
AZERBAIJAN AND IRAN SEEK COMMON GROUND AMID REGIONAL TENSIONS

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In early March, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Iran met to discuss restoring operations of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran (Anadolu, March 5). Following an assault on the embassy by a lone attacker in January 2023, Baku temporarily halted its diplomatic mission in Tehran, stoking fears of a wholesale breakdown in bilateral ties (see EDM, January 31, 2023). At the time, tensions between the two countries were running high. Iran was becoming increasingly sensitive to the shifting power balance in the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan seeking to gain the upper hand over Armenia. Bakus adamant that the Zangezur Corridor be opened in accordance with the tripartite statement (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia) ending the Second Karabakh War has haunted Iranian policymakers, as such a development would effectively cut Tehran out of regional transit (see EDM, September 23, 2022, October 11, 2023). Iran has also been worried about Türkiye's growing role in the South Caucasus, fearing the potential creation of a Turkic corridor along its northern border (see EDM, July 6, October 2, 2023). In more recent months, Baku and Tehran have managed to find some common ground, especially regarding regional transit goals. This does not mean, however, that the two sides will cease competing for influence.

The meeting between the Iranian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers laid the groundwork for several new bilateral initiatives. On March 15, Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian announced that the two sides will soon unveil a joint storage dam on the Aras River, which serves as a natural border between the two countries. Moreover, on March 17, Seyed Abbas Mousavi, Iran's ambassador to Azerbaijan, declared that both governments are intent on opening a new chapter in bilateral relations that builds on a shared historical background (Nournews, March 17). Political statements from both sides likewise indicate a commitment to a renewal of bilateral cooperation. At the end of last year, Baku and Ankara signaled their openness to developing the Aras Corridor as an alternative route to the Zangezur Corridor. Opening an alternative passage would give Tehran a more central role in regional transit and trade (see EDM, November 3, 2023; January 10).

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