confrontation.

Kazakhstan's Multilateral Foreign Policy: Balancing and Managing Interactions in Central Asia

Seyed Mohammad Hossein Akramian[1]

Ali Akbar Talebi Matin[2]

Multilateral policy constitutes a deliberate strategic choice in international relations, conceived to consolidate national interests and to harness balancing capabilities in engagements with international actors. Within this framework, particular emphasis is placed upon maintaining equilibrium between Eastern and Western powers, thereby enabling states to derive simultaneous political, technological, and economic advantages from relations with both poles. Such an approach assumes heightened strategic significance in regions that share immediate geographic proximity with the spheres of influence of both East and West—most notably Eurasia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In this context, Kazakhstan, from the moment of its independence in the 1990s, has placed this balance-oriented paradigm at the very core of its national agenda in order to foster development, enhance sovereign capacities, and consolidate independence.

The fundamental research question examines the rationales underpinning Kazakhstan's adoption of a multilateral foreign policy and elucidates the operational tiers of these relations with Eastern and Western powers. The central hypothesis posits that Kazakhstan's foreign policy toward these powers has been structured and sustained through a model of balanced multilateralism across multiple operational levels.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Despite a relative scarcity of indigenous scholarship on Kazakhstan, previous studies have examined dimensions such as the nexus between national security and nuclear disarmament, balancing dynamics within the "New Great Game," transit potential under the Nurly Zhol (Bright Path) national programme, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The novelty of the present study resides in its simultaneous analysis of Kazakhstan's interactions with four principal Eastern and Western actors—Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—across political, social, economic, and security dimensions, while applying the theoretical framework of balanced multilateralism operationalized through three key indicators: indivisibility of relations, diffuse reciprocity in multilateralism, and adherence to generalized organizing principles. Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach grounded in library research and contemporary documentation.

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Analysis of Findings

Empirical evidence indicates that Kazakhstan's foreign policy—conceptualized domestically as the "multi-vector" doctrine—emerges from the interplay between structural factors (its landlocked geopolitical position at the heart of Eurasia, economic and security interdependencies, and demographic composition) and agency-driven dynamics, reflected in the strategic vision of leaders such as Nursultan Nazarbayev and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, centred upon strategic autonomy, economic modernization, and Eurasianism. At the operational level:

- Relations with Russia are sustained through historical and cultural commonalities as well as institutionalized economic and defence dependencies; yet Astana carefully circumvents unilateral dependence on Moscow by systematically diversifying its external partnerships.
- Engagement with China is propelled by capital investment, energy resource demand, transit centrality within the Belt and Road Initiative, and institutionalized academic and cultural cooperation.
- Ties with the European Union are structured around the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), robust trade flows, energy access, and institutional frameworks such as the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA).
- Relations with the United States are maintained through economic investment, regional security cooperation, and strategic stability mechanisms, the geopolitical salience of which has been further magnified by recent systemic shifts, most notably the Russia–Ukraine war.

Conclusion

By deploying an independent, interactive, pluralistic, and smart foreign-policy model, Kazakhstan has successfully institutionalized a sustainable equilibrium among competing great powers. In so doing, it has safeguarded its territorial integrity and state sovereignty while simultaneously establishing a viable platform for economic growth and capital inflow. Consequently, this study recommends that other states across Eurasia and Central Asia, within the emerging multipolar global order, draw upon the Kazakh experience in prudently synthesizing multi-vectored engagements, leveraging geoeconomic and transit assets, and actively participating in regional and international institutions as an effective roadmap for expanding their diplomatic manoeuvring space and maximizing national interests.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Balanced Multilateralism, Eastern and Western Blocs, Central Asia, Eurasia.

The Soft Power of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Geopolitical Balance in the South Caucasus

Seyed Morteza Hafezi[1]

Seyed Amir Niakouei [2]

1-Introduction

In the evolving international system, soft power has become an important instrument for influence, persuasion, and shaping regional relations. The South Caucasus, owing to its geopolitical significance, has emerged as an arena of competition among regional and extra-regional actors. The expanding cooperation among Türkiye, Israel, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, particularly following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, has created challenges for Iran's regional position. This study examines how the Islamic Republic of Iran can leverage its cultural, historical, religious, and diplomatic capacities and employ soft-balancing strategies to constrain the influence of this cooperation. The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach and draws on the theoretical framework developed by Nye and Pape.

2-Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study integrates Robert Pape's theory of soft balancing with Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. Soft balancing refers to an indirect strategy for constraining the influence of a dominant power without direct confrontation. It operates through four principal mechanisms: territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, signals of resolve to balance, and delegitimizing the hegemon. By contrast, Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes the ability to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and the shaping of preferences, with its principal sources rooted in culture, political values, and foreign policy. Within this framework, public and cultural diplomacy, along with Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, are incorporated as complementary dimensions. The study applies this framework to examine Iran's capacity to constrain the influence of Türkiye, Israel, and the Republic of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus.

3- Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the Islamic Republic of Iran has employed a range of soft-balancing instruments in response to the expanding cooperation among Türkiye, Israel, and the Republic of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. These measures can be categorized according to Robert Pape's four principal mechanisms of soft balancing: territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, signals of resolve to balance, and delegitimizing the hegemon. Overall, the evidence

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suggests that Iran's approach has not been exclusively reactive or security-oriented; rather, it has combined diplomatic, economic, cultural, transit-related, and institutional instruments.

With regard to territorial denial, Iran has sought to reduce the region's dependence on routes influenced by Azerbaijan and Türkiye by strengthening relations with Armenia, developing alternative transit routes, and participating in the International North–South Transport Corridor. Emphasis on preserving Armenia's territorial integrity and opposing geopolitical changes along Iran's northern borders has also formed part of this approach. From this perspective, Iran's transit policy serves not only economic purposes but also functions as an instrument for preserving geopolitical access and preventing the monopolization of regional connectivity routes by rival actors. Regarding entangling diplomacy, Iran has utilized regional and international institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the 3+3 regional consultation platform, and bilateral relations with Russia and China. These efforts have enabled Iran, through multilateralism, the development of alternative partnerships, and the articulation of security concerns in international forums, to increase the political costs associated with some initiatives pursued by rival actors. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that the effectiveness of this strategy remains contingent upon the degree of cooperation among other regional actors and the broader evolution of the geopolitical environment. In terms of signals of resolve to balance, Iran has sought to strengthen domestic capabilities, expand cooperation with Armenia and Georgia, develop economic relations, and utilize its cultural and religious resources to reduce dependence on external actors and establish a network of regional partners. Iran's cultural and historical soft-power resources can provide a basis for sustaining social and economic linkages with regional societies. However, intensified identity-based competition and the growing influence of Türkiye and Israel constrain the scope and effectiveness of these capabilities.

Finally, delegitimizing the hegemon has been pursued through public diplomacy, media engagement, and participation in regional and international institutions. Iran has sought to frame Israeli-Azerbaijani security cooperation in terms of broader regional security concerns and, through political and media narratives, to challenge the legitimacy of such cooperation. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Iran's soft-balancing strategy in the South Caucasus is multidimensional. Rather than seeking to eliminate the influence of rival regional actors altogether, it primarily focuses on increasing the costs of external influence, developing alternative connectivity routes, diversifying regional partnerships, and preserving Iran's geopolitical room for maneuver.

5- Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the expanding geopolitical cooperation among the Republic of Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Israel, particularly following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, has created new strategic challenges for Iran. In response, Iran has employed a multidimensional soft-balancing strategy encompassing territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, signals of resolve to balance, and delegitimizing the hegemon. These strategies have been pursued through alternative transit initiatives, regional diplomacy, domestic capacity-building, and public and cultural diplomacy. The analysis indicates that Iran has sought not to eliminate competing influence, but to constrain its strategic effects, preserve geopolitical access, and diversify regional partnerships.

Nevertheless, economic constraints, regional rivalries, and competing external interests limit the effectiveness of Iran's soft-balancing strategy in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Soft Power, South Caucasus, Cultural Diplomacy, Balance of Power, Regional Relations

Transit Diplomacy in Eurasia: A Comparative Study of the Iranian Route and the Trans-Afghan Railway

Jalal Malakootifar[1]

Introduction. Access to the sea is a transport and governance problem for Central Asian economies. Distance matters, but so do border procedures, service reliability, financial access, and relations with transit countries. The war in Ukraine has increased interest in alternative Eurasian routes without making all northern routes unusable. Southern access through Iran and the proposed Trans-Afghan Railway should therefore be assessed as parts of a diversified network rather than as automatically exclusive alternatives. The article asks what the Iranian routes and the Trans-Afghan project can offer under their different implementation conditions. Its hypothesis is that Iran provides greater readiness for short-term use because much of the required network already exists, whereas potential advantages of a new railway through Afghanistan depend on origin and destination, project delivery, financing, and operating arrangements. This proposition does not establish that Iran is universally cheaper, faster, or safer.

Theoretical framework. Geoeconomics explains how transport access and infrastructure can become instruments of statecraft (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Complex interdependence highlights the distribution of adjustment costs and the availability of alternatives (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Transit dependence need not be symmetrical: the cargo-owning country, the transit country, and the destination port may bear different costs when a route is disrupted. Diversification can reduce vulnerability, but an unbuilt railway cannot yet perform the same substituting function as an operating service. The framework thus treats corridors simultaneously as instruments of competition and as arrangements that require cooperation.

