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Iran and the Role of Transit Corridors in the South Caucasus in the Context of the War against Ukraine

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Abstract

The Russian war against Ukraine, the extensive Western sanctions against Russia, the blockade of the east-west transit corridors through Russian territory, including the various China–Central Asia–Russia–Europe transit corridors and the Northern Corridor branch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that traverse Eurasia have impacted on new dynamics of the three corridors through the South Caucasus: the 'Middle Corridor', the 'International North–South Transport Corridor' (INSTC), and the 'Persian Gulf–Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor' (ITC). While neither Iran nor Russia play a role in the 'Middle Corridor' as it bypasses the two countries, Tehran and Moscow (as well as Baku) are very active in the INSTC. Furthermore, Iran aims to play an active role in the ITC in collaboration with Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria and Greece. In general, Iran seeks to establish a 'transit balance' in the South Caucasus region as part of its 'balanced foreign policy approach' framework; the challenges and constraints it has faced in this process will be examined in this article.

Introduction

When the new conservative government of Ebrahim Raisi came to power in Tehran in August 2021, the 'Look East' policy grew in importance overnight to become the main approach of Iranian foreign policy. Within this framework, Raisi declared his 'Neighbourhood Policy' and 'Economic Diplomacy' as his administration's top two foreign policy objectives. Transit corridors are vital to these efforts. On the other hand, in a world where oil exports as well as insurance operations and banking and financial transactions are subject to US sanctions, Iran hopes to prevent regional and international isolation by developing regional transit and effectively utilizing its strategic location. This also serves to create high and stable sources of income for Iran, which is especially important in the context of sanctions and other serious economic pressures.

However, as a result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, the balance of power and geopolitics of the South Caucasus shifted against Iran due to the strengthening of the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis with the informational and military support of Israel; furthermore, following Russia's war against Ukraine, several challenges were created for Iran in the field of revitalising its long-contentious nuclear agreement, the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). 'The main concern was that the scope of the rifts between Russia and the West due to the Ukraine crisis will extend to the Iranian nuclear talks, possibly preventing the parties from agreeing on the final text of the deal' (Kaleji 2022d). These concerns grew when Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov mentioned that 'we want an answer [...] we need a guarantee that sanctions (against Rus-

sia) will not in any way touch the regime of trade-economic and investment relations which is laid down in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' (Sly 2022). Indeed, selling drones to Russia and exporting Russian oil and steel to Iran's Asian customers, including China and India, for below-market prices constituted further challenges for Iran.

Under these circumstances, it seems that transit corridors are one Tehran's biggest opportunities to establish a 'transit balance' in Eurasia (and particularly the South Caucasus region) as part of its 'balanced foreign policy approach' framework. At the present time, 'Iran is the only country that has regular diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Armenian-Turkish relations have been severed since 1993, while relations between Georgia and Russia have been strained since 2008' (Kaleji 2021a). Therefore, Iran considers transit and trade as an important tool to maintain balanced relations with all three South Caucasus countries.

For this reason, Iran's active participation in both the 'International North–South Transport Corridor' (INSTC) and the 'Persian Gulf–Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor' (ITC) not only help its economy under the current US sanctions regime, but can also strengthen its 'balancing' approach in the South Caucasus. But how have transit opportunities been created for Iran? How can Iran use these opportunities? And what challenges and obstacles does it face in this process? This article answers these questions to gain an accurate, comprehensive, and realistic understanding of both the INSTC and ITC in the period since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's War against Ukraine and Transit Corridors

Before the start of Russia's war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Belarus had all hoped to be part of the 'New Eurasian Land Bridge' linking Europe to East Asia. These aims were derailed when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The war, the resulting extensive Western sanctions against Russia, and the growing possibility that European border states including Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Latvia will block east-west transit corridors traversing Russian territory into Europe are having far-reaching implications for the landlocked countries of Central Asia (Kaleji 2022c), as well as the South Caucasus. Under these circumstances, two potential transit routes, the Middle Corridor and the INSTC, have been significantly activated: both of them pass through the South Caucasus and Caspian Sea. The Middle Corridor is a rail freight and ferry system from China to Europe running through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, completely bypassing Russia (Carafano 2022). While Iran and Russia are bypassed by the Middle Corridor, Tehran and Moscow have been very active and influential in the planning and operating of INSTC.

