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**“SHAM PARTNERSHIP”
OR “HIDDEN COMPETITION”? THE RUSSIAN
FEDERATION AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC
OF IRAN IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION**

Keywords: Russia, Iran, Central Asia, partnership, national interests, regional cooperation.

ABSTRACT: Recent years the growing confrontation between the Russian Federation, the United States, and the EU is accompanied by Moscow's searching the alternative allies for its diplomatic support. Iran is called one of such allies today. The Russian-Iranian relations are interesting both in terms of sectoral and geographical fields. The region of Central Asia is of particular importance. The need to consider such aspects is explained by the strengthening of Iran's position in Central Asia as a direct zone of Russian interests in a sense of its economic, cultural, and religious presence.

The author is going to study the Russian Iranian cooperation exclusively in the Central Asia region. The need to consider such aspects is explained by the strengthening of Iran's position in Central Asia through the intensification of its economic, cultural, and religious influence.

The main issue of scientific consideration for the author is the problem of forming a strategic alliance between Russia and Iran. The author asserts that the bilateral cooperation between Russia and Iran can be described as a “sham partnership” or “hidden competition” in the Central Asia region.

The author examines the balance of interests between Russia and Iran exclusively in the Central Asia region as an area where both countries intend to expand or maintain their influence.

Here we outline four regional nodes which are of mutual concern to both sides. The first node is regional security. The second node is the settlement of territorial disputes for fruitful coope-

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ration in the Caspian Sea. The third node is the economic and energy policy. The fourth one is the overlapping of cultural influence in the region.

The four cooperative areas (regional security, border issues, economic and energy field, as well as cultural influence) demonstrate the broad segment of tensions and contradictions between Russia and Iran in the Central Asia region.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the growing confrontation between the Russian Federation, the United States, and the EU is actively accompanied by Moscow's searching the alternative allies for its diplomatic support. Iran is called one of such allies today. The Russian-Iranian relations are interesting not only in terms of functional fields but also geographically. In this sense, the region of Central Asia is of particular importance.

Since the 1990s the Central Asia region and its emerging powers have been a significant factor in the development of relations between Russia and Iran. The countries of the region, which gained their independence in 1991, to varying degrees continue to maintain ties with Russia, primarily in the field of security, economy, as well as in the cultural sphere. Russia, for its part, continues to consider Central Asia as an extremely important region for its national interests. On the other hand, Central Asia, as a region bordering Iran, has had a cultural unity with it, as well as strong economic and political ties in some periods. This circumstance was the reason why, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between the newly independent republics of Central Asia and Iran have been actively developing. The economic attractiveness of the region, as well as the importance of the current political and security processes of these countries in terms of their impact on Iran, have made Central Asia the more important region than ever before. It also explains why Iran was one of the first countries which officially recognize the independence of Central Asian states and took steps to develop cooperation with them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND REVIEW OF THE STUDIES

The author's *methodological approach* is based on the principles of *political realism* in the interpretation of foreign policy. The category "state interest" is chosen as the main one, which determines the foreign policy activity of a state. We understand "interest" as a set of internal and external needs of the state to ensure the security and sustainable development of its society or power institutions. Based on the position of the realistic school, the author considers such main factors as the geographical location of the state, the peculiarities of its political, economic, and cultural development. This also explains the author's sectoral principle of studying the current bilateral relations between Russia and Iran.

An additional basis for this study is the *geopolitical approach*, by which the author examines the balance of interests between Russia and Iran exclusively in the Central Asia region as an area where both countries intend to expand or maintain their influence.

The main issue of scientific consideration for the author is the problem of forming a strategic alliance between Russia and Iran. At present, we can say that there are at least three types of views on the current level and prospects for the strategic alliance formation between Russia and Iran. It is 1) idealistic or optimistic approach (Pylev, 2009; Ivashov, 2017); 2) restrained assessments (Mohammad al-Sa'eed Idris, 2017; Milani, 2017; Kortunov, 2018); 3) and pessimistic views (Ramani, 2017; Sazhin, 2017).

It is noteworthy that most of such studies develop around the Syrian problem, the problem of worsening relations between Russia, the United States, and the European Union, or the bilateral relations in the Middle East as a whole. It is also widespread to focus on mainly two cooperation spheres. These are the regional security sector as well as the energy sector. Slightly less interesting is the field of trade and economic relations and a particularly small number of studies are devoted to aspects of cultural interaction between the two countries.

