

Central Asia, World and Regional Powers with an Emphasis on Iran

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ABSTRACT

Today in the 21st century, countries extremely need to cooperate with each other in different fields because they will not succeed by isolating themselves. The enriched, sensitive and geopolitical region of Central Asia as well as its related countries are no exception. They are trying to increase their power by joining different unions and organizations, thereby further satisfying their national interest. However, the fact is that each of these countries have taken a different path. Some of them have inclined towards Russia, some towards the U.S.A and some towards China, Turkey and Arab world. Perhaps, Iran is in the most difficult situation, which in spite of its good transit situation to two seas, various underground resources, and high population, better cultural-lingual-racial accordance to the region, has faced with the US obstructionism. Therefore, the regional countries need to turn to internal convergence so that they can have a say at the regional and global level.

Keywords: Central Asian geopolitics, energy, foreign powers, trade, cultural diplomacy.

Introduction

The Central Asian countries with a total population of 60 million people and about 4 million square kilometers, are heavily dependent on their neighbors due to being enclosed, and regarding the global geopolitics theory, the presence of a country in international trade reflects its maritime and continental domain. These countries are thinking of the regional and global point of view and are not at all interested in absolute isolation in Eurasia and being far from major commercial routes. These countries with their maritime geostrategy have a vast deposits of oil, gas and uranium, and powerful neighbors such as China, Russia and Iran. We can see political instability of governments, drug dealing, Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic crises and so on. Therefore, they highly need industrialization, creation of job opportunities and absorbing investments, democracy, elections and so forth. China and Russia have the highest chance for realizing these objectives. To control the energy infrastructures as well as to harness its rivals, the US has a special perspective to the region. After gaining their independence, these countries have tried to cooperate

with key players in the regional and global sector in the energy sector (Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan), the industrial as well as the transport and transit sectors (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan).

Methodology and hypotheses

In this paper, the data collection method was mainly of attributional-desk type which we will try to cover the events in the region since the Soviet collapse to date using the descriptive-analytical method. The basic question is whether the region's countries have the potential for convergence considering the existing conditions. If so, to what side this potential tend to? It is assumed that if the region is seeking economic, technical and civil convergence, it will extend to the political-security convergence in long-term, something we can see in the European Union in practice.

Theoretical framework

Political systems have achieved cohesion and solidarity and managed to maintain it due to common and universal values. David Mitrani believes that at the international level, technical issues require cooperation of scholars and not political elites, which, according to the divergence principle, the development of cooperation in one area will extend to other areas. In fact, functionalism has been assumed to be the counterpart of realism.

According to Ernest Haas, the political actors would take their several allegiance national units to a new center during convergence. According to Carl Deutsch, however, political convergence is a multidimensional phenomenon which creates a strong feeling that it can be predicted that the developments will remain peaceful between people for a long time.

The initial condition for achieving this convergence is the multiplicity of communication and different exchanges, and besides that, the role of the elite is highly regarded, and the member units get rid of the war to resolve disputes. In such alliances, the weaker a state is, the more likely it will be to adhere to the policy of following.

Now, according to the above-mentioned information, it can be said that the convergence procedure in Central Asia has been very slow, and each has a tendency towards a different side. Some are inclined to Turkey, some to Russia, some are thinking about the transit of their oil and gas. Iran is trying to have a say in the region by relying on ECO, however, because their economies are not complementary, they cannot easily come together in a single unit.

China and Central Asia

In the far past, the silk road with a length of 15000 km continued from eastern China to Rome, where all sorts of paper, fabric, spices, gold, silver, carpet were bought and sold. Now, China is trying to establish a new silk road to reach the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, thereby showcasing its economic power to the world. In 2000, China's economic relations with the region hardly amounted to \$1 billion, whereas it reached \$50 billion in 2013, which is steadily increasing. In fact, China is the first to third of the region's economic partner. It probably has a special outlook to the region's energy resources as well as its transmission lines (Kazakhstan's oil pipeline in Xinjiang with a length of 3000 km) and plans to guarantee itself in terms of energy and on the other hand reduce its dependence on the West in the long run, and even does not consider its closer economic aid and loans as Western preconditions (human rights observance, democracy, etc.). On the other hand, China's northwestern region is close to Central Asian Muslim regions, and the fear of the Islamic fundamentalism has resulted in its bold presence in these countries. Beijing is also concerned about Central Asia in terms of organized crimes and drug transit.

