

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH TOWARDS THE CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

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ABSTRACT:

Regional cooperation is becoming important worldwide. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and acknowledging the independence of the 12 remaining republics, the attention of many countries drew in this region. Nevertheless, Iran, as a country which has cultural and historical ties with this region, and also as a bridge between landlocked central Asian countries and the Persian Gulf, is not using its strategic geopolitical situation as part of its foreign policy with focus on Central Asia and Caucasus. While keeping its ties with Russia, Iran should acknowledge and use its capacity to increase its bilateral relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus countries. It important to mention that by having an active role in Central Asia, Iran can increases its regional power.

KEY WORDS: Iran's foreign policy, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Geopolitics, Regional Cooperation, International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and Caucasus could be explained as policies to encounter the western influence and accommodate its own interest in the region (Vatanka and Scholar, 2012); However, Iran was not much successful in the later. In order to counter western influence, Iran followed cooperative policy with Russia. Although Iran received the support of Russia for important issues like Iran's nuclear program, but more active role for Iran in the region is needed. Iran should balance its relation with Russia as well as gaining a foothold in Central Asia and Caucasus with offering more cultural expansion and economic incentives. This study provides an analytical view for answering the question of what has been Iran's foreign policy approach toward the Central Asia and the Caucasus and what it should be in the future. This is important because of the growing importance of regional cooperation's in the world. In order to answer this question, the paper has been designed in four parts: first, Iran's cultural approach in her foreign policy toward the Central Asia and the Caucasus has given. In second part the political approach and in the third part the economic approach has been evaluated. Finally, in the last part conclusions are presented.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and acknowledging the independence of the 12 remaining republics, the attention of many countries drew in this strategic region. Central Asia include five countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan which bordered with Russia from North, Iran and Afghanistan from South, Caspian Sea from west and China from East. Modern Day Central Asia was a great part of the ancient Transoxiana, the region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. Transoxiana was one of the satrapies of the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia under the name Sogdiana (Abolhassan Shirazi, pp. 111-114).

According to Takmil Homayoun, from the ethnic view, Arians have habituated in part of Transoxiana, but later they became under the influence of Turks. At the time being, except Tajiks that mostly talk in Persian language and have Arian ethnic, the Cultural and linguistic characteristics of the rest of the region is similar as Turks (Takmil Homayoun, 1992, p.33).

Iran has strong ethnic and cultural ties with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. However, relations with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan are tough. Tajikistan has tenacious historically connections with Iran; the official language of the country is ‘Tajik’ which is a dialect of Persian language. Hence, Iran has a possibility of developing pan-Iranian tendencies in Tajikistan. According to Efezil and A. Stone, Iran contributes to bringing to power a pro-Iranian party in Tajikistan (Ertan and Stone, 2010, p.358). Turkmenistan has been part of ancient Iran in the past. Therefore, there is a cultural interconnectivity among Iranians and Turkmens as well.

But then despite having linguistic ties with Iranian Azeri’s, Azerbaijan links with Iran is inappropriate. Because of the potential threat of separatist tendencies among Iranian Azeri minorities, Iran is not favored with strong cultural ties with Azerbaijan. Furthermore, mostly pan-Turkish people of Azerbaijan are somewhat hostile toward Iran (Ertan and Stone, 2010, p.357). Uzbekistan official relations with Iran are also tense, but cultural ties cannot be disregarded. There are still a group of Persian speaking people living in Samarkand and Bukhara – two cities as cradle of Iranian civilization where today belongs to Uzbekistan.

Atayi and Shibani have summarized Iran’s Cultural interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus as following: first, the revival of Islam in the region and reinforcement of close

cultural ties with each of the countries; Second, the revival of Persian language among the region especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; Third, maintaining and preserving the manuscripts and the historical remnants of the ancient Iran in the region; and the last cooperation in closing Iran's and the region's identity (Atayi and Shibani, 2011, p.144).

POLITICAL APPROACH

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a vacuum of power among the new established countries in this region. The United States, as a single super power after the cold war, as well as some neighbor countries like Iran and Turkey tried to fill this vacuum. Although Iran had set a relatively good relation with most of the Central Asian and the Caucasus countries, but the country's foreign policy in this region can be explained as countering the influence of the U.S. and competing with Turkey. Both Turkey and Iran are trying to increase their influence in the region; however, turkey is enjoying western support as well.

In her paper *Turkish and Iranian interests and policies in the South Caucasus*, Evanthia Balla has well explained the trends of Iranian-Turkish competition and cooperation in the Caucasus. She states that Armenia has developed strong political and economic ties with Iran while Azerbaijan and Georgia seeks to reinforce their links with Turkey and the west (Evanthia, 2013). In addition, Bahram Amir Ahmadian has described Iranian close relation with Armenia as a "trump card which has been frequently played in the political game between the west and the east" (Amir Ahmadian, 2013). Iran has established its close relation with Armenia to confront pan-Turk tendencies. Iran's supports for Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resulted to the loss of relations with Azerbaijan. In addition, supporting Armenia implicitly raised Iranian-Turkish contest, considering Turkey as a main supporter of Azerbaijan.

Armenia is not only having close ties with Iran, but also with Russia. In order to naturalize the American influence in the region, Russia intensified its ties with Iran and Armenia (Sharashenizade, 2011, p.3). Iran, on the other hand, emphasize on Russia's role for the regions security and stability. In addition, Russia was among the few countries which supported Iran's nuclear program. Therefore, Iran's policy in the region seldom contradicts with those of Russians. Thus, according to Svante E. Cornell, Iran's influence in the region is limited because Iran follows a defensive position (E. Cornell, 2003, p.6). In other words, due

to Russia's desire to have more influence in Caucasus, Iran's overall engagement has decreased in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Alterman, et al. 2013, p.13). However, this situation can be changed due to recent Iranian-western positive negotiations over Iranian nuclear program and the ongoing improvement on the country's relation with the west.

Iranian foreign policy in the Central Asia has realistic policy trends as it has in the Caucasus. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the idea of 'Exporting the Islamic Revolution' articulated by the revolution leader- Ayatollah Khomeini, neighboring countries were alarmed by the threat of the political Islam. After the cold war and independency of the Central Asian countries, the fear of political Islam hindered their relation with Iran. In addition, since the 11/9 and the 'war on terrorism,' the U.S. became politically and military involved in the region. This brought about the new republican's direct engagement against the terrorism issue. For instant, Uzbekistan asked for the U.S. security in exchange for full cooperation (E. Cornell and A. Spector, 2002, pp. 201-202). Consequently, given these points, Iran's regional role has been faded.

Same as in Caucasus, Turkey's involvement in Central Asia has been presented in the U.S. agenda. According to Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson, President George H. W. Bush called Turkey as a model for Central Asian newly independent republics. By and large, this policy has been continued on the years after. However, Turkey has much more geographically and culturally limitation in Central Asia than in Caucasus (Pipes and Clawson, 1992, p.9). All of which encourages Iran to work harder to enhance its image abroad so that it could have more indirect influence in Central Asia and Caucasus as being a model for them instead of the Turkish model. Again, recent proceedings in Iran's nuclear negotiation with the west should be one more reason for the country to use this opportunity and set its regional stand in accordance with its real great potentials.

ECONOMIC APPROACH

Economic situation of the Central Asia is worse in compare with the time it was under communism. According to the CIA world Fact book, All 5 countries GDP has declined in comparison with what it was 90s. The practical approach to bring them off from this situation would be finding ways to induce the Central Asian states to open their borders to each other and to the outside world (Maynes, 2003, pp.2-4). Therefore, Iran's role could be bold in this regard. Iran has a special geopolitical situation as being a crossroads of transit routes from the

Central Asia and Caucasus to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Landlocked central Asian Countries can merely access to the sea through the land of their neighbors. Hence, because of its convenient geopolitical location, Iran is the best country that can provide the direct link between five central Asian countries and the outside world.

In addition, according to Muhammad Javed, Iran's possession of huge oil and gas resources is another advantage to cooperate with Central Asia and Caucasus countries. Iran has the technical know-how in oil and gas industry which is a great context for cooperation. Furthermore, the region is a potential market for Iranian goods. Hence, there is a wide range of economic cooperation fields among Iran, Central Asia and Caucasus in energy sector, infrastructure provision, trade and commerce (Javed, 2002, pp.115-119).

While Iran has considerable advantages for Central Asian and the Caucasus countries, it was not successful to accomplish an effective foreign policy to cooperate properly with this region. A more proactive standpoint is suggested for Iran's approach toward Central Asia by applying the policy of making trust, avoiding ambitious goals, economic development and giving investment incentives for Iranian businessmen's to do more investment in Central Asia. In addition, cooperation with Central Asia and Caucasus countries should increase in the Economic cooperation Organization (ECO) framework. The organizations were founded on 1985 by Turkey, Iran and Pakistan and have its headquarters in Tehran-Iran. ECO aims to meet "sustainable socio-economic development for people of the region."¹ Iran should play a dominant role in providing incentives to move the region to an open market environment in which welcomes more trade and less trade tariffs and barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union has ended competition among the great powers but it created a new room for competition among regional powers. It is true that the number of regional powers interested in Central Asia and Caucasus geopolitical advantages, but it should note that Iran has an especial stand comparing with others. Nevertheless, the countries have not used its great economic and geopolitical potential as well as strengthen cultural links in her relation with Central Asia and Caucasus countries. It is the time to try to have a more active role for Iran in the region instead of having defensive stand against foreign influence. It

¹ Economic Cooperation Organization's official website, <http://www.ecosecretariat.org/>.

should be note that achieving Iran's goals in Central Asia and the Caucasus will not be possible if Iran undermine its good relation with Russia. Hence, Iran should balance its policies toward both keeping its close ties with Russia and increase its overall engagement in the region. Economic incentives would be the first step in this regard: giving Central Asian and the Caucasus countries more opportunities to enjoy Iran's great geopolitical situation as a transit way for their products. The regional bridge perspective in Iran's foreign policy can increases Iran's regional power both in the Central Asia, Caucasus and the Middle East regions. In addition, Iran should improve the country's economic basis as its groundwork for being an exclusive model in the region. With doing this, Central Asian countries would show their interest to cooperate more with Iran themselves. Furthermore, recent proceedings in Iran's nuclear negotiation with the west should be one more reason for the country to use this opportunity and set its regional stand in accordance with its real great potentials.

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