In turn, the author is going to study the Russian Iranian cooperation exclusively in the Central Asia region. The need to consider such aspects is explained by the strengthening of Iran's position in Central Asia (as

a direct zone of Russian concentration and interests) through the intensification of its economic, cultural, and religious presence.

In this regard, *the author asserts that the bilateral cooperation between Russia and Iran can be described as a “sham partnership” or “hidden competition” in the Central Asia region.* Nonetheless, the presence of at least four regional problems nodes with different levels of its urgency is of mutual concern to both sides and forms the current field of their interaction. The first node is security. It is related to the Afghanistan problem, as well as the spread of religious extremism and terrorism in the region. The second node is the settlement of territorial disputes as the necessary precondition for constructive interstate cooperation in the Caspian Sea. The third node is the economic and energy policy of both states. The fourth one is the overlapping of cultural and civilizational influence in the region.

RELATIONS WITHIN THE REGIONAL SECURITY CONTEXT

At first glance, the common interests of the two countries in security issues make possible both bilateral and multilateral formats of their cooperation in Central Asia. Both Russia and Iran are equally concerned about “soft” threats to regional security, which include drug smuggling, extremism, and terrorism activity. Both countries intend to make efforts to ensure security and prevent instability in their territories.

On the other hand, conceptual approaches to certain features of regional security, strategic goals, as well as the power potential of Russia and Iran are differentiated. The main problem is the transformation of the threats and their sources in the region, especially in Afghanistan. Since the mid-2010s, the internal security situation in Afghanistan, and even in some other countries of the region (mainly Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tadzhikistan), has been complicated by a new factor of the Islamic State’s activities. The latest, in comparison with the Taliban, is considered as a more aggressive and extremist one. At the same time, any effective counterterrorist actions in Afghanistan are not possible until solving the main problem – achieving internal integrity and peace in this country.

During the 2010s, the main trends in Russia's Afghan policy were the intensification of diplomatic efforts to promote a peaceful solution to the internal conflict. With the withdrawal of most US and NATO forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, Russia has stepped up military and economic assistance to its Central Asian allies under the Collective Security Treaty Organization, most notably Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, such assistance was seen by Moscow only as partial insurance against further aggravation of the situation in Afghanistan after 2014. The main threat to Russia in Afghanistan is large-scale drug trafficking, which directly threatens the internal security of the Russian state. Secondly, it is the danger of destabilization due to the terrorist attacks, the influence of religious, as well as, ideological extremism from Afghanistan (Stepanova, 2019).

At the same time, Russia's ability to influence the situation inside Afghanistan without proper interaction with main regional neighbors-states (Pakistan, Iran, or even China and India) remained limited. After withdrawing from the war in Afghanistan in 1989, Moscow has adhered to a "distance-keeping" stance and has not resorted to any direct military presence in Afghanistan. In the current adverse geopolitical environment and limiting its political influence, the Kremlin is considering the benefits of diversifying its foreign policy approaches. Today, this is reflected in the introduction of an approach to the regionalization of the Afghan problem and simultaneously strengthening its diplomatic activity in resolving the Afghan issue (Vinogradov, 2019).

The first approach involves intensifying dialogue and interaction with major regional players on the Afghan issue. It applies Russia's traditional partners, such as Iran, China, and India, as well as, relatively new partner, such as Pakistan. The regionalization of Russia's Afghan policy began long before 2014 and was a response to significant changes at the regional level, particularly, to the growing role of these four countries in regional security policy and the expansion of their influence in Afghanistan. The reduction of the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan by the mid-2010s, as well as, the gradual decline of Western influence in the region have only contributed to further strengthening the regionalization approach in Russia's foreign policy.

The combination of these approaches by Moscow to solving the Afghan problem leaves enough room for a new interaction format with Tehran. At the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, Iran, along with Russia and the Central Asian states, supported the Northern Alliance. Currently, Iran is a partner of Russia in cooperation with the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as the struggle against the terrorist Islamic State. In December 2018, a month after the talks in the Moscow format (five Central Asian countries, Russia, China, India, Iran, and Afghanistan), additional talks with the Afghan Taliban took place in Iran. The Tehran talks were seen in Russia as a sign that Iran was taking great responsibility for stabilizing Afghanistan after leaving the United States. On the other hand, at the SCO summit in Qingdao (China) in June 2018, Iran took steps to strengthen relations with the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. It considered a positive turn according to Russian interests. Relations between the Kremlin and the Afghan government deteriorated in late 2018-early 2019 due to Russia's interaction with Afghan opposition politicians. This allowed Tehran to support Moscow's policy in Afghanistan through its ties with Ashraf Ghani (Grajewski, 2019).

