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**Central Asia and the Caucasus in Iran's foreign policy strategy (1991-2021)**

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## Definitions

**Bipolarity**, in the context of international relations, refers to a distribution of power where two states or superpowers have a significant preponderance of power compared to other states. This concept is often used to describe a global system in which two dominant powers exert influence and shape the international order.

**Power Distribution:** Bipolarity implies that there are two major powers that possess a substantial amount of economic, military, and political influence on the global stage.

**Spheres of Influence:** In a bipolar system, these major powers often establish spheres of influence, where they have dominance and control over certain regions or countries.

**Alliance Systems:** Bipolarity can lead to the formation of alliance systems, where states align themselves with one of the major powers to gain protection or benefits.

**Foreign Policy** refers to the strategies and actions that a country employs to guide its relationships with other countries. It encompasses a wide range of objectives, including defense and security, economic benefits, and humanitarian assistance. The formulation of foreign policy is influenced by various factors such as domestic considerations, the behavior of other states, and geopolitical strategies.

Foreign policy aims to ensure national security by forming military alliances, employing soft power, or engaging in international isolation or war.

**Economic:** Foreign policy plays a central role in a country's role within the global economy and international trade. It involves establishing trade agreements, managing imports and exports, and distributing foreign aid.

**Internationalist:** Many states have developed humanitarian programs based on the responsibility to protect, providing assistance and support to less powerful countries.

**Geopolitics** is the study of how geography, economics, and demography influence politics and foreign policy of a state. It focuses on understanding, explaining, and predicting international political behavior through geographical variables such as area studies, climate, topography, demography, and natural resources. Geopolitics examines the relationship between political power and geographic space, particularly territorial waters and land territory, and how these factors shape diplomatic history.

**Geostrategy** is a subfield of geopolitics that focuses on the study and analysis of the strategic and military aspects of foreign policy, taking into account geographical factors. It involves the formulation and implementation of strategies by a state to achieve its national interests and security objectives, considering the geographic regions that are of importance to the state and influence its security. Key points about geostrategy include: Geographic Direction of Foreign Policy, Combination of Geopolitical and Strategic Factors, Matching Means to Ends: Like all strategies, geostrategy is concerned with aligning the available means with the desired ends, taking into account the limited resources of a state and its goals, whether they are local, regional, or global. Nationalist

Perspective: Geostrategists approach geopolitics from a nationalist point of view, advocating strategies that prioritize the national interests of their own country.

**Great Power** is a sovereign state that has significant diplomatic, economic, and military strength to exert influence on a global scale. Great powers are recognized as having the ability and expertise to shape international affairs. They often have the capacity to defend themselves against other countries and engage in sustained politico-military operations beyond their own region. Great power status is not solely based on military capacity but also includes factors such as economic strength, territory, population, political stability, and global influence.

**Greater Middle East:** is a geopolitical term that refers to a loosely defined region encompassing the Arab world, along with Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and sometimes the Caucasus and Central Asia . It was introduced in 2004 as part of the U.S. administration's preparatory work for the Group of Eight summit. The term is often used to discuss the political, economic, and social dynamics of this region. The majority of the population of this region are Muslims, and they suffer from a decline in their positions on freedom and development indicators.

The region has faced numerous challenges, including conflicts, competing ideologies, and power struggles among ruling elites. Many countries in the Greater Middle East have struggled to make progress in civil and economic reforms, reduce corruption, and improve governance. These challenges have been exacerbated by factors such as the impact of the crisis in petroleum export prices and the Coronavirus pandemic on the local and global economy.

**Heartland:** landlocked areas of central Eurasia stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Arctic to the Himalayas. whose control was the key to world domination in an era of declining importance for traditionally invincible sea power. Was posited by the British political geographer Halford Mackinder in his paper “The Geographical Pivot of History” (1904) observed that the majority of the world’s population resided on the Eurasian and African landmass and that control of this “world island” would lead to eventual world domination.

Heartland also refers to a specific geographic region within a country that holds significant political importance and influence. It is often associated with a concentration of power, resources, and population, which gives it a central role in shaping the political landscape of a nation. The concept of Heartland can vary depending on the country or context in which it is used.

**Multipolarity,** in the context of international relations, refers to a distribution of power where more than two states possess similar amounts of power. It is a concept that describes the structure of the international system and how power is distributed among states. The term "multipolarity" has gained attention in recent years as the global landscape has evolved and new powers have emerged.

**National interest:** National interest encompasses the array of goals, objectives, and priorities deemed essential by a sovereign state for its well-being, security, and

prosperity. This concept embodies the collective interests of a nation, covering economic, political, military, cultural, and social dimensions. National interest serves as the foundation for a country's decision-making processes, policies, and actions in both domestic and international arenas.

### **Key Points about National Interest**

#### **Goals and Ambitions:**

The national interest encapsulates a state's aims and aspirations, which may include economic development, national security, territorial integrity, citizen welfare, cultural promotion, and the preservation of sovereignty.

#### **Primary Government Objective:**

National interest is regarded as the government's foremost goal, signifying the overall well-being and advancement of the nation.

#### **Prioritization:**

Various aspects of national interest are prioritized differently based on the unique challenges and circumstances a country faces.

#### **Dynamic Nature:**

The concept of national interest is fluid, evolving in response to changing domestic and international environments.

**Nuclear Program of Iran** refers to Iran's efforts to develop nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment and the construction of nuclear power plants. The program has been a subject of political controversy and international concern due to suspicions that Iran may be seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

1950s - 1960s: Iran's nuclear program was launched in the 1950s with support from the United States under the Atoms for Peace program. The Tehran Nuclear Research Center was established, and Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968.

1970s: The Shah of Iran approved plans to construct nuclear power stations, and international companies, including US and European firms, were involved in Iran's nuclear program. However, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, most international nuclear cooperation was cut off.

Post-revolution, 1979-1989: Iran decided to continue its nuclear development despite the revolution. The country faced challenges in obtaining foreign facilities and fuel supplies, leading to a focus on developing local expertise and manpower. Iran sought assistance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and established bilateral cooperation with China.

**Polarity** in politics and international relations refers to the distribution of power within the international system. It describes the nature of the system based on the number and influence of great powers. There are three types of polarity: unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity.

**Unipolarity:** This occurs when one state holds a significant amount of power and faces no major competitors. It is characterized by a lack of counterbalance and is different from an empire or hegemon that can control the behavior of all other states.

**Bipolarity:** In bipolarity, power is concentrated between two dominant states. Spheres of influence and alliance systems often develop around each pole. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union is an example of bipolarity.

**Multipolarity:** Multipolarity refers to a system with three or more centers of power. It is characterized by a more distributed distribution of power among multiple states. Some scholars argue that multipolarity can lead to a more stable structure.

**Region** a limited number of states or countries that are linked by a geographical relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence. It is characterized by a common sense of identity and purpose, which is expressed through the creation and implementation of institutions that shape collective action within the region. Regions can vary in size and scope, ranging from small subnational regions to larger transnational regions. Regionalism, which is closely related to the concept of region, involves the formation of interstate associations or groupings based on regions.

**Regional Hegemony** refers to the political, economic, or military predominance, control, or influence of one powerful state over other neighboring countries within a specific region. It involves the establishment of a dominant position by one state over others in terms of power and influence. Regional hegemony can be achieved through various means, including diplomatic alliances, economic dominance, military strength, and the ability to shape regional policies and norms.

Historically, regional hegemony has been observed in different periods and regions. For example, in Ancient Greece, city-states like Thebes and Sparta exerted hegemonic control over other city-states within their respective regions. In more recent times, Rome established its hegemony over the Mediterranean region after its victory over the Seleucid Empire.

Regional hegemony can have significant implications for the political dynamics and stability within a region. The hegemon state often sets the agenda, influences decision-making processes, and shapes the behavior of other states in the region. It can also impact economic relations, trade patterns, and security arrangements among neighboring countries.

**Regional Power** is a state that exercises significant influence and power within a specific geographical region. It is characterized by its economic, military, demographic, political, and ideological capabilities. Regional powers shape the polarity of their respective regions and have the capacity for regional and global action. They are recognized or accepted as regional leaders by their neighboring states and have a dominant position in economic and military terms.

A regional power is a sovereign state that exercises significant power within its geographical region. It is characterized by its influence and capacity for regional and global action, as well as its relatively large population and coverage of a large area.

Regional powers shape the polarity of a specific region and have important capabilities within that region, although they may not have the same capabilities on a global scale.

**Soft power** refers to a concept in political science that describes a country's ability to influence others and achieve its objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. It involves the use of cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means to shape the preferences and behavior of other nations. Soft power is based on a country's intangible assets, such as its values, culture, political ideals, and policies, which can generate admiration, respect, and influence on the global stage.

Soft power is not limited to the actions of governments alone. Non-state actors, such as multinational corporations, civil society organizations, and influential individuals, can also contribute to a country's soft power by promoting its values and interests.

**Unipolarity** refers to a condition in international relations where one state holds a dominant position of power and influence in the world, with no significant competitors or counterbalancing powers. In a unipolar system, this state enjoys a preponderance of power and faces no direct challenge from other states.

**World Order** refers to the framework and structure that governs the relationships between nations and shapes the global political landscape. It encompasses the rules, norms, and institutions that guide international relations and maintain stability in the world

World order is the system of governance and power dynamics that determine the interactions and behavior of states in the international arena. It establishes the rules and principles that govern the conduct of nations, the distribution of power, and the resolution of conflicts. World order can be influenced by historical events, geopolitical shifts, and the emergence of new ideas and ideologies.

## Abbreviations

AIB: Asian Investment Bank  
ASEAN: Association for the Southeast Asia Nations .  
BRICS: Russia, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa  
CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization  
EEU: Eurasian Economic Union  
EU: European Union  
ECO: Organization of Economic Cooperation  
GCC: The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf /Gulf Cooperation Council.  
IAE: International Atomic Energy Agency  
IMU: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan  
IRPT: Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan  
IRGC: (Sepah): Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps  
KTZ: Kazakhstan n Temir Zholy  
MoU: memorandum on understanding  
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
NSRI: New Silk Road Initiative  
OBOR: One Belt, One Road  
OIC: Organization of the Islamic Cooperation  
OPEC: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries  
PCA: Partnership and Cooperation Agreement  
SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization  
SEZ: Special Economic Zone  
UAE: United Arab Emirates  
WTO: World Trade Organization



## Introduction

The Research into Iran's policies in two geopolitically important regions in the Eurasia theme was achieved through the changing global situation caused by the international crises in Ukraine, Syria, and Central Asia. The leadership of Iran has to follow the geopolitical changes resulting from weakening or strengthening Russian positions, being one of the most reliable partners of that country, but calculate the chances to gain some benefits. At the same time Iran has to take into account that Russian invasion to Ukraine would affect the positions of the regional countries (in Central Asia and Caucasus), and provide its own scenarios for relations development to pursue its national interests. That would influence the regional and global balance of power. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran endeavored to establish diplomatic, economic, trade, and cultural connections with neighboring states in Central Asia. It aimed to capitalize on the favorable circumstances that arose after the Soviet Union's collapse in the early 1990s, with the objective of overcoming its political isolation that had persisted for over two decades since revolution of 1979.

