

Georgia is tightening its relations with Iran

On 3-4 November, Iran's foreign minister Manushehr Mottaki visited Georgia. The most important result of the visit was the signing of an agreement on visa-free travel, the opening of an Iranian consulate in Batumi, and an agreement on regular air connections between Tehran and Tbilisi. The development of relations with Iran, which hitherto had not been one of Georgia's principal trade partners (US\$41m in the first nine months of this year) is an expression by Tbilisi of its efforts to diversify its foreign policy.

Georgian-Iranian relations have been frozen since Georgia handed over an Iranian citizen to the USA in 2008. An additional obstacle from Tehran's perspective was bad Russian-Georgian relations. The cooling of relations between Tehran and Moscow has since reduced the importance of this factor.

Closer relations with Iran, despite the extremely tense relations between Washington and Tehran, is a symptom of Tbilisi's disappointment with what it sees as the West's weakening interest in Georgia, as well as its desire to extend its room for political manoeuvre in the region. Despite declarations from the Georgian foreign ministry that Tbilisi's aim is solely to develop economic cooperation and tourism, Tehran is also a desirable political ally for Georgia, one sign of which was Mottaki's explicit support for Georgia's territorial integrity.

<MMat>