Despite this, two obstacles to Russia's full-fledged partnership with Iran on the Afghan issue are valid. The first one is the differing willingness of partners to cooperate with the Afghan Taliban, which implicitly reflects the difference in their goals and possible consequences of this cooperation in the region. Particularly, Moscow's deepened engagement with the Afghan Taliban is unfavorable to it both the terms of internal security issues and the terms of possible complications in relations with other Central Asian states, primarily Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The position of Tehran is distinctive. Since 2015 it has allowed itself to arm and train the Taliban in western Afghanistan (Ramani, 2017). The second obstacle reflects the level of Russia's and Iran's readiness to cooperate with the United States in the region. In this view, Moscow is occultly inclined to the wide format of cooperation with Washington regarding the Afghan problem, in contrast to the diametrically opposite position of Tehran.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE CASPIAN SEA BASIN

Another dimension of regional security is the settlement of territorial disputes between states in the Caspian Sea basin. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new republics around the Caspian Sea, Iran lost its land border with Russia and gained new neighbors. As a result, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan challenged the legal regime enshrined in the 1921 and 1940 treaties. The 1991 Almaty Declaration obliged these new coastal states to abide by all the agreements and treaties concluded by the Soviet Union. Despite this, the national interests of the newly formed states forced them to abandon the existing legal regime.

Under the new conditions, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan sought to use the rich resources of the Caspian Sea to solve their economic problems. In turn, Iran and Russia, which sought economic dominance, objected to the presence of transnational companies and Western countries in the Caspian region. From 1994 to 2007 there were 25 meetings of the five coastal states at the presidential and ministerial levels (Behzadi, 2010). However, the agreement on the Caspian Sea legal regime was formally reached only in August 2018.

According to the document signed on August 12, 2018, at the five Caspian states Summit in Aktau (Kazakhstan), the main area of the Caspian Sea surface remains in the common use of the parties. The bottom and subsoil must be divided by neighboring states into areas by agreement between them based on international law. Agreed that, shipping, fishing, research and laying of main pipelines must be carried out according to the rules settled by the parties. Within the process of implementing large-scale marine projects, the environmental factor must be considered (Nikolskij, 2018).

However, the agreements reached on August 12, 2018, at the Summit of the five Caspian states in Kazakhstan provoke internal criticism in Iran and assessed by it as strengthening the status of Russian dominance in the region. Two issues remain controversial in this sense: 1) delimitation of the disputed sectors of the South Caspian Seabed borders as well as inter-

pretation of the parties' property rights there; 2) laying the underwater trans-Caspian pipelines (Garibov, 2019).

Thus, the principles and measures of seabed delimitation remain undefined in the Convention. In August 2018 in Aktau, Iranian President Hassan Rohani stated that the delimitation of the Caspian Sea will require additional agreements between coastal states (Blank, 2018). In turn, Iranian diplomats have stated that any allegations made by the Russian side about the full settlement of the problem are untrue and misleading to the public (Blank, 2018).

ENERGY AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN THE CENTRAL ASIA REGION

The territorial problems are directly marked by the peculiarities of the configuration of energy interests and policies of Russia and Iran in the Caspian Sea region. The lifting of sanctions on Iran in January 2016 created the preconditions for a radical change in the balance of power in the Caspian Sea basin. This directly affected the nature of Russian-Iranian relations, which until 2015 were based on common approaches to settle the international legal status of the Caspian Sea. After the lifting of sanctions, Tehran began to seek to influence the pipeline architecture of the Caspian region. The pipelines built and designed in the last twenty years did not consider Iran's interests. Moreover, the Iranian side has repeatedly reaffirmed its desire to increase its share in the European gas market and increase oil exports. This was confirmed by Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Naidar Zanganeh, who noted that Iran does not have a pipeline to export gas to European countries because it needs time (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 2015).

In these circumstances, Russia was interested in finding new foreign policy instruments to increase its influence in Iran. Moscow has faced the interest overlapping with Iran, which after the lifting of sanctions was waiting for new technologies that can increase oil and gas production. Only Western oil and gas companies, which have accumulated considerable experience in offshore development, could provide such technologies.

