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Political and economic aspects of Iran's relations with Central Asian countries

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Abstract. Central Asia holds economic and political significance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their cooperation has great potential for both sides. However, Iran's practical role in economic and political relations within the region remains limited.

Currently, Iran does not have a significant position among the top ten economic partners of regional countries. Iran's foreign trade with Central Asia is less than 2% of Iran's total foreign trade. The most important reasons for this are the lack of priority given to economic development domestically, resulting in Iran's weakness in investment, technology, and the private sector, the lack of diplomatic priority for the region, and sanctions limiting Iran. Some developments in recent years have given hope for the expansion of cooperation between Iran and Central Asian countries. In this regard, we can refer to the preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union from 2019, the free trade agreement from 2023, Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 2022, the neighborhood policy and the eastern policy of the new government from 2021. All these economic and political communications have been leading to an increase in development of relationships between Iran and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Although bilateral relations between Iran and Kyrgyzstan are not particularly dynamic, but relations between Iran and Uzbekistan are the most complex in the region among the CA countries.

All in all, Iran and Central Asian countries have taken important steps towards each other in order to have political stability and economic development over the last decade. Thus, Tehran has enormous potential for cooperation with the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, but its implementation is closely connected with the geopolitical situation around Iran.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Central Asia, cooperation, country, integration, transportation, agreement, economy, development, international, industry.

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Introduction

Iran occupies an important place in the system of political and economic relations of the Central Asian states. Central Asian countries are also interested in developing their relations with Iran. Political and economic aspects of Iran's relations with Central Asian countries include transport, energy, technology supply, development of trade relations and cooperation within various regional organizations. In this context, we have decided to focus on the relations between the Republic of Iran and the countries of CA region.

As for relations between Iran and Kazakhstan, although Tehran is not considered a strategic partner of Astana, these two countries are actively developing mutually beneficial cooperation in many political and economic spheres. The commonality of economic interests and territorial proximity of the countries of the Caspian region will undoubtedly have a great influence on the nature and content of bilateral relations between Iran and Kazakhstan. These states include culture, education, healthcare, sports, tourism, cargo transit, oil and gas industry, mutual investments, transport, etc. Intergovernmental and interdepartmental agreements on cooperation in the areas were signed.

In 1992, Iran supported the entry of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which deals with integration issues in Central Asia and the Middle East. In turn, Kazakhstan made an attempt to include Iran among the participants in the Council for Cooperation and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CACA). Iranian leaders made significant contributions to three CSTO summits. In 2004, Kazakhstan supported the creation of an observer institution in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and a year later Iran was admitted to it with observer status [1]. In 2021, the process of raising Iran's status within the organization to the level of a member state began. Iran was unable to join the SCO earlier due to sanctions imposed on it by the UN Security Council, the United States and the European Union. After 2016, restrictions began to be gradually lifted, including thanks to the conclusion of a nuclear agreement, according to which Iran pledged not to produce nuclear weapons. In September 2022, Tehran signed a memorandum of accession to the SCO, which was approved by the republican parliament in November [2]. On July 4, 2023, it officially announced Iran's entry into the ranks of the member countries of the association; a decision on this was made at the 23rd summit of the organization chaired by India.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is interested in Iran not only as a Muslim country, but also as a country with sufficient industrial, agricultural and scientific potential, and Tehran actively imports grain, oil products, metallurgical and other products from this republic.

Kazakhstan is also interested in developing trade and economic activities and political dialogue with Tehran, joint oil and gas projects, in particular, the construction of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran pipeline (Persian Gulf). Thanks to the construction of this pipeline, Astana will have the opportunity to enter the Asian market. Iran is also interested in Kazakhstan as an investor in the fields of mechanical engineering, infrastructure, transport and telecommunications. In recent years, there has been an increase in trade between Iran and Kazakhstan. If in 1992 the volume of trade between Kazakhstan and Iran was 229 thousand dollars, then in 2022 this figure exceeded 528 million dollars and did not fall below this figure

in subsequent years. Although this trade turnover is not very large compared to other countries, efforts are being made to make better use of the available opportunities [3].

