



Iran and Central Asia

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PREAMBLE

Iran is one of the largest countries in South-West Asia and key Middle Eastern regional actors (players) in Central Asia (CA). According to the UNESCO definition, Iran itself, or rather its north-eastern areas are part of Central Asia. The proximity of Iran to Central Asia has significant meaning for regional geopolitics: it naturally creates a set of regional interconnections and conflicting dependencies. The common border is also a factor of all known threats and challenges today.

The relations between Iran and the countries of Central Asia contain a number of unsettled issues and difficulties. Here are some of them:

- *Lack of clear strategies and objectives of CA cooperation with Iran, hence – lack full results. First of all, CA states should declare their own, if possible, independent position vis-à-vis Iran.*
- *The difference in social and economic models, as well as political and ideological approaches in their mutual relations.*
- *The confessional factor in relations between Iran and CA states is not decisive as much yet, but some “friction” that could lead to Sunni-Shiite contradictions still occurs.*
- *The civilization factor, which implies a single space with long-lasting ties, common historical heritage, Islamic culture and traditions, often becomes a tool in Iran’s political arguments over relations with Central Asian countries. In general, Iran is trying to reduce anti-Iranian sentiments, expanding cooperation with Central Asia and skilfully using anti-Western discourses.*

Brief History

Immediately after the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s secular regime in Iran in 1979, Shiite clerics came to power. Shiite clerics, whose leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, proclaimed a thesis on export of the Islamic revolution. In his opinion, there were three ways to make it possible.

First, through military means. Second, through sabotage, such as special operations inside the Shiite Diaspora. The third method of exporting the Islamic revolution is ideological and cultural domain.

From the Iranian worldview, there are three great Asian civilizations: Chinese, Indian, and Persian (the latter is considered by the Iranians as the greatest). Therefore, Iran is seeking to become a superpower in the region – the most strong and powerful. As a result, Iran now sets military and political objectives that

bear aggressive character, both secret, and manifest, in relation to neighbouring countries and far abroad.

Currently, the geography of involvement of Iranian military advisers, Shiite militias, arms transfers in all kinds of military conflicts does not give way perhaps even to the United States. It is participation in clashes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Bahrain, border provinces of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, ethnic and religious strife’s in Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa and in West Africa (Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia and Nigeria), annexation of disputed island territories, permanent military threats against Israel, border conflicts with the Kurds and Turkey. At the same time, the ruling Iranian clergy does not regard any civilian losses in the country. Only in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1989, the country had more than 700,000 losses.



Iran's interests in Central Asia

The contacts between the two regions witness centuries-old history. The peoples of Iran and Central Asia share many common traditions. A powerful consolidating factor in the life of the region's peoples was philosophy and poetry of Sufism represented in the region mainly by Orders of Naqshbandi and Yassavi.

Under the conditions terms of the actual embargo by the West, Tehran seeks to weaken international isolation by widening contacts with Central Asia and strengthening its influence in various spheres there – ideological, cultural and socio-economic. Tactically, the Iranian diplomacy in Central Asia targets gradual penetration into all spheres of the region, in order to facilitate removal of Iran's isolation.

Ideological aspects of rapprochement have special emphasis. In practice, "soft power" in this area is manifested in the activities of Iranian cultural centres in the region.

Economic interests of Iran are grounded in the field of energy cooperation. By participating in the creation of pipeline systems of Central Asia, Iran seeks to bring its energy resources to the regional market. Simultaneously, the Iranians are actively building power plants in order to strengthen their control over the region's energy. There has been considerable focus of bilateral relations on cooperation in the transport sector through promoting creation of transport system in Central Asia. For instance, commissioning of the area Tejan-Sarakhs-Mashad in 1996, and a direct railway route Kazakhstan – Turkmenistan – Iran in 2014, which is part of the international transport corridor "North – South", designed to ensure transport links from the Baltic States to India. Rather promising is the project of the trans-Afghan transport corridor, including railway and a highway along Termez – Mazari Sharif – Herat – Mashad, leading to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas (Persian Gulf) and Chabahar (Indian Ocean).

