

REGIONAL POLITICS

**COOPERATION BETWEEN IRAN AND
THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES:
PAST, PRESENT,
AND FUTURE****Dmitri VARNAVSKIY**

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The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted, among other things, in the emergence of a new political and economic situation in the Central Asian republics, whereby new dominating factors are taking precedence and influencing its development. There has been a change in the line-up of political players interested in the region's evolutionary process, as well as in the balance of global and national forces in Central Asia. New actors, including Iran, have become actively involved in the game for the region's future.

Tehran's policy toward Central Asia has not always been consistent and well-balanced. But the overall modification of its foreign policy in the 1990s greatly affected Iran's strategic course toward the Central Asian states as well.

During his visit to the Central Asian countries in 1993, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani emphasized that the main purpose of his trip was to establish business contacts. But prior to this, the country's foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati said that Iran was not looking at its relations with these republics from the commercial standpoint.¹ This clearly showed Tehran's pragmatism, after all, this

¹ See: D. Menashri, "Iran and Central Asia," in: *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*, London, 1998, p. 90.

statement was probably made keeping in mind that the Central Asian countries repeatedly demonstrated their desire to develop primarily economic relations with Iran, without political undertones. For example, a representative of the Turkmenistan Foreign Ministry said that Turkmenistan needed Iran to gain an outlet to the sea for its commodities, but in so doing Turkmenistan has no intentions of becoming an Iranian-style Islamic state. The former head of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia mufti Muhammad-Sadik Muhammad-Yusuf also spoke in the same vein when he noted that the Turkish path of development was more acceptable to Uzbekistan.²

The pragmatic wing of the Islamic Republic of Iran understood that the cultural dominant could become a more reliable springboard for launching Iran's intensive penetration into the region and spreading its influence there. Therefore, Tehran quickly reoriented itself toward reviving cultural communality, in particular, especially in the 1990s, by actively promulgating the common cultural heritage of the region. In so doing, attention was focused on the need for a cultural revival to achieve true independence and restore the splendor of the past, and it was emphasized that Iran was willing to render significant assistance in this.

This new vector in the country's foreign policy course coincided with the fact that since the end of the 1980s, a traditional, purely Iranian element has become more noticeable in Iran (along with a slackening off in the strictly Islamized ideological course in the country's political and cultural life).³ The country is declaring adherence to classical tradition in cultural policy and showing a desire to unite the academics of Asia and the whole world around the values of Persian classical poetry and the heritage of Ferdowsi. A special accent is placed on the importance of Ferdowsi's epic for the national cultures of the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus. These are the priorities in paving the way to integration into the region on the basis of common cultural and economic prerequisites.⁴ Iran's cultural-political doctrine in the region departs from the strictly Islamic postulates and is oriented toward the spread and promulgation of the monuments of Iranian cultural tradition: promulgating the Persian language and poetry and the Qu'ran in Farsi, rebuilding historical traditional relations, and spreading common ethnic pre-Islamic and Islamic principles. In so doing, the Muslim heritage features in the doctrine only in the form of a general background.⁵

Tehran says that during the formation of a purely economic organization, such as the ECO, the role of Iran's cultural heritage will make it possible to consolidate the economic union of countries and create a sustainable image for it in the Islamic world. The Iranians believe that precisely the specific nature of their ancient culture, its deep roots in history, and the consciousness of the South Asian peoples will help today's states to more efficiently integrate into the region and promote its development and creation in the light of the cultural-political and economic communality of neighboring countries.⁶

In 1995, Iranian Foreign Minister A. Velayati proclaimed the efficiency of the principle "return to oneself" (*bazgesht be hod*) set forth by Islamic ideologist Ali Shariati, which, in his opinion, is still viable and is manifested in cultural, political, and economic life in the region. He talks about the regional ties between Iran and Central Asia, the success and reality of which "guarantee a common cultural heritage for these countries."⁷ This statement, if it is viewed in the context of Iran's regional policy in Central Asia in the 1990s, shows how Iran is using the ideas of common culture

² See: Ibidem.