Saudi Arabia and Central Asia

Saudi Arabia is one of the countries which enters late in the region, but has benefited more from its high financial capability. The main objective of the Saudis is to compete with Iran and to prevent Tehran's influence; this procedure has been further enhanced by the election of Mohammed bin Salman as the crown prince, and due to the relative Saudi defeat in the resistance axis (Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq), has turned to Central Asia to compensate for it. They have turned to the region following the fall in oil prices and the financing of the war in Syria and Yemen, and in fact gaining a foothold and prestige in the region.

They have also sought to develop Wahhabism, which, by the way, the poverty and economic problems in the region have contributed to this, so that they would be able to hurdle the influence of Iran's policies; for example, with the tension in Iran's relations with Tajikistan, Abdullaziz ibn Muhammad al-Badi, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Tajikistan, said it was a great victory for the Saudi Kingdom.

Russia and Central Asia

The 70-year-old soviet presence in the region has formed a kind of lingual and administrative and even cultural ties with Russia, and Moscow has an active presence in many scientific, educational, military, technical sectors and so on.

The partnership agreement among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus regarding the customs union, which later other countries joined them (except for Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia). However, Putin does not seek the Soviet revival through this agreement, instead, he regards it as a kind of convergence on the basis of new values and time requirements as well as international politics. In fact, Russia will enter into a new Hartland in partnership with Iran and reach hot waters. In addition, they are seeking to create a bridge between Europe and the East Asia. Thus, their presence in the region will become more intense and perhaps this presence will lead to the weakness of Iran, and in return, Iran will move towards reconstructing convergence in the Caspian Sea or the ECO to compensate for this.

According to the United Nations Human Development Report in 2002, about a number of landlocked countries, 9 out of 22 countries have a low human development level, and interestingly, none of the European enclosed countries were undeveloped countries, which means that landlocked countries cannot remain undeveloped forever and they can use their neighbors. Some has considered their state of being landlocked as being undeveloped, and that they would have been unimportant. If this region was not so important, then why had it become a place for the great power struggles? According to Brzezinski, here is a big game or a chessboard in which major oil companies, transporting roads, energy lines and etc. are playing a role.

The U.S.A and Central Asia:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US became closer to the region little by little, and he was very happy and intoxicated that his long-standing rival was not there anymore, and he can establish a foothold there. Perhaps, it can be said that this slow entering is a whisper of a long-term presence in the region, especially that there are too many oil and gas resources, and the United States, as the world hegemon, is always looking to take advantage of opportunities. On the other hand, confronting the influence of Russia and Iran and restraining them has been vital for the United States and advertising against terrorists is also a good justification. The regional countries, after 9/11, needed more support from the United States to protect against Islamic fundamentalism, while the United States has approved the activities of Turkey and Israel and is in fact backing them up.

In summary, although the US distance to the region is about 10,000 km, its rich resources, proximity to Afghanistan, balancing role with Russia and China, reduction of their dependence on Russia, and most importantly, disrupting the Iranian movement in the region are several major American strategies in the region.