Iran sought to take advantage of these geopolitical transformations to reposition itself at the regional level, ultimately attaining significant influence and leverage in the broader Greater Middle East region. Iranian policymakers were determined to persuade the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus that cultivating a friendly relationship with Iran holds greater value than engaging in conflict. Politics and diplomacy have been employed as strategies to establish and enhance relationships with these nations, with the aim of alleviating their apprehensions. Furthermore, Iran, due to its geographical location and historical background, perceives itself as the most proximate power and asserts its entitlement to assume a significant role in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In contrast, the nations within the aforementioned regions sought to appeal to regional and international powers for assistance in disassociating themselves from the Russia. These countries could identify Iran as a potential regional ally in achieving their objective. However, concerns arose among these nations due to the ideological motivations of the Iranian regime. These motivations encompassed the export of revolution, support for Shiite groups in neighboring countries, infiltration into societies to exert influence on their policies. Consequentially, these apprehensions led to a cautious approach towards Iran (for example, Strengthening economic sanctions) or, according to some analysts, prompted some countries to intensify their efforts to counter any illicit Iranian policies [1].

The period since 1991 on the post-Soviet space as well in the other regions and globally experienced several serious transformations to mark the process of new world order creation. Briefly they from global geopolitics perspective the period from 1991 can be divided into several as follows: 1) 1991-2001 – USSR disintegration to US invasion to Afghanistan, period of strategic instability, 2) 2001-2014 – until annexation of Crimea by Russia, 3) 2014-onwards – including Russian invasion to Ukraine. The

regional and subregional periodization also involves a number of peculiarities' to be counted Iran's opportunities to gain some benefits in the Caucasus and Central Asia due to changes in geopolitical plans of the USA, EU, Russia, China, Turkey. The regimes in Caucasus and Central Asia since 1991 did not change drastically their nature and geopolitical stances, as their location does not give them any chances for that. For instance, Central Asia is sandwiched between Russia and China can maneuver between them mainly, while the Caucasian republics – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan- have to count the geopolitical interests of Russia, Iran and Turkey primarily [2, 108 p.].

It has been modified as follows:

This study investigates the evolution of Iranian foreign policy towards Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) from 1991 to 2023. It analyzes how changes in the global, regional, and subregional orders, along with the foreign policy priorities of the aforementioned states, have influenced Iranian foreign policy. The research identifies the core objectives pursued by the Iranian leadership and the instruments employed to achieve them.

**The significance of the topic under research.** The end of the bipolar world marked by the USSR disintegration opened a playground for new order creation from global and regional perspectives. Seeming geopolitical vacuum, in former Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus prompted the Iranian leadership to reevaluate its potential and devise plans to include these states and the regions they relate to into the zone of influence. Geopolitically Iran, Caucasus and Central Asia refer to different geopolitical zones – rimland (Iran), zones related to heartland (Caucasus and Central Asia). From geopolitical perspectives they are interested in each other, Central Asia state being landlocked, and some of them double landlocked (Uzbekistan surrounded by 5 landlocked countries), would view Iran as a gateway to get out of geopolitical isolation, rather being depended on Russia and China. Caucasus consists of three interrelated parts- Russian part (Dagestan, Abkhazia, Ossetia), three former soviet states – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and some parts of the Middle East, including Iran [3, 60 p.]

It should be taken into consideration that currently, the world politics has been in search of effective methods of interstate cooperation. Simultaneously, in the process of establishing relations with others, the vast majority of countries often focus primarily on protecting their national interests. This matter gained significant relevance subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which resulted in a shift in the global balance of power. Over time, the post-Soviet independent nations have transformed into a domain where the interests of global powers collide, with the intensity varying according on their geopolitical importance. Central Asian countries also found themselves in this situation, since this region, in terms of its geopolitical significance, belongs to one of the geopolitical zones where great powers could enhance their plans for new order shaping.

On this basis, not only Iran and Russia but also Western countries are interested in establishing stable basis their presence in Central Asia and Caucasus. Central Asia located on the way to Russia and China, is rich with various resources, hydrocarbons the most important for world economy, and is landlocked. Southern Caucasus also landlocked had been a bridge between two seas - The Caspian and Black. From both Southern Caucasus and Central Asia the access to the Russian territory could be reached, as well as to the Middle East from the Russian part. It is clear that in such circumstances, Iran and Russia seek to direct their efforts to strengthen their presence in the region, because this may contribute to the benefit of ensuring stability here, and also ensure the protection of their national interests and the interests of the state.

Studying the influence exerted by the Islamic Republic of Iran on the current political dynamics in the post-Soviet Central Asian region holds great scientific and practical importance. Iran, as it actively seeks regional leadership in the Middle East (among other theocratic states), can strengthen its position and regional presence to protect the stability of its hard-line government and advance national interests.

**The object under research** is the place of Central Asian and Caucasian states take in the foreign policy strategy of Iran since 1991 onwards. The subject of research – what geopolitical projects has the leadership of Iran ben developing to promote its national interests in Central Asia and Caucasus in the changing geopolitical conditions.

To achieve the above stated objective the following methods were employed – historical, event and content analysis, comparative, documents analysis. The research is based on analysis of the following sources: official documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Constitution), agreements reached between the governments of Iran and governments of Central Asian and Caucasian countries, official statements of the heads of states of related countries, projects of cooperation developed by Iran towards Central Asia and Caucasus, official statistics indicating the progress of political and economic contacts between the states.

**The degree of scientific research on this problem.** Geopolitics as an integral part of political geography and further on as a separate discipline dates back to the turn of the XIX and early XX centuries. The term "geopolitics" was introduced into scientific circulation in 1916 by Swedish scientist Rudolf Kjellen who defined it as the science of the state, personifying a "geographical organism in space." The geopolitical approach to explain and justify the politics of USA and European states for the global dominance was taken by a number of bright theoreticians and practitioners - P. Vidal de la Blanche, A. Mahen, H. Mackinder, N. Spykman, J. Fairgreave, and K. Haushofer who created a core of classical geopolitics. Thus, were created national geopolitical schools—French, American, English and German. In the given research we hold the geopolitical stance of H. Mackinder who devised the global map in his essay “The Geographical Pivot of History” (1904) as the World Island (comprising Europe, Asia and Africa) with its Heartland (Eastern Europe, the Pivot/center – the territory of Russian empire) and Periphery=Rest of the world (including the Americas). His formula – Who rules the

Heartland rules the World, explained the motives behind global actors to get to the Heartland or adjacent zone.

Thus, the geopolitical factors taken into consideration are the region's location, its neighborhood, positions of the key actors, natural resources endowment, population characteristics, political and ideological factors- regimes' nature, religion, ideology. Specialists that study the geopolitical situation in both regions and Iran's geopolitics, regions of Caucasus and Central Asia and explain their transformation since 1991 [4, 120 p.]. One of the important problems of regional geopolitics that affects security is the religious factor. Orientalists and muslim scholars: V. Akaev, Z. Arukhov, D. Makarov, K. Khanbabaev, and others are actively working in this direction. The works of N. Medvedev, Kh. Tkhagapsoev, and others are devoted to the analysis of conflict factors in the Caucasus, manifested in geopolitics and ethnic, ideological, administrative, and political spheres.

The study of the Iranian policy changes towards Caucasus and Central Asia, including its priorities and the assessment of its role and significance in fostering effective cooperation with post-Soviet states, is a subject of extensive research and notable relevance in contemporary political science.

Arab authors such as Ammar Jafal, Abbas Fadel Atwan, Ali Muhammad Hussein, Mahmoud Sari al-Kalam, and others are of undeniable importance for understanding the foundations of the theory of the development of Iran's foreign policy. The studies of these authors make it possible to better understand the essence of ongoing trends and changes in international relations, taking into account how Iran's foreign policy was built and implemented in relation to Central Asian and Caucasian states.

Modern Russian researchers are devoted to studying the geopolitical aspects of the problem. These are the publications of Abakarov A.T., Belashov I.I., Bogatov M.Yu., Galich Ya.V., Pak Ch.K., Pugiev T.N., Sidorkin S.A., and Ezhiev I.B., where this problem is analyzed from the perspective of Russia's geopolitical interests in the Caucasus region.

A significant group consisted of the works of Iranian scientists and politicians devoted to this problem. These include the works of Kaikhon B., Kharzik E., Pahlavon Ch., Mukhamedriz H., Afshurd M., Hasani Saifali, Kazimi Aliasgar, Mehrobi Alirizo, and others. In their works, these authors touch upon various aspects of the foreign policy of modern Iran and its desire to spread its influence on the sovereign states of the Central Asian region.

Furthermore, the investigated issue also pertains to the contributions of renowned scholars, namely Sanai Mehdi, Sayyid Javad Husaini, A.N. Makhmadova, Shababi, M., and Sh. Shoismatulloeva et al.

Of special significance are scholarly publications pertaining to diverse facets of the formulation of foreign policy by the independent states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

**The primary focus of this study** is to examine the evolution of Iran's foreign policy with assessment of the political dynamics inside the Caucasus and Central Asian areas. For that end will be analyzed the distinct characteristics of Iran's foreign policy and the conflicting dynamics of its impact in the Caucasus and Central Asian areas from geopolitical perspectives and how Iran safeguards its national and regional interests.

**The implementation of this objective** will address seeking answers to the following questions:

- 1) How does the Iran's leadership evaluate the geopolitical changes in Central Asia and Caucasus to accommodate its national interests?
- 2) What kind of resources can Iran employ to achieves its geopolitical plans in Central Asia and Caucasus?
- 3) What the most perspective geopolitical projects in both regions that Iran could participate in?