³ See: V. Kliashitorina, "Evolutsiia roli kultury v protsesse modernizatsii Irana i stran regiona," *Osobennosti modernizatsii na musul'manskom Vostoke*, Moscow, 1997, p. 158.

⁴ See: Ibid., p. 161.

⁵ See: Ibid., p. 164.

⁶ See: V. Kliashitorina, "Kulturno-politicheskaia doktrina IRI v regione," in: *IRI v 90-e gody*, Moscow, 1998, p. 123.

⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

to develop ties and strengthen its influence and position in the Central Asian countries. In so doing, it is emphasized that the Iranian culture is not something imported from the outside, but is part of their own cultural past. It is not propaganda of Iran's own culture, but a call to return to its historical-cultural sources, to its glorious past, a reverent attitude to which is a traditional part of the culture of the Eastern peoples as a single historical-cultural discourse, and not only of the Central Asian peoples.

As Tehran claims, their common cultural-historical past, common borders, economic foundations, and long-standing trade relations are conducive to the development of cooperation between the region's countries and Iran. The common culture, history, art, literature, and religion of the Iranian people and the Central Asian people form a reliable foundation and solid basis for developing their relations.

So an analysis of the cultural past has become of particular importance in the relations between the region's republics and Iran. In this respect, the viewpoint of Mehdi Sanai, an Iranian researcher specializing in the study of Iran's relations with the Central Asian countries and who published a book in 1997 called *Vzaimootmosheniia Irana i stran Tsentral'noi Azii* (Interrelations between Iran and the Central Asian Countries), is of particular interest. He presents several arguments to substantiate the common historical and cultural features between Iran and the current republics of the region.⁸ I would like to take a closer look at some of them.

1. Iran's relations with Central Asia began developing before the appearance of Islam, even before the appearance of Christianity, when most of the territory of present-day Central Asia was part of Iran. Thanks to the educational system borrowed from the ancient Iranians, the schools of Central Asia enjoyed enhanced development and became centers for producing great scientists. Thanks to this system, Islamic culture, science, technology, education, philosophy, art, and literature successfully developed in the region. Even when they were under the authority of the Turkic rulers who had close ties with the Abbasid caliphate, hindered the spread of Shi'ism, and prevented Iranians from taking power, the Iranians still had great influence in political and cultural life.

Based on these precepts, after the appearance of Islam in the region, Iran is given direct credit for the culture and civilization that exist in Central Asia.⁹ There are a great many Persian words in the languages of the peoples of Central Asia. The local population uses Persian sayings and poems in conversational speech. The Tajik language belongs to the Iranian linguistic family. In Uzbekistan, the people perform most Islamic rituals in Persian. Thanks to the influence of the Iranian education system, in many chronicles of the 15th-17th centuries, the history of the peoples of Central Asia was written in Persian. Well-known academics who were born in Central Asia are recognized as natives of the Iranian-Islamic culture. For example, such academics as Rūdakī, Ulugbek, Buhari, ibn Sina, Balami, Biruni, and Naser Hosrov are well known as Iranian figures at the global level. The peoples of Iran and Central Asia have many common traditions, for example, the celebration of Navruz. Many traditions and customs were formed under the influence of Islam, which has a strong impact on the mentality and everyday life of the peoples of the Central Asian region. One of the reasons for the close ties between Iran and Central Asia is that national minorities live on both sides of a common border. This reciprocal settlement underwent particularly intensive development during the time of the Great Silk Road.

⁸ See: M. Sanai, *Vzaimootmosheniia Irana i stran Tsentral'noi Azii*, Almaty, 1997, Chapter 1.

⁹ See: *Ibid.*, p. 15.

2. In the 18th-19th centuries, a large part of Central Asia became part of the Russian Empire, and, in the 20th century, of the Soviet Union, whereby the cultural relations between Iran and Central Asia underwent a period of relative stagnation. But, according to M. Sanai, the presence of Iranian culture and traditions in Central Asia was so great that it hindered the spread of the Russian culture in the 19th-20th centuries. Sovietization and collectivization caused the Turks of Central Asia to leave the region en masse, and Iran was one of the countries to which they emigrated. A large community of ethnic Turkmen live today in the province of Mazandaran on the border with Turkmenistan, in the town of Gorgan, while a large number of Kazakhs live in the north of Iran.
3. Only after they acquired their independence did the Central Asian republics turn their attention to self-determination and reviving their national self-identification, the purpose of which was to establish a certain distance from Russia and the Russian culture.