Methodology and scope. A qualitative documentary comparison examines four criteria: cost and time, infrastructure readiness, operational security, and political and financial sustainability. Official agreements are distinguished from reported projections, construction expenditure from shipment costs, and design capacity from observed throughput. The project-status assessment relies on the July 2025 feasibility-study agreement, its February 2026 ratification, and reporting through 2026; it does not claim to cover subsequent developments. No matched shipment-level dataset is available in the reviewed material, and no numerical ranking of total transport costs is attempted.

Findings on cost and time. Iran's route benefits from an existing network. Reported transit times from Central Asia to Iranian ports are around 10–14 days, compared with 25–35 days by sea; rail transit from Bandar Abbas to Tashkent is reported at 10–16 days, and road haulage at 12–18 days. A comparative study estimates about US$3,300 per TEU and 15–17 days for the Iran corridor.

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However, rail gauge differences at Sarakhs and Incheh Borun require transhipment or bogie exchange, so "transit time" is not identical to "delivery time." For the Trans-Afghan Railway, official documents present a target of reducing Pakistan–Uzbekistan transit from an average of 35 days to 3–5 days, with design capacity of up to 20 million tons per year and container costs potentially three times lower. These are design objectives and model-based projections, not observed performance. Construction cost estimates have risen from about US$4.6 billion in July 2025 to US$6.9 billion in February 2026 and to over US$7 billion by June 2026; the feasibility study is expected to be completed by the end of 2026. A multi-billion-dollar construction cost is an investment variable, not directly comparable with current freight rates on the Iranian route.

Findings on infrastructure readiness. Iran's main advantage is the existence of active ports, an internal network, and rail border crossings. Bandar Abbas (Shahid Rajaee) has 45 berths, nominal capacity of about 140 million tons and more than 6–7.8 million TEU, and handles over 100 million tons annually, including more than 50 percent of national imports and exports and 70 percent of transit. Chabahar, by contrast, has a nominal capacity of about 10 million tons but actual throughput of only about 2 million tons per year; the Chabahar–Zahedan railway, about 650 km long, has physical progress of over 80 percent and rail-laying of over 50 percent, but the chain is not yet fully operational and reliable. The Trans-Afghan project remains at the feasibility-study stage: the July 2025 framework agreement and its February 2026 ratification authorize a study, not construction or final financing. The proposed route is about 647 km (with reported ranges of 573–760 km), requires 1,200 structures including 360 bridges and about 70 km of tunnels, and crosses the Salang Pass at about 3,500 meters. Even if financed, construction would take at least five years. Reaching the Pakistani border is not the same as direct and equal rail access to all Pakistani ports: Karachi is accessible via Peshawar and Rohri, while Gwadar and Qasim depend on completing domestic rail connections and port handling capacity.

Findings on operational security. For Iran, operational security includes physical protection and service continuity. The active network has an operating record and responsible institutions, but this does not prove that the route is safer in every period and for every cargo. The principal risks are institutional and financial: after the snapback of UN sanctions in late September 2025, insurers have shown hesitation in covering cargo transiting Iran, banks have tightened compliance, and investors have slowed port and rail modernization. Standard marine insurance may exclude Iran, requiring specialized war-risk and Iran-specific coverage. This highlights the difference between physical passage and commercial usability: infrastructure may be usable, but some companies may be unable to benefit from it due to legal, banking, or insurance restrictions. For the Trans-Afghan Railway, operational security cannot yet be measured through operating experience. The assessment must focus on construction risks, facility protection, border arrangements, and the capacity to implement commitments. Taliban authorities have announced that they guarantee the security of the railway within Afghanistan, but reports based on Russian documents indicate that each participating country is independently responsible for security in its own territory and that the idea of a joint security institution has been rejected; experts still regard the risks as serious. Cross-border and political risks are significant: tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban have repeatedly disrupted borders and trade routes, and the March 2026 conflict threatened projects including the Trans-Afghan Railway, the TAPI pipeline, and CASA-1000. The line also faces

construction and operating risks in difficult terrain, including heavy snowfall that could make the line inoperable for months unless additional tunnels are built.