**The main provisions for defense are:** The complexities surrounding the establishment of a new post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian region are a fundamental component of contemporary political science and an essential facet of the broader international relations theory in its current developmental stage. In the aftermath of the USSR's dissolution, the global power equilibrium underwent significant disruption. The newly sovereign states that emerged within the post-Soviet space found themselves grappling with a myriad of unresolved internal and external issues. These challenges precipitated the exacerbation of interethnic and interstate tensions in various regions once encompassed by the sprawling empire, with the Caucasus and Central Asia emerging as focal points of contention. Within this geopolitical landscape, this region assumed profound significance for both Eastern powers, including India, Iran, China, Pakistan, and Turkey, as well as Western powers, including the European Union and the United States. Consequently, the newly formed states found themselves navigating a treacherous terrain, replete with internal quandaries and external dilemmas imposed upon them by external forces.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 heralded the end of an era characterized by the Cold War's bipolarity. This geopolitical transformation ushered in a unipolar moment, with the United States emerging as the world's sole superpower. This shift in global dynamics had profound implications for the former Soviet republics, particularly those in Central Asia and the Caucasus. While the newly independent states yearned for autonomy and self-determination, they were also confronted with the formidable challenge of establishing stable political systems, viable economies, and diplomatic recognition on the international stage.

Internally, these nascent nations grappled with a multitude of pressing issues. The abrupt transition from centrally planned economies to market-based systems presented a steep learning curve, often accompanied by economic hardship and social upheaval. The collapse of the Soviet Union also unleashed pent-up nationalist sentiments and interethnic tensions that had been suppressed under the authoritarian rule of the Soviet

regime. Consequently, many countries in the region found themselves embroiled in ethnic conflicts, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan [6, 18 p.].

Externally, the newly independent states faced the challenge of redefining their geopolitical orientation. The Central Asian and Caucasian regions became a battleground for competing influences, with both Eastern and Western powers seeking to establish footholds in the region. For Eastern powers like China, Central Asia represented a critical conduit for energy resources and a potential market for their goods. Meanwhile, Iran sought to exert its influence in the predominantly Shia Muslim areas of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Turkey, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, eyed the region as an opportunity to assert its historical and cultural ties. Pakistan, a fellow Muslim-majority nation, also sought to cultivate relations with these newly independent states. On the Western front, the European Union and the United States viewed the region as a strategic chessboard in their efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and economic development [6, 28 p.].

In this complex geopolitical landscape, Central Asian and Caucasian states found themselves maneuvering amidst the competing interests of external powers. They had to strike a delicate balance between cultivating diplomatic ties with multiple actors while safeguarding their national sovereignty and pursuing their domestic agendas.

One of the central challenges for these states was the establishment of effective governance structures. Many of them lacked the institutional capacity and experience required to govern effectively. Corruption, political instability, and weak rule of law became pervasive problems, hindering economic development and social progress. The need for state-building and capacity development was acutely felt across the region.

Furthermore, the issue of resource management assumed paramount importance. Central Asia, in particular, is endowed with abundant reserves of energy resources, including oil, natural gas, and minerals. The competition for control over these valuable assets added another layer of complexity to the geopolitical dynamics of the region. It fueled rivalries among both regional powers and global actors seeking to secure access to these resources.

The security situation in the post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian region also presented formidable challenges. The breakup of the Soviet military apparatus left a power vacuum, and several states struggled to establish capable armed forces to secure their borders and maintain internal stability. This security deficit opened the door to non-state actors, including extremist and terrorist groups, which sought to exploit the region's vulnerabilities.

Moreover, the unresolved conflicts from the Soviet era continued to smolder, periodically erupting into open hostilities. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Tajik Civil War, and the Chechen conflicts were just a few examples of protracted disputes that cast a shadow over the region's stability and hindered its development.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the international community, including organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution efforts. However, progress in resolving these conflicts remained slow and elusive, underscoring the deeply entrenched nature of these disputes.

The economic dimension of the region's transformation also presented a complex picture. While the newly independent states sought to diversify their economies and attract foreign investment, they faced numerous obstacles. The legacy of Soviet economic planning and the lack of modern infrastructure impeded their efforts to integrate into the global economy. Additionally, the global financial crises of the late 1990s and early 2000s had adverse effects on the region, underscoring its vulnerability to external economic shocks.

The Central Asian and Caucasian states embarked on a journey of economic reform and liberalization, albeit with varying degrees of success. Some countries, such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, leveraged their energy resources to attract foreign investment and stimulate economic growth. Others, like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, faced greater challenges in diversifying their economies and reducing their dependence on remittances from migrant workers abroad.

In conclusion, the formation of a new post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian region has been an intricate and multifaceted process. It has entailed the navigation of complex internal and external challenges, including issues of governance, resource management, security, unresolved conflicts, and economic development. The geopolitical significance of this region, situated at the crossroads of Eastern and Western interests, has made it a focal point of international attention and competition. As these states continue to grapple with their unique set of challenges, the trajectory of their development will have far-reaching implications for the broader landscape of international relations in the 21-st century [7, 19 p.].

Since the emergence of independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Iran has played a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of these regions. This influence stems from various factors, primarily Iran's status as a regional power and its profound understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and political intricacies characterizing the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Furthermore, Iran's historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties, coupled with its geographical proximity, endow it with unparalleled opportunities to exert influence over the region's political processes. Notably, Iran also wields significant economic leverage, allowing it to impact ongoing socio-political developments in the area.

Iran's Constitution sets forth the primary objectives of its foreign policy, which include advocating for the unity of Muslims, recognizing a unique global mission for Islam and the Islamic Republic, maintaining the ongoing nature of the Islamic Revolution, and opposing oppressive forces. The Constitution explicitly rejects any form

of domination—either over Iran or by Iran—while preserving national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the protection of Muslims’ rights. It also stresses the imperative of resisting every form of tyranny and injustice.

Additionally, the Constitution underscores Iran’s commitment to avoiding interference in the domestic issues of other nations, even as it supports legitimate struggles by oppressed peoples worldwide. It bars the country from entering into agreements or treaties that could place Iran’s economy, natural resources, military, or culture under foreign influence, and it prohibits the establishment of any foreign military bases on Iranian soil, regardless of purported peaceful intentions [8].

A defining feature of Iran’s foreign policy is its emphasis on exporting the Islamic Revolution as a key vehicle for fulfilling what it views as a global mission. Iranian diplomats are instructed to promote the principles of the Islamic Revolution in their host countries. Furthermore, within the realm of Dar-i-Islam (the Islamic world), nations are categorized as “brotherly,” “friendly,” “neutral,” or “hostile.” Out of more than 120 predominantly Muslim countries, only four—Syria, Libya, Algeria, and Yemen—are deemed brotherly, with the remainder viewed as hostile or neutral [9].

In practice, the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy rejects all forms of hegemony, whether imposing or submitting to it, and upholds comprehensive independence, territorial integrity, and the defense of Muslims’ rights [10]. It neither aligns with dominant powers nor tolerates foreign oversight of its natural resources, economy, or cultural and military spheres [11].

At its core, the Islamic Republic of Iran aspires to foster global human prosperity, asserting that independence, freedom, and the pursuit of justice are universal rights. Hence, while strictly avoiding interference in other countries’ internal affairs, it actively supports legitimate struggles for justice by oppressed communities across the globe.

Major problems of Iran in global terms- its relations with the western countries, and in the list of problems Iran could not come to terms with the USA and some European states- its nuclear program, position towards Israel, support to Shia forces/groups in the Middle East, security collaboration of Arabic states with the USA, US bases in the Middle East and ambitions to become a regional leader. The friendly to Iran countries are not many, and they include Russia and China, and some Central Asian states maintain good relations with Iran as well.

Since achieving independence, the countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus have sought to establish diplomatic relations with their neighbors and nations in the Far East to address internal and external political challenges. Iran, as a one of the leading states in the Middle East with favorable location- access to the Middle East and the Indian ocean, has been actively working to establish mutually beneficial interstate



cooperation with these nations. Notably, Iran has cultivated stable foreign policy relations with several Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. It's essential to recognize that Iran maintains particularly close foreign policy relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, although recent developments have strained their interactions. Iran's collaboration with other regional states, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, can be characterized as a dependable partnership. Moreover, Southern Caucasus and Central Asia have been within the Russian and Turkey's geopolitical interests, China has been historically significant factor in Central Asia, while the positions of Russia are the strongest ones in both regions. From geopolitical perspectives both regions are landlocked and the ways to the world markets go via Russia, China and Turkey. Thus, Iran offers reliable alternative to them.

Since 1991 relations between Iran and Russia have been improving due to mutual interests and relations with the western countries, notably, the USA and EU. As two significant players in the region, possess substantial political capital to address the existing conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia. They have the potential to serve as powerful stabilizing forces. However, as geopolitical realities dictate, despite the steadily advancing Iranian-Russian foreign policy relations, both nations prioritize their national interests when resolving issues and contradictions that arise between them. For example, this was evident in their differing stances regarding the Iranian nuclear program, with Russia justifying its position based on its national interests. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that Russia and Iran act as strategic partners in Central Asia, and their combined influence significantly impacts the region's political dynamics [12].

In today's world, states formulate their foreign policies based on their core national interests, which often revolve around the utilization of energy resources—a concern of global magnitude. This issue holds immense geopolitical significance for Iran, given its substantial energy potential in the Caspian and Persian Gulfs. Iran ranks among the foremost producers and processors of oil in the region, a fact that doesn't align with the interests of Western states. Over the years, Iran has entered into numerous interstate agreements with regional countries regarding the extraction and utilization of its natural resources, particularly hydrocarbons. However, concerns about Iran's nuclear program persist within the international community, leading to the imposition of various sanctions. [13]

To understand the dynamics between Iran and the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, it's essential to examine their relationships with other key Asian powers, notably Turkey. These countries' aspirations for regional leadership and their interactions with other geopolitical actors are evident in their dealings with Ankara. Turkey, like Iran, harbors ambitions for regional dominance. However, it is crucial to note that Turkey's pursuit of hegemony in the region aligns more closely with the interests of the United States, while Russia supports Iran's leadership endeavors. In the context of the

prevailing geopolitical landscape, Turkey's chances of emerging as a regional leader appear less promising compared to those of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's influence in the Central Asian and Caucasian regions is underpinned by its rich cultural and historical affinities with these nations. These bonds, shaped by centuries of shared history, linguistic connections, and religious ties, have fostered a sense of familiarity and trust. Iran's deep-rooted cultural connections with the region enable it to navigate diplomatic challenges and establish robust relationships based on mutual understanding.