Iran and Central Asia:

Iran's view towards Central Asia was at first geopolitical and ideological, however, recently, it has become more realistic, and economic issues have arisen. As you know, these countries are mainly Sunni which are not in accordance with the Shiite Iran. Iran plays a vital role for them due to its geography and access to free waters (transportation of the goods, energy and passengers) which has become ineffective as a result of the US sanctions. The only remaining effective alternative for Iran is to exploit the cultural and civilization patterns. This domain has gone beyond Iran and includes the Persian Gulf, Oman Sea, Central Asia and the Subcontinent. Accordingly, Iran can have an influential role in the region. Hence, they soon set up their embassy in these countries, and in January 1992, these five countries, along with Turkey and Pakistan created the Economic Cooperation Organization (CEO) on the invitation of Iran (Of course, the Khazar and even bilateral issues were discussed in this organization). Among them, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were of particular importance due to their proximity with Iran and their oil and gas swap was taken on the agenda. Uzbekistan was also a good market for Iranian goods because of its high population.

For Tajikistan, Iranian companies were involved in technical engineering services such as creation of dams, power plants, Sang Tudeh 2 Anzab tunnel, road construction projects and so on. Tajikistan is dependent on Uzbekistan in terms of transit and has a lot of uranium and water, whose result is the abundant electricity generation. The Rogun hydroelectric power plant has caused a dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, because Uzbeks believe that this power plant has reduced their input water. We know that 90% of the Central Asian water supply is available to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan's industries are heavily dependent on water. In terms of population, Uzbeks comprise nearly 23% of Tajikistan's population; (Khujand), Samarkand and Bukhara which are also populated by Tajiks, are in Uzbekistan.

Iran and Turkmenistan are connected with each other with a total of 1300 km of common borders and with 4 Bajgiran, Lof Abad, Sarakhs and Incheboron crossings and a rail which links Mashhad, Sarakhs and Tajan. In addition, there is a shipping line between the Turkmenbashi seaport and Iranian ports. Moreover, border markets have been established between the two countries which are not very active. The discussion of Turkmen gas transit route from Iran to Europe could have been very serious and effective in the relationship between the two countries in the long run, which went in vain due to US pressure. However, in general, it should be noted that Turkmens had lived centuries with Iran in a common land, even the Turkmen kings were originated from the powerful Iranian sultans, such as the Seljukites (Seljuqs). Currently, Persian is taught in Turkmen schools, and the existence of manuscripts of the Turkmen poet, Magtymguly, indicates the importance of the Persian language for Turkmens, also the abundance of Turkmens in northern Iran has contributed to establish these links, and figures like Magtymguly Pyragy - Jar Allah al-Zamakhshari – are the well-known Turkmens in Iran.

Uzbek cotton is exported to the world through Iran's railways. The opening of the Gorgan-Incheboron-Almaty railroad, called the Eastern Caspian Railroad, was started in 2014 with the presence of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, along with the Mashhad-Tajan-Sarakhs railroad that contribute to Iran and Central Asian railways and can link the 3,000-kilometer distance from Kazakhstan to the Persian Gulf (transiting 5 million tons annually). Yet, in the best possible case, Iran has 6 to 8 among Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan's export partners (2010); the lack of planning by Iran – discordance of economic relations with Iran's diplomatic establishment – has been due to the lack of support from Iran's private sector and so on.

Abai, the Kazakh poet, who has been so fond of Hafiz, has translated about 3,000 words from Persian literature to Kazakh language. Southern Kazakhstan has been located in Kharazm and historical great Khorasan. The tomb of Khajeh Ahmad Yasawi in Turkestan still has the same condition as Isfahan's Charbagh School. In general, it should be noted that the import of wheat from this country to Iran and the transit of its goods and oil from Iran's soil, and most importantly Iran's nuclear program and the need for Kazakhstan uranium are all the evidence of linking the two countries.

Iran and Tajikistan:

Although Iran soon recognized Tajikistan after independence and opened its embassy, the extent of the relations between the two countries was not widespread. In 2001, the volume of trade between the two countries started with \$40 million, and reached \$195 million in 2010, the bulk of which was Iran's exports to Tajikistan (\$160 million). However, it should be noted that Tajikistan is Iran's strategic depth in Central Asia, and can be a platform for Iranian cultural diplomacy considering many common things that they have.