Findings on political and financial sustainability. For Iran, the main issue is not "attracting new investment" but maintaining and operating an existing network under restrictions on access to international finance and insurance. The United States revoked the Chabahar sanctions waiver on 29 September 2025, and India, which was developing the Shahid Beheshti terminal, has reportedly considered divesting its stake to an Iranian entity to avoid US sanctions. This shows that legal and financial restrictions can directly remove a key player from the chain, even when physical infrastructure exists. Nevertheless, the network is operating: in 2025, Iran's rail transit exceeded five million tons, a new record, and container traffic via Astara grew by more than 50 percent to over 8,000 containers. These figures show progress in utilizing existing capacity, but they do not substitute for removing structural constraints: investment in equipment modernization, terminal development, and rail connections still faces financial and legal obstacles. Demand matters as well: nominal port and line capacity is not guaranteed revenue, and sustained demand depends on competitive rates, predictable scheduling, and service quality, not merely on infrastructure. For the Trans-Afghan Railway, there is an institutional gap: political agreements and expressions of interest by financial institutions have not yet become binding financing commitments. The three countries signed a framework agreement in July 2025, but as of September 2026 no financing for construction had been secured. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the EBRD, the European Investment Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the AIIB, and the US International Development Finance Corporation have all expressed interest, but this is not the same as a financial commitment. The Eurasian Development Bank has also announced readiness to participate. In September 2026, Pakistan proposed a joint mechanism for approaching international lenders, but a government statement indicated that Uzbekistan did not accept the proposal and no lender had made a financial commitment. According to a Russian study covering 2021 to March 2026, despite the signing of more than fifteen international agreements, no kilometer of the new main line has been put into operation; active works are limited to projects worth about US$100 million, less than one percent of the total declared project cost. This gap stems from a combination of constraints: near-total lack of international recognition, the sanctions regime, lack of access to institutional financing, rail gauge incompatibility, and strained relations with Pakistan. In such conditions, even cargo demand—critical for repaying construction capital—cannot be reliably predicted, because the route does not yet exist and the behavior of cargo owners is unknown.

The Middle Corridor and Caspian routes. The development of Caspian routes and the ports of Aktau and Kuryk has noticeably diversified regional options. Their combined capacity is about 22 million tons per year, with plans to reach 30 million tons. Aktau alone has a capacity of about 12 million tons per year, and the first phase of a container hub with a capacity of 140,000 TEU has been commissioned; the second phase, planned for 2027–2028, would raise total capacity to 240,000 TEU. Six container ships have been ordered, with four to be delivered in 2027 and two in 2028. Cargo volumes on the Middle Corridor (TITR) rose from 840,000 tons in 2021 to about 4.5 million tons in 2024; in 2025, total volume was about 4.12 million tons, but container traffic grew by 36 percent to 76,900 TEU, with 433 container trains active. Transit times for container trains fell to 12–15 days (excluding winter), compared with 38–53 days previously. However, the

corridor's main structural limitation is its discontinuity: unlike the Iranian route, which is a continuous rail–road chain to southern ports, the Middle Corridor requires unloading trains, loading ships, and sea transport across the Caspian, followed by reloading. The OECD notes that the route faces shortages of ships, limited container handling capacity, harsh weather, and declining Caspian water levels, which undermine the long-term reliability of Caspian ports. Therefore, nominal capacity should not be equated with usable and reliable capacity for Central Asian cargo. The relationship between the two routes is not one of complete substitution but of complementarity in crisis conditions and competition in normal conditions.

Conclusion and policy implications. The strongest supported conclusion is greater current readiness of the Iranian routes and conditional future potential for the Trans-Afghan project. Iran's advantage is readiness for current use, not proven superiority in cost, time, or security. The Trans-Afghan project could become a complementary or competing option for some trade flows if financing, infrastructure, border arrangements, and reliable operations are secured. Policies should focus on measurable service performance, coordinated border procedures, transparent tariffs, verified infrastructure connections, and realistic demand and financing assessments. For Iran, priorities include completing the Chabahar–Zahedan railway, developing port hinterlands, separating the performance assessment of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, reducing border bottlenecks, and creating insurance and financial mechanisms compatible with sanctions. For the Trans-Afghan project, priorities include completing the feasibility study with a clear final route and cost scope, converting expressions of interest into binding financing with clear risk allocation, establishing joint security and operating arrangements, and assessing demand based on origin, destination, cargo type, and competitive rates. For regional policy, the priority is a multi-route connectivity approach that reduces vulnerability rather than replacing one dependence with another. Future research should compare a common shipment, origin, destination, and time period, with sensitivity analysis for border delays, insurance restrictions, sanctions, and security disruptions.

A Comparative Study of the Behavioral Models of the Emerging Powers China and India in Their Interaction with Iran

Mohammad Younes Bahadori[1]

Mandana Sajjadi[2]

Entitled "A Comparative Analysis of the Behavioral Models of Emerging Powers: China and India in Their Engagement with Iran," this study by Mohammad Younes Bahadori and Mandana Sajjadi examines the behavioral patterns exhibited by these two rising Asian powers vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2015 onward. The underlying problem stems from the systemic transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, wherein the augmented agency of emerging powers has prompted Iran to implicitly adopt a "Look to the East" strategy. By virtue of its vital geostrategic nexus connecting the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, Iran holds heightened significance for both Beijing and New Delhi. The central inquiry investigates the behavioral models adopted by China and India since 2015, alongside their core similarities and structural differences.