In this chain, the statement of Dosym Satbaev, a Kazakh political expert, director of the Risk Assessment Group, is completely justified, since, in his opinion: "We are interested in Iran, first of all, as a country that can actively participate in resolving the situation in Afghanistan, because it is a powerful country, which passes through our territory, not only neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are concerned about the flow of drugs. In this regard, Iran's stabilizing role in solving the Afghan problem would be very useful for all countries in the Central Asian region. Everyone understands that Iran must be taken into account, because the situation in other regions of the world depends on its position, be it the Palestinian issue or the Afghan issue. Iran is our neighbor in the Caspian Sea, and it is beneficial for us to have true partnership relations with it [4].

Although bilateral relations between Iran and Kyrgyzstan are not particularly dynamic, in general they are developing smoothly. Since Manas Airport is home to US air bases, interaction between Iran and Kyrgyzstan is limited and mainly within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Currently, the fruitful interaction between Iran and Kyrgyzstan at the level of parliament, ministries and departments, as well as the constant work of the intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation, will raise relations between these states to new heights, as evidenced by the volume of trade between the two countries. In 2014, it increased to approximately 100 million US dollars. The current figure stays at around 50 million US dollars. In the future, specific areas of cooperation between Iran and Kyrgyzstan may be the energy, oil and gas and transport sectors [5].

In 2010, as part of cooperation between Iran and Kyrgyzstan in the field of transport, it is planned to build a railway in the direction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran, which will further connect Russia and Uzbekistan. This was planned at the initiative of Iran. Four years later, in December 2014, the countries of the region reached an agreement on this project in Dushanbe. Some experts consider the construction of the railway to be a "transport and economic masterpiece"; others, on the contrary, do not believe in the success of the plan. Currently, the fate of the railway line project remains unclear due to a lack of investment [6].

In February 2009, the decision of the then President of Kyrgyzstan K. Bakiyev to withdraw the US air base located at Manas airport from the country was very positively received by the political leadership of Iran. The deployment of NATO strategic forces in Central Asia has caused Iran a lot of trouble, especially due to rumors that the United States is ready to strike Iranian territory from this very airbase. Bishkek immediately announced that the Manas military base would not be used against Iran in the event of a military operation.

In general, according to many specialists of the Axis Information and Analysis expert group, Iran's foreign policy towards Kyrgyzstan is an integral part of the country's more global strategy in Central Asia. Its policy is aimed at neutralizing US efforts to isolate Iran in the near future, economically and politically [7].

Tajikistan occupies a special place in Iran's relations with the states of Central Asia not for economic and political reasons, but due to factors of ethnocultural proximity. During the civil war in Tajikistan, Iran maintained a policy of non-intervention and remained neutral towards the warring factions. Although some experts call Tajikistan's rapprochement with Iran a process

of cultural expansion, it is certainly based on a common historical, cultural and religious past. Of course, Iran's goal, it seems to us, is to extend its ideological dominance to the states of Central Asia, and primarily to the Republic of Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking country in the region. And as a result of this dominance, Iran is trying to create an Islamic state in Tajikistan, similar to its own. Such accusations were not accepted at the official level, since, as the Iranian authorities noted, the choice of a strategy for further development is an internal matter of this Central Asian state [8].

An analysis of Iran's political relations with Tajikistan shows that Tehran has always been particularly interested in the independence and territorial integrity of Tajikistan and has tried to strengthen its political relations at a high level. Since Tajikistan gained independence, a number of important documents have been signed between these countries. For example, over the past decade, Iran has successfully implemented several strategically important projects, such as the construction of the Istiklol road tunnel, the construction of the Sangtuda Hydroelectric Power Station-2 and many other objects that will certainly contribute to the elimination of communications. Bottleneck and the creation of energy independence of Tajikistan.

