

## IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA: COMPARATIVE-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERESTS

*Najiyeva Madina*

*Master's student, Department of International Relations  
and modern political processes, UWED*

**Abstract.** This article is dedicated to comparative-political analysis of interests between Iran and Central Asian countries. It is obviously seen that Iran had made attempts in its foreign policy to set up regionalist agenda in CA and develop relations, mainly concentrated in common cultural and economic prospects. Moreover, from Iran's perspective, the lever of counteraction of avoiding the US-led containment system is to promote bilateral and multilateral relations with CA, and this is strengthened by coming up with diverse efficacious projects including oil pipeline of Kazakhstan- Turkmenistan- Iran and railway communication. It also covers Iran's interactions with regional associations, such as SCO with the intention of enhancing closer ties with the Commonwealth of Independent States and obtaining the support of China and Kazakhstan. Furthermore, higher level of relationship between these countries can be elucidated by being in ethno-cultural proximity, particularly Iran and Tajikistan and presence of bilateral economic and cultural interests. To clarify, it is observed in Iran's political activity that Tajikistan should act as a part of "Aryan unity" concept. The authors consider that Iran forms a "gateway" for CA to the World Ocean, at the same time it assists them to reach world markets by the means of Iran's shortest routes. In this analytic network, in the process of organizing regional integration it should be taken into consideration the perceptible role of China. Precisely, Chinese strategy "One Belt, One Road" which is described as a modern incarnation of the Silk Road incorporates Iran and Central Asia. In this partnership, Iran takes on a prominent role in being transit. Briefly, Iran excluded a prospect of export of Islamic revolution to the region so that Iran can evade short-sightedness of relationship remaining "multivector" foreign policy and an equally profitable method of treatment with Central Asian countries.

**Key words:** Islamic revolution, Euro-Atlantic vector, Kazakhstan- Turkmenistan- Iran oil pipeline, concept of "Big Iran", Islamophobia, Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, Caspian Sea, South Caucasus, Persian Gulf, regional alignment of force.

**Аннотация.** Это статья посвящена сравнительно-политическому анализу интересов между Ираном и странами Центральной Азии. Очевидно, что Иран в своей внешней политике предпринимал попытки по формированию региональной повестки дня в ЦАР и развитию отношений, главным образом в общих культурных и экономических перспективах. Кроме того, с точки зрения Ирана, рычагом противодействия уклонению от возглавляемой США системы сдерживания является содействие двусторонним и многосторонним отношениям с ЦАР, и это укрепляется за счет разработки различных эффективных проектов, включая нефтепровод Казахстан - Туркменистан - Иран и железнодорожное сообщение. Он также охватывает взаимодействие Ирана с региональными ассоциациями, такими как ШОС, с целью укрепления более тесных связей с Содружеством Независимых Государств и получения поддержки со стороны Китая и Казахстана. Кроме того, более высокий уровень отношений между этими странами может быть разъяснен в контексте этнокультурной близости, особенно Ирана и

Таджикистана, и наличия двусторонних экономических и культурных интересов. Чтобы уточнить, в политической деятельности Ирана наблюдается, что Таджикистан должен выступать в рамках концепции "арийского единства". Авторы считают, что Иран формирует "шлюз" для ЦАР к Мировому океану, в то же время помогает им выйти на мировые рынки с помощью самых коротких иранских маршрутов. В этой аналитической сети в процессе организации региональной интеграции следует учитывать заметную роль Китая. Именно китайская стратегия "Один пояс - один путь", которую называют современной воплощением Шелкового пути, включает Иран и Центральную Азию. В этом партнерстве Иран играет заметную роль в транзите. Вкратце, Иран исключил перспективы экспорта исламской революции в регион, чтобы Иран мог избежать близорукости отношений, остающихся "многовекторной" внешней политикой и не менее выгодным методом обращения со странами Центральной Азии.

**Ключевые слова:** исламская революция, евроатлантический вектор, казахстанско-туркменско-иранский нефтепровод, концепция "Большого Ирана", исламофобия, Исламское движение Узбекистана, Каспийское море, Южный Кавказ, Персидский залив, региональное выравнивание силы.

The lands of Central Asia (CA) have long held an important place in the Iranian political imagination. Iran has, for the past 25 years, sought to build its relations with Central Asia and has often cited its historical connection as a basis for developing relations. Perhaps, more pressing for the Islamic Republic, however, has been the desire to capitalize on relationships that do not have the historical baggage that has traditionally hampered relations with Western powers, namely the United States. In doing so, Iran has sought to demonstrate its capability as a rational and reliable international partner for states in the region and, certainly, until very recently, challenge US-led efforts at containing Iran's influence. To this end, Iran has historically sought to promote a strongly regionalist agenda in Central Asia, which has met with limited success thus far. If the Middle East is seen as the place of Iranian misadventure, then Central Asia is the place where the Islamic Republic shows its pragmatic streak.