As was recognized by Iranian Vice President's Adviser for Agriculture, Water Resources and Environment Isa Kalantari, Iran is moving towards an unprecedented ecological catastrophe in history, mainly due to the shortage of water resources.

Therefore, Iran intends to purchase water in Tajikistan, where significant amounts of all water resources in Central Asia are formed. Tajikistan's alpine Lake Sarez, whose water volume makes up about 16 cubic km., as well as cross-border waterways, are regarded as relevant water sources. Tehran, Kabul and Dushanbe have already agreed to establish a joint water and energy corridor, through which drinkable water will be delivered from Tajikistan to Iran through Afghanistan, and the other way around – oil.

Since energy projects implemented by Iran in Tajikistan (Sangtuda 2 Hydroelectric Power Plant) without taking into account interests of other participants in the cross-border water, cause legitimate protests downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Iran seeks to neutralize and suppress their resistance by using various kinds of leverage. That was evident, in particular, in gas "blackmail" of Turkmenistan, "rail blockade" of Uzbekistan, who was more than once denied purchase of agreed gas volumes and delivery of goods through the Iranian railway network, respectively. Moreover, Iran has afforded itself attempts of direct intimidation and interference in the affairs of sovereign states, voicing criticism of the multi-vector foreign policy of Uzbekistan for its allegedly "pro-American" direction.

Realizing that in the predominantly Sunni Central Asia it would be difficult for Iran to find enough followers and coreligionists to achieve Shiite dominance in the region, the Iranian political establishment considers the absorption of Tajikistan and Afghanistan as part of "Greater Iran" under the concept of "Aryan Unity". Ministers of Defense of Iran and Tajikistan signed an agreement on military cooperation long ago. In other terms, there is an



evident attempt of revival of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, whose satraps (provincial governors) had occupied ancient states of Central Asia – Bactria and Sogdiana for an extended period of time. Thus, forming a powerful anti-Turkic bloc in the region and taking control of energy flows and transport communications, Iran attempts to turn Central Asia into a raw-materials appendage targeting its vast natural resources and human potential. Simultaneously, Iran declares that it fulfills its mission to "unite the Muslim Ummah".

At the same time, Tehran is aware that in order to avoid counteraction of other CA players against its regional designs, it is necessary to achieve a certain consensus of key stakeholders of the "Great Game". The most powerful external forces in Central Asia are China and Russia. However, given Russia's has been involvement in large-scale confrontation with the West, it faced overspending of resources which caused slow-down, and in some cases, curtail of its expansion in Central Asia. Russia, fearing that its conceded positions could be taken under control by China or the United States, finds it bearable strengthening of Iran's influence in the region, as opposed to global heavyweights. In return, Russia might require more active involvement of Iran in the Syrian conflict and joint political steps towards mutually beneficial division of the Caspian Sea by the CA's Caspian states. Therefore, Iran needs legitimization in the regional international structures. In future, full membership of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could render it an opportunity to increase its influence over formation of the system of Central Asia's regional relations.

Central Asia's benefits of cooperation with Iran

Cooperation with Iran provides CA countries additional opportunities to diversify its external relations, fits well into the multi-vector policy and balancing between the different centres of power.

Iran's economic and political weight in the Middle East and the Islamic world is important for Central Asian republics: Iran's status of the second economy in the region, its industrial capacity, resources, and, of course, the world's largest oil reserves, high technology and infrastructure are highly attractive for the growing economies of the region.

Implementation of transit and transport potential of Iran can have both optimistic scenario (CA countries would have an economic leap, Central Asia and China would gain access to the Persian Gulf), and security threats. And in future, this optimistic scenario could imply more active rapprochement of countries and people, conflict-free dynamics of multilateral relations.

