Armenian-Iranian relations have the potential to achieve new levels of ‘amicable’ collaboration—if the two nations are left alone to deal with one another. Although few laypersons can even locate one or the other on a map, many soon will be able to as American sanctions on Iran impact the region and complicate larger geopolitical events.

America’s goal is to isolate Iran from all outlets to the rest of the world, albeit it is not working as planned. Efforts to date may actually be making the US governments position more difficult with its friends and driving Iran closer to some of its neighbours out of economic and political expediency.

Describing the close relationship in 2018 between Armenia and Iran (the main two countries in this discussion), the [then] acting Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, said: “We don’t see the need to make any change in them, we need to only maintain the good level of these relations and to raise them to a new level.”

This statement is significant, from both a perspective of historic and context of current events. This should be hardly surprising, as both nations live under the shadow of US-imposed sanctions, which in Armenia’s case also include any
business dealings with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

These continued good relations are maintained despite US might and they are not a welcomed development for the US while it continues finger pointing and trying to further tighten the noose around Iran.

**New Realities**

For Armenia, the current challenge is to keep its good relationship with Iran intact whilst also not distancing itself from the US and Russia. Pashinyan has repeatedly said that, "Armenia needs to intensively develop relations with Iran for mutual benefit."

This may be easier said than done in light of recent statements. For instance, "Iran considers Karabakh to be Azerbaijani territory and supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan," said Lt. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, Iran’s chief of General Staff a few days ago. "Changing borders by force is unacceptable, and Iran always stands by the [Azeri] side on this issue."

But this sudden shift in policy by Iran is all about location, timing, and trying to maintain a delicate balance. At the end of the day, that is what Armenia is also trying to do. It understands (and accepts) the Iranian support of the Azeri position, provided it (does not go beyond) mere words.

Two of Iran’s near neighbours, Armenia and Georgia, serve as important conduits to the West. Azerbaijan and Turkey have Armenia blockaded on two sides, and Georgia has not always been a trusted trade and banking outlet for Armenia. All told, if it weren’t for the borders with Georgia and Iran, the economies of both Armenia and Iran would suffer far more.

Armenia remembers the early 90s well, a period when food and energy had to flow through neighbouring Georgia, and were subject to hijacking and extraction. On one occasion the main railroad bridge which carried wheat and energy supplies from Georgian ports was blown up.

The Western media blamed this act on the Azerbaijani Special Forces. However, from the information I have been able to gather from local sources, it was an open secret in regions close to the border that this was the handiwork of the Georgian fuel mafia.

Hence there are very pragmatic reasons why the small border between Armenia and Iran should remain open for traffic and trade, especially for energy. As then-president Sargsyan said in an interview in 2017 with the Shardh Daily newspaper, gas for electricity swaps was a win-win situation for both Iran and Armenia, and this is why both countries remain interested in future cooperation.

**Rock and Hard Place**

In these days of never-ending US sanctions, it can be awkward, given its relations with the West, for Armenia to fully justify its close and expedient relations with Iran. But there is a general understanding in Brussels and Washington that Yerevan is between a rock and a hard place.

The fallout from the recent Iranian statement over NK remains to be seen. But the Iranian Ambassador in Yerevan will be obliged to issue a clarifying statement of some sort.

On January 18 the Iranian military attaché to that embassy discounted the “information which is circulating in the Azeri media on his visit, especially in terms of the controversial statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue”.

The attaché reaffirmed Iran’s balanced position on the NK issue, and that Iran has recently stated that it has not undergone any changes in [its policy] and that the information presented in the media and with various comments, has been distorted. Moreover, emphasising the importance of political relations between the two countries, “the sides are confident that there will be many opportunities to express their official position on high level mutual visits and to address various issues.”

Diplomats from both sides, Levon Ayvazyan and Mehdri Vecdani, also highlighted the development of defence relations for regional stability, peace and security.

**Meanwhile - never ending story**

America and many of its close allies often turn a blind eye to sanctions-busting due to the realities faced by Armenia, as a landlocked country. Despite the rhetoric, Iran and Armenia will likely continue business as usual, as it would not
be politically expedient, especially for the US, to drive Armenia even closer to Iran and Russia by trying to use it as a stick to beat –Iran with.

Cross-border and regional commerce is made easier by the presence of a sizable Armenian community in Iran (albeit one that’s been dwindling since the revolution of 1979). It gives ties between Armenia and Iran a particular relevance today. The current geopolitical turmoil has strengthened the Armenian community in Iran, and it is now in a better position, both politically and in terms of religious freedom.

That is why Armenia will not collaborate and impose strict sanctions on Iran. It also has to maintain a delicate balance with other, less friendly, neighbours like Azerbaijan and Turkey but also Russia, which is an unconditional military ally, supplier of weapons and other necessary goods. Russia also maintains a military presence in the country which ensures Armenian national security. The ties with Russia go back far and run deep.

Both Armenia and Iran have regional ambitions. Armenia already has a stronger military than fellow Caucasus countries Georgia and Azerbaijan. The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 afforded regional opportunities to both countries.

**Regional Dynamics**

Relations between Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan will also impact the future status of the Caspian Sea, and reflect the dynamics of regional power plays. With so many interactions, it should be obvious why Armenia clarified last year, as reported by Radio Free Europe, that it has a mind of its own.

Despite John Bolton telling Prime Minister Pashinyan last October that, “the administration of Donald Trump will impose sanctions very vigorously,” and despite America’s efforts to pressure Armenia to close ranks with the US over sanctions, Armenia has made it very clear that it will not bow to foreign pressure. All these political maneuverings make the Armenia-Iran border a significant issue.

America knows very well that Iran uses Armenia and Georgia as gateways to the West, and that Armenia priorities its own national and state interests. It also understands that such vested interests do not always correspond with the interests of other countries. The presence of an active and vocal Armenian Diaspora in the US and its allies also makes these interests a matter of domestic importance.

But Iran also has other routes, via the Middle East and India and points farther east, to connect with the Western World. Georgia and Armenia are important, but they are not the only paths Tehran can use. This factor is often underestimated, but that is because Iran and Armenia both want this, knowing that emphasising their common interest benefits both.

Iran also has to walk a fine line. It borders counties that are not on good terms with Armenia, such as Azerbaijan and Turkey. It must also respect cultural diversity and be politically expedient and open to compromise. It will also need to present a less radical face to Christian countries for the sake of trade.

This explains in part why Iran has maintained a more or less neutral position in terms of the Karabakh conflict, at least until recently.

Iran, as an Islamic nation with a large Azerbaijani or otherwise Turkic population, would normally side strongly with Azerbaijan out of common religious values. The recent statement by General Bagheri is what you would expect to come out of Tehran. But it is newsworthy because it is anomalous.

Given what the US is always saying about Iran, Washington will be hoist on its own petard if it tries to use it to cause trouble, when this is one of the few statements Iran has made which can be interpreted negatively by Yerevan.

Iran also realizes that it is not an expert in the conflict resolution process. Tehran tried to mediate back in the ’90s, but did not get too far. In fact, it was one of the first nations to realize that it would ultimately gain more influence by allowing the combatants to sort out their own mess, and then offer resolution models over NK.

Reluctance to get involved in resolving conflicts also puts them out of step with the US, which tries to enlist everyone into such efforts. But if Iran’s alternative methods are seen to work, this will antagonise the rest of the world and make formal Iran-Armenia alliance, a necessity.

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