This country is one of the main sources of electricity export and the Nurek hydroelectric power plant can help Iran for importing oil. On the other hand, they need oil which is exported from Afghanistan (of course, its own oil refineries were shut down after the Soviet Union due to the high cost of extraction and lack of economic justifications). Another issue for the cooperation between the two countries is in the field of fighting drug dealing and the good experience of Iran regarding the training of Tajikistan's military force, which has recently faded.

In total, Iran accounts for approximately 3 to 5 percent of Tajikistan's global trade, and almost 150 Iranian companies are active there, such as the Sang-e-Tudeh 2, a health clinic, a tourism college, opening of a branch of Azad and Payam-e Nour University, agreement for the construction of a cement factory in

South Khatlon Province and so forth. These state-owned and private investments could boost Iran's national image there.

Iran intends to enter the Shanghai Organization, which is not possible without normalization of relations with Tajikistan, as Tajikistan has the right to veto. The cooling of relations between the two countries has slowed the chance of entry into Tajikistan for Iran. Tajikistan, on the other hand, has a strategic and security interest for the United States. The US has a military base in Kulyab, and in return, it gives a military assistance worth \$1.5 million to Tajikistan. Moreover, Russia, with respect to the 201 Army presence, has announced that the Afghanistan border with Tajikistan is the same border with Russia.

Although the convergence of Turkish language countries has reached the geopolitical development stage and they are becoming a regional organization, the Persian-speaking countries are miles away. The union of Persian-speaking countries was posed after the Soviet Union, but it came to no avail due to different political values. Iran and Afghanistan are two Islamic states, but Tajikistan has a tendency towards Western values, while the economic factor can repair these gaps. Shortly thereafter, a proposal was made for the establishment of a joint TV network among the three countries, which, due to the technical and financial problems and the content of the programs, remained in the form of paper. This is becoming clearer when to know that Tajikistan is Iran's cultural gateway to this region. For example, after gaining independence, Lenin's sculpture was replaced by Ferdowsi's sculpture, and deployment of cultural art groups, holding festivals, publishing books and articles, the exchange of professors and students were carried out gradually. The first scientific agreement between the two countries was signed in 1996 between Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and the Tajik Academy of Sciences, and Mohammad Jan Shakouri and Abdollaqadir Niyazov joined the Academy of Languages and Persian Literature. In the cities of Khujand, Kulob, and Panjakent, several libraries were launched by Iran; and the cities of Hamedan in Iran and Kulob in Tajikistan became step sisters. Then, the Islamic Republic of Iran Counselor in Dushanbe, the Saadi foundation, the Relief Foundation, Tajik-Persian cultural institute became gradually active in Tajikistan.

Unfortunately, over the past few years, the main concern of Iran's foreign policy has been the issue of nuclear and JCPOA¹, which has led to the marginalization of Central Asian issues that were objectively demonstrated in the relationships with Tajikistan. On the other hand, the role of the National Bank of Tajikistan in Iran's large money laundering scandal and the connection of one of the economic corruptors of Iran to Tajikistan, all have played a role in this process.

Conclusion

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new geopolitical atmosphere emerged in northern of Iran. This necessitated the need for more precision in Iran's foreign policy. However, each global and regional powers pursued their own goals, which were not generally in line with the interests of Iran. Among them, the role of Russia, China and the US was more evident than ever before. Russia felt their structural dependence on her due to a 70-year-old dominance of communism. China benefited from an economic leverage. The United States justified her policies based on the specific geographic conditions of the region and its proximity to its rivals and their control. Iran, on the other hand, sought to have an effective presence in the region in various ways, such as the ECO, the Caspian Cooperation Organization, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Sometimes, it would spend much money and investment but did not get enough, partially due to the international system policy and partly due to Iran's management weaknesses and shortcomings in Central Asia. Despite the fact that Iran's cultural, civilian and linguistic dependencies are abundant, the good geopolitical position can be used to expand communication lines, such as railroads, oil and gas transmission lines, and the establishment of free trade areas and so on.

¹ *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*

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