Methodologically, the study employs a hypothesis-testing design anchored in the theoretical framework of "emerging power behavior" and comparative document analysis. Within this theoretical paradigm, an emerging power is conceptualized as an actor possessing expanding material and ideational capacities, a reformist or revisionist posture within the international order, sustained economic dynamism, and autonomy from hegemonic value systems. Accordingly, the behavioral models of China and India toward Iran are characterized as "pragmatic and cooperative," prioritizing national interests, tangible outcomes, bilateral engagement, and systemic adaptability across four foundational axes: 1) pursuing broad economic interests; 2) securing energy supplies against a backdrop of rising domestic consumption; 3) maintaining regional stability across West Asia; and 4) addressing geopolitical imperatives tied to regional equilibrium.

The findings indicate that while both actors have pursued a "pragmatic and cooperative" model toward Iran since 2015, the decisive comparative distinction emerges in implementation, interest prioritization, and resilience against external coercions. These nuances manifest across three distinct dimensions:

First, energy security and economic relations: China has steadfastly and continuously maintained its economic ties with Iran, expanded bilateral trade volumes, cemented its status as Iran's foremost trading partner, and—despite international sanctions—solidified its position as the preeminent economic actor within the country. Conversely, despite acute energy demands, India

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abruptly suspended its Iranian oil imports in 2019 under maximum U.S. pressure, thereby forfeiting a proximate and cost-effective energy lifeline as well as vital leverage in its relations with Tehran.

Second, geopolitical considerations and transit corridors: Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing perceives Iran as an indispensable bridge linking Asia to Europe and the Middle East, embedding this vision into a broader strategic competition with the United States in West Asia. The 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between Iran and China further institutionalizes these deep-seated infrastructural alignments. Meanwhile, New Delhi's engagement centers primarily on the Chabahar Port project, driven by the strategic imperative of securing land-locked access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia, and—more crucially—bypassing its regional rival, Pakistan. However, India's acute sensitivity to U.S. sanctions has rendered the project's progress markedly sluggish and vulnerable.

Third, balancing behavior and third-party management: China frames its balancing calculus primarily in opposition to U.S. hegemony in the region, even demonstrating diplomatic efficacy by mediating the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In contrast, India navigates a far more intricate balancing act, compelled to harmonize its relations with Tehran against its strategic partnerships with Washington, Tel Aviv, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, as well as multilateral frameworks such as I2-U2. Furthermore, the presence of approximately seven million Indian expatriates across Persian Gulf monarchies imparts an existential necessity for New Delhi to exercise profound caution.

Overall, the study concludes that China assumes the role of a "pragmatic strategic partner" toward Iran, whereas India functions predominantly as a "cautious, balance-constrained partner." This dichotomy charts divergent horizons for Iran's future bilateral cooperation. While robust opportunities endure across economic cooperation, infrastructure development, technological exchange, energy security, cultural diplomacy, regional stability, and defense collaboration with both nations, formidable challenges persist—including international sanctions, volatile regional dynamics, human rights sensitivities, and the imperative of maintaining equilibrium among rival regional powers. Consequently, the Islamic Republic of Iran requires an agile, calibrated, and astute foreign policy framework capable of accurately discerning the divergent behavioral models of China and India to leverage its unparalleled geographic advantages and resource endowments when engaging these two pivotal Asian actors.

Analysis of Key Components in Governance Structures with a Focus on Nuclear Energy: A Case Study of Russia

Kamal Kaviani[1]
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1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Energy governance refers to the institutional matrices, procedural frameworks, and coordination mechanisms through which authority, accountability, and inter-organizational dynamics within the energy sector are structured. Since the 1980s, the paradigm of modern public administration and energy governance has increasingly underscored the functional unbundling of policymaking, regulatory oversight, and service provision. This structural decoupling is paramount in strategic sectors characterized by the complex convergence of macroeconomic, technological, environmental, and geopolitical imperatives.

Nuclear energy represents one of the most intricate domains within public sector governance due to its capital-intensive technological requirements, stringent safety parameters, geopolitical sensitivities, and intrinsic linkages to national security. Consequently, governing the nuclear sector transcends mere commercial viability and electricity generation; it necessitates robust institutional capacity, institutional clarity, coherent risk governance, and well-calibrated inter-agency coordination among political, regulatory, scientific, and operational entities.

The Russian Federation presents a compelling case study: it maintains a pronounced, sovereign state presence while orchestrating a sophisticated, functionally differentiated institutional architecture. The central inquiry of this study is to examine how Russia structures its nuclear energy governance across the tripartite axes of policymaking, regulation, and operational delivery, and to evaluate the extent of institutional autonomy and functional separation achieved within this state-centric paradigm.

2. Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design grounded in documentary analysis and single-case study methodology. Russia was chosen as a purposive case due to its preeminent standing in the global nuclear landscape and its distinctive hybrid governance configuration.

The theoretical foundation is constructed from a critical synthesis of academic literature, public policy frameworks, international statutory instruments, peer-reviewed energy governance studies,

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and official policy documentation. Through this lens, an analytical matrix structured around three functional layers—policymaking, regulation, and service provision—is applied to the Russian nuclear ecosystem. The empirical investigation evaluates statutory mandates, power allocations, and intra-institutional dynamics. To ensure internal validity and empirical rigor, qualitative data from regulatory records, official reports, and scholarly publications were systematically triangulated.

3. Strategic Drivers of Russia's Nuclear Energy Trajectory

The findings reveal that the expansion and modernization of Russia's nuclear sector are propelled by a multi-dimensional matrix of economic, technological, ecological, and geostrategic imperatives. Nuclear energy is strategically positioned within the national Energy Strategy not merely as a resilient, base-load, and low-carbon electricity source, but as a critical catalyst for advanced industrial capabilities and technological sovereignty.

Crucially, the perimeter of Russia's nuclear apparatus extends well beyond civilian power generation. It encompasses advanced research and development, nuclear fuel cycle infrastructure, industrial isotope production, export-oriented reactor design and construction, and sovereign technical-engineering diplomacy. This expansive mandate highlights the sector's high-stakes nature and explains why its administrative apparatus requires specialized institutional mechanisms that diverge sharply from standard liberalized utility models.

4. The Tripartite Governance Architecture

The core finding of this research demonstrates that Russia has established an institutionalized, three-tier functional division of labor:

The Policymaking Echelon: The President of the Russian Federation functions as the ultimate strategic architect, determining sovereign priorities and national directives. The State Duma and the Federation Council provide legislative foundations and statutory oversight, while line ministries—chiefly the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—align sectoral initiatives with domestic energy policy and international diplomatic strategies.

The Regulatory Echelon: Dedicated supervisory bodies exercise independent oversight over nuclear, radiation, and industrial safety, environmental standards, licensing protocols, and market conduct. The Federal Service for Environmental, Technological and Nuclear Supervision (Rostekhnadzor) assumes primary responsibility for nuclear safety compliance and licensing, while specialized agencies, such as the Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS), supervise market competition and tariff structures. This supervisory tier acts as an autonomous check to enforce stringent technical and safety norms.

The Service Provision and Operational Echelon: The State Atomic Energy Corporation (Rosatom) and its consolidated subsidiaries constitute the operational vanguard. Operating as a state-owned statutory corporation, Rosatom integrates asset management, plant engineering, fuel cycle operations, scientific research, and international turnkey projects. This model enables the state to preserve overarching strategic ownership while delegating operational agility and commercial execution to an integrated, specialized entity.

Importantly, this tripartite architecture does not reflect full administrative fragmentation or Western-style regulatory insulation; rather, it represents a deliberate functional separation orchestrated within a coherent, state-dominated governance ecosystem.

5. Institutional and Administrative Implications

The institutional differentiation observed in the Russian model illustrates that assigning distinct functional portfolios to dedicated entities is pivotal for strategic performance. Policymakers focus on long-term strategy and legal frameworks; regulators maintain uncompromising standards on safety, environmental protection, and fair market practices; and state enterprises focus on technical execution and commercial efficiency.

This functional demarcation attenuates institutional overlap, mitigates structural conflicts of interest (particularly between safety mandates and commercial imperatives), and fosters targeted organizational expertise. Crucially, the Russian experience substantiates that functional unbundling does not necessitate the privatization of assets or the withdrawal of the sovereign state; instead, state ownership can be coupled with functional discipline and institutional clarity.

6. Conclusion and Strategic Lessons for Iran

In conclusion, the Russian Federation has institutionalized a resilient governance framework for its nuclear sector through the systematic unbundling of policymaking, regulatory supervision, and industrial execution. This configuration balances state authority with specialized administrative accountability.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the fundamental policy insight lies not in multiplying administrative bodies, but in the rigorous, statutory separation of governance competencies:

Decoupling Mandates: Drawing precise boundaries between policy formulation, regulatory enforcement, and operational execution is critical to resolving conflicting institutional interests, eliminating agency redundancy, and elevating accountability.

Strengthening Regulatory Autonomy: Empowering the national nuclear regulatory authority ensures that safety, environmental, and non-proliferation benchmarks remain paramount, insulated from the financial or scheduling pressures of plant operations.