In this way, we see that a convincing ideological base was created for Iran's penetration into the region, which was immediately put into action. In 1992, Iran opened its embassies in nearly all of the Central Asian republics, each of which had special employees engaged in cultural, educational, and scientific affairs. Moreover, at that time, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation opened its special representative office in Almaty, which performs the role of an Iranian cultural center in the region. Then Iranian cultural representative offices appeared in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. These structures promoted the dynamic development of Iran's cultural, educational, and scientific ties with the region's countries.¹⁰ In May 1992, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan participated in an international book fair in Tehran. While it was in progress, several bilateral documents on cooperation in the cultural sphere were signed, including in library science and the printing trade, which also dealt with replenishing the national libraries of the corresponding countries with books. In those years, a series of textbooks, dictionaries, and magazines for the Central Asian republics were published in Iran.

I would like to draw attention to several extremely vulnerable spots in the propaganda of Iranian culture in the region's countries. For example, despite the loud statements about the common cultural heritage, there are quite a number of differences between the Iranian and Central Asian cultures, and it is hardly correct to say that they are culturally identical. In the 16th century, Iran became a Shi'ite country, which naturally separated it from its neighboring Sunni countries. There are not any large Shi'ite minorities in the Central Asian republics with which Iran could establish strong ties. After independence was gained, the youth representatives of the Central Asian republics began to travel abroad to the theological centers of Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco to study, but not to Iran. Moreover, these countries began widespread religious activity in the Central Asian republics as missionaries rushed in to spread and promulgate Islam. When the wave of the Islamic movement rose and the Islamic Revival Party was created back in Soviet times, the ideologists of this movement mainly turned to the works of Sunni and not Iranian thinkers.¹¹

As far as culture and linguistics are concerned, four out of the five Central Asian countries are part of the Turkic-speaking world, and Farsi only predominates in Tajikistan. The region has always been under the influence of the civilizations around it, at the crossroads of such philosophical systems as Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. The Great Silk Road passed through it, which served not only as a means for exchanging goods, but also ideas among China, India, Iran, as well as

¹⁰ See: A. Atakhanov, "Razvitie kul'turnykh svyazei gosudarstv Tsentral'noi Azii s IRI v postsovet'skiy period," *Islamskaia revoliutsia: proshloe, nastoiashchee i budushchee*, Speech Theses, Moscow, 1999, p. 7.

¹¹ See: O. Roy, *Iran's Foreign Policy towards Central Asia*, New York, 1999, p. 9.

the Southern and Central European states. As New York University Professor Robert D. McChesney notes, the countries of Central Asia borrowed key elements from the three main components of the Islamic world—religion from the Arabs, the administrative-bureaucratic system from the Persians, and the military from the Turks, thus acquiring a unique advantage from the combination of Iranian and Turkish origins in their own culture.¹²

In addition, Iran often emphasized its superiority over the Central Asian republics and tried to pose itself as an “older brother” competent to teach them lessons in Islam, culture, and even language (in the case of Tajikistan), which aroused irritation in these states. So Iran’s justification for its presence in the region is far from ideal, although the ideas of cultural-historical commonality will most likely be developed and used further, since they meet Iran’s interests most of all.

As for possible Islamization of the Central Asian countries, the threat does not come from Iran. Iranian Shi‘ite Islam is unlikely to become widely accepted in the Central Asian countries, the population of which mainly consists of Hanafi Sunnis. The groups of Shi‘ites in the region are small and mainly consist of native Azerbaijanis and Iranians who live in compact groups in some of the Central Asian countries.

The main threat of expansion of radical Islam comes from the Sunni radical movements based in Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹³ The experience of several Muslim countries shows that the Islamic fundamentalists are rapidly gaining momentum and beginning to make claims on power in those states where modernization (in combination with the demographic explosion) is leading to rapid impoverishment of a large part of the population. The same situation could develop in the Central Asian countries. The Islamic fundamentalists are strong in preaching social justice, confessional democracy, and internationalism, which could be an ideological-political alternative to nationalism and ethnocracy.

As already mentioned, Iran is not interested in destabilization of the situation in the region, what is more, it is afraid that the nationalistic moods being manifested in the Central Asian countries might spread to the Iranian population (a large part of which comprises national minorities, particularly immigrants from Central Asia), which will pose a threat to Iran’s territorial integrity. Indeed, people with the same religion, traditions, and language live on both sides of Iran’s borders with the Central Asian countries, which is of great significance to Tehran. National minorities of Central Asian peoples also live in other countries of the Middle East. For example, there are Turkmen national minorities not only in Iran, but also in Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

Iran’s relations with the Central Asia states are developing at the multilateral and bilateral level, as well as between regions and provinces. Iran was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the Central Asian states in all the regional and international organizations and forums.¹⁵

It meant a lot to Iran that these republics joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference, thus not only raising the prestige of the OIC in the world, but also augmenting the role of the non-Arab states in the OIC, which is strengthening Iran’s position in this organization.

Iran is also in favor of the Central Asian countries joining OPEC and is trying to draw up a joint policy with them for exporting oil and gas through its territory, which could also strengthen Tehran’s position in OPEC.

In 1992, on Iran’s initiative, the Central Asian countries were accepted into the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) recreated in 1985 on the basis of the Regional Cooperation for Develop-

¹² See: R.D. McChesney, “Central Asia’s Place in the Middle East,” in: *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*, p. 31.

¹³ See: M.A. Khrustalev, *Tsentral’naia Azia vo vneshnei politike Rossii*, Moscow, 1994, p. 19.

¹⁴ See: B. Shaffer, “Epilogue,” in: *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*, p. 230.

¹⁵ See: “Prakticheskie shagi, napravlennye na ukreplenie regionalnykh i mezhdunarodnykh otnochenii,” *Tretiy vzgliad* (Moscow), No. 71, 2000, p. 36.

ment Organization, which turned it into the second largest regional organization in the world in terms of territory and population.

The founders of the ECO regarded these republics as a new market, sources of natural resources, and transit routes for their goods to Europe, the Far East, Siberia, Southeast Asia, and other markets of the world. Iran put forward the idea of creating a Common Islamic Market. It goes without saying that cooperation in the ECO also provides Iran with the opportunity to penetrate the Central Asian countries and come out of its isolation. For example, the main attention in the ECO projects (Iran plays the leading role in this structure) is paid to creating transportation and other communication routes, in which Iran holds the key place, thanks to which the latter will establish close ties with the countries of the region. There are attempts to coordinate banking activity for providing financial support of the projects being developed by the ECO countries. In 1993, a decision was approved to create a Joint ECO Bank, and the organization's insurance company was formed. Within the framework of the ECO, a Scientific Fund and Cultural Organization for the Development of Cooperation in Culture and Exchange of Scientific Achievements were formed.¹⁶ But trade remains a priority area of cooperation in the region, although bilateral relations prevail here, the development of which is complicated by the monotony of the export-import products of the ECO countries, a problem that traditionally complicates regional integration.

An important area in cooperation among the ECO countries is implementing joint projects in the oil and gas sphere and power engineering, but cooperation is mainly being carried out on a bilateral basis.

The idea has been revived of creating a trans-Asian railroad called the Great Silk Road, which would link the countries of the Middle East with Europe, the Far East, India, and the Southeast Asian countries, and in which, according to A. Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran would become the main pillar.¹⁷ Within the framework of this project, Iran put a 700-kilometer section of the Bafq-Bandar Abbas railroad into operation in 1995, and in 1996, construction of the Mashhad-Serakhs-Tejen route was completed, which joined the railroad networks of Iran and the Central Asian countries. Putting these routes into operation is ensuring the fastest transit for shipments from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf ports.¹⁸ Since 1996, the international NOSTRAK consortium and Russian Transcontinental Lines Company have been drawing up a project for building an international North-South transportation corridor, within the framework of which there are plans to organize rail communication along the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea (with the construction of a connecting branch between the railroads of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with subsequent access to Iran's railroad network). There are also plans to implement a variety of other projects. The Mashhad-Bafq and Kerman-Zahedan railroads are also under construction. Great importance is attached to the plans to create sea ferries that will operate from the port of Anzali to the ports of Turkmenbashi and Olia, as well as along the Makhachkala-Baku-Noshahr route. This also applies to the preparations for building the railroad ferry Lagan (Kalmykia)-Noshahr route which will provide access to the UAE.¹⁹

A decision has been made to join the energy systems of the region's countries in order to deliver electric power to territories which are in short supply. For example, Iran's electric power network has already been joined up to the electric power networks of Turkey and Azerbaijan, and work is underway to connect the electric power networks of Iran and Turkmenistan. Attempts are being made to create an integrated communication system. Iran is justifiably taking active part in preparing and

¹⁶ See: E. Dunaeva, "Iran i strany OES," in: *IRI v 90-e gody*, p. 89.

¹⁷ See: D. Menashri, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁸ See: *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ See: E. Dunaeva, "Kaspiyskiy region i IRI," in: *Islamskaia revoliutsia v Irane*, Moscow, 1999, pp. 135-136.

advancing projects for transportation of energy resources through its territory from the Central Asian republics.

Pipelines are not only of economic, but also of strategic significance to Iran. Any country through which the Caspian's energy resources are transported has every chance of becoming a real regional power and, of course, gaining economic dividends. And as we have already noted, it would be very advantageous for Iran to receive Caspian oil for consumption in its northern regions. Some American researchers also admit that the Iranian transportation route for Caspian oil is more convenient (at least for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan), since it is cheaper, and Iran is the most stable country in the region and a reliable business partner.²⁰ But the sanctions imposed by the United States pose a major obstacle. The Central Asian countries face the problem of choosing between an energy transportation route they need, which promises great dividends, and relations with the U.S., which is at the top of the foreign policy priorities of the region's republics. In addition, these republics cannot always resolve the questions related to the transportation of their energy resources themselves. For example, Kazakhstan's oil industry depends heavily on foreign oil companies, among which American and European partners prevail (they provide about 50% of the investments in the industry).²¹ It should be noted that many projects for laying pipelines are not implemented due to the lack of funding. And international financial organizations refuse to allot funds to these projects, since Iran is to become the key country on the gas and oil pipeline routes. For this reason, U.S. and other Western companies refuse to participate in these projects. So it is extremely important that Tehran achieve the removal, or at least the alleviation, of Washington's sanctions.

Here is worth emphasizing that the problem of transportation routes is not only a question of choice of direction for transporting the Central Asian countries' export and import commodities, it is more a problem of access to the region, which is no longer economic, but geopolitical in significance. For Iran it is also a question of coming out of its isolation and removing the sanctions. The implementation of Iranian projects will mean ending all boycotts and embargos, and the interests of Western companies, whose oil will pass through the pipelines, will become the best guarantee of Iran's foreign policy prestige and also raise its influence in the region.

So Iran needs to conduct an active foreign policy toward Central Asia in order to maintain its current position and possibly in the future return what it has lost. Keeping in mind the situation that has currently developed around Iran and the rapidly changing political climate in the Central Asian countries (active expansion by Western companies of economically advantageous vectors of cooperation, enlargement of NATO, and so on), they could greatly undermine Iran's possibility of having an influence on the region's countries. The latter circumstance will have a negative effect on Iran's domestic economic and political situation, will lead to new problems, and will create an additional threat to its security. Such problems can be resolved not only by means of large financial and economic projects, but also on the basis of a more active cultural policy aimed at re-enacting the centuries-long involvement of the region's nations in the area where Islamic historical-cultural values are widespread.

²⁰ See: O. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²¹ See: I. Azovskiy, *Tsentrāl'noaziatiskie respubliki v poiskakh reshenia transportnoi problemy*, Moscow, 1999, p. 89.