Iran sees huge opportunities in the region, not only in the oft-cited realm of delivering Central Asia's natural resources to the world market, but also in developing closer ties based on common cultural and security interests. Iran's desire for greater economic, security and cultural links with the region has traditionally been stymied by two issues. First, the newly independent nature of these states meant that they were loath to pool any of their new-found sovereignty into regional initiatives, particularly those led by Iran. Second, Iran was hampered by the US-led containment strategy that sought to keep its interests in check in its own neighborhood and found an articulation in successive rounds of punitive economic sanctions, some of the most damaging of which were linked to its disputed nuclear programme.

In 1996 the American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski started in a turn "horror story" that one of the main installations of the Iranian foreign policy in the direction of Post-Soviet Central Asia is export of Islamic revolution.[1] Similar assessment already turned into one of the steadiest stereotypes in expert community and public opinion. However, if to analyze actions of Iran in CA so far, then it is very difficult to see signs of vigorous religious activity. All activity of Iran is concentrated in two spheres - it is culture and economy, the main tactical installations of the Iranian diplomacy in the countries of Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR are directed to a gradual installation to all spheres of life of the region giving the chance

to promote overcoming foreign policy and economic isolation of Iran. More than visually it is shown in the analysis of the bilateral relations of the Islamic republic with the Central Asian states.

Interaction of Iran with Kazakhstan are partially limited to the aspiration of the last to make active an Euro-Atlantic vector of the foreign policy. And, in the opportunities of development of the southern vector of foreign policy and external economic activity, Kazakhstan is a hostage of difficult relations between Iran and the USA.

The instrument of counteraction of this situation are economic cooperation and attempts of its building. Preparation of the project of construction of the oil pipeline of Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran and railway communication according to the same scheme (Uzen-Gyzylgaya-Bereket-Etrek-Gorgan) is conducted[2]. At the same time in the Iranian political establishment there is a clear understanding of positions of Kazakhstan at regional alignment of forces. Tehran understands intentions of Astana to take the place of the regional leader and taking into account own interests is ready to give support in it. So, Iran seeks to increase interaction within multilateral structures, such as SCO in which has the status of the observer and through which has an opportunity to interact with multilateral associations of the Commonwealth of Independent States, counting in it on support of Kazakhstan.

The main feature of the relations between Turkmenistan and Iran is that the mutual inclination of two countries is caused by lack of other choice.

That isolation in which the western community put Iran, that isolation in which the Turkmen leaders put itself doom to have the adjoining countries active bilateral ties. In the economic sphere there is quite serious commodity turnover between the republics. After the collapse of the USSR between them railway communications are created. There is supply of gas from Turkmenistan to the north of Iran. It is more convenient to Tehran to receive the Turkmen gas, than to pull pipelines to the north from the South from own fields.[3]

The neutral status of Turkmenistan gives it the chance to manoeuvre successfully between world poles of force. For Iran the Turkmen neutrality allows to concentrate the foreign policy potential on other directions.

As for Kyrgyzstan, there is only one reason which disturbs the bilateral relations – existence of the American military base. So, in May, 2006 in the context of the American threats about the beginning of military operations against Iran messages about the probability of use of the American air base located at the Bishkek airport “Manas” for airstrikes across the Iranian territory were heard.[4] This thesis was widely adopted so and a big resonance that the parliamentary committee on defense and safety of Kyrgyzstan made the decision to submit for consideration of chamber a question of denunciation of the agreement with the USA of finding of air base in the territory of Kyrgyzstan, and then the prime minister of Kyrgyzstan of that time Almazbek Atambayev made the special statement that Kyrgyzstan under no circumstances will not allow to use the air base of the USA in the territory of the republic for conducting combat operations against Iran. Political interaction of KR and Iran is carried out mainly within participation of both countries in a number of the international organizations. As for economic and cultural presence of the Islamic republic in this country, it considerably concedes Russian, Chinese or Turkish. Iran is beyond ten main external economic partners of Kyrgyzstan so far.

Higher level of the relations of Iran with Tajikistan, than with other states of the region, is caused by ethno-cultural proximity of Tajiks and Iranians. Certain circles in the Iranian political establishment even regard Tajikistan as a part of a certain “Big Iran” within a concept

of the “Aryan unity” meaning integration the language of the countries and creation of an axis of Tehran-Kabul-Dushanbe[5].

Iran and Russia are two major subjects of the end of civil war in Tajikistan as the political leadership of Iran managed to find levers of impact on the management of the Joint Tajik opposition while Moscow managed to find the same levers for representatives of the People’s Front. Iran and the Russian Federation forced two parties of the Tajik conflict to sit down at the negotiating table. During this period in the Iranian political leaders a certain understanding of where possibilities of its penetration into Tajikistan come to an end was established: after the collapse of the USSR influence of Russia on Dushanbe in the most different spheres was quite strong. At that moment, probably, at the level of the closed diplomacy a certain consensus between the Russian Federation and Iran about influence borders in Tajikistan was reached. However, to become the main partner of Tajikistan Iran, owing to own economic problems and deplorable state of the economy of Tajikistan, probably, after all is not able [6].