Furthermore, Iran tries to have an active role in the ITC, which passes through the South Caucasus. While India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia are active in the INSTC, Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria and Greece participate in the ITC. Although Azerbaijan and Armenia are parties to both corridors, but due to tensions between Baku and Yerevan, in practice, the Republic of Azerbaijan is very active in INSTC, while Yerevan plays an essential role in the ITC.

The Role of Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia in the INSTC

Russia, Iran and India signed the agreement establishing the INSTC on 16 May 2002. Other countries, including Azerbaijan, joined this corridor in later stages. The INSTC is a multimodal and combined network of ships, rails, and road freight routes connecting India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. In particular, the Iran–Azerbaijan transit route in combination with the sea route between Iran and Russia via the Caspian Sea allows the

flow of goods between India and Russia by a shorter route without crossing the Suez Canal (see Figure 1 on p. 20 for a map of the INSTC).

Azerbaijan is Iran's main trade partner in the South Caucasus, and "topped the list of Iran's export destinations among the Caspian Sea littoral states in 2022".¹ But during the last two years, the volume of trade and transit between Iran and Azerbaijan has increased significantly, as the Astara–Baku–Dagestan land route is the main transit route from Iran to Azerbaijan and the densely populated areas of Western Russia. According to Alireza Peyman-Pak, 'the bilateral trade turnover between Iran and Azerbaijan increased by 100 per cent in July 2022 compared to July 2021'.² According to the statistics of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, Iran's non-oil trade turnover with Azerbaijan amounted to about 716,000 tons, worth approximately US\$637 million, during the first 11 months of the current Iranian year (21 March 2022 to 19 February 2023) (Baghishov 2023). Indeed, the volume of trade between Iran and Russia has also grown significantly in 2022, an important part of which is transported via the transit route through Azerbaijan: US\$4 billion in January–October 2022, an increase of 27% in Russian exports to Iran, as well as 10% in imports from that country.³

According to Russian officials, INSTC's total capacity, including all of its different branches, can reach up to 15.4 million tons per year, thus allowing space for significant growth.⁴ At the first trilateral meeting of Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia on 8 September 2022, the parties signed a statement to increase freight transit through the INSTC to 30 million tonnes by 2030. Additionally, Tehran hosted a transit meeting between Iran, the Central Asian countries, Russia, and Azerbaijan on 9 October 2022. The meeting resulted in an understanding on the development of transit among those countries, the unification of transit customs duties, and the issuance of one-year visas for transit truck drivers.⁵ According to the agreements made at the Tehran meeting, transit meetings will be held every 6 months. It clearly shows that Iran's approach to transit corridors in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine is part of the country's long-term goal of becoming a regional transit hub by diversifying transportation routes with neighboring countries.

1 'Azerbaijan Tops Iran's Export Destinations Among Caspian States', Financial Tribune, 4 July 2022, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/114221/azerbaijan-tops-iran-s-export-destinations-among-caspian-states> (accessed 20 March 2023).

2 'Trade turnover between Iran, Azerbaijan increases', Caliber.az, 28 August 2022, <https://caliber.az/en/post/103851/> (accessed 11 January 2023).

3 'Iran-Russia Trade at \$4 Billion', Financial Tribune, 11 December 2022. Available at: <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/116385/iran-russia-trade-at-4-billion> (accessed 12 January 2023).

4 '12 million tons of cargo to transit Iran yearly on Moscow-Mumbai route', *Rail Freight*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/11/28/12-million-tons-of-cargo-to-transit-iran-yearly-on-moscow-mumbai-route/> (accessed 20 March 2023).