Suggestions for building relations between Central Asia and Iran

By their consolidated position, CA states should make it clear and unambiguous to Iran that its activities in the region should be guided by the rules established by local players. It is not upon Iran, besieged by sanctions, to dictate conditions for Central Asian people.

Central Asian countries should facilitate in all aspects construction of transport corridors between China and Europe within the framework of the Great Silk Road and TRACECA projects through their territory, using the Caspian Sea ports for transit to Turkey and further to the EU. Thus, Iran's monopoly for alternative communication through the Persian Gulf would be undermined. As a result, CA countries, would able to transport their cargoes in all directions: north – the Baltic, the east – the East and the South China Sea, the south – the Persian Gulf and West – Europe. It is clear that if under such circumstances, Iran attempts to speculate on their communications in some way, it would simply lose its current customers.

It is the Central Asian countries, and not foreign authorities, that should decide the fate of Iran's membership in the SCO. Since the main objective of the organization is to ensure peace and security in the region, it is the people of the



region themselves that should determine whether the applicant for accession fits the basic principles of association. And if the candidate itself is stuck in dozens of local and regional conflicts and cannot bring peace to his own home, isn't its membership in the SCO too premature? After all, it could bring but strife and discord, and not peace. First let it restore order at home: this should be a prerequisite.

The Central Asian countries, bearing in mind Iran's nostalgia for its glorious superpower past, should establish a reliable system of checks and balances in their relations with Tehran. For example, Iran's attempts to increase its influence in the region should be balanced by greater involvement of Europe and Southeast Asia in regional business projects to foster competition.

Security, and especially intelligence agencies, should intensify their contacts with relevant structures of foreign partners as much as possible regarding the creation of the joint "Iranian dossier", whose contents would give an idea of behind-the-scenes plans and intentions of Iran vis-à-vis Central Asia. We believe that Israeli experts, in particular, could have a very substantial assistance in this issue.

CA has to express its political support to the Iranian authorities in their struggle against illegal actions of the so-called ISIS, or Daesh. However, one should clearly indicate the inadmissibility of the brutality and inhumanity committed by Iran-backed Shiite militias against Sunni prisoners who are exposed to medieval tortures and burnings alive. The country, which is a signatory to the UN Charter on Human Rights, should not come down to the level of primitive cannibalism.

Conclusion

Currently, the position of Iran in the region and the world is extremely unstable. The country expends huge resources, including human, on the export of the revolution, and has

spoiled its relations both with the neighbours and global centres of power. This has resulted in financial and economic downturn and a sharp decline in living standards. The projected failures in Syria, Yemen, etc. Would condition a social explosion in the country, since more than half of the population, as was shown by the presidential elections, are exhausted by the religious rule of "Rahbar" limiting personal freedom and discriminatory rights of women. If at the same time, external pressure is increased, which cannot be excluded after the change of president in the United States, then split in the society could lead to fragmentation of the state into Kurdistan, South Azerbaijan, Balochistan and other similar "stans".

Therefore, the most interested party in collaboration with CA is Iran itself, for which access to new markets could facilitate its internal economic situation. Consequently, CA countries need to seize the initiative in their trade, economic and other fields of cooperation with Iran and to dictate the agenda of their interests. For this purpose, Iran should feel the firm position of the Central Asian partners.

We would like that both Iran and Central Asia (historically, Turan) forgot their past scores to each other, when in response to the Persian aggression Central Asian people of Massagets, Tomiris, Hephthalites, warriors of the Turkic khaganate, Samanids, Khwarizmshahs and Timurids crushed the invaders.

We would also like that instead of hostility and mistrust, both of the parties launched a new page in their relations of mutually beneficial cooperation and brotherly neighbourhood.

However, vigilance, of course, should be present in any considerations. The timely use of the principle "Sivis pacem, parabellum" (If you want peace, prepare for war") has always served as a redoubtable warning against the aggressor to curb its excessive ambitions and appetites.