The relations between Iran and Uzbekistan throughout all their existence have moderately benevolent character, without showing a tendency to activation or basic change of quality of these relations. Such vigilance in many respects result of pro-American nature of foreign policy of Tashkent. A certain Islamophobia in the leadership of Uzbekistan played a role too. In the late nineties Iran rather actively interacted with the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU is made up of militant Islamist extremists mostly from Uzbekistan, but includes other Central Asian nationalities and ethnic groups as well. The group has mainly conducted small-scale armed attacks, including car bombings and taking hostages, and it has limited incursions into Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. While the group’s early attacks focused on Uzbek targets, recent operations have been closer to the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, indicating the IMU’s ambitions of igniting a broader conflict. The IMU has also conducted attacks more openly, withdrawing to villages and disguising themselves as locals rather than retreating to the mountains following an attack [7]. It is necessary to notice that from the sum of the relations of Iran with the countries of the region more than a half of all efforts and initiatives is the share of Uzbekistan. Though development of transport infrastructure could become a load-carrying structure of trade and economic relations of two countries. Thoroughfares from Tashkent to Mashhad through the territory of Afghanistan it is very positively evaluated both in Iran, and in Uzbekistan. They are important for all region. Even China very actively supports this project at the diplomatic level as it would provide transit from China to Iran further to the countries of the Middle East [7]. However, the unpromising situation in Afghanistan slows down implementation of this project.

As such, Iran is often described as forming a “bridge” or “gateway” for the landlocked Central Asian States to the World Ocean. This is of particular use to resource-rich states, such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, as Iran provides the shortest routes for their hydrocarbons to reach the world market. However, the use of Iran as a transit country for such resources and pipelines has been hampered by continued American involvement in the Caspian region.

As for the Caspian Sea, it is important for Iran in the context of foreign policy interests: as network of key international communications and also an outpost of influence on a situation in South Caucasus and in Central Asia. Till certain time Iran considered negotiation process across the Caspian Sea and a question of its legal status as political tools for control of economic expansion from the oil companies which are torn to the Caspian Sea offshore [8]. Its

own oil resources (some of the world's largest) lie in the Persian Gulf, but not on the Caspian Sea - this situation would not change even the status of the Caspian Sea, most favorable to Iran.

Although this article focuses primarily on the relations between Iran and the states of Central Asia, it is also important to note the role of China briefly. China is one of Iran's largest trading partners and provided it with vital economic links during successive sanctions regimes against the Islamic Republic. China sees the value of Iran as a key node in its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which seeks to develop a modern incarnation of the Silk Road. China also has experience of investing in Iran, particularly in transport infrastructure [9] and hydrocarbon development projects, although it should be noted that the latter has been with mixed success prior to the recent lifting of sanctions. China's development of its new Silk Road project is important not only for Iran but also for the Central Asian states, as it provides additional impetus for these countries to diversify their

trade and export routes. Iran is not only a useful conduit for them alone, but also for part of a wider Chinese strategy that incorporates Iran and Central Asia [10].

It should be noted that, improving the relations with the states of Central Asia, Iran actually excluded a possibility of so-called "export of Islamic revolution" to the region, having realized short-sightedness of actions which could cause open counteraction from the secular leaders of the Central Asian countries. Without calling in question importance of the states of CA for full-scale implementation of regional policy, Iran will purposefully pursue a policy of priority strengthening of economic positions in the region. Certainly, a number of geopolitical and economic "shocks" in Iran led to what concrete mechanisms of co-operation on its central an Asian vector of foreign policy still are in a development stage. However regardless of the one who in a concrete historical interval of time will be in power in Iran whether it be representatives of a reformatory or conservative wing, interaction with CA with high probability will keep a trend on forward strengthening of economic, trade and cultural co-operation. Similar approach allowed Iran to take a certain place in the system of priorities of foreign policy interaction of the states of CA, however and owing to aim circumstances the Iranian vector will not seem in the medium term as priority. Added to this is the geographic proximity and opportunities afforded by acting as a gateway state, both to and from Central Asia, along with increased Chinese investment as part of its new Silk Road-inspired "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Central Asia helps develop further connections between Iran and China too, and the sense of reinvigorating an old trading route in the form of a new Silk Road not only speaks of the deep historical rootedness of both states' geopolitical imaginaries, but also speaks of the pragmatic realism of modern international relations. Although Iran has been keen on promoting regional groupings, such as the ECO and SCO, the Central Asian states, while participating in such ventures, have remained steadfast in their desire for a "multivector" foreign policy. This has come about as a result of their still relatively recently gained independence, which gives them a desire to pursue independent foreign policy objectives. As such, there is a questionable commitment to these initiatives, especially if they are seen as providing cover for another power to assert its hegemony over the region, with the result being that there has been much in the way of declaration and little in the way of substance.

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