



THE REGIONAL STRATEGY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IN CENTRAL ASIA POLITICAL FACTORS AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

**(Iran's Regional Strategy in Central Asia:
Political Factors and Development Trends)**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward Central Asia through political, geopolitical, cultural and economic factors. It examines Iran's regional approach, the internal and external conditions influencing its formation, and the development dynamics of Iran's relations with the states of the region.

Keywords: Regionalism, Iranian plateau, OPEC, exporting the Islamic revolution, deviant actor, Corpejer–Kurt-Kuy, selective character.

Introduction

Within the framework of contemporary political science, the category of “regionalism” is acquiring increasing theoretical and practical significance. This situation is explained by transformations in the international order, the transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar political configuration, and the growing activity of regional centers of power. In particular, for Iran, which operates under long-term external pressure and sanctions, the policy of regionalism has become an important tool for ensuring state stability and expanding foreign-policy opportunities.

Before analyzing Iran's regional policy, it is appropriate to clarify the essence and content of the concept of “regionalism.”

A region is a specific space characterized by socio-territorial commonality, the integrity of its constituent elements, and their interconnection. According to the interpretation of political scientist K. Deutsch, a “region” consists of several



countries that are more closely interconnected with one another in various spheres than they are with other states.¹

E. Markusen, in turn, explains the “region,” alongside the nation and the city, as a territorial unit formed as a result of socio-economic and political-cultural cohesion, as well as historical evolution, which distinguishes it from other territories.²

Scientific approaches to Iran’s influence on the Central Asian states and its role in the region are manifested in two opposing directions. Some researchers tend to overestimate Iran’s influence over the countries of the region. In particular, the revival of religious values in Iranian society after the Islamic Revolution and Tehran’s efforts to expand its sphere of influence in the international arena are sometimes interpreted as a potential threat to the region.

Such views have shaped a certain political discourse for the states of the region as well as for the international community. Elements of propaganda aimed at strengthening sentiments of “Iranophobia” around Iran can also be observed through certain global powers and their information channels.

Political analyst N. Vigeland, relying on a functional approach, classifies regions into the following groups on the basis of functional, cultural and administrative criteria:

1. Functional region — a space of interaction oriented toward achieving specific benefits and results through cooperation in particular spheres such as trade, customs policy, education and integration.
2. Cultural region — a space formed on the basis of common heritage, language, customs, values and historical memory, expressing cultural proximity and a certain degree of commonality within a given territory. One of its important features is that processes often develop in a “bottom-up” direction.
3. Administrative region — a territorial unit defined within the administrative-territorial structure of the state.³

The Islamic Republic of Iran borders 15 states and is directly connected with four regional spaces: Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean and Southwest Asia. Studying the level and nature of relations

¹ Deutsch K. On nationalism, world regions, and the nature of the West // Mobilization, Center-Periphery structure and nation-building. A volume in commemoration of Stein Rokkan / Ed. by Per Torsvik. Universitetsforlaget. Bergen — Oslo — Toronto, 1981.

² Markusen A. Regions: economics and politics of territory. Rowman & Littlefield publishers. 1987.

³ Цыренов Очир Чингисович. Регионализация и регионализм: понятие и классификация



with these groups of countries is of particular importance in research on international relations.

The main focus of this study is to analyze Iran's policy toward the Central Asian region. At the same time, the factors influencing relations between the two geopolitical spaces are also examined.

Another group of researchers assesses the efforts of the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran to improve relations with the states of the region as a natural and historical need that serves to strengthen Tehran's regional position. In their view, any society striving for development seeks to expand its sphere of influence and improve mechanisms of cooperation.

Naturally, in the era of the "state and nation," such an aspiration contributes to increasing the creative and institutional potential of the country. This position differs significantly from the views of the representatives of the first approach noted above.

The conceptual document on Iran's development prospects for the next twenty years may be regarded as a practical expression of this approach. The realization of such a perspective depends not only on the country's internal stability, but also on Iran's interest in strengthening peace and security in the region.⁴

Iran is a state with an ancient history and a rich civilizational heritage. The area known as the "Iranian plateau" covers a wide geographical space, and certain parts or even entire territories of today's neighboring countries have historically been connected with this space. This demonstrates that Iran shares a common historical heritage with many neighboring states.

Historically, the Persian language served as the language of science, politics and culture across vast areas of the region, and even today it retains symbolic significance in some spaces. The existence of common beliefs, historical memory and cultural heritage creates important opportunities for Iran to develop constructive relations with neighboring countries.⁵

According to some analysts, Iran's aspiration to strengthen its position in the region is explained precisely by historical and cultural traditions. In their interpretation, such an approach may include reliance on a glorious past and a desire to achieve regional leadership.

⁴ Мехди Иманипур. Иран и регион. Теоретические и прагматические аспекты региональной политики

⁵ Российская Академия Наук Институт востоковедения. Роль и место Ирана в регионе Коллективная монография



Alongside the historical factor, Iran's geopolitical opportunities also determine its influence on the region. Rich energy resources around the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, as well as direct proximity to Central Asia and the Middle East, allow Tehran to exert influence over these two strategic spaces. This, in turn, strengthens Iran's role at both the regional and global levels.

Iran has a number of objective preconditions for expanding its cultural influence. First of all, Iranian civilization and culture, as one of the world's oldest cultural layers, provide the country with a positive historical image. After the Islamic Revolution, the idea of strengthening cultural influence over neighboring states was actively promoted by the Iranian leadership.⁶

Distancing itself from the values of Western civilization and placing Islamic cultural traditions at the center shaped specific tendencies in Iran's cultural policy. This situation created conditions for Iran to present itself as a leading spiritual and cultural center in a region composed mainly of Muslim states.

Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, paid special attention to Iran's cultural development and regarded it as the fundamental basis for educating the nation and future generations. He envisioned Iran's cultural development as relying on the principles of national identity and independence. It was precisely after the Islamic Revolution that special terms emerged in Persian to express a culture independent of the West. The concepts of "Farhange kish" or "Farhange kishinge," directed toward neighboring states, also appeared as products of the idea of future cultural expansion.

The fact that Islam remains an important socio-cultural factor in Central Asia occupies a special place in the formation of Iran's foreign-policy concept. Although the majority of Muslims in the region are Sunni, while a large part of Iranians belong to the Shia branch, Tehran does not regard this difference as an absolute obstacle. This is because the factors uniting the parties — historical and cultural proximity associated with Persian civilization and the Islamic religion — occupy a priority place in Iran's political imagination. However, sectarian differences remain a significant limitation in practical politics.

Iran's religious-political elite links the strengthening of its position in Central Asia with the revival of the ideas of "Muslim brotherhood" and believes that this

⁶ М. Каменова. Цели культурной политики Ирана в регионе и ее воплощение.



process will spiritually bring the peoples of the region closer to Iran as one of the influential centers of the Islamic world.⁷

From this point of view, the main principles of the new regime's foreign policy consisted of strengthening the solidarity of Islamic peoples, promoting common interests and, to a certain extent, supporting the idea of a unified Muslim community.

The main vector in implementing this policy is reflected in the new regime's attempt to link socio-political solidarity with the concept of a socio-religious community.⁸ Iran's political strategy toward the Central Asian countries is based on ideas of cultural, historical and religious identity.

In one of his speeches, religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei emphasizes the need to revive Islamic culture, the awakening of Islamic countries, the growing awareness of governments of their independence, and the strengthening of a sense of dignity among peoples.⁹

Thus, in Tehran's regional policy toward Central Asia, one can observe an effort to apply religious, cultural-educational and social components in an integrated manner. These components are harmonized with economic relations and implemented gradually.

The Central Asian states themselves are also interested in cooperation with Iran. Iran is viewed as an important partner in developing transport corridors, especially access to the Persian Gulf, energy issues, technological cooperation and trade relations. Iran's participation in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), established in 1985, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) also increases its potential for regional cooperation.

Strengthening its position in Central Asia enables Iran to address several interrelated strategic tasks. The first of these is overcoming international isolation. This direction of foreign policy serves to improve Iran's international image.

Moreover, unlike in the Middle East, Iran pursues its policy of expanding influence in Central Asia not through military-political pressure, but through a relatively balanced and cautious approach. This has allowed it to establish

⁷ Khabib Allah Khasan Shirazi. Nations of Central Asia. Tehran; 1992

⁸ Keyhan B. Middle East and International Security. Foreign policy. 2008;22:460..

⁹ Элиана А. Сатарова. Внешняя политика Ирана в Центральной Азии: на примере Кыргызстана



practical relations, albeit at varying levels, with all states of the region. Cooperation with Iran, in turn, corresponds to the Central Asian countries' policy of diversifying external relations and maintaining balance among centers of power.¹⁰

Iran established diplomatic relations with the newly independent states of Central Asia. The international position of these states has a certain strategic significance for Tehran. According to some experts, the main tactic of Iranian diplomacy in the region is to strengthen, step by step, those directions that help overcome foreign-political and economic isolation.

Tehran seeks to present itself as a reliable partner whose interests intersect with those of the world's leading powers. Unlike in the Middle East, Iran's policy in Central Asia is not built on a confessional basis, since the majority of the region's Muslim population is Sunni. Therefore, Tehran relies here more on pragmatic interests than on ideological priorities.¹¹

Iran's policy toward Central Asia is rational and cautious in character. Changes of political leaders in the region do not have a sharp impact on Tehran's policy. As a rule, Iran tries to refrain from abrupt political steps and open confrontation. For example, during the civil war in Tajikistan, although Tehran supported the Islamic opposition, it sought to strengthen its political influence through dialogue on power-sharing. At the same time, it also maintained constructive relations with supporters of Tajikistan's secular regime.

This situation shows that caution and stability are present in Iran's Central Asian policy. Compared with Tehran's policy in the Middle East, its approach in Central Asia appears relatively consistent and balanced.

During the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian government developed an updated regional concept. It advanced a strategy for strengthening Iran's influence in neighboring areas, including Central Asia. In particular, eliminating factors that hinder the expansion of trade, investment and cooperation potential was defined as an important task.

As one of the main directions of this strategy, Iran announced its support for large infrastructure projects aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative. This

¹⁰ Грозин Андрей Валентинович. Политика и интересы ирана в центральной азии с учётом энергетического и логистического факторов

¹¹ Грозин Андрей Валентинович. Политика и интересы ирана в центральной азии с учётом энергетического и логистического факторов



approach is directly connected with Tehran's interests in strengthening road and rail links with Central Asia, as well as in accessing Chinese markets in the future.¹²

Within the framework of the Chinese initiative, the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran railway line was launched. In addition, the Ashgabat Agreement was signed in 2014 on the establishment of the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Oman–Qatar transport and transit corridor (Memorandum on the implementation of the agreement on the establishment of an international transport and transit corridor, 2014).

Tehran's priorities for integrating transport infrastructure into international transit systems create opportunities for turning Iran into an important transport and logistics hub located at the intersection of international transit routes.

In the process of forming relations with the Central Asian states, Tehran took into account in advance the consequences of political actions that could provoke open resistance from the elites of these countries. As a result, Iran almost completely abandoned the idea of “exporting the Islamic Revolution” in this region.

Without denying the role and position of the Central Asian states in regional politics, Iran is pursuing a policy in this area aimed primarily at strengthening its economic position. Nevertheless, existing geopolitical and economic constraints show that the process of fully developing and implementing Tehran's regional policy in Central Asia has not yet been completed.

In the 1990s, the Iranian government emphasized that the economic factor could not be the only decisive criterion for establishing relations with the Central Asian states. The countries of the region, however, were primarily interested in economic cooperation. Therefore, Tehran preferred to place special emphasis on the cultural dimension of its regional policy, particularly on historical and cultural heritage.

Within the chosen strategy, the Islamic factor played more of an additional background role in promoting Iranian cultural traditions and historical monuments. Therefore, it cannot be denied that in Iran's foreign-policy concept toward the Central Asian countries, cultural interaction was thoroughly analyzed

¹² Асанов А, 2014. Новая политика Ирана в Центральной Азии // <http://polit-asia.kz/politika/348>, дата обращения 06.06.2020.



and a certain ideological basis was created for strengthening its position in the region.

Although the ideas of historical proximity promoted by Iran have not been fully realized in the Central Asian space due to various objective reasons, the very existence of this idea shows that Iran's interests in the region have a long-term character.¹³

According to B. Shaffer's analysis, Iran's policy toward the region rests on the following five main factors¹⁴:

1. Ensuring Iran's national security;
2. Preventing the activation of Azerbaijani and Turkmen ethnic minorities on Iranian territory against the regime;
3. Iran's relations with third parties, primarily Turkey and Russia;
4. Iran's participation and integrative role in regional transit, transport and energy trade routes;
5. Economic interests.

Iran's pragmatic approach to Central Asia reveals another important aspect of its foreign policy: Tehran is capable of acting in accordance with international norms and playing a constructive role. This contradicts stereotypes that portray Iran as a "disruptive" or "deviant actor" in international relations. This approach demonstrates the multidimensional thinking of Iran's foreign-policy decision-makers and their ability to analyze international processes in a differentiated manner.

Iran is well aware of the possibility of using cultural resources to expand its influence. Under sanctions, the country feels the need to preserve its position and strengthen it by relying on its cultural potential. This gives Iran an opportunity to demonstrate its national identity, take pride in its civilizational heritage and use this factor as a constructive tool in international diplomacy.

It is noteworthy that among the Central Asian states, Iran has developed cultural relations with Uzbekistan relatively weakly. This situation demonstrates that geopolitical contradictions can also have a significant impact on cultural relations.¹⁵

¹³ Лаумулин М. Т., 2018. Современная Туркмения в поисках выхода из транс-портно-коммуникационной ловушки // <https://isca.kz/ru/analytics-ru/3218>, дата обращения 17.07.2020.

¹⁴ Brenda Shaffer. Iran's policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia

¹⁵ Милтон кейнс. Внешняя культурная политика ирана в центральной азии: демонстрация политического прагматизма



On the other hand, the above circumstances show that, alongside its real relations with the region, there is also a politically attractive discourse in Iran's foreign policy. Tehran regularly emphasizes cultural proximity with the states of the region and uses common historical heritage, but this approach often takes on a selective character. Such actions can be assessed as a means of achieving specific political and economic goals.

Indeed, Iran seeks to ease international isolation and resist the long-standing pressures exerted by the United States. In this regard, Tehran makes use of cooperation with multilateral organizations. However, in some cases, the development of bilateral relations may provide it with more tangible results.

In this regard, Iran's main attention is directed toward Tajikistan, alongside Afghanistan. It is precisely in this direction that Tehran has significant economic investments. It is no coincidence that these two states, which are closest to Iran in cultural and linguistic terms, occupy a special place in its regional foreign policy.

Analysis of the cultural factor in Iran's relations with Central Asia reveals the importance of institutions such as the Organization for Culture and Islamic Relations in international diplomacy. If Iran's "soft power" diplomacy in the region is often manifested through bilateral meetings at the presidential or foreign ministry level, a significant part of practical initiatives is implemented through Iranian cultural centers.

As noted above, this organization is directly subordinate to the office of the head of state. Therefore, within the complex system of power of the Islamic Republic, this institution functions as one of the important instruments in the international political arena.

However, in the context of Iran's relations with Central Asia, this situation is interpreted not as competition with the presidential office or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but as an example confirming the coordinated activity of the foreign-policy and diplomatic apparatus and the important role of culture in Iran's international policy.¹⁶

In 2022 and the first half of 2023, strengthening Tehran's influence in Central Asia became one of the important tasks of Iran's foreign policy. This process is explained by the following factors:

¹⁶ file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/vneshnyaya-kulturnaya-politika-irana-v-tsentralnoy-azii-demonstratsiya-politicheskogo-pragmatizma.pdf



Russia's mobilization of its main resources toward Ukraine relatively weakened its position in Central Asia.

Turkey's influence in Central Asia is growing. Iran is concerned about the possibility of a "Turkic encirclement," since Azerbaijan's rapprochement with Ankara and Turkmenistan's shift into the orbit of Turkic influence create additional geopolitical pressure for Tehran. The seriousness of the problem is further intensified by the risk of using the factor of Azerbaijani and Turkmen minorities on Iranian territory.

Pressure by the Taliban movement on the Hazara community in Afghanistan, the possibility of using the factor of Afghan refugees who lived in Iran for destabilization, as well as the aggravation of border and water-related disputes with the Afghan government, led to armed clashes on the Afghanistan–Iran border in May 2023.

In April 2022, a political regime more oriented toward the United States was formed in Pakistan.

In July 2023, the long process of Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was completed.

The normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia in March 2023 reduced pressure on Iran from the Arab monarchies and enabled Tehran to redirect part of its foreign-policy resources from the Middle East to other areas, including Central Asia.¹⁷

Just as the Central Asian states are of multifaceted importance to Iran, Iran is also an important partner for the countries of the region. Tehran does not use a single universal model toward the countries of the region; rather, it applies a differentiated approach based on each state's political needs, geopolitical orientation and priority areas of relations with Iran. In other words, Iran gradually forms an algorithm of relations with each state and seeks to strengthen it through key channels of communication. These relations are considered separately below.

1. Iran–Tajikistan relations are formed on the basis of the closeness of common cultural and educational heritage, and cooperation in other areas also largely relies on this factor.¹⁸ Cultural and educational ties play an important role in strengthening bilateral relations. In this regard, Tajikistan Culture Days were

¹⁷ Евгений Троицкий. Политика Ирана по укреплению влияния в Центральной Азии

¹⁸ Евгений Троицкий. Политика Ирана по укреплению влияния в Центральной Азии



held in the cities of Tehran, Shiraz and Tabriz in the Islamic Republic of Iran on October 3–9, 2022. Likewise, Iranian Culture Days were organized in the cities of Dushanbe, Khujand and Bokhtar in Tajikistan from October 30 to November 6, 2022.

2. Iran–Turkmenistan relations are based mainly on economic and transit factors. In particular, under the SWAP scheme, Turkmen natural gas is being supplied to Iran and through it to other countries. There is an intention to expand the scale of this cooperation. Measures are being taken to increase the volume of gas supplied to Iran to 40 billion cubic meters per year. The Chairman of the People’s Council of Turkmenistan proposed implementing a number of projects jointly with Iranian companies specializing in this field.

This indicates that Iran is an important economic and geopolitical partner for Turkmenistan. At the same time, Tehran seeks to prevent Turkmenistan from becoming excessively close to Turkey. Iran provided Ashgabat with certain concessions by agreeing to repay a previously unrecognized debt, restore gas supplies through the Korpheje–Kurt-Kuy gas pipeline, and increase gas transit under the SWAP scheme within the framework of a trilateral agreement with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Relations between the two states are expected to become even more active in the near future. This is because China is one of the main buyers of Turkmenistan’s oil and gas products, and its demand for energy is increasing. This makes Iran even more important as a convenient transit route for Turkmenistan and for the Central Asian states in general.

3. In Iran–Uzbekistan relations, Uzbekistan’s neutral and balanced policy against the background of the Iran–United States confrontation is of particular importance. Tehran is concerned about the intensification of relations between the United States and Uzbekistan. Therefore, through the development of bilateral ties, Iran is trying to attract Uzbekistan as a beneficial partner in the economic and security spheres.

In March 2022, the parties established a joint commission on security. This commission is chaired by the Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and representatives of the Security Council of Uzbekistan. In September 2022, Uzbekistan signed a memorandum on the use of the Chabahar port. Agreements were also reached on the participation of Iranian companies in the



modernization of Uzbekistan's oil refineries in Bukhara and Fergana. In addition, the issue of establishing the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran international transport corridor is also being discussed.

In conclusion, Iran's regional policy toward Central Asia provides for a separate approach to each state. This approach derives from the specific nature of the region's countries' historical-cultural, socio-political, economic and geopolitical ties with Iran. It is also related to the orientation of each state toward external centers of power and the degree of its inclination toward them. From this point of view, Iran's regional policy differs according to the level of relations with each individual state. It may be assumed that in the near future Tehran's policy toward Central Asia will preserve the pragmatic and selective rhetoric noted above.