Streamlining Operational Delivery: Consolidating operational, engineering, and commercial mandates into a specialized entity optimizes capital efficiency and international project delivery.

Ultimately, an institutional realignment along these lines would not only enhance the domestic efficiency and safety culture of Iran's nuclear energy ecosystem, but would also establish a more coherent structural basis for long-term technological, regulatory, and diplomatic cooperation between Iran and international partners, including the Russian Federation.

The Role of Energy in the Development of Turkey-Azerbaijan Relations

Amirhosein Mehdipour[1]

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Introduction

In recent decades, geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia have become increasingly shaped by energy geoeconomics. Given its strategic geographical position between key energy-producing regions and major consumer markets, Turkey has evolved into a vital energy bridge. High import dependency, steady economic expansion, and escalating domestic demand have positioned energy security at the core of Ankara's foreign policy, driving its ambitions to diversify supply sources and become a regional energy hub. Moreover, producer volatility and the war in Ukraine have accentuated Turkey's importance as an alternative transit corridor to Europe.

Within this strategic landscape, the Republic of Azerbaijan occupies a central role in Turkey's energy architecture. Strategic pipeline undertakings namely Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline have significantly expanded bilateral economic ties into a multidimensional strategic alignment. Beyond bolstering Azerbaijan's export-driven economy and reinforcing Turkey's transit leverage, hydrocarbon flows have capitalized on historical and ethno-cultural affinities to foster security convergence. Nonetheless, the longevity of this alignment remains contingent upon South Caucasian geopolitical shifts, major-power rivalries, and the technical and financial resilience of these transit corridors. This study investigates the transformative role of energy in Turkey–Azerbaijan relations, addressing how energy cooperation shapes their broader economic, political, and security ties toward deeper convergence. Grounded in the hypothesis that bilateral cooperation particularly hydrocarbon trade substantially consolidates their strategic partnership, this analysis also elucidates broader patterns of contemporary regional energy security.

Research Methodology

This applied study employs a descriptive-analytical framework to examine the mechanisms of energy interdependence between Turkey and Azerbaijan, drawing upon Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence. Data was gathered through documentary analysis, official energy reports, and verified scholarly literature in Persian, Turkish, and English. The temporal scope spans from 1994 to 2024 to trace the evolution of bilateral energy relations. Analytical findings are evaluated across five key indicators: import dependency, transit advantage, disruption costs, political leverage, and geopolitical implications.

Finings and Discussion

1. The Position of Energy in Turkey's Foreign Policy

Since 2003, Turkey's energy policy has pursued the dual objectives of securing national supplies and leveraging geography to amplify its regional transit role. High fossil-fuel import reliance, soaring domestic consumption, and severe current-account import bills have driven Ankara toward supply diversification and proactive "dependence management." Through the lens of asymmetric interdependence, Turkey seeks to convert structural import vulnerabilities into geopolitical

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leverage and bargaining power via the expansion of cross-border transmission networks. Azerbaijan plays an indispensable role in this strategy. The BTC, BTE, and Southern Gas Corridor components address Turkey's diversification needs while integrating the country as a pivotal node into Europe's energy architecture. In 2022, Azerbaijan accounted for approximately 16% of Turkey's natural gas imports, compared to Russia's 39.5%. Alongside domestic renewable expansion, this cooperation mitigates single-supplier vulnerability and solidifies Ankara's regional standing, effectively turning energy diplomacy into an instrument of geopolitical influence.

2. Political Dynamics within the Framework of Energy Cooperation

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey was the first state to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, seeking to fill the regional geopolitical vacuum. Leveraging shared linguistic, ethnic, and cultural bonds, Ankara extended robust diplomatic and political support to Baku, epitomized by the closure of its border with Armenia in 1993 during the First Karabakh War. By the early 2000s, this normative alignment transformed into institutionalized, infrastructure-driven cooperation. The materialization of the BTC, BTE, and subsequently TANAP shifted bilateral ties from diplomatic rhetoric to a material strategic partnership. Concurrently, regional security challenges in the South Caucasus catalyzed institutionalized coordination. From an asymmetric interdependence perspective, Azerbaijan possesses structural resource power, whereas Turkey provides downstream transit infrastructure, domestic market access, and vital links to European consumers. Consequently, while mutual dependence exists, alternatives differ: Azerbaijan exhibits higher structural sensitivity and vulnerability regarding transit routes, while Turkey maintains a more diversified supplier portfolio. However, mutual commitments particularly massive capital investments by SOCAR, such as the STAR Refinery in İzmir and shared equity in TANAP have driven up the mutual costs of disruption, embedding this asymmetry within a balanced, managed interdependence.