Iran's economic prowess plays a critical role in shaping the political landscape of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Its vast energy reserves, combined with its strategic location, enable it to wield substantial economic influence in the region. Iran's energy resources are highly coveted by both neighboring states and global actors, further accentuating its significance. The development of energy infrastructure and economic cooperation agreements has enabled Iran to strengthen its ties with nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While Iran's influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus is undeniable, it also faces challenges and complexities in its regional engagement. One of the foremost challenges is navigating the intricate web of rivalries and alliances that define the geopolitical landscape of the region. The competing interests of major powers, such as Russia, China, and the United States, often necessitate delicate diplomacy on Iran's part to maintain its influence while avoiding confrontation.

Another challenge stems from the diverse and evolving political landscapes of Central Asian and Caucasian states. These nations have unique political systems, economic structures, and foreign policy priorities. Iran must adapt its approach to each country, taking into account their specific needs and aspirations [14].

Furthermore, Iran's involvement in regional conflicts, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, presents both opportunities and risks. While Iran can potentially play a mediating role in such conflicts, its involvement may also draw it into the crossfire of regional tensions.

Multilateral organizations and initiatives have played a significant role in shaping Iran's engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran is a member of various regional organizations, including the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These platforms provide opportunities for Iran to enhance its diplomatic and economic ties with neighboring states.

Additionally, Iran's participation in regional infrastructure projects, such as the North-South Transport Corridor, underscores its commitment to fostering connectivity and trade in the region. These initiatives have the potential to boost economic cooperation and strengthen Iran's position as a regional player.

The evolving dynamics of the Central Asian and Caucasian regions will continue to shape Iran's role in the years to come. As these nations grapple with economic

development, security challenges, and geopolitical complexities, Iran's experience and resources will remain valuable assets.

Iran's ability to navigate the intricate balance of power in the region, maintain positive relations with neighboring states, and contribute to conflict resolution efforts will be essential in shaping its influence. Additionally, Iran's commitment to economic cooperation and infrastructure development will further solidify its role as a regional actor.

In conclusion, Iran's multifaceted engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors. While it faces challenges and uncertainties, Iran's deep-rooted ties and strategic positioning will continue to make it a significant player in the evolving landscape of these regions. As global dynamics continue to evolve, Iran's role in shaping the future of Central Asia and the Caucasus will remain a subject of interest and scrutiny in the realm of international relations.

The Conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1) The countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have economic and political importance for neighboring countries (Russia and Iran) on the one hand and major countries (China and the United States) on the other. This importance comes primarily from the energy sources that these countries possess and their location in the heart of Asia, which constitutes suitable land routes for the transportation of oil and natural gas across their territory.

2) Iranian foreign policy sees these countries as a lifeline to escape US sanctions, re-impose regional control, and return them as major players in the region.

3) Iran's relationship with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus will open the way for it to get out of the US sanctions and blockade imposed on it and to secure calm on the domestic front.

4) The countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have geopolitical importance, as they are part of many conflicts that witness, from time to time, intense competition between international parties seeking to attract the region's interest and, ultimately, access its natural resources. The bilateral and multilateral economic and military agreements that are sought to be concluded with the countries of Central Asia are cited as clear evidence of competition for the control of the region's resources.

5) Iran realizes the importance of the region in making it play an important regional role, in terms of the possibility of possessing the key to controlling energy fields and transporting natural gas from landlocked countries in Central Asia through its territory to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, if it finishes building giant transportation line projects in cooperation with these countries.

6) Religious and sectarian cultures could also play a significant role in Iran's relationship with Central Asia and the Caucasus, as a means of exercising control and domination.

7) The strategic geographic location and religious basis of Iran make it a dominant regional power and major player in the region and it achieves its geopolitical interests.

The intensity of international and regional competition in the Caucasus and Central Asian regions stems from the clarity of the contradictory and different strategies of each country separately due to the difference in interests and their opposition more than their convergence or compatibility.

**Theoretical and methodological Framework.** Iran's foreign strategy in dealing with Central Asia and the Caucasus can be analyzed within a theoretical framework that takes into account various factors and dynamics. While there may not be a specific theoretical framework explicitly developed for this particular context, we can draw upon existing theories and concepts to understand Iran's approach.

Iran's dealings with Central Asia and the Caucasus are influenced by various geopolitical considerations. These considerations shape Iran's foreign policy objectives and strategies in the region. Here are some key geopolitical considerations in Iran's dealings with Central Asia and the Caucasus: *Historical and Cultural Ties*.

The concept of the "security dilemma" can indeed be applied to analyze Iran's actions in the region, as it provides insights into how countries perceive threats and take actions to protect their own security. The security dilemma refers to the situation where defensive actions taken by one state are perceived as aggressive by other states, leading to a cycle of hostility and potential conflict [15].

In the case of Iran, it is important to consider its historical and geopolitical context. Iran is situated in a region that has experienced significant conflicts and power struggles. It shares borders with countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, which have faced instability and intervention from external powers. This context shapes Iran's perception of threats and influences its actions in the region.

The methodological framework employed in this research is comprehensive and multifaceted, taking into account the historical, geographic, political, and economic dimensions of the study area. Various methodological strategies were used to ensure a nuanced and in-depth analysis.

**Interdisciplinary Perspective:** Political phenomena are complex and multifaceted, often requiring insights from various disciplines. The methodological framework acknowledges this interdisciplinary nature and draws upon diverse scientific and epistemological perspectives. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter by integrating knowledge and methodologies from fields such as history, geography, political science, and economics.

**Comprehensive Analysis:** The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Central Asia and the Caucasus region. To achieve this, the chosen methodological strategies cover a wide range of dimensions and levels of analysis. By considering historical, geographic, political, and economic factors, the research ensures a holistic examination of the region and its dynamics.

**Historical Methodology:** The historical methodology is employed to uncover the historical evolution of the region. By examining past events, historical trends, and evidence, researchers establish a historical context for the study. This approach helps to understand the continuity of certain dynamics, the impact of historical legacies, and the long-term drivers of political developments in the region.

**Descriptive Method:** The descriptive method is used to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Through detailed descriptions, the research aims to capture the complexities and nuances of the subject matter. This approach helps to uncover various facets and dimensions, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the region and its implications.

**Case Study Approach:** The case study approach is deemed essential due to the significance of Central Asia and the Caucasus within academic discourse. By focusing on specific cases or examples within the region, researchers can delve deeper into the complexities and dynamics at play. This approach allows for detailed analysis of specific countries, conflicts, policies, or events, providing valuable insights into the region's dynamics.

**Inductive Approach:** The inductive approach is employed to identify underlying patterns and causal relationships. By collecting and analyzing data, researchers can observe trends, develop theories, and make generalizations based on empirical evidence. This approach helps to uncover the underlying dynamics of forces' behaviors, providing a deeper understanding of the region's political phenomena.

**Comparative Analysis:** Recognizing the limitations of direct experimentation in political science, a comparative approach is embraced. This approach allows for the examination of behavioral disparities between countries and their external agendas. By comparing different cases and contexts, researchers can identify variations in strategic priorities, decision-making processes, and outcomes. This comparative analysis provides valuable insights into the interactions and dynamics among regional players.

By employing this methodological framework, the research aims to go beyond traditional statistical methodologies and provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of the political dynamics in Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

**Proposed Dissertation Tasks:**

1) Context analyzes the major shifts in global, regional, and subregional systems following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. How did these changes impact Iran's strategic landscape? Examining the emergence of independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus and their evolving foreign policy priorities. How did these priorities intersect with Iranian interests?

2) Identify the basic objectives guiding Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus, including security concerns, economic interests, political influence, and cultural and religious relations.

3) Analyze the various tools Iran has used to achieve its goals in the region, including diplomacy, political engagement, economic cooperation, trade agreements, cultural exchange, religious outreach, security cooperation, and military assistance.

4) Conduct an in-depth study of Iran's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

5) Analysis of how Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus developed during the research period (1991-2023). Have Iran's goals or tools changed in response to internal and external pressures?

6) Assess the effectiveness of Iran's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and analyze potential challenges and opportunities for Iran's future engagement in the region.

#### **Research Questions:**

1) What instruments did Iran employ to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Central Asia and the Caucasus (diplomacy, economic cooperation, cultural exchange, etc.)?

2) How did Iran navigate the evolving regional dynamics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including the rise of other external actors like China, Russia, and the US?

3) How did domestic political considerations and leadership changes in Iran influence its foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus?

4) What are the potential challenges and opportunities for Iran's future engagement with the region?

5) How might the broader geopolitical landscape and international relations influence Iran's foreign policy approach in the coming years?

**Appearance of Research Results.** The dissertation was completed at the Department of the Middle East and South Asia of the al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The problems posed in this dissertation and proposals for determining Iran's foreign policy regarding the international legal status of the Caspian Sea are reflected in the works published by the author:

XV International Scientific and Practical Conference, Sofia, Bulgaria, International Scientific and Practical Conference "Relation between the Central Asian countries and the Arab World," International Scientific and Practical Conference "Przemysl Nauka I Studia" 2019 Poland, and VI International Scientific Conference "Farabi World."

Iran's foreign policy regarding the international legal status of the Caspian Sea is reflected in works published by the author in the online magazines «edu.e-history.kz» and SCOPUS (Titolo Rivista: RIVISTA DI STUDI SULLA SOSTENIBILITA).

*Research Sections.* The research consists of three sections, with a theoretical introduction and conclusion.

First section: Geopolitics of Central Asia and Caucasus After 1991 .

The second section: Central Asia and The Caucasus in Iran Foreign Policy .

The third section is "Geopolitical Projects of Iran in Central Asia and The Caucasus."

## **1 Geopolitics of Central Asia and Caucasus after 1991**

### **1.1 Major Principles of Iran's Foreign Policy.**

Central Asia, situated at the heart of the Eurasian continent, is a landlocked region with enduring global significance. Its strategic location between Asia and Europe has made it a pivotal geopolitical player and an area of interest for major world powers. Of particular note is the region's geopolitical importance within the Caucasus, which has garnered increasing recognition from major global powers. This acknowledgment is primarily driven by the area's abundant resources, cultural heterogeneity, and storied historical heritage. This article endeavors to dissect the centrality of Central Asia within the Caucasus and its far-reaching influence on regional dynamics and the broader sphere of global politics.