5 'Iran inks transit communique with Central Asian countries', *Shargh Daily*, 9 October 2022, <https://www.sharghdaily.com/Section-iran-256/857998-iran-inks-transit-communique-with-central-asian-countries> (accessed 20 March 2023).

It seems that two main factors have caused a significant increase in the volume of trade and transit between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. The first factor is Iran's cooperation with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which has recently been upgraded to a Free Trade Agreement. The Free Trade Agreement, signed on 19 January 2023, involves more than 7,500 types of commodities.⁶ Although neighbouring Azerbaijan is not currently an EAEU member, it is the closest direct transportation route between Iran and the important Russian market. In this regard, the INSTC, which crosses Azerbaijan, has in Iran's mind a key role to play.

The second factor is the Russian war against Ukraine. The extensive Western sanctions against Russia, including transit restrictions in Eastern Europe, have greatly increased the INSTC's importance. 'The Kremlin considers this route not only as an alternative to the Suez Canal and an opportunity to establish new supply chains, but also as a way to evade the imposed sanctions, with Iran seen as an important trade partner, at least in grain trading. Iran can also become a transit hub for Russian wheat exports to Iranian neighbouring countries, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, both of which are likely to increase wheat imports in the 2022–23 marketing year'.⁷ Since the Astara–Baku–Dagestan transit route plays an important role in trade and transit between Iran and Russia, it is obvious that the transit role of Azerbaijan has increased significantly since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine as well. The route is also very important for Belarus, which is under Western sanctions as a partner and ally of Russia in the war against Ukraine.

Challenges and Constraints of the INSTC

Iran's efforts to develop trade and transit within the INSTC after the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine faces several important challenges and constraints:

1. The political relations between Tehran and Baku are not stable and have been tense several times since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. 'The strengthening of the axis of Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan with the support of Israel and Pakistan is the most important development that has happened in the Caucasus region' (Kaleji 2023). Under these circumstances, Iran faces new threats and challenges as a result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, including Iran's opposition to the 'Zangezur Corridor' connecting Azerbaijan proper with its enclave

Nakhchivan—because it fears the obstruction of the 38-kilometres Iran-Armenia border—and the increased military and security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. The armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran in January 2023, which led to its evacuation and closure by Baku, is but the latest example of tensions between the two sides. It is clear that these developments have a negative impact on economic, business and transit cooperation between Tehran and Baku in the INSTC.

2. Lack of rail connection between Iran and Azerbaijan has reduced the volume and speed of goods transfer within the corridor. The construction of the 164 km Rasht–Astara and the 55 km Zangilan–Nakhchivan railway lines through Iranian territory, as well as the revival of the Soviet-era Jolfa–Nakhchivan line, have not yet come to fruition. Undoubtedly, the most important rail gap is the 164 km Rasht–Astara route, as the only incomplete part of the INSTC as a whole. The completion of the 164 km Rasht–Astara Railroad between the cities of Rasht and Astara in Iran's Gilan Province and that in the Southwest of the Caspian Sea will connect to Azerbaijan's Astara, located at the Iranian border. The railway would enable increase in freight transport to 15 million tonnes annually, as well as making the journey 40% shorter and 30% more economical compared to existing land routes between the two countries. However, at the moment, 'the lack of this railway connection has made it inevitable that freight trains at the Astara railway station on the Iranian side will be transferred to trucks, or vice versa' (Kaleji 2022c). It is clear that these conditions have a negative effect on the rapid transfer of goods and containers between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. For this reason, Tehran hopes that, due to the war in Ukraine and Russia's resulting extreme reliance on the INSTC, it will be able to complete the project within the next three years (with the help of Russian investment).
3. The main transit route between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia is the 'Astara–Astara border crossing'⁸ on the Iran-Azerbaijan border, via which trucks and containers are transported to Azerbaijan and on to Russia. On average, a truck crosses the Astara border every 7 minutes. This issue causes heavy traffic and in some cases disruptions and long stops, problems the Astara crossing shares with the Samur border crossing between Azerbaijan and Russia. At the

6 'Iran, EAEU Finalize FTA Terms', *Financial Tribune*, 10 December 2022, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/116360/iran-eaeu-finalize-fta-terms> (accessed 20 March 2023).

