

The Iranian issue as the cause of intensified tensions in the South Caucasus

Krzysztof Strachota

In recent weeks a series of incidents took place in the South Caucasus, which proves that this region is becoming the foreground of the intensifying conflict over Iran. Tehran accused Azerbaijan of helping the Israel's Mossad in killing the scientist involved in the Iranian nuclear programme (on 11 January), whereas Azerbaijan allegedly foiled attacks on the Israeli ambassador, a rabbi and the headmaster of a Jewish school in Baku (on 19 January) organised by Hezbollah. In Tbilisi an attack on an employee of the Israeli embassy was thwarted (on 13 February). In Azerbaijan arrests of the members of the alleged Iranian subversion network are also ongoing (20 people were detained on 16 February in the town of Nardaran near Baku; an Iranian journalist was arrested on 20 February). In the political dimension there is a particularly intense conflict in Baku–Teheran relations, which is manifested by the statements made and actions undertaken by the governments.

Commentary

- The major cause of current tensions is the mounting pressure, mainly from Israel and the US, on Iran – including the threat of armed intervention – with regard to the development of the military nuclear programme by Tehran. Iran accuses Azerbaijan of supporting anti-Iranian actions, which becomes part of tense relations between the two countries over the last 20 years (Azerbaijan is fuelling nationalism and Azerbaijani separatism in Iran, whereas Iran provides support for Muslim radicals and Karabakh Armenians against Baku). To a slightly lesser extent this problem concerns Georgia: whereas its bilateral relations with Iran are correct, the pro-Washington orientation and co-operation with Israel has strategic importance for Tbilisi. Due to the geopolitical situation and tangible economic interests only Armenia in this region has clearly positive relations with Iran.
- With regard to the increasing tension over Iran it should be taken into account that further incidents and mutual accusations (particularly between Baku and Teheran) may occur; their radical escalation is however rather unlikely as long as an attack on Iran is not mounted. However, if an intervention in Iran was decided, the Caucasus would become a potential supply base for the conflict (Azerbaijan's courteous neutrality should there be attacks; Georgia's possible logistic support, motivated by strategic interests).

- The crisis over Iran (including the alleged mobilisation of the US and Israel in this region) is – along with the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the dispute between Russian and Georgia – another element which aggravates the situation in the South Caucasus. This crisis mobilises both Turkey (consistently closer co-operation with Azerbaijan) and Russia. Russia announced that it would strengthen its collaboration in the area of security with Armenia, including the protection of the Armenian-Iranian border (on 12 February) and stated that should there be an escalation of the Iranian crisis it would put its own forces in the South Caucasus in combat readiness. Such statements are intended to increase Russia's role in the debate over Iran and above all to protect and reinforce Russia's position in the South Caucasus.