Central Asia, a vast geographical region situated in the center of the Eurasian continent, possesses enduring global importance owing to its strategic position that connects Asia and Europe. The region under consideration consists of five nations, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This landlocked expanse shares its borders with Russia to the north, China to the east, Iran and Afghanistan to the south, and the Caucasus region to the west.

In stark contrast, the Caucasus is a region of remarkable diversity, encompassing Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and portions of Russia and Turkey. What sets this region apart is its unique blend of cultures, religions, and languages, all strategically concentrated at the crossroads of historic trade routes that historically linked the two great continents of Europe and Asia.

Central Asia's geopolitical significance in the Caucasus region is deeply rooted in its strategic location and abundant resources. This vast region serves as a natural corridor connecting the Caspian Sea to China, facilitating vital connections between the Caucasus, South Asia, and the broader global landscape. Additionally, Central Asia possesses substantial reserves of oil, natural gas, and minerals, rendering it a pivotal energy provider for the global economy. The geographical location of the region has historically been a significant factor influencing the aspirations of empires and global powers aiming to assert dominance and extend their territories.

Central Asia has consistently drawn the interest of major global powers. The term "Great Game," coined by British colonialists in the 19th century, encapsulates the strategic rivalry between the British and Russian empires as they vied for dominance in Central Asia. This rivalry was driven by the recognition of the region's immense resources and trade routes, both of which were deemed pivotal to their respective colonial aspirations across Asia [16].

The Great Game had profound effects on the region, leading to a series of wars and conflicts that shaped its political and social landscape. The region's division into various countries was a direct result of the rivalry between the two empires. The legacy of the Great Game is still visible today, as the region remains a hotly contested area of influence between global powers.

In recent times, Central Asia's growing geopolitical significance within the Caucasus region has been fueled by the emergence of new regional powers and shifting global dynamics. A major driving force in this development is China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative has strategically integrated Central Asia into its expansive infrastructure development program, which aims to establish vital connections between China, Europe, and Africa. Consequently, Central Asia has experienced substantial investments in its transportation, energy, and telecommunications sectors, fostering enhanced connectivity and economic relations with China [17].

Additionally, both Central Asia and the Caucasus have witnessed active engagement from Russia, a traditional regional superpower. Given its geographical proximity to the region, abundant energy resources, and geopolitical significance, Russia views Central Asia and the Caucasus as pivotal areas for exerting its influence. Russia's strategic interests in the region are anchored in concerns regarding regional security and stability, as well as its desire to uphold its sphere of influence within the post-Soviet space.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the supreme law of Iran. It was adopted by referendum on December 2 and 3, 1979, and replaced the Constitution of 1906 [9]. The constitution sets forth the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society based on Islamic principles and norms [8]. It reflects the aspirations of the Islamic Ummah (Muslim community) and was influenced by the Islamic Revolution of Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini [9]. The constitution established an Islamic government based on the concept of wilayat al-faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) . It emphasizes the importance of justice, self-determination, and the pursuit of an authentically Islamic and ideological line in the country's struggles. The constitution was approved by a majority of 98.2% in a doubtful referendum [9].

Russia has bolstered its economic and political ties with Central Asia and the Caucasus through its participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The EEU is dedicated to promoting regional integration and economic cooperation and includes member states such as Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Through the EEU, a common market has been developed, facilitating the exchange of goods, services, capital, and labor among member states. This union has notably streamlined trade and investment within the region, thanks to the establishment of a unified energy market and a customs union, both directly resulting from the union's initiatives.

In addition, Russia has kept a military presence in the region, with military bases located in both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The military presence of Moscow in the region acts as a deterrent against the regional threats that it perceives and supports the country's



strategic interests there. In addition, Russia has been involved in the process of mediating conflicts in the region, such as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which was between Armenia and Azerbaijan and ended in 2020 with a ceasefire that was brokered by Russia.

In the realm of geopolitical discourse, there is a notable lack of consensus concerning the precise definition of "Central Asia." The only point of consensus among scholars is its geographical location at the heart of the Asian continent, distance from the open waters of oceans and seas. Two primary perspectives on its geographic boundaries exist.

The first perspective is restrictive in its definition, confining Central Asia to certain newly independent republics within the core of Asia, which were formerly part of the Soviet Union. These republics include Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. Consequently, the Republic of Kazakhstan fails to meet the criteria of this definition.

On the other hand, an alternative viewpoint, as expressed by authoritative sources like the "Britannica Encyclopedia" and scholars such as Wheeler Geoffrey, presents a more expansive geographical understanding of the Central Asia region. According to this perspective, Central Asia is defined as the geographical region extending in an eastward direction from a demarcation line positioned southeast of the Urals and Caspian Seas, to the northwestern areas of China and Mongolia. The comprehensive definition encompasses the northern region of southern Siberia and extends to encompass the northern parts of Iran and Afghanistan. Within this vast geographical region, one can observe the inclusion of Mongolia, the southern regions of Siberia, as well as the northern territories of Afghanistan and Iran. Moreover, it includes the five recently established sovereign nations that arose from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, specifically Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan [18, 93 p.].

The geopolitical region under consideration, which includes Central Asia and the Caucasus, holds great importance as a major hub for energy production on a global scale. This region boasts extensive reserves of oil and natural gas resources. The phenomenon has generated significant international attention and placed the region in the midst of complex strategic rivalries. The competition primarily revolves around energy resources, encompassing the acquisition of energy production sites and the management of crucial transportation networks for energy distribution. The aforementioned routes establish connections between a wide range of destinations, encompassing China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region, and the Indian Ocean, with the assistance of the Caspian Sea.

This geographic area holds significant historical and cultural importance, with deep connections to the chronicles of human civilization. The region played a pivotal role in facilitating trade and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, thereby exerting a substantial influence on Islamic and global history. The area has a history of containment and annexation, especially during the eras of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet

Union. However, after the Cold War, the countries in the region became distinct political, cultural, and social entities, leading to the formation of the independent nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Central Asia is contiguous with the Caucasus region and is an essential component of the larger "Eurasia," commonly known as the "heartland." It includes the five republics in Central Asia and the Third South Caucasus region comprising Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. The strategic location of these countries on either side of the Caspian Sea makes Central Asia a crucial region [19, 56p.].

Figure – 1 Map of the "Heartland Theory", as published by Mackinder in 1904 (H. J. Mackinder, The Geographical Pivot of History. //https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775498).



The primary geostrategic importance of Central Asia lies in two fundamental factors: significant energy deposits and its role as a central passageway for oil and gas pipelines, as well as their corresponding transportation networks. These pipelines connect different geographical areas such as China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region, and the Indian Ocean, with the Caspian Sea serving as a facilitator.

In the twentieth century, Central Asia and the Caucasus were incorporated into the Soviet Union. After its disintegration, five sovereign nations emerged, each adopting the political system of an Islamic republic. These nations are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The region, covering a land area of approximately 5 to 6 million square kilometers, is home to over 60 million people, including a significant Muslim community of approximately 40 million individuals. Over time, this region has become increasingly significant in terms of its strategic value.

The significance of this factor is further amplified by the geographical proximity of the region to volatile areas in Asia, as well as its adjacency to the Arab Gulf and Iraq. Moreover, the longstanding competition between Russia and the United States for regional dominance intensified subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. As a reaction, the Central Asian nations initiated the establishment of diplomatic ties with neighboring states, both within the region and on a global scale. These nations are

situated as continental entities, forming the central foundation of the region. As a result, Central Asia finds itself surrounded by regional actors who are keen on forging connections with these nations, citing the primary motivation of the geopolitical void created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The aforementioned dynamic holds significant geopolitical ramifications, and the stances of regional actors can be classified into four principal categories:

- 1) **Geostrategic Orientation:** Russia takes the lead among players motivated by security considerations and politics. These Central Asian nations are part of Russia's southern security belt and are deemed strategically significant.
- 2) **Geopolitical Orientation:** This orientation aligns with the American Atlantic Commission project and the global strategic maneuvering of the U.S. unipolar system. It focuses on the entry of a non-regional strategic player into the region, shaped by geostrategic determinants.
- 3) **Goeconomic Orientation:** Countries like China, Iran, India, and Turkey engage in goeconomic endeavors, capitalizing on the commercial and energy opportunities offered by Central Asia.
- 4) **Geocultural Orientation:** This orientation pertains to the identities, ethnicities, and religious affiliations of regional countries. It involves a geopolitical game between Iran and Turkey, intersecting within the broader geostrategic landscape shaped by Central Asia's strategic players—Russia, China, and the United States of America [19, 56p.].

Historically, Central Asian nations faced constraints in terms of resource exportation and revenue generation, predominantly relying on Russia as their exclusive conduit for these endeavors. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the Cold War created opportunities for global rivalry, thereby freeing these nations from the geographical and political limitations enforced by Russia. The ongoing process of globalization has led to increased openness and permeability of borders, resulting in a proliferation of security threats and challenges. Consequently, this has heightened international competition within the region. As a result, Iran is strategically positioned to potentially enter into confrontations with prominent global powers such as Russia, the United States, and China as it seeks to establish its regional influence and secure economic benefits in the Central Asian region.

The regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus are located at a geographical crossroads where the continents of Asia and Europe intersect. Central Asia is geographically situated in the region between the Caspian Sea and the Himalayas, whereas the Caucasus region is located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The region is characterized by its diverse geography, encompassing mountain ranges, elevated plateaus, and expansive deserts, among other notable topographical elements

The political history of the region has been significantly impacted by the region's geography, which has played a significant role. The mountain ranges of the Caucasus have historically acted as a natural barrier between Europe and Asia, which has made the region of the Caucasus a strategically important location for business. Since ancient

times, the Caspian Sea has served as an important commercial waterway, allowing access to both the Middle East and Central Asia.

Central Asia, owing to its unique geographical location, serves as a pivotal gateway towards the Gulf region and the broader East. The power that exerts control over Central Asia can potentially influence not only the countries of the East but also those in the Caucasus. This vast mountainous region, characterized by its formidable terrain due to high elevations and limited mountain passes, spans approximately 1200 kilometers between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, demarcating the boundary between Europe and Asia. Central Asia adjoins the Caucasus region [20, 92 p.].