3. Energy as a Catalyst for Deepening Strategic Alignment

Turkey–Azerbaijan energy relations exemplify managed asymmetric interdependence. Pipeline networks have elevated Turkey's transit-hub status, while providing Azerbaijan with indispensable, secure market outlets. Co-investment in critical energy infrastructure has reinforced economic mutual lock-in, significantly raising the barriers to exit. Consequently, energy cooperation has not only enhanced Turkey's transit profile and supply security, but also yielded functional spillover effects, cementing bilateral defense, intelligence, and diplomatic alignment. Shared energy interests have thus become an enduring structural pillar of the bilateral alliance.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that energy in Turkey–Azerbaijan relations transcends commercial exchange, functioning as a primary institutional pillar of their comprehensive strategic partnership. Spanning 1994 to 2024, bilateral cooperation expanded from direct commodity trade into integrated transit corridors, joint capital ventures, and intergovernmental regimes.

This relationship is best characterized as managed asymmetric interdependence: Azerbaijan wields upstream resource power, while Turkey holds transit geography and market connectivity. Strategic pipelines BTC, BTE, TANAP, and TAP alongside extensive SOCAR direct investments in Turkey, have locked in mutual interests and heightened the prohibitive costs of disruption. Crucially, the ramifications of this collaboration have produced functional spillover into security and political coordination, although energy remains one of several interacting variables. The sustainability of this model relies on regional stability, market dynamics, and infrastructure security. Ultimately, the Turkish–Azerbaijani experience demonstrates that asymmetric

dependencies, when steered through shared infrastructure and institutionalized coordination, can convert structural disparities into durable, resilient strategic alliances.

The Status-Laden Construction of Threat in Russian and Ukrainian Official Discourse

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Introduction and Research Objective

This article examines how Russian and Ukrainian official discourses connect material and security threats to historical narratives, collective identities, and claims to status and recognition. It asks how these connections give security concerns additional meanings and how, in some cases, compromise or concessions are represented negatively while confrontational policies are justified. The article analyzes the justificatory logic of official discourse; it does not treat discourse as a sufficient explanation of the war or of military decisions.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The analysis draws on Richard Ned Lebow's cultural theory of international relations, particularly *thymos* as a concern with honor, respect, and recognition, and sensitivity to humiliation. It distinguishes status, or claims to international standing, from recognition, or acknowledgment of identity, sovereignty, and political agency. Collective dignity is treated as a supplementary normative category, not as a separate foundational motive in Lebow's theory.

The study uses qualitative document analysis and directed thematic analysis to examine 50 official documents—25 Russian and 25 Ukrainian—issued between 2014 and the end of 2022. Documents were selected for their official provenance, relevance to identity and security, and connection to significant developments in the conflict. Twenty-nine documents provide the principal evidence for the findings; 21 provide historical or diplomatic context and qualifying evidence.

Meaningful statements or clauses served as the units of analysis. Documents were coded manually through ten operational codes organized within a six-component framework. The presence of at least five components in a document was used to identify extensive co-occurrence, not to select documents or establish causation. The framework is interpretive and does not imply a fixed sequence or a linear causal relationship.

Findings

Both corpora use historical narratives and self–other distinctions to frame political identity and make claims to status and recognition. Russian documents more often emphasize historical continuity, perceived post-Soviet grievances, great-power standing, and Russia's role in the regional security order. Some connect NATO enlargement and military insecurity to historical

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identity and Russia's collective future. Confrontational action may be presented as defensive, morally justified, sacrificial, or historically necessary.

Ukrainian documents more often emphasize historical independence, sovereign equality, political agency, and rejection of a subordinate or buffer-state position. References to invasion, occupation, and violated commitments connect immediate threats to national survival and an independent future. In some documents, concessions are framed as appeasement, abandonment of sovereignty, or repetition of historical mistakes, while resistance is justified as national defense and protection of democratic principles.

The comparison identifies shared discursive patterns without treating the two cases as equivalent. Russian documents foreground historical continuity and a claimed regional role; Ukrainian documents foreground independence, sovereign equality, and resistance to invasion. At the same time, references to negotiations, ceasefires, prisoner exchanges, and political solutions show that neither corpus is uniformly confrontational. Negative framing of particular concessions does not necessarily amount to rejection of negotiation itself.

Conclusion and Limitations

The findings show how official discourse can connect security concerns to historical identity, status, recognition, and collective dignity. In some documents, these connections give compromise a negative symbolic meaning and provide justifications for confrontation. The study's conclusions are limited to the selected official documents. They do not establish the causes of the war, decision-makers' private motives, public acceptance of official narratives, or causal effects on military decisions. Further research could examine audience responses and the circumstances in which status- and identity-related language accompanies diplomatic accommodation.

Keywords: Thymos; Russia–Ukraine War; Recognition; Status; Cultural Theory of International Relations