7 'Russia looks east to boost exports amid sanctions', *Argus Media*, 6 July 2022, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2348111-russia-looks-east-to-boost-exports-amid-sanctions> (accessed 18 February 2023).

8 The name of the border towns, Astara, is the same in both countries.

border crossing of Astara exists only one 80-year-old metal border bridge, causing long queues of trucks. To solve this problem, Iran and Azerbaijan signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' on 26 January 2022 to build the new four-lane Astarachay Bridge, which aims to alleviate the existing traffic issues at the border. However, it seems that until the new bridge is built, serious traffic problems will continue.

4. Since the majority of Iran's exports to Azerbaijan and Russia in the INSTC are agricultural products, as well as medicine, there is a need for trucks equipped with refrigerated containers. The lack of these containers is considered an important challenge and obstacle in increasing the volume of trade and transit of these products in the INSTC.

Iran, Armenia and Georgia in the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor (ITC)

The ITC is a multimodal and combined network of ship, rail, and road freight routes connecting Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Greece. 'This multimodal corridor begins from the Persian Gulf and southern Iran and then proceeds to Armenia, from which it reaches the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi in the Black Sea. From there, Roll-on-Roll-off ('Ro-Ro') ships cross the Black Sea to Bulgarian ports (Burgas and Varna), after which cargo proceeds again by road to Greece and further into the European Union.'⁹ Iran was chosen as the 'trustee of the agreement', responsible for coordinating demands and finalising documents for the national parliaments of the six countries, and it has played a central role in establishing a transit route to the Black Sea region since 2016.

It seems that the Russian war against Ukraine and the blockade of the east-west transit corridors through Russia has led to a new dynamic within ITC. According to Hussain (2022), 'The US and EU are searching for coherent long-term strategies to reduce Russia's geo-economic sway in Eurasia; this has included the recent American engagement of Qatar to help wean Europe from its reliance on Russian gas. The ITC furthers this Western objective by giving the former Soviet South Caucasus a non-Russian route to global markets'. The ITC, like the Middle Corridor, fully bypasses Russia, and thus the West can be motivated to support this corridor—especially since Bulgaria and Greece, two members of

the European Union, are members of the ITC (see Figure 2 on p. 20 for a map of the ITC).

For this reason, on 6 June 2022, three months after the start of the Russian invasion, the Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry hosted a conference on the opportunities for cooperation within the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), as observer member in this regional organisation. Senior officials, including BSEC Secretary General Lazar Comanescu, attended the conference, which was a considerable opportunity for Iran to promote the Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian 'emphasised the need to finalize the Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Corridor Agreement' and 'expressed hope that the signing of the document and the building of the corridor would result in positive developments in trade and transit cooperation between Iran and the Black Sea region'.¹⁰

Within this transit corridor, Armenia is very important for Iran because it is the only South Caucasian country that is a member of the EAEU and can serve as a direct bridge between Iran and the bloc (Kaleji 2021b). Iran's exports to Armenia can be transferred to Russia through Georgia. Although the Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia land routes are superior in terms of existing infrastructure, Azerbaijan is not a member of the EAEU; therefore, Armenia, being in the ITC, presents a great advantage for Iran and Russia in terms of transit, customs and banking arrangements. Indeed, the corridor can help Iran connect its ports to the Georgian Black Sea ports of Batumi and Poti. Because Tehran and Ankara have faced a series of problems over the past several years (such as disputes over extra customs fees and border security), Iran aims to bypass Turkey in terms of transit to Europe to reduce its dependence by establishing an alternative route for trade, particularly via Bulgaria and Greece.¹¹