This fact has significantly affected the Russian Federation, whose approach based on the need to strengthen its foreign influence and increase the production and export of hydrocarbons to foreign markets. For Russia, the implementation of such plans poses a serious threat in the long run. Iranian gas could become a competitor to Russian supplies to European markets. Especially since the United States has not abandoned plans to establish by 2020 the supply of shale gas to Europe in the amount of 80 billion cubic meters. (Sultanov, 2012). However, despite the interest in developing friendly relations with all Caspian region countries, Iran was in no hurry to intensify the negotiation process on the Caspian issues.

Purely economic relations between the two states are accompanied by the absence of any significant joint economic projects as well as joint transport and communication projects. In recent years Iran's economic presence in the countries of the Central Asia region has not yet shown rapid dynamics. The competitive situations are primarily local and sectoral (for example, between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Iranian grain market) or related to Iran's participation in transport and communication projects. The latest contradict Russia's interests but localize in a more global China's geopolitical projects. These include all East-West transport projects, as well as energy transportation projects, such as the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran oil pipeline.

The visible difference can be seen in the integration aspiration of Iran and Russia in Central Asia as well as the related economic goals of both countries. The mismatched agendas of the two sides in the region reduce any significant opportunities for economic cooperation between them. In general, Russia's attempts to maintain economic ties with Central Asian countries and maintain its monopoly in various areas of the region limit effective cooperation with other players, including Iran. The intensive development of trade and economic relations with third countries in the region considered by Moscow as undesirable. In this way, any trade partnerships can lead to the penetration and dominance of new trade participants who will be playing the role of Moscow's direct rivals not only in the economy but also in the political sphere. The changes that have already taken place in Central Asia due to China's factor have led to Russia losing its position. Today China turns into the main trading partner

with Central Asian countries. The same fears, albeit to a much lesser extent, are followed in Moscow's attitude toward Tehran.

While Iran's economic influence in the region is much more limited than China's, it should not be ignored in terms of long-term perspectives. First, it opens prospects for strengthening the IRI's interaction with the Central Asian countries in the energy field. Iran's relations with Central Asian countries are also being revived in the transport and logistics sector. There is an opportunity to establish more deep trade relations in “Iran – Central Asia – Europe” configuration, which is also undesirable for the Russian Federation. The project “One Belt – One Road” is particularly indicative here. Russia's efforts are directed mainly to guarantee the trade flows and economic ties within the “Russia – Central Asia” track, but not the “Iran – Central Asia” one.

CULTURAL FACTOR IN THE REGION

The cultural and civilizational factor within Russian-Iranian relations in the Central Asia region characterized by the growing asymmetry of their influence on the background of other players' influence, such as Turkey, China, and even the European Union. The overall balance of soft power in the region indicates a further decline in Russian capabilities, which is reflected in the marginalization of the Russian language and Russian cultural projects here.

Thus, the Russian language is currently used by less than half of the population in the Central Asian region (Bekmurzayev, 2019). Such countries as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have already changed their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin. Kazakhstan, the largest state in Central Asia, is currently in the process of a similar transition. By 2025, all national newspapers, textbooks, documents, street signs and advertisements are expected to be written exclusively in Latin. (UNIAN, 2019).

The national languages in the five Central Asian states today play a key role in rethinking the past and future of the region. (Letnyakov, 2015) They are the basis for the formation of national identity. The countries of the region, jumping over the Soviet period, delve into their ancient history

and past when they spoke their native language and practiced political autonomy. To this end, Kyrgyzstan, for example, uses the Manas epic, Uzbekistan turns to the times of Amir Timur and his Timurid empire, and Tajikistan to the Samanid Empire to use them as key elements in its nation-building projects. That's why there is simply no place for the Russian language and the "Russkiy mir" projects in their cultural areas. The policies of linguistic nationalism in all five countries are gradually pushing the Russian language out of their public space, thus undermining Russia's cultural and linguistic influence in the region. Besides, the growing negative perception of the Soviet past and the colonial policy of the Russian Empire in Central Asia presents the Russian as the language of oppressors.

For its part, Iran is trying to spread its own cultural, religious and educational influence on the countries of Central Asia, acting as a strong competitor of Russia in the region. In the history of Iran's relations with the countries of Central Asia, there were no serious contradictions based on sub-religious differences. Despite their Sunni Islam, the peoples of Central Asia have coexisted peacefully with Iran for centuries. The peoples of this region (primarily the Tajiks) are united with Iran by the ethnocultural community and belonging to the Islamic world. In addition to the attractiveness of civilization, for the peoples of Central Asia, Iran is of interest even as an example of "educated Islamic state with elements of modern democracy" (Bakhriyev, 2017).

