

# Georgia in Russian Foreign Policy: Implications for Iran

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## Abstract

Georgia has experienced many developments since independence because of the presence of Russia and the West in this country, which has played an important role in making a balance of power between Russia and the West. Therefore, examining the factors that have made Georgia's role important will help to identify the issue. So, the main question in this article is what is the role of Georgia in the balance of power between Russia and the West and its impact on Iran's national security? Our hypothesis is, the role of Georgia is important in the balance of power between Russia and the West due to its unique geopolitical position and its pro-western policies, and this orientation has an important impact on Iran's national security. The hypothesis has been investigated according to the assumptions of Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory and Mackinder's geopolitical theory. Findings show that Georgia, as a small country, has felt threatened by Russia and has tried to join the Western structure, which has highlighted Georgia's role in the balance of power between the two sides. The West has used the energy resources of the Caspian Sea to supply its energy and Georgia is playing a key role in this process, which jeopardizes Russia's policy of monopolizing Europe's energy supply. Thus, the Western military presence in Georgia and Russia's monopoly

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policy to supply energy to the European Union has a negative impact on Iran's national security. The research method is descriptive-explanatory.

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## **Introduction**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, three countries (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) emerged in the South Caucasus. Georgia is located in the south of the strategic Caucasus Mountains and has a common border with Russia. Georgia is geographically the only country in Central Asia and the South Caucasus that has access to open seas through the Black Sea. After independence, Georgia clashed with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were autonomously ruled during the Soviet era, and finally reached a peace agreement in 1992, mediated by Russia. Georgia, like other countries after independence, wanted to be free from Russian domination and used Christianity and European identity to join the European Union, especially after the Rose Revolution. After the Rose Revolution, with Saakashvili in power, Georgia wanted to join the European Union. In August 2008, Saakashvili invaded South Ossetia to unite Georgia and seized Tskhinvali, while Russia felt threatened by Western influence in Georgia. During the war, following Saakashvili's mistaken attack on Russian troops in South Ossetia, Russia reacted harshly and occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognized the autonomy of the two regions. Western influence in Georgia was due to Russia's containment and supply of oil and gas resources through Azerbaijan, which launched the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines because the transit of oil and gas resources to Europe was monopolized by Russia, and the West wanted different ways to supply their energy resources. By infiltrating Georgia, the West seeks to take advantage of Russia in the South Caucasus and provide various ways to supply its energy. Due to the military nature of the Caucasus Mountains,

NATO's presence in Georgia was also dangerous for Russia and could have shifted the balance of power in favor of the West. If NATO dominates the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia, it will dominate the Russian plains.

We refer to several studies that have led to the confrontation between Russia and the West in Georgia. Matsaberidze (2015) wrote an article about Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine. He analyzed the construction and transformation of Georgia and Ukraine's post-Soviet security strategy in the context of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy (Near-abroad policy). In his research, he concluded that the wars of 2008 and 2014 could be seen as reactions to the success of the velvet revolutions that encircled the Russian Federation in the region. The wars were aimed at altering the changing international realities in the near abroad, and these wars were also not a revenge for the velvet revolutions—a sign of the rude interference of the West in Russia's near abroad—but the reaction to Russia's international humiliation. The humiliation began with German reunification, continued through Kosovo, and concluded with the EU's eastward expansion to Ukraine's borders. Thus, the soft power applied by the West was countered by military means by the Russian Federation. Russia's drive was aimed at creating buffer zones in Georgia and Ukraine by initiating "frozen conflicts," which could be used as indirect leverage in the hands of the Russian Federation to block the progress of Western aspirations in those two countries. Nilsson (2021) has written an article entitled "Between Russia's 'Hybrid' strategy and Western Ambiguity: Assessing Georgia's Vulnerabilities". He said in this article, Russia's 'hybrid' strategy for neighboring countries highlights the importance of the Russian approach of influence and how these approaches target domestic and foreign vulnerabilities in target countries. This article talked about the different resources that Russia uses against Georgia in terms of military, economic, political, information resources. The article concludes that the current focus on narrative progress in Russia's foreign policy research may divert attention from

addressing strategic weaknesses. In this article, we want to answer this question: what is the role of Georgia in the balance of power between Russia and the west? The role of Georgia is important between Russia and the West due to its unique geopolitical position and its pro-western policies and this orientation has an important impact on Iran's national security. In this article we used the descriptive-explanatory method.