Challenges and Constraints of the ITC

Despite Iran's efforts to develop trade and transit within the ITC since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, there are many challenges and constraints:

1. The lack of rail connection between Iran and Armenia has reduced the volume and speed of goods transfer along the corridor. The old suggested rail lines of Marand-Norduz-Meghri-Yerevan were very expensive, and the perspective of reviving Soviet-

9 'Iran Looks to Create Persian Gulf-Black Sea Trade Corridor', Silk Road Briefing, 21 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2017/04/19/iran-looks-create-persian-gulf-black-sea-trade-corridor/> (accessed 20 January 2023).

10 'Iranian FM Urges Implementation of Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor', Tasnim News Agency, 30 May, 2022. Available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/05/30/2719112/iranian-fm-urges-implementation-of-persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor> (accessed 20 January 2023).

11 'Iran Welcomes Transit Corridor Linking Persian Gulf, Black Sea', Financial Tribune, 23 April 2017. Available at: <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/63028/iran-welcomes-transit-corridor-linking-persian-gulf-black> (accessed 18 February 2023); '1st European Cargo Bypasses Turkey to Reach Iran', Financial Tribune, 21 November 2016. Available at: <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/54005/1st-european-cargo-bypasses-turkey-to-reach-iran> (accessed 12 October 2022).

- Era Railways (specifically the Jolfa–Nakhjavan–Yerevan Railway) is not clear after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, due to constant tension between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan.
2. The ITC crosses the Iranian border and enters Syunik, Armenia's southernmost province, which is located on the route of 'Zangezur Corridor' that will connect main land of Azerbaijan to Nakhjavan. 'Several reasons underline Iran's concerns regarding the possible blocking or destruction of its border with Armenia. If this border is destroyed, all of Iran's northwestern regions will border Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan—and the number of Iran's neighbors will decrease from 15 to 14' (Kaleji 2022b). It is obvious that the possible blocking or destruction of 40-km Iran-Armenia border would cut the land route and transit access between Iran, Armenia and Georgia.
 3. Armenia's inadequate transit infrastructure and non-completion of the 'North–South Highway' poses another problem for the ITC. The 400-km road from Yerevan to Meghri on the Iranian border passes through mountainous areas and is very narrow, making it a slow and difficult journey for trucks, especially during winter with its snow and ice. Therefore, until the Armenian 'North–South Highway' is completed and linked to the 'East–West Highway' in Georgia, the transit and transfer of goods within the ITC via Armenian land routes will remain exceedingly slow, dangerous, and expensive.
 4. Differences in customs and transit regulations of the member countries of the ITC present another challenge. Bulgaria and Greece are members of the EU and adhere to the Union's customs and transit regulations. Georgia, as part of its broader goal of eventually joining the EU, has coordinated its customs and transit regulations with the bloc. However, as a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and EAEU member, Armenia's customs and transit rules and regulations are more similar to those of Russia. Indeed, 'according to the "Preferential Trade Agreement" with the EAEU that was implemented on October 27, 2019, Iran has taken important steps to coordinate customs and transit regulations with the Union' (Kaleji 2022a). Furthermore, the Preferential Trade Agreement was upgraded to a free trade agreement, which will mean

greater coordination of Iran's customs, banking, export and import laws with the EAEU and Russia.

5. US sanctions against Iran's financial and banking system and constraints on issuing a Letter of Credit constitute an important challenge and constraint for the ITC. Unlike the North–South corridor, where Iran and Russia have been able to activate and coordinate national banking mechanisms and Azerbaijan cooperates with Iran through exchange or cash payments at border points, the financial and banking conditions of this corridor are very difficult for Bulgaria, Greece and Georgia. Therefore, Iran's financial and banking restrictions resulting from US sanctions and the uncertain prospect of JCPOA are a substantial challenge to the trade and transit processes within the scope of the ITC. If the negotiations to revive JCPOA fail completely, Iran's nuclear case returns to the UN Security Council and Iran will once again be subject to Chapter 7 sanctions. Iran's financial and banking problems in the context of the ITC will intensify even further.

Conclusion

In a world where oil exports, insurance operations, and banking and financial transactions are subject to US sanctions, Iran hopes to prevent its own regional and international isolation by developing regional transit and effectively utilizing its geographic location to create high and stable sources of income. Within this framework, despite all challenges and constraints, Iran has attempted to (within the changing regional and international environment resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine) fully exploit the capacities of the INSTC and the ITC.

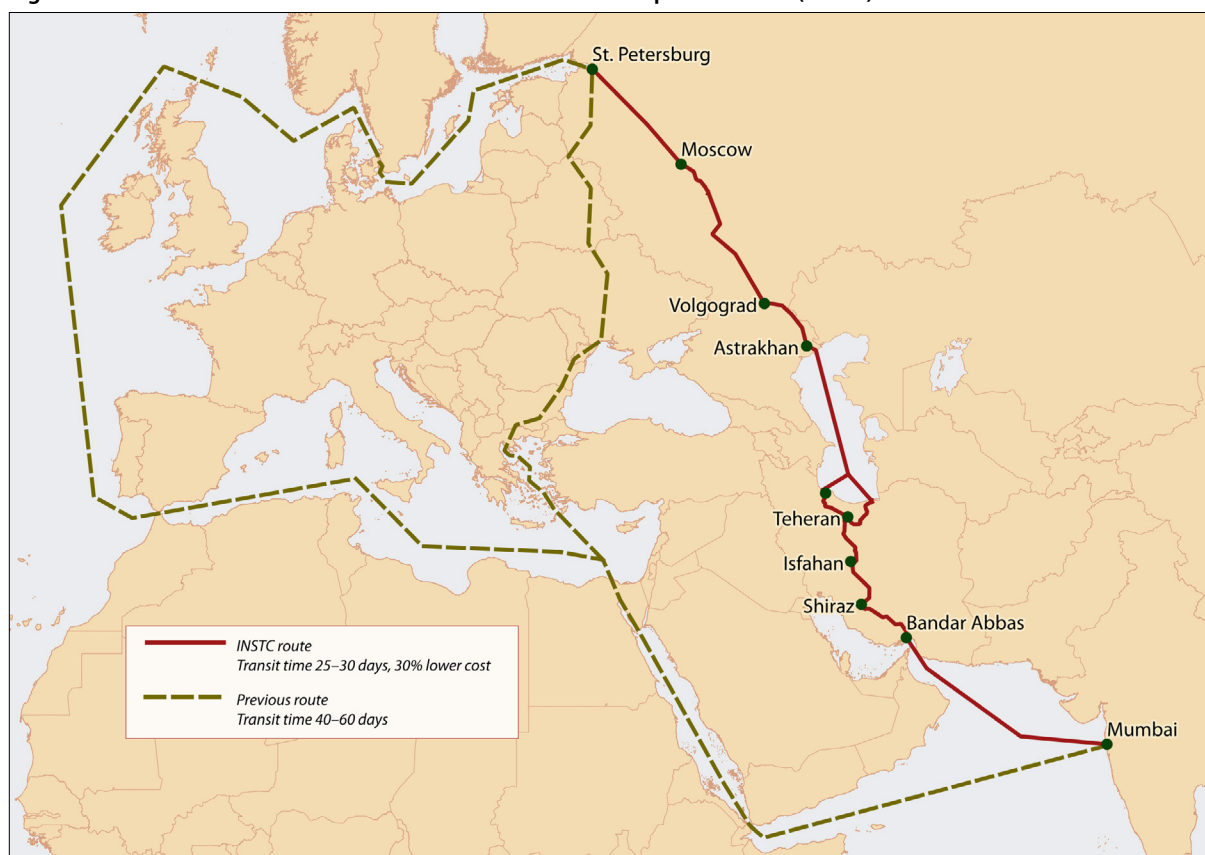
In addition to the economic and commercial benefits, Iran has the opportunity to strengthen its position in the South Caucasus after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. We should not forget that at present, among the three neighbours of the Caucasus (Iran, Russia and Turkey), Iran is the only country that has regular diplomatic relations with all three countries of the South Caucasus. As a result, Iran seeks to use this leverage to establish a 'transit balance' in the South Caucasus region as part of its 'balanced foreign policy approach' framework, specifically using the INSTC and ITC to further cement its power in the region.