At the end of the twentieth century, Iran has formulated the national concept of cultural diplomacy, one of the main elements of which was the popularization of Farsi (Torin, 2017). This approach has become a driving force of Iran's cultural and political activity in the Central Asia region. With the help of language, philosophy and poetry, which are traced to varying degrees in the history and consciousness of neighboring peoples, Iran hoped to become a part of the future cultural, political and economic community of neighboring countries (Klyashtorina, 2003).

In the XXI century, Iran's leadership has relied on cultural and educational trends that have become predominant in cooperation between Iran and Central Asia. At the same time, Iran's regional cultural diplomacy has a religious component, as the Islamic factor underlying Iran's chosen strategy to expand its influence in the region has acted and continues to

serve as a background for the dissemination and promotion of Iranian cultural traditions (Parkhomchik, 2016).

In general, it can be said that in the future Russian influence will not be able to compete with Iranian, despite the existing obstacles in the region for the spread of Iranian cultural diplomacy. In this sense, there are at least two factors. The first is the presence of several cultural and civilizational centres of influence in the region. For example, in some circles of the expert community believe that Iran has little chance to reach a higher level of cooperation with the Central Asia states belonging to the Turkic world. The cultural presence of Iran in the Central Asian republics in this regard is still inferior to Russian, Chinese, Turkish or even the European Union influence (Mutoy, 2011). However, in the last few years, the situation has begun to change, and Iran based on cultural and educational resources is gradually becoming an important and no less influential player in the region.

The second factor is the differences in religion - Shiite Iran and the Sunni population of Central Asia. However, despite these differences, there are several consolidating factors between Sunnis and Shiites - common to all Muslims, the shrines of Mecca and Medina. Besides, Shiites in their religious rituals do not use Persian (Farsi), but Arabic, which also unites them with Sunnis.

Relations with Tajikistan are of importance to Iran, as the Tajiks and Persians are part of the so-called "Iranian world," the only civilizational, historical, and linguistic space that has connected the two nations for centuries. Since the late 1990s, Tehran has opened access to the education of Tajik students in Iranian religious centres.

On the other hand, Tehran's remarkable interest in spreading its cultural and educational influence can be traced today to other Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where Iranian cultural and educational centres operate successfully. For example, the Iranian Cultural Centre in Nursultan provides support and efforts to promote Iranian culture in Kazakhstan by offering free Persian language courses and cooking lessons for students studying Persian, and by organizing celebrations of Iranian holidays. The development of cooperation with Kazakh universities is one of the main priorities of the Centre. It currently

works with the Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, Abilai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages as well as Abay Pedagogical University. All of them are in Almaty. The centres for Iranian study offering Persian language courses also operate at Al-Farabi University, Abilai Khan University, and Gumilev Eurasian National University in the capital of Kazakhstan (Satubaldina, 2018).

Similarly, the centres of Iranian and Persian languages in the universities of Kyrgyzstan have become widespread. It is especially significant that today one of such cultural and educational centres was opened at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (the centre of Iranian studies). Iranian centres also operate at the Bishkek Humanities University (Centre for Islamic Studies and Iranian Studies) and the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic (Centre for Iranian Studies and Persian Language) (Garbuzarova, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

In general, the considered by us four cooperative areas (regional security, border issues, economic and energy field, as well as cultural influence) demonstrate the broad segment of tensions and contradictions between Russia and Iran in the Central Asia region. The existent contradictions can be marked as: a) insignificant or moderate (e.g. the regional security misconceptions); b) hidden like the time-lapse mines (territorial disputes and cultural influence in the region); c) and blatant (energy, trade and economic cooperation). All of them derogate the substantiality of the strategic alliance between Russia and Iran, as well as characterize it as a “sham partnership”. Simultaneously the third countries’ (e.g. the United States, Turkey or the EU) attendance in the Central Asia region is influential for the strategic alliance of Russia and Iran. It can both strengthen the alliance (in the case of geopolitical expulsion of Russia and Iran from the region) and weaken it (in the case of intensified cooperation in the region with one party to the detriment of the other). In any case, this feature actualizes further researches of Russia-Iran strategic alliance through the broader prism of the role and policies the third countries in the region.

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