Figure – 2 Map of world with Rimland and Heartland's theories

(Source:[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimland#/media/File:Ob\\_cf43ac\\_copy-of-spykman.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimland#/media/File:Ob_cf43ac_copy-of-spykman.jpg))



The strategic significance of these Central Asian nations has seen a substantial increase due to their geographical proximity to conflict-prone areas in Asia, most notably Afghanistan and Iran. Furthermore, their close adjacency to the Arab Gulf region and Iraq amplifies their strategic importance. These countries exist within a complex geopolitical landscape characterized by threats and security challenges that are further compounded by limitations in their military capabilities. To gain a comprehensive understanding and analyze the ongoing conflicts in the Central Asian region, it is crucial to examine the geographical location, significance, and geopolitical dynamics of the region and its individual constituent countries.

Central Asia grapples with a series of formidable challenges, primarily stemming from its geographical isolation. The region finds itself surrounded on three sides: to the north by the Russian Federation, to the east and west by expansive stretches of arid terrain, and to the south by natural and political barriers such as mountains and seas, along with regions marked by political conflicts or subjected to international sanctions.

This intricate web of geographic and political encirclement places the Central Asian countries in a challenging position. Some still contend with unresolved conflicts while others endeavor to institute political reforms. The region's infrastructure, particularly its pipelines, presents a substantial technical barrier. Many pipelines in the area are aging and traverse countries with vested interests, contributing to the complexity of the situation. A prime example is the "Baku-Ceyhan" pipeline, anticipated to transport approximately one million barrels per day, equivalent to roughly 1.2% of global production. This extensive oil pipeline originates near Baku on the Caspian Sea coast, traversing Azerbaijan and Georgia before reaching the Mediterranean coast of Turkey in Ceyhan [21,52 p.].

A nation's strategic position is influenced by several factors, such as its natural resources and its place in the regional and global context. According to geographical theories like Halford Mackinder's, Central Asia is at the heart of the world. This viewpoint played a significant role during World War II, particularly among Germans. It encouraged Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union to establish political power over the region. Central Asia is vast, with remote territories that played an important role in military operations, making it of significant geopolitical and strategic importance [22, 47p.].

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia's abundant natural resources, particularly oil, drew the attention of major global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. These influential nations sought to establish political and economic footholds to fill the void left by the Soviet Union's collapse. Central Asia swiftly became a focal point of international competition and conflict due to its political geography within a vital international system, particularly in relation to major countries and regional powers vying for influence in the region. The competition in this region can be understood as one of the primary drivers of international conflict, driven by geopolitical factors and the control of natural resources.

From a geographical standpoint, Central Asia extends from Siberia to the Himalayas, encompassing vast north-south and east-west expanses. It spans regions with characteristics more typical of landlocked areas due to its considerable distance from oceans. Central Asia has historically served as a key arena for the concentration of land power, attracting the attention of sea powers. The region functioned as a transit zone where the rivalry between land-based and sea-based powers reached its zenith.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Russia considers Central Asia to be encompassed within the broader region of the Middle East. The region in question is situated geographically between the Near East, encompassing the territories from Morocco to the Arabian Gulf, and the Far East, which encompasses the coastal areas along the Pacific Ocean. According to this perspective, the geographical boundaries of the Middle East and Central Asia span from the western region of the Caucasus to the eastern region of Mongolia, while also extending southwards towards the Indian subcontinent. The geopolitical and geocultural division discussed here serves to demarcate the Ottoman

Empire from Iran and India. The designation "Central Asia" was originally introduced by Alexander von Humboldt in the year 1829, and subsequently embraced in the literary works of German and French writers. Conversely, the designation "Inner Asia" initially referred to an ethnic delineation rather than a geopolitical classification, encompassing regions situated between latitudes 40 and 50, which include Turkestan and Mongolia. In the context of geographical categorization, the term "Outer Asia" denoted the collective designation of Asian territories that were devoid of coastal boundaries [23,40 p.].

The Central Asian nations have experienced a significant rise in their strategic importance as a result of their close geographical proximity to regions in Asia that are prone to conflict, particularly Afghanistan and Iran. Moreover, the proximity of these countries to the Arab Gulf region and Iraq enhances their strategic significance. These nations are situated within a multifaceted geopolitical environment marked by various threats and security challenges, which are further exacerbated by their military constraints. To develop a comprehensive comprehension and conduct an analysis of the ongoing conflicts in the Central Asian region, it is imperative to scrutinize the geographical positioning, significance, and geopolitical dynamics of the region as well as its constituent countries.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the considerable natural resources found in Central Asia, specifically in the realm of oil, garnered the interest of significant global actors, including the United States, Russia, and China. These prominent nations endeavored to establish political and economic positions of influence in order to occupy the vacuum created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Central Asia swiftly became a focal point of international competition and conflict due to its political geography within a vital international system, particularly in relation to major countries and regional powers vying for influence in the region. The competition in this region can be understood as one of the primary drivers of international conflict, driven by geopolitical factors and the control of natural resources [24].

The end of the Cold War introduced significant changes to the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. It created a geopolitical vacuum in the region, spurring new dynamics and strategic interactions among regional and global players. Central Asia emerged as a strategic arena for Eurasian politics, with various players vying for influence. The rebuilding process of Central Asia's geopolitical landscape has become a subject of debate, as each nation's role in this reconstruction determines its influence in the region.

Central Asia holds a pivotal position both geographically and culturally, fostering dynamic interactions with neighboring civilizations along the continent's peripheries. Influences from Iran, India, and China have intricately shaped Central Asia's cultural, political, and economic landscapes, resulting in unique amalgamations and transformations. The region's political and cultural spheres have been profoundly influenced by cross-cultural exchanges between Asian and European centers. Cities such as Istanbul, Konya, Isfahan, Samarkand, Bukhara, Delhi, and Lahore owe their

prominence to these interactions, which have fueled the emergence of dominant political and cultural entities throughout the region [24].

Throughout history, Central Asia has been a focal point for competition and rivalry between Iranian, Indian, and Turkic regions, despite sectarian tensions. Ottoman-Iranian, Iranian-Uzbek, and Indian relations were marked by complex interactions and alliances. The Ottoman Empire, for example, maintained close ties with the Uzbeks against Iranian and Russian forces. Geopolitical factors and the human element of Turanian origin played a crucial role in this competition. Central Asia's position as a refraction arena for transit areas between Iran, Turan, and India made it a theater for geopolitical rivalries. This historical backdrop illustrates the enduring significance of Central Asia in the larger geopolitical context [25, 121 p.].

In summary, Central Asia's geographic location, political dynamics, and historical role have made it a region of immense significance in global geopolitics. Its position as a bridge between East and West, coupled with its abundant natural resources, has attracted the attention of major powers and contributed to a complex geopolitical landscape characterized by competition and strategic maneuvering. Understanding the geopolitical importance of Central Asia requires.

The Central Asian region is characterized by several key attributes, each of which contributes to its significance in global geopolitics:

1. **Political Emergence and International Significance:** The emergence of multiple countries in Central Asia has profound political and economic dimensions that extend beyond the local level, impacting the international system of relations. These countries hold significance not only regionally but also on the global stage.

2. **Geopolitical Location:** Central Asia serves as a geographic bridge between Russia to the north, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent to the south. This strategic location places it at the crossroads of civilizations, acting as a mediator between the East and the West and facilitating historical exchanges between Asia and Europe.

3. **Ethnic Diversity:** The Central Asian region is ethnically diverse, with a range of nationalities residing both within individual states and across the region as a whole. While various ethnicities are present, Turkish and Iranian elements dominate, with Turkish and Persian languages being widely spoken.

4. **Ideological Tensions:** Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has experienced ideological tensions, particularly between two main currents: secularism and Islamic fundamentalism. Various political parties and leaders in the region represent these differing ideologies, leading to complex political dynamics.

5. **Authoritarian Regimes:** Central Asian countries share similarities with some Arab countries in terms of their political regimes. Some of these regimes have faced scrutiny for issues such as corruption, tyranny, limited civil liberties, and human rights violations. Authoritarianism is a common feature in both regions, raising questions about the potential for similar revolutions and uprisings [26,9 p.].

In summary, Central Asia's geopolitical importance is underscored by its emergence as an independent nation with international significance, its pivotal location between major global regions, its ethnic diversity, ideological tensions, and the presence of authoritarian regimes that parallel developments in other parts of the world. These factors combine to make Central Asia a region of considerable interest and importance in the field of global geopolitics.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former president of Kazakhstan, has made several statements about the relationships between the Caucasus, Iran, and Central Asia. In a speech at the 2012 Astana Economic Forum, he emphasized the need for greater cooperation and integration between these regions, stating that "the unification of the Central Asian and Caucasian regions and their interaction with Iran would create a new geopolitical and economic space in Eurasia" [26,9 p.].

Nazarbayev also emphasized the importance of addressing security challenges and enhancing cooperation on issues such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. He called for the development of a common security strategy for the region, stating that "only through joint efforts can we ensure stability and sustainable development in the region" [21].

In addition to security cooperation, Nazarbayev also emphasized the importance of economic integration and cooperation, stating that "we must create a common economic space in the region, which will provide a powerful impetus for the development of our countries." He called for the development of transportation infrastructure and the establishment of a common energy market to enhance economic cooperation.

Nazarbayev's comments underscore a vision of closer collaboration and interconnectedness among the Caucasus, Iran, and Central Asia, highlighting the need to jointly tackle security challenges and advance mutual priorities, particularly in economic development and energy partnerships.

One notable plan designed to destabilize the North Caucasus and the broader region south of Russia is the British-American "Storm over the Caspian" strategy, reportedly developed in the mid-1990s with input from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This proposal includes a "peacekeeping" deployment by the United States and NATO should unrest arise in areas crucial for extracting or transporting oil and gas in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea [26, 10 p.]. Western nations regard separatist movements in the North Caucasus as a means to achieve their broader objectives, offering increased backing for such movements following Georgia's unsuccessful military operation in South Ossetia. Several republics in the North Caucasus have experienced escalating tensions, including terrorist attacks by suicide bombers.

Currently, organizations across nearly 20 countries are thought to support separatist endeavors in the North Caucasus, either openly or covertly. Under various humanitarian or human rights labels, certain groups with different intentions are active in the region. During the Chechen conflict, intelligence agencies from roughly 50 countries operated there. The West has, for an extended period, engaged Russia in multiple "fourth



generation” wars, characterized by covert or limited hostilities involving sabotage, terror, and the encouragement of criminal and political lawlessness to provoke fear among citizens and officials. In these conflicts, Russia often faces armed extremists financed from abroad who operate under political or religious banners, undermining stability in southern Russia [25, 125 p.].