Considering that the Republic of Tajikistan is landlocked, Iran's geographical location can provide this country with free access to international sea routes. That is, through Iran, on the one hand, Tajikistan gets in touch with Europe, and on the other hand, it has the opportunity to access the Persian Gulf and other parts of the world. All this was due to the difficulties that the Republic of Tajikistan faced until 2016, since it was practically under a communication blockade from neighboring Uzbekistan. The political leadership of Tajikistan and all its people were concerned about the policies of the former President of Uzbekistan I. Karimov, who, competing with Kazakhstan, tried in every possible way to increase his pressure on Tajikistan. The situation forced the Tajik authorities to take a "strategic breath" from Iran. The meeting of the Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan Muhiddin Kabiri with the spiritual leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was interrupted. This party was declared terrorist and banned in Tajikistan, and the leader himself was accused of attempting a coup and is wanted by Interpol. Following the meeting, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan presented a note of protest to the Ambassador of Iran to the Republic of Tajikistan, Hojatollah Faghani. Tajikistan has banned the import of Iranian food and goods due to "inadequate quality," denied Iranian citizens the ability to obtain a visa at the airport, and suspended the operation of a branch of the Iranian charity Assistance to Imam Khomeini [9].

After the signing of the relevant agreement, the Iranian company Sobir International began construction of the Istiklol tunnel connecting the north and south of the republic, and it was quickly put into operation. Suffice it to recall the words of the then US Ambassador to Tajikistan about the importance of this project: "By purchasing this project, Iran secured its fame for many years." [10].

Taking into account the relations between Iran and Turkmenistan, it should be noted that such a feature of Turkmenistan's international status as the declaration of permanent neutrality as the basis of its foreign policy is of significant interest to Iran. The neutrality declared by Turkmenistan acts as a deterrent, allowing it to distance itself from participation in international military-political bloc structures, which is very important for Iran.

In addition, this area of Iran-Turkmeni cooperation is supported by existing economic ties that are objectively beneficial to these countries. It is clear that this course is unlikely to undergo radical changes due to a change in the top leadership of Turkmenistan and certain changes in the foreign policy of official Ashgabat. It is well known that the rapprochement of Turkmenistan with the West has an impact on the nature of bilateral cooperation. In 2018, the 5th Caspian Summit took place in Aktau. At this meeting, the parties signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea [11].

The Tejen-Sarakhs-Mashhad railway, put into operation in May 1996, allowed Turkmenistan to reach the Middle East region by the shortest route and, one might say, actually restored the Great Silk Road. Thanks to Iran, Turkmenistan has implemented or is implementing about a hundred priority industrial projects for the national economy. Iran's financial and material assistance is also enormous in the construction of the 200-kilometer Korpedje-Kurdkuy gas pipeline, which became an alternative to Russian gas pipelines and was put into operation in 1998. Similarly, Turkmenistan was obliged to supply its southern neighbor with up to 25 million cubic meters of gas daily for twenty-five years, and since 2006 has increased supply volumes [12].

In addition, an analysis of the relations between Iran and Turkmenistan shows that some tensions have arisen at times. Thus, in January 2008, when Turkmenistan stopped gas supplies to Iran due to severe frosts, the Iranian side was dissatisfied with Ashgabat's decision. After some time, gas exports resumed, and at the new price it was sold at \$140 instead of \$65 per 1 thousand cubic meters. However, in February 2009, the presidents of the two countries signed an agreement on annual supplies of 10 billion cubic meters of gas to Iran. Despite all this, relations between Tehran and Ashgabat are integrative in nature.

Continuing the analysis, we note that relations between Iran and Uzbekistan are the most complex in the region among the CA countries. However, the threat to Islam from the Uzbek government was caused not by external, but by internal reasons. Since gaining state sovereignty, Tashkent has been concerned that Iran's presence in the Central Asian region could contribute to the revival of Tajik culture and national identity in the country. In the future, they may lead to the emergence of separatism in Bukhara, Samarkand and other regions inhabited by Tajiks. As a result, when the US Congress imposed economic sanctions on Iran in 1995, Uzbekistan was the only post-Soviet state to openly support the measure. However, Iran has not been confrontational and has only occasionally criticized Tashkent's actions against the Islamic opposition in Uzbekistan. Thus, Political relations between Tashkent and Tehran in the beginning can be characterized as based on mutual suspicion and mistrust [13]. The emerging relations between Iran and Uzbekistan are characterized as normal friendship, with no tendency to aggravate or fundamental changes throughout the entire period of their cooperation. Until 2005, a certain Islamophobia in the political leadership of Uzbekistan and the open Americanism of the foreign policy of this Central Asian state were factors that prevented the rapprochement of the two countries. However, Iran's political elite, as experience shows, very seriously understands the importance of Uzbekistan in the regional context.

However, at the beginning of the new millennium, the leadership of Uzbekistan, especially its president, began to show interest in expanding cooperation and deepening ties with Iran. Creating a hierarchy of foreign policy relations for the near future (since 2007), the leadership

of Uzbekistan put Iran in first place among the countries of the Near and Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. This can be evidenced by several visits of high-ranking officials of Uzbekistan and Iran at various levels, exchange of government delegations, regular meetings and consultations of foreign ministers and deputies, as well as other official representatives of these countries. Undoubtedly, against this background, trade and economic cooperation between these states has expanded, and in 2008 the volume of Iranian-Uzbek trade exceeded 600 million US dollars. Iran supplies Uzbekistan with building materials, detergents, food, tea, fruits and other goods, and in return receives cotton, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, mineral fertilizers, chemical fiber and other products. Uzbekistan and Iran are involved in agriculture, transport, pharmaceuticals, banking, gas production and oil refining, construction, etc[14].

The Iranian side benefits from access to transportation infrastructure that allows Uzbekistan access to the sea. In general, the development of bilateral relations cannot be called dynamic at the moment. Prospects of cooperation are primarily related to transport and communication projects.

Conclusion

Iran and Central Asian countries have taken important steps towards political stability, regional security and economic development over the decades. Iran's relations with regional countries have placed it at a maximum of tenth place among their economic partners. The situation of these relationships is as follows: none of the eight energy transmission lines in the region pass through Iran; a maximum of 5% of goods transportation is through Iran; approximately 3% of passengers use Iranian airports and routes for foreign exchange; and about 5% of regional trade is with Iran. Consequently, despite Iran's importance, its actual role is minimal, and it can be considered a missing link in regional cooperation and convergence, as Iran's strategic capacities have not been utilized. The most important reasons for Iran's denied strategic and geopolitical position can be viewed at three levels: national, regional, and international [15].

Iran's approach to the region has been primarily economic and less political, but this has only been in relation to regional countries, and as its priorities are non-economic compared to other regions, it has provided conditions for Western governments to demonize Iran's political and religious face. Though, Iran's policy in the region can be considered more defensive, cautious, maintaining the status quo, and moving alongside Russia's foreign policy, and practical initiative cannot be observed in it. In fact, while Iran may not have lost any points, it has not gained any points either. Iran's policy in this region remains under the shadow of its relationships in other regions and issues such as its conflict with the United States.

Overall, taking into account the changed external conditions, Iran is strengthening the Central Asian vector of its policy. There is progress in Iran's relations with Tajikistan, which is becoming the leading force of Iranian influence in the region. It can also be noted that Iran's relations with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have improved. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are interested in using Iran's logistics potential. However, sanctions against Iran remain a strong constraint on the development of bilateral relations between Iran and Central Asian countries.

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Иранның Орталық Азия елдерімен қарым-қатынасының саяси және экономикалық аспектілері

Аңдатпа. Иран Ислам Республикасының Орталық Азия үшін экономикалық және саяси маңызы зор. Олардың ынтымақтастығы екі тарап үшін де болашағы бар. Алайда Иранның аймақтағы экономикалық және саяси қарым-қатынастардағы практикалық рөлі әлі де шектеулі.

Қазіргі уақытта Иран аймақтағы елдердің он ірі экономикалық серіктесінің арасында айтарлықтай орынға ие емес. Иранның Орталық Азия елдерімен сыртқы саудасы Иранның жалпы сыртқы саудасының 2 пайызынан азын құрайды. Мұның ең маңызды себептері Иранның инвестиция, технология және жеке сектордағы әлсіздігіне, аймақ үшін дипломатиялық басымдықтың болмауына және Иранды шектейтін санкцияларға әкелетін ел ішінде экономикалық дамудың басымдылығының жоқтығы. Соңғы жылдардағы кейбір оқиғалар Иран мен Орталық Азия елдері арасындағы ынтымақтастықты арттыруға үміт береді. Осыған байланысты 2019 жылдан бастап Иран мен Еуразиялық экономикалық одақ арасындағы жеңілдік сауда келісіміне, 2023 жылдан бастап еркін сауда келісіміне, 2022 жылдан бастап Иранның Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымына мүшелігіне және жаңа үкіметтің көршілестік саясаты мен шығыс саясатына сілтеме жасауға болады, 2021 жылы осы экономикалық және саяси байланыстардың барлығы Иран мен Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Қырғызстан және Тәжікстан арасындағы қарым-қатынастардың артуына әкелді. Иран мен Қырғызстанның екі жақты қарым-қатынасы ерекше серпінді болмаса да, Иран мен Өзбекстанның қарым-қатынасы Орталық Азия елдері арасында аймақтағы ең күрделісі болып табылады.

Жалпы, өткен онжылдықта Иран мен Орталық Азия елдері саяси тұрақтылық пен экономикалық дамуды қамтамасыз ету үшін бір-біріне қатысты маңызды қадамдар жасады. Осылайша, Тегеранның Орталық Азияның посткеңестік елдерімен ынтымақтастық үшін орасан зор әлеуеті бар, бірақ оны жүзеге асыру Иран төңірегіндегі геосаяси жағдаймен тығыз байланысты.

Түйін сөздер: Иран Ислам Республикасы, Орталық Азия, ынтымақтастық, ел, интеграция, көлік, келісім, экономика, даму, халықаралық, өнеркәсіп.

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Политические и экономические аспекты отношений Ирана со странами Центральной Азии

Аннотация. Центральная Азия имеет экономическое и политическое значение для Исламской Республики Иран. Их сотрудничество имеет большой потенциал для обеих сторон. Однако практическая роль Ирана в экономических и политических отношениях внутри региона остается ограниченной.

В настоящее время Иран не имеет значимой позиции среди десяти крупнейших экономических партнеров стран региона. Внешняя торговля Ирана со Средней Азией составляет

менее 2% от общего объема внешней торговли Ирана. Наиболее важными причинами этого являются отсутствие приоритета экономического развития внутри страны, что приводит к слабости Ирана в инвестициях, технологиях и частном секторе, отсутствию дипломатического приоритета для региона и санкциям, ограничивающим Иран. Некоторые события последних лет дают надежду на расширение сотрудничества между Ираном и странами Центральной Азии. В этом отношении можно сослаться на соглашение о преференциальной торговле между Ираном и Евразийским экономическим союзом от 2019 года, соглашение о свободной торговле от 2023 года, членство Ирана в Шанхайской организации сотрудничества с 2022 года, политику соседства и восточную политику нового правительства с 2021 года. Все эти экономические и политические коммуникации привели к активизации развития отношений между Ираном и Казахстаном, Узбекистаном, Кыргызстаном и Таджикистаном. Хотя двусторонние отношения Ирана и Кыргызстана не отличаются особой динамикой, однако отношения Ирана и Узбекистана являются наиболее сложными в регионе среди стран ЦА.

В целом, за последнее десятилетие Иран и страны Центральной Азии предприняли важные шаги навстречу друг другу для обеспечения политической стабильности и экономического развития. Таким образом, Тегеран имеет огромный потенциал сотрудничества с постсоветскими странами Центральной Азии, но его реализация тесно связана с геополитической ситуацией вокруг Ирана.

Ключевые слова: Исламская Республика Иран, Центральная Азия, сотрудничество, страна, интеграция, транспорт, соглашение, экономика, развитие, международный, промышленность.

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