First, we talked about our theoretical framework that we use and after that, we talked about the historical background, and then, we analyzed and explained the geopolitics of Georgia, pro-western policy of Georgia, Georgia between Russia and the West, and impact of this situation on national security of Iran. In the final part, we make the conclusion to our article.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article is based on the theory of balance of power from Kenneth Waltz. We have connected the balance of power theory with the heartland theory. We explained them in the following:

**Balance of Power:** The Balance of power was “revived and recast in 1979 with the publication of Kenneth Waltz’s theory of International Politics” (Nexon, 2009, p. 1). The balance of power is historically one of the most important concepts of international politics and the academic discipline of international relations (IR). The balance of power concept is defined as the following:

Two of the assumptions are needed to understand balance of power. First, "the chaotic nature of international politics is key to understanding the behavior of states, which must lead to state balance." (Simpson, 2018, p. 3). “Second, states are the principle actors in the international system” (Sun, 2014, p. 1).

If a country is emerging in the international system, small countries may see this great power as a threat and unite to counter and balance it to achieve equal weight on the scales. (Andersen, 2018). On the other hand, the father of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz, merely comments that “faced with unbalanced power states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the

international distribution of power into balance” (Parent & Rosato, 2015, p. 53).

**Heartland Theory and Balance of Power Theory:** The word Eurasia is a combination of the words Europe and Asia, first coined in 1883 by the Austrian geologist Edward Switzerland. The race to conquer Eurasia continued with the end of the Cold War, and after the Cold War, this geographical area became the focal point of competition between world powers. Central Eurasia is bounded on the west by the Black Sea, on the east by China, on the north by Russia, and on the south by Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. (Koolae, 2017).

The beginning of the geopolitical debate is Hartland's theory. Mackinder's theory of a world power shift is known as the “Heartland Theory”. It reflects the intricate dynamics and relationships between geography, political power, and military strategy intertwined with demographics and economics. These relationships illustrate the features and importance of Heartland's theory (Daniels, 2020). Mackinder explained for the first time “how the "Heartland" region of Eurasia is effective in creating global balance and security, and that a country that controls the region will play a very important role globally” (Vaezzadeh, 2016 p. 541).

According to this statement, he suggested that “the state that dominated the Heartland would possess the necessary geopolitical and economic potential to ultimately control the world politics” (Hel Kafi & Chowdhury, 2021, p. 3). Due to the importance of the region to Russia and its efforts to re-infiltrate the region, the newly independent countries tried to form new alliances in order to survive and escape from Russian domination. According to Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory, if there is a rising, big, and powerful state in the international system, other smaller states may find this Great Power threatening and will therefore join together to oppose and balance it, to achieve equal weight. Thus, the efforts of the newly independent states to join the new alliances and Russia's efforts to infiltrate the region have created rivalry between the great powers of the region.

## I- Historical Background

**Cold War:** The Cold War period can be characterized as a permanent competition between the West and East blocs, or between the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its satellite states” (Cizik & Novák, 2015, p. 3) The South Caucasus was part of the Soviet Union during the cold war. The alliance system dominated by the two superpowers, therefore, divided the entire world into two camps. Western European countries mostly sided with the United States, while Eastern European countries joined the Soviet camp. This is why these alliances are also called "Western" and "Eastern" alliances (Uppal, 2007).

“NATO’s founding document, the North Atlantic Treaty (known as the Washington Treaty) was signed in 1949” (Hillison, 2018, p. 9). By joining NATO, each member state agreed to treat an attack on any other member as an attack on itself. “NATO's collective defense policy was known as deterrence because it was designed to deter (discourage) a Soviet attack. In 1955, the Soviet Union and its allies formed their own military alliance, called the Warsaw Pact, to oppose NATO” (Cronin, 2019, p. 1).

**The 1990s Events:** Following the collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO changed its goals for survival. The existence of the NATO alliance before the collapse of the Soviet Union was significant and purposeful. The organization, which was set up to counter Soviet threats and to defend the security of its members against the Eastern threat, had virtually no reason to survive and somehow faced a crisis of legitimacy (Tabatabai & Fathi, 2015). Thus, "by changing NATO's goal from confronting communism and the former Soviet Union to other issues such as Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism the slogan of defending human rights based on the principles of Western liberal democracy, countering the production and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ensuring security of extraction and the transfer of energy (oil and gas resources), the need for NATO to continue its life and expand its geographical area to the east became a necessity” (MohammadAliPour & Taremi,

2020, p. 49). The important decision taken by the leaders of the Russia with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union was to make a new policy on the basis of shared values and interests to integration or association with the “political West” (Zagorski, 2019). Russia cooperated in NATO's Partnership for Peace program and formally joined this part of NATO's defense program in May 1995, but with the announcement of NATO's East Development Plan, Relations between the two sides cooled. . NATO announced its expansion plan at a summit in Brussels in the summer of 1994. This in turn led to a hostile reaction from Russia. From the Russians 'point of view, NATO's expansion to the east has been the most important factor in the backwardness of NATO-Russia security cooperation (Ebrahimi & Babri, 2017).

**After 9/11:** The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were a milestone in international developments. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the united states marked the beginning of a new order proposed by Bush Jr. (the Bush Doctrine) to form a global coalition against terrorism, beginning with the United States entering Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East under the pretext of fighting terrorism and using the coalition military bases (Zargar & Sayad, 2016). At first, Russia supported the US invasion of Afghanistan. Putin expected the United States to respond appropriately, but the United States announced the expansion of NATO to the east, the establishment of military bases and the deployment of missile systems, which caused Russia to lose confidence. These events led Russia to declare in its 2010 national security documents that the United States is the main competitor for the next ten years (Samudi et al., 2010, p. 54).

Georgia has participated in US-led NATO missions in Afghanistan and Iraq since gaining independence in 1991 (Ahmadi et al., 2020). In cooperation with NATO, Georgia had the second-largest number of troops in Iraq after the U.S. In 2012. At the height of the Georgian contribution to Afghanistan, it had more than 2,000 troops serving in some of the deadliest places in Afghanistan, in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. Today, Georgia has 870 troops



in Afghanistan, making it the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO training mission (Coffey, 2019). In recent days, NATO has tried to leave Afghanistan. During this time, the United States strengthened its bilateral defense ties with Georgia by training and developing infrastructure, which strengthened the Georgian Armed Forces. Therefore, Georgia was able to upgrade its conventional weapons, aircraft and equipment from 2016 onwards, in cooperation with the United States.

## **II- Geopolitics of Georgia**

Georgia is located in the South Caucasus and sits at crucial geographical and cultural crossroads. Georgia has been important for economic and military reasons for centuries. Among the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, only Georgia has access to open seas through the black sea (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Georgia's defense policy has remained the same since 2008. Georgia is trying to find political and financial support for itself. It also considers access to international organizations very important. Georgia remains committed to developing cooperation with NATO. (Kuimova & Wezeman, 2018). Georgia has also participated in international missions, exercises and other activities led by NATO. "Georgia has been one of the top troop contributors (and the top non-NATO contributor) to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, which will end in 2021" (Welt, 2021, p. 10). Georgia offered its territory, infrastructure, and logistical capabilities for the transit of NATO forces and cargo for Afghanistan.

According to the strategic partnership pact between the United States and Georgia, the United States supports Georgia's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, the firm political support of the U.S. will remain as a main deterrent to Russian aggression (Mnistry Defence of Georgia, 2018). In addition to security and defense, Georgia seeks to enhance economic and trade cooperation through strategic partnership. Tbilisi focuses on the idea of an economic corridor between Asia

and Europe, in which Georgia plays an important role. The idea that Georgia could act as an economic hub to connect European and Asian markets has led to strategic partnerships between the two sides. (Smolnik, 2020). Georgia has been able to realize this idea to some extent because of pipelines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and even the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Georgia, due to its special geographical location, has also been able to play an important role in diversifying energy routes for Europe (Kazemi, 2020). The United States has sought to advance its national interests by expanding the economic mechanisms of the Caucasus region and the process of energy transfer from east to west and by providing assistance in resolving conflicts. Thus, the United States sought to reduce Russian influence in the region because Russian influence in the Caucasus region jeopardized Western interests.

Russia has a common border with the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In addition it has the first-largest proved reserves of natural gas in the world. Under President Putin, Russia's energy influence has peaked. "Russia uses its energy wealth for three reasons: to gain economic benefits; to maintain, increase and exert its political influence in its perceived sphere of influence, the so-called near abroad; and, should the need arise, to exert political pressure on end-consumers" (Kortweg, 2018, p. 13). The huge volume of oil and gas reserves, access to major consumer markets and having an extensive transit network have created a high potential for Russia. This capability, when used in diplomacy and policy-making, highlights Russia's role as an influential global power. At times, Russia has used energy diplomacy as leverage to counter issues such as EU enlargement and prevent its neighbors from joining NATO, and repeating it in the future could have important consequences for the EU. Georgia is a rival to Russia in the transport of energy and is jeopardizing Russia's interests because Russia wants monopoly of the transit and export of oil and gas resources to the EU. That is why Europe is trying to provide different ways to supply its energy. This has led to warnings among

European countries that depend on Russian energy. These fears stem from Gazprom's decision to cut off gas supplies to Ukraine, Belarus and the war in Georgia, which posed a threat to the corridors of non-Russian European pipelines.

The Georgian government's rapprochement with NATO and the signing of military alliances with the United States, participation in the transfer of Caspian energy, and NATO membership applications limited Russia's influence in the Caucasus. Russia had pressured the country to block reforms leading to Georgia's westernization. In Georgia, Russia tried to show the country that it would pay a heavy price by moving away from Russia, and, on the other hand, it tried to show the West that Russia is sensitive to its Near-abroad countries and reacts to developments around its borders. Although Russia was passive in the 1990s in the face of developments in the Commonwealth of Independent States, but now it uses economic and even military means to defend territory that was formerly part of the Soviet Union.

### **III- The Pro-Western policy of Georgia**

Over the past three decades especially after the independence, "Georgia has faced serious domestic and international problems that have threatened its existence as a sovereign state" (Kakachia, 2013, p. 1). It has also pursued its main goal which has been to escape from the Soviet Union legacy and structure. Georgia rejected post-soviet institutions like Common Wealth of Independent States (CIS) (Georgia withdraw in 2008), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Georgia withdraw in 1999), because it was dominated by Moscow.

In November 2003, the Rose Revolution took place. When Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, he made Euro-Atlantic integration a priority (Paul & Shiriyev, 2012). in fact "Saakashvili came to power with two key slogans: joining Euro-Atlantic structures and the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity by restoring separatist areas" (Vaezi, 2009, p. 15). "The

Rose Revolution was interpreted as ‘the masses upholding Georgia's national dignity and democratic values’ that implied reentry into Europe” (Kakachia, 2015, p. 174). There were many factors for the revolution, but apart from Georgia's internal factors, the support of the West and international organizations contributed to the Georgian revolution. As a result of the Rose Revolution, the West's influence in Georgia became stronger and Russia's influence weakened. It also provided grounds for confrontation between Russian and Western interests (Koolae, 2012). With the victory of the Rose Revolution, the Georgian system of government changed to a system similar to that of the European Union. The soft power of the west was successful. The balance of power was breaking down and NATO and the EU had infiltrated Russia's backyard.

Georgia, frustrated by Russia-South Ossetia relations, wanted to join NATO as well as EU; this request was strongly opposed by Moscow. In 2008, the separatist crisis in South Ossetia and Abkhazia intensified. Tbilisi occupied the center of South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) in August 2008, then on August 8 Russia sent troops to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and with the deployment of Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow attacked the airports and military bases of Georgia. The war ended with the defeat of Georgia. Russia has recognized the independence of these regions and has expanded political and military cooperation with South Ossetia, so that according to the agreement signed on August 31, 2017 between South Ossetia and Russia, part of the military units of this autonomous region have joined the Russian army (Ghorbani et al, 2018)]. Russia was dissatisfied with Georgia's decision to join NATO and the European Union and felt threatened. Therefore, “the August War of 2008 was a Russian attempt to stop Georgia’s aspiration to join NATO and the EU, or at least to transform it into a vaguer promise for the future” (Matsaberidze, 2015, p. 81). With Saakashvili stepping down and the Dream Party coming to power in 2012, Georgia has sought to maintain a balance between Russia and the West. Accordingly, they approved a new article. Details will be explained below. In March 2013, the

Georgian parliament passed a resolution on foreign policy. Integration into Europe and the Euro-Atlantic was a top foreign policy priority, but the resolution contains dubious paragraphs that indirectly acknowledge Russia's security interests in the region. (Kapanadze, 2014).

In recent years, Georgia has still been pursuing a policy of EU membership, but one of the most important obstacles to Georgia is Russia. One of the conditions for a country to join the EU is that it does not have conflicts with its neighbors. However, Georgia does not have good relations with Russia because Russia separated the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia during the 2008 war and recognized the independence of these republics. Although this raises doubts about Georgia's accession to the European Union, relations between Russia and European countries are working in Georgia's favor. Russia does not have good relations with Europe, and this causes Europe to use Georgia to put pressure on Russia. Another obstacle is that Russia strongly opposes the approach of Europe or NATO to Russia's borders, or the so-called perceived threat of Russia approaching NATO to the buffer zone between Russia and Europe. In early 2019, incumbent Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili said in a speech in France that Georgia would continue its efforts to move closer to the European Union. The president of Georgia showed his strong desire to converge with the European Union.

#### **IV- Georgia between Russia and West**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia considered itself the legitimate successor to the Soviet Union and sought to revive the Eastern Empire. Russia has declared the South Caucasus as part of its vital interests. Russia's security vision in the region is based on preventing the presence of regional and trans-regional powers, especially NATO and the United States. Russia is sensitive to the Caucasus because of its geographical, economic and energy aspects. (Shirazi and Naderi, 2011). Georgia was the first republic in the South Caucasus whose officials distanced their security view

by those of Russia.

After the independence, Georgia suffered from transition repercussions (from communism to democracy) and had limited success in making democratic institution (Ingle, 2020) In addition, the international system was unfamiliar with Georgia. The Great Powers have struggled to control over the Black Sea and the Caspian resources. In the new security environment, Georgia has gained its political and economic significance as a transit corridor for energy supplies. Georgia plays an important role for the United States because the United States is interested in separating the former Soviet republics from Russia. Georgia is important for the EU because it can reduce EU member states' dependence on energy import from Russia and also for Russia because Russia is interested in dominating the region. The main issue lies in geopolitical competition in the Black Sea region and in geopolitical influence in Georgia.

The West is pursuing its own interests in Georgia, "reliance on Russian gas is considered a threat to the wealth, power and security of the EU" (Popovic, 2020, p. 1) because Russia uses energy as a leverage to the European Union, but simultaneously, avoids challenging its influence and interest in the region. The West tries to diversify its energy supply routes through the Caspian Sea and Georgia plays a key role for the West in this respect.

Georgia is like a bridge in the south Caucasus that can connect south-north and east-west energy corridors (Tsursumia, 2015) Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline were made with American support. "One of the results of these two plans is to reduce the dependence of the countries of the east-west transport corridor route on Russia and Iran, which will reduce the influence of these two countries" (Heydari, 2011, p. 221). Georgia is considered a partner and friend for the EU, due to its adherence to the values of liberal democracy and European structures. Pipelines that can export gas to Europe other than Russia are Georgian pipelines that are of great importance to Europe. Russia's approach to energy is based on the monopoly of the South

Caucasus republics' dependence on it, and it sensitively pursues other countries' energy programs in the region. The South Caucasus is economically important to Russia. The main issue in this regard is oil and energy resources and its transportation or energy corridors (Shirkhani et al, 2018).

### **V- Impacts on Iran`s National Security**

Georgia and Iran don't have a common border but has a common border with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia is far from Iran due to its western orientation. (Weiss & Zabanova, 2017). "The South Caucasus, situated as it is at the crossroads of Eurasia's major energy and transport corridors, continues to play a vital role in the world's security affairs" (Balla, 2013, p. 1). Iran recognized Georgia's sovereignty after the collapse of the Soviet Union but the relationship between Iran and Georgia is at low level (Rahnejat & Kabiri, 2018). "For centuries, the Caucasus region, due to its regional position and geopolitical and geostrategic importance, has been a place of rivalry and conflict between major regional and trans-regional powers such as Russia, Britain, Iran, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and today the United States" (GhorbaniNezhad et al, 2021, p. 947). Iran's foreign policy towards Georgia is based on maintaining cultural relations and taking into account its national interests. Amirahmadian, 2012) Iran also is trying to "Use Georgian territory for transit purposes to Europe, energy supply and is expanding its cultural and historical relations with Georgia" (Kazemzadeh, 2016, p. 18).

According to Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory, Georgia as a small and new independent state tries to make alliance with the other countries especially west to be free from domination of Russia. Georgia's pro-western policies and geopolitical position have played a significant role in the balance of power between Russia and the West, and Georgia's role as a balancing country has an impact on Iran's national security. Georgia is trying to join NATO and become a member of the European Union by pursuing pro-Western policies. In term of security, Georgia's cooperation

with NATO and the military presence of NATO in Georgia can have a negative impact on Iran's national security. Furthermore, the geopolitical situation has caused the Caspian Sea energy resources to pass through this country and be exported to the European Union, which is why it is very important for the West, because Russia seeks to monopolize energy exports to Europe. Russia has tried to undermine Georgia's geographical advantage and maintain its monopoly on energy export to Europe.

Therefore, if Georgia acts as a balancing country between Russia and the West independently, it will have a positive impact on Iran's interests, which has been not materialized due to the limitations of Georgia as a small state. But, if Georgia's orientation to the West shifts the balance in favor of the United State, this situation can be considered as negative, because of the hostile relations between the two countries. On the other hand, if Georgia takes a pro-Russian approach, it can be seen in political sense as good for Iran due to the current good relations between Iran and Russia but in terms of Iran's energy exports to Europe, it can be negative due to Russia's policy based on sustaining monopoly on energy exports to Europe.

Tbilisi-Washington relations are based on their common interests in reducing Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Georgia as a small state try to join European structure which creates a balance with Russia. The policy of the United States toward supply energy is to seek diversification of energy sources. "The energy resources of the Caspian Sea are of great importance because the US can reduce its dependence on Persian Gulf energy" (Koolae & Goudarzi, 2014, p. 208). In addition, the US seeks to prevent the infiltration of Iran and Russia in region.

The main goal of the US in South Caucasus is to control energy resources in the Caspian Sea and prevent the formation of any rival power against US sovereignty over the world's energy resources, (Shirazi & Naderi, 2011) as well as control energy corridors. Therefore, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines were built with US support and were commissioned in



2006. These pipelines do not pass through Iran and Russia. They have already jeopardized the interests of Russia and Iran. Also, by connecting the Trans-Caspian pipeline to the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline, Iran and Russia have no role in exporting Turkmen gas to Europe, which also jeopardizes the national interests of both countries. “The United States is trying to undermine Iran's role in the region and pursue a policy of everything without Iran” (Zibakalam et al, 2014, p. 85) in other words, According to US policy toward Iran, if Iran plays an important role in this process, the balance of power between Russia and the West will be upset, which is why the West is trying to involve its allies in energy transfer projects. In this competition, the United States has generally viewed Turkey as able to foster pro-Western policies and discourage Iranian interference in the South Caucasus states. The United States has sought to limit Iran's revenue. Also, by limiting Iran's revenue, it hinders economic recovery and has strengthened Iran's military and political power. In fact, economic leverage is used to threaten Iran's political and military security (Hakim et al, 2015). In addition, “Iran has missed the opportunity to enter a multinational structure for pipeline contracts due to US and even Russian policies toward Tanap-Nabucco pipeline project” (Rahnejat & Kabiri, 2018, p. 156).

After the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, Iran-Georgia relations improved. In July 2017, at a meeting between President Rouhani and the Prime Minister of Georgia, the President of Iran said: “Iran and Georgia have great potentials and capabilities for development of ties in the field of economics, science and culture”. The President also said: “Today, transit is very important in the region, and with regard to connecting Iran’s rail system to Astara and Azerbaijan and rail and road connection in Georgia, deepening Tehran-Tbilisi ties in this field can make great developments in the region” (Official Website of the President of Iran, 2017). But with the withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA in 2018, good relations between Iran and Georgia did not continue with maximum pressure on Iran by the

US government. Moreover, during the visit of US National Security Adviser John Bolton to Georgia in October 2018, the development of strategic cooperation between Georgia and the United States and regional security issues were among the topics discussed by John Bolton with Georgian officials (IRNA, 2018). Tbilisi sees Washington as a trans-regional source for diplomatic, security and focal support for infrastructure investment and economic growth. Politically, Georgia's relations are under Western pressure or, depending on geopolitical circumstances, Russia-centered. For these reasons, the political relations between Iran and Georgia are not well developed.

Moscow is sensitive to any presence by third countries in the South Caucasus region. Meanwhile, Iran, with its close relations with Russia, is no exception. From Moscow's point of view, Iran's presence in the Caucasus jeopardizes Russia's interests because Iran has enormous natural resources and its ability to connect the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea. Therefore, Russia is not interested in Iran's presence in the Caucasus. Given that buyers of natural gas cannot easily have an alternative if the flow of gas by the supplier is stopped, so it makes buyers dependent on Russia, or on the other hand, the EU becomes dependent on Russia in terms of energy (Koolae and Rezaei, 2017), in other words, the competition between the West and Russia means that if Iran has an important role in the field of energy transit through Georgia, Russia will lose its most important lever in competition with the West. "Energy is an important factor in enhancing Russia's position in the international system. Government's control over oil and gas pipeline projects has become an important tool for Russia's political, military, and economic influence, and energy production therefore serves Russia's foreign policy goals" (Koolae & Goudarzi, 2014, p. 107).

The war between Georgia and Russia has opened a new chapter of bilateral cooperation between Tehran and Tbilisi. Georgia is desperately seeking a way out of its political dependence on Russia and Iran can play a positive role in this matter. For example, in 2006

Moscow imposed heavy economic sanctions against Georgia, it cut transport links and announced that it would increase current gas price for Georgia from \$110 to \$230 per 1,000 cubic meters (Chitadze, 2012). After this fact, it became clear, why a closer relationship with Iran is so important to Georgia and also why Russia is so sensitive. As a result, Russia is trying to prevent closer ties between Iran and Georgia because it does not want Iran to join energy transit projects to Europe via the Caucasus. Russia believes that if Iran joins the Caucasus energy transfer projects, the geopolitical and geostrategic balance in the Caucasus and Central Asia will change to the detriment of Russia. The situation created by the geopolitical situation and energy transition by Russia has prevented Iran from opportunities such as access to European markets.

## **Conclusion**

During the 2008 war between Georgia and South Ossetia, the Georgian military mistakenly targeted Russian forces in support of its citizens. It led Russia to invade Georgia and occupy the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and recognize the independence of the two regions. Russia thus prevented Georgia from joining NATO and the European Union, because a country that wants to join the European Union should not have a conflict with a neighboring country. We can consider the Russia-Georgia war as Russia's reaction to the victories of the Western soft power in Georgia. With the victory of the Georgian Dream Party in 2012, Georgia has tried to strike a balance between its relations with the West and Russia and not challenge Russia's interests in the region, but Georgia's priority remains to join Western structures.

What has given rise to the rivalry between the West and Russia in the present period is the political, economic, and military importance of Georgia. Georgia's pro-Western policy and geopolitical position have prompted the West and Russia to seek a balance of power in the South Caucasus that makes the role of Georgia important. Therefore, if Georgia acts as a balancing

country between Russia and the West independently, it will have a positive impact on Iran's interests, which has not materialized due to the limitations of Georgia as a small state. But, if Georgia's orientation to the West shifts the balance in favor of the United State, this situation can be considered negative, because of the hostile relations between the two countries, on the other hand, if Georgia takes a pro-Russian approach, it can be seen in the political sense as good for Iran due to the current good relations between Iran and Russia but in terms of Iran's energy exports to Europe, it can be negative due to Russian policy based on sustaining monopoly on energy exports to Europe.

The limitation of Georgia caused this country as a small state and newly independent country close to one side and don't act independently. Georgia pursued a pro-western policy, even after the Dream Party came to power, but simultaneously tried not to challenge Russia's interests. Also, Georgia has distanced itself from Iran in the framework of cooperation with NATO. These conditions are in contrast to the history of Georgia. Georgia-Iran economic cooperation, including energy exports to Europe through Georgia, was not happening due to Western sanctions, and even Iran was excluded from energy transfer projects from the Caspian Sea to Europe. If Georgia turns to Russia, it will lead to good political relations between Iran and Georgia, but this will have a negative impact on energy exports, as Russia will lose its monopoly on energy exports to Europe.

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