About the Author

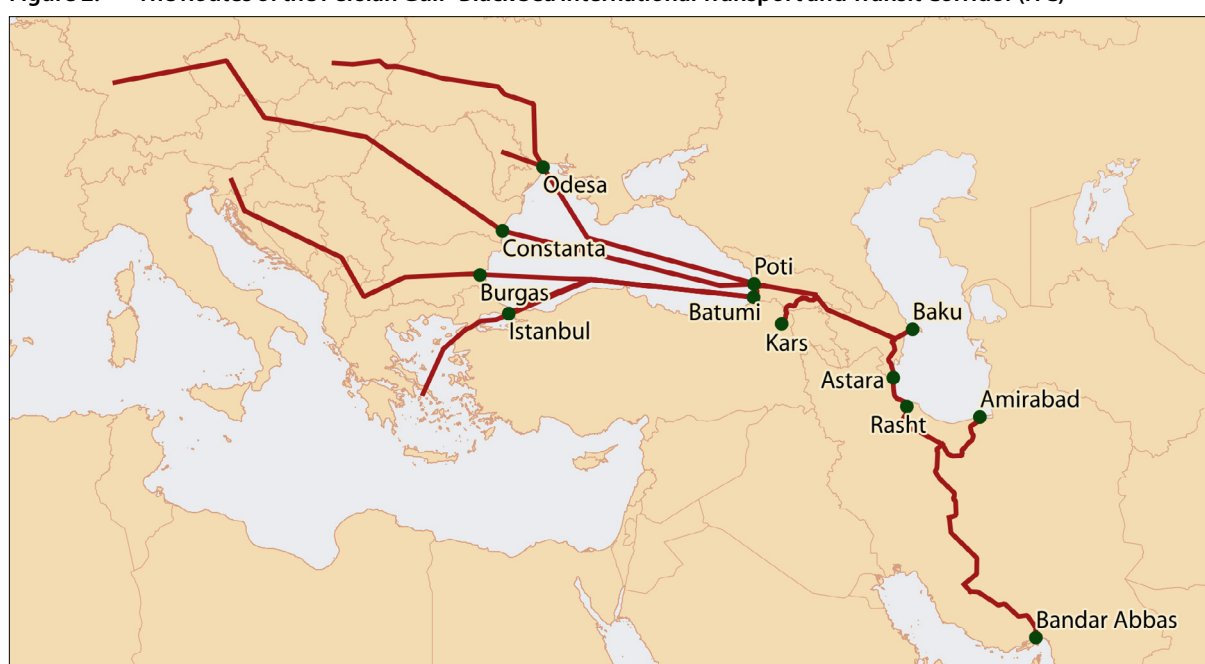
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Figure 1: The Route of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

Map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen in QGIS, with geodata from OpenStreetMap and GADM, based on a map in: Kasturi, Charu S. (2022) *Is the INSTC Russia's new economic escape route?*, Al Jazeera, 27 July. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/27/russias-new-economic-escape-route> (accessed 20 March 2023)

Figure 2: The Routes of the Persian Gulf–Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITC)

Map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen in QGIS, with geodata from OpenStreetMap and GADM, based on a map in: Papatolios, Nikos (2022) *Persian Gulf–Black Sea corridor: why does Iran need a new gateway?*, RailFreight.com, 9 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/02/09/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-why-does-iran-need-a-new-gateway/> (accessed 18 February 2023)