The United States and Western Europe are striving to shape and control this area by analyzing the drawn-out actions in Chechnya and anticipating the possibility of civil strife in the North Caucasus republics. Strategies include studying regional powerholders and their potential challengers, examining motives, and predicting actions. Furthermore, the U.S. State Department has identified all former Soviet republics—excluding Russia—as part of the U.S. military sphere. Under these plans, NATO’s Central Command is tasked with overseeing the Caspian region, while the European Command (U.S. forces in Europe) secures relevant transport routes. Infrastructure for rapid deployment, commonly referred to by the U.S. as “mobile forces,” is being developed along Russia’s southern border, including bases and warehouses.

Former British Prime Minister John Major once spoke bluntly about Russia’s future role, stating that its principal responsibility would be to supply prosperous nations with resources and indicating that only a fraction of Russia’s population was needed for this function. Samuel Huntington, an American theorist of mondialism, similarly characterized Russia as a nation destined for fragmentation, foreseeing violent rifts and contradictions leading to territorial disintegration and the absorption of Russian regions into other geopolitical blocs [25, 125 p.].

In essence, certain governments are seemingly collaborating to remove Russia from the North Caucasus and foster conditions that further erode Russia’s territorial unity. The developments in this region are pivotal not only for local stability but also for the overall integrity of the Russian Federation. Despite interventions by federal authorities, tensions remain high and the situation remains delicate.

The Southern Federal District is the scene of 84% of Russia’s terrorist incidents. In the past year and a half alone, authorities have apprehended 1,736 leaders and primary participants in illegal armed groups, and 61 organized criminal networks have been identified—representing one-fifth of such groups nationally [25, 121 p.]. Analysts note that a pronounced surge in separatism across the North Caucasus, the influx of disenfranchised youth into militant factions, and Georgia’s combative rhetoric are interwoven developments receiving explicit Western support. Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, who presides over the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, has underscored this ongoing Western involvement and financial backing in a conversation with RBC daily [25, 123 p.].

In recent years, Western governments have shown heightened interest in the entire region, continually monitoring events, analyzing ramifications, and projecting likely outcomes for U.S. and EU objectives. They increasingly regard the North Caucasus as an influential zone where Russia may seek to assert greater authority. Evidence includes

the growing presence of U.S., British, and Israeli telecommunications companies in Kuban, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Events unfolding in Chechnya and South Ossetia, together with Georgian policy and responses from Western states—particularly the U.S.—illustrate that Russia’s foothold in the Caucasus remains under scrutiny. The question is whether Russia can maintain its status as a global power and defend its strategic interests, guaranteeing stability and order within its own borders. President Dmitry Medvedev underscored Russia’s resolve in the region during his inaugural speech to the Federal Assembly, declaring, “We will not retreat in the Caucasus” [23, 35 p.].

Several key factors influence security, as well as social, political, and economic conditions in the North Caucasus. These include:

1. Geopolitical rivalry, notably disputes involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
2. The fragmented and inconsistent execution of national policies.
3. Instability stemming from political confrontations among local elites.
4. The presence of illegal armed formations responsible for terrorism and violence.
5. A diverse ethnic and religious makeup that can spark ethnonational disputes.
6. Weaknesses in the unified legal framework, fueling aspirations for greater regional autonomy.
7. Deepening social and ethnic divides driven by economic hardships.
8. The deteriorating law enforcement environment and increasing corruption.
9. Unregulated migration patterns and their socio-economic implications.
10. Lack of a coherent information strategy [25, 125 p.].

These “conflict-driving” dynamics grow even more significant in light of heightened friction caused by Georgia’s military action against South Ossetia and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia. Although the Western world must now acknowledge Russia’s concerns following events in South Ossetia, it remains hesitant to engage in direct confrontation while still advancing its own long-term interests.

All of these elements underscore that the contest for influence in the Caucasus is ongoing. In this context, Russia will need to formulate a fresh policy approach for managing the Caucasus, given the region’s strategic importance. The dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered wider geopolitical shifts across the post-Soviet landscape, making these territories attractive to major global powers. The Caucasus region’s importance is evident, as more than 30 countries have declared it a key zone of interest.

In contemporary geopolitics, competition for control over natural resources, strategic positions, and critical maritime routes drives global power dynamics. While geopolitics is complex and influenced by many factors, the assertion that major world powers aim to push Russia to the northeast of Eurasia has some historical and geopolitical validity. Here are key points to consider:

1) **Resource Control:** Access to and control over natural resources, especially energy resources like oil and natural gas, are crucial in shaping the strategic goals of major world powers. The Mediterranean-Black Sea-Caucasian-Caspian region's richness in energy resources makes it a highly strategic area.

2) **Geostrategic Significance:** The region you mentioned holds significant geostrategic importance due to its location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It serves as a bridge between these regions and provides access to vital trade routes, including those for energy transportation.

3) **Historical Context:** Throughout history, control over key maritime routes and access to important regions has been a goal of major powers. The competition for control over these areas has shaped geopolitical strategies and rivalries.

4) **Russia's Role:** Russia's geographical position spans both Europe and Asia, giving it a unique role in Eurasian geopolitics. Its influence in the region, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, has been a point of contention between Russia and other major powers.

5) **Global Power Dynamics:** The actions and strategies of major world powers are influenced by their broader geopolitical interests. These interests often involve containing or countering the influence of rival powers and securing access to key resources and routes.

6) **Balance of Power:** Geopolitical strategies are often framed in terms of maintaining or shifting the balance of power in key regions. Pushing a rival power away from strategically vital areas can be seen as an effort to rebalance power dynamics [25].

It's important to note that geopolitical strategies are subject to change over time and can be influenced by a range of factors, including economic considerations, alliance dynamics, and shifts in global politics. Additionally, the assertion that major world powers aim to push Russia to the northeast of Eurasia is a simplification of complex geopolitical strategies that involve multiple actors and interests.

While resource control and strategic route management are vital components of contemporary geopolitics, the strategies and objectives of major world powers are complex and can evolve over time. The competition for influence in regions like the Mediterranean-Black Sea-Caucasian-Caspian area exemplifies broader geopolitical dynamics in the 21st century. The North Caucasus occupies a uniquely important position in Russian politics because of its strategic border location near NATO's southern flank, its proximity to Transcaucasia and Central Asia, and its access to the Black and Caspian Seas [25, 126 p.]. Over time, persistent internal and external tensions have turned this region into a major source of wide-ranging threats to Russia's national security and interests. Among the most prominent conflicts are the Chechen wars, which inflicted severe human and material losses. Other examples include the Ossetian-Ingush standoff, political and economic unrest in Dagestan, ethnic strife in Karachay-Cherkessia, and lingering issues in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea. Additionally, ongoing tensions between Georgia and Ossetia, along with the situation in Abkhazia,

demonstrate that these conflicts form part of a broader geopolitical dynamic rather than merely local disputes.

One might question why such global focus rests on this relatively small area. The term “North Caucasus,” introduced officially in 1860, refers to an expanse of roughly 250,000 square kilometers bounded by the Black and Azov Seas in the west, the Caspian Sea in the east, the Kuma-Manych depression in the north, and the Main Caucasian Range to the south. Its strategic geography and substantial natural resources have historically attracted the interest of major world powers.

Comprising around 55 indigenous groups and up to 120 ethnic minorities, the North Caucasus encompasses followers of all major world religions. The region has seen interethnic conflicts and social discord often linked to the absence of consistent national policies. Moreover, political instability in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia serves the interests of various external actors and nations looking to diminish Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet realm and restrict its strategic reach.

Russia has a long history of encountering geopolitical rivals in the North Caucasus who seek to curb its authority in the region. As noted by the Russian historian P.N. at the turn of the previous century, Western governments have, for quite some time, shown the intent to weaken Moscow’s standing there [25, 118 p.].

In conclusion, the political geography of Central Asia and the Caucasus is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, religious, and geographical factors. These regions feature diverse political systems, from democratic republics to authoritarian regimes, and a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic groups. Despite challenges related to governance, corruption, and conflict, Central Asia and the Caucasus hold critical geopolitical importance due to their strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia, abundant natural resources, and potential as key transportation and trade corridors. Going forward, it is crucial for scholars, policymakers, and citizens to engage in thorough analysis and dialogue to address the political, economic, and social challenges facing these regions.

## **1.2 New Great Game in Central Asia after 1991: agenda, resources, challenges, actors, projects**

Central Asia has long been a hotspot of conflict and rivalry among global powers, a trend dating back to the nineteenth century. Notably, the Russian Federation and Great Britain, both wielding substantial influence worldwide at the time, vied for control over this strategic region. This rivalry wasn't solely fueled by the presence of valuable oil and gas reserves but also by a myriad of strategic factors contributing to the breakup of former Soviet Union states. Consequently, a cluster of newly independent states emerged, grappling with the challenges of nation-building amidst political and economic turbulence. Despite the challenges faced by Iran and Turkey, Central Asia's substantial natural resources, especially energy reserves, have drawn the attention of major global powers.<sup>1</sup> This has led to competition and geopolitical maneuvering as these powers seek to secure influence and capitalize on shifts in the region's political landscape.<sup>2</sup> Comprehending Central Asia's geopolitical and strategic significance is key to understanding the motivations behind major countries' involvement in the region [27, 49 p.].

Central Asia, a region of considerable contemporary geopolitical importance, comprises five independent republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—formerly part of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Situated between China to the east, Russia to the north, and Iran and Afghanistan to the south, Central Asia has historically served as a vital link between Eastern and Western cultures.<sup>4</sup> Its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and diverse cultural composition have made it a focal point for great power competition and a potential arena for regional conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

Geopolitically, Central Asia's location at the crossroads of important transportation and trade routes has made it a crucial transit hub for the movement of goods and people between Europe and Asia.<sup>6</sup> This geographical position has amplified its importance to China's expansive economic development plans, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's investment in pipelines, roads, and railways across Central Asia, designed to connect with Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, has significantly elevated the region's role in the global economy.

Beyond China, Russia has also preserved its influence in Central Asia, a region that was once a core part of the Soviet empire.<sup>7</sup> Russia maintains military bases in the region and continues to provide economic and political support.<sup>8</sup> This enduring influence allows Russia to create a buffer zone between itself and China, while also safeguarding its own regional interests.

Central Asia's strategic importance has been acknowledged by the United States and other Western powers in a similar manner. The United States has established a military presence in the region from the initial phases of the War on Terror, employing military sites located in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to facilitate operations in the nearby

country of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the United States has provided economic and humanitarian aid to the region with the aim of fostering stability and democratic governance [28, 98 p.].

The geopolitical prominence of Central Asia has been further enhanced by its abundant natural resources. The geographical area possesses abundant supplies of oil, gas, and minerals, rendering it a highly appealing location for nations with high energy demands. The region is believed to possess substantial oil and gas deposits, ranking among the greatest globally. To facilitate the transportation of these rich resources to international markets, numerous significant pipelines have been developed in the area. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) implemented by China has generated novel prospects for energy collaboration between China and Central Asian nations [28, 99 p.].

The region's cultural diversity has also contributed to its geopolitical importance. Central Asia is home to a rich mix of ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Turkmen. This diversity has created opportunities for cultural exchange and economic cooperation, as well as for conflict and instability. Ethnic tensions have occasionally boiled over into violence, as in the case of the 2010 ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan [29, 48 p.].

Despite its strategic importance, Central Asia faces several challenges that threaten its stability and development. Political instability, corruption, and authoritarianism have been persistent problems in the region. Economic development has been slow, and the region remains heavily dependent on natural resources, leaving it vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices. Climate change has also had a significant impact on the region, exacerbating water scarcity and contributing to environmental degradation.

In conclusion, Central Asia's geopolitical and strategic importance is likely to continue to grow in the coming years. The region's location, natural resources, and cultural diversity make it an attractive destination for great power competition and an arena for regional rivalries. However, the region also faces significant challenges that threaten its stability and development. Addressing these challenges will require sustained efforts by both regional and global actors, including the promotion of political stability, economic development, and cultural exchange.

#### *The geopolitical importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus*

In his seminal work titled "Democratic Ideals and Reality," Halford Mackinder introduced a theory that has garnered significant recognition as one of the foremost geopolitical theories. According to Mackinder's theory, known as "The Geographical Pivot of History," the majority of the Earth's surface, approximately three-quarters, is comprised of water bodies, while the remaining one-quarter is occupied by landmasses. Additionally, the author observed that the interconnectedness and cohesive nature of the world's seas offer a rationale for referring to it as the "Global Ocean." Additionally, he observed that the landmasses of Europe, Asia, and Africa can be considered as "world islands." It encompasses approximately 66% of the total landmass, and Mackinder

denoted it as the pivotal point of the global island, commonly referred to as the "heart of the earth." This region spans from the Volga River basin to eastern Siberia, as well as a significant portion of the Iranian plateau, encompassing Iran, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan, along with a segment of the Mongolian Highlands [29, 65 p.].

In the realm of geopolitical theories, Spykman, a prominent figure in American international relations, presents a compelling argument. He underscores the pivotal geopolitical importance of the peripheral regions, known as the "Rimlands." These Rimlands encompass Eastern Siberia, China, Korea, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. Spykman posits that gaining control over these Rimlands translates into dominance over the vast Eurasian landmass, ultimately conferring control over the entirety of the world [30, 56 p.]. Moreover, these Rimlands encapsulate the essence of the Asian continent. The concept of centrality emerges as a crucial aspect in our exploration of the Asian continent and its interactions on the global stage. Examining the inherent geographical attributes of Central Asia reveals its profound significance. Here are some notable characteristics:

- 1) Central Asia encompasses regions located beyond the Gihon River, often referred to as West Turkestan to distinguish it from East Turkistan, which falls under China's governance. This expansive territory includes the basins of the Sihon and Gihon rivers, as well as the vast Aral Sea.

- 2) Geographically, Central Asia assumes a trapezoidal shape, flanked by the Himalayas to the south, the Pamir Hill to the southwest, and the Altai, Yapluni, and Stauffori mountains to the north. To the east, it is bounded by the Ganjan and Connor Mountains.

- 3) Khorasan, covering substantial portions of Central Asia, extends across six provinces. The specific location in question resides within the Republic of Turkmenistan, a nation sharing borders with Iran to the west, Afghanistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the east, and the northwestern fringes of Kazakhstan, adjoining the Caspian Sea to the north.

- 4) Central Asia boasts several valleys ensconced amidst mountain ranges, exemplified by the Tien Shan and the Altai. The region is traversed by significant rivers such as the Sihon, Gihon, Atrak, and Mirghab.

- 5) The Aral Sea, also known as the Sea of Khorezm, stands as the largest lake on the Asian continent. It is bordered to the south and west by Uzbekistan and to the north by Kazakhstan.

- 6) The countries of Central Asia lack direct access to open seas or oceans, with none possessing ports on such expanses. Instead, some nations overlook enclosed bodies of water like the Caspian Sea though technically a sea due to its size and salinity, the landlocked Caspian Sea borders several Central Asian countries including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia. It is the largest enclosed body of water on Earth by surface area. and Lake Issyk-Kul: Nicknamed the "Pearl of Central Asia," it's the world's second-largest saline lake (after the Caspian Sea), and the seventh

deepest lake. Located in northeastern Kyrgyzstan. Lake Balkhash: Located in southeastern Kazakhstan, a unique endorheic lake (meaning it has no outlet) that is divided into two basins (freshwater in the east and saltwater in the west). This unusual characteristic is attributed to the varying salinity levels of the rivers that feed the lake. and Aral Sea: Once the world's fourth-largest lake, the Aral Sea has shrunk dramatically since the 1960s due to Soviet irrigation projects that diverted the waters of its feeder rivers, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. This ecological disaster has had a devastating impact on the surrounding environment and local communities. Kolsai Lakes: Located in southeastern Kazakhstan, a series of three scenic lakes nestled amidst the Tian Shan mountains. These republics grapple with landlocked status, presenting a form of dual custody as they lack immediate access to open seas or oceans. To surmount this challenge, landlocked nations often seek permission from Russia to navigate the high seas, using the Volga Channel situated within Russian territory. This channel serves as a vital conduit connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black and Baltic Seas [31, 40 p.].

The Caspian Sea region, enveloping the coastlines of countries including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran, emerges as a prominent arena of shared sovereignty, particularly concerning its abundant reserves of natural resources. Dr. Laurent Ruskas, serving as the Caspian Sea Project Director at the Cambridge Energy Research Foundation in the United States, underscores the region's remarkable resource potential [32, 50 p.].

Popular media frequently portrays the Caspian Sea region as an enclave of immense wealth, with projected oil reserves reaching a staggering 200 billion barrels. Nevertheless, confirmed statistics for oil and condensates presently stand at a more conservative range of 25 to 30 billion barrels. Yet, the region brims with prospects for future discoveries, conceivably augmenting reserves to the extent of 50 to 75 billion barrels.

The International Energy Agency offers varied estimations of oil reserves in the region, ranging from 15 to 40 billion barrels, constituting approximately 1.5-4 percent of global reserves. Concurrently, gas reserves span between 6 to 7 trillion cubic meters, accompanied by an additional 9.2 trillion cubic meters awaiting exploration, collectively representing about 6-7% of the world's total natural gas reserves [33, 35 p.].

According to an additional study, it has been indicated that the estimated quantity of proven oil reserves originating from the Caspian Sea amounts to roughly 176.5 billion barrels. This figure represents approximately 17.1% of the global total of proven extractable reserves. Moreover, the aforementioned study provides an estimation of the cumulative gas reserves in the region, amounting to around 14.5 trillion cubic meters. This figure represents approximately 9.7% of the global aggregate of natural gas reserves [33, 36 p.].

In addition to its considerable reserves of oil and gas, the Caspian Sea region is renowned for its noteworthy accumulations of precious minerals such as gold, copper, uranium, and diverse heavy metals.



However, the process of extracting oil and gas reserves may face several challenges related to technological, economic, geopolitical, and ethnic factors. Moreover, the Caspian Sea's physical structure, characterized by its enclosed nature and complete land surroundings, presents difficulties in the transportation of oil and gas to international consumer markets. This statement suggests that substantial financial resources are necessary to develop fresh infrastructure aimed at facilitating the exportation of Caspian oil to global maritime regions. As a result, the costs associated with transportation will be significantly higher when compared to international standards, therefore negatively affecting the economic viability of the development process. The intricate structure of transportation in the Caspian Sea region is influenced by a combination of factors, including the ample availability of resources, varying viewpoints, and conflicting interests. This complexity is characterized by the interplay of political and economic components. Following the achievement of independence by the oil-endowed states in Central Asia, specifically the countries bordering the Caspian Sea, and the subsequent revelation of their oil reserves to the international community, a competitive rivalry has arisen among Western corporations, as well as international and regional powers, in their pursuit to secure access to these newly discovered wealth. The categorization of this competition into two broad tiers is apparent, with one tier comprising foreign corporations that demonstrate a relatively limited level of care. When examining the political consequences of extending the lines in various directions, it is important to also take into account the political and strategic positions of major global powers. These perspectives subsequently shape the stances of corporations, as well as the stances of regional states that hold concerns about their reliance on certain powers for oil to different degrees. According to the source cited as [34, 55 p.].

1) The Republic of Turkmenistan is home to the largest industrial channel in the entire world. This channel receives its supply of fresh water from the Amu darya River, which is a Corm channel that winds its way across the desert from east to west along a thousand kilometers [34, 208 p.].

2) The region known as Central Asia comprises a single geographical mass. Russia shares a border with Kazakhstan to the north, while China borders Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to the east. Additionally, Turkmenistan shares a border with Iran. As per the British Encyclopedia, the region under discussion is characterized as a vast inland sea, denoting a substantial continental expanse that is geographically enclosed. Consequently, the countries within this region are significantly influenced by the circumstances and events occurring in the neighboring countries, which serve as a conduit for external influences akin to traversing open waters.

3) Central Asia is often described as a crucial link between East and West, connecting the continents of Asia and Europe as well as bridging the gap between the Middle East and other regions [35, 229 p.].

Its strategic positioning has earned it significant geopolitical importance, not only due to its geographic centrality but also its intricate ties with neighboring nations and the

broader international community. Central Asia serves as a vital nexus, facilitating connectivity among Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, while its substantial energy resources further enhance its strategic value, contributing to global energy security efforts. The region's prominence on the world stage is underscored by its role in bridging Western and Eastern spheres. Notably, the dominant control of energy resources by a select few nations in the region has led to a relatively closed stance, limiting international engagement. Consequently, many states rely on neighboring countries to act as intermediaries, facilitating their integration into global markets.

4) Central Asia possesses considerable geopolitical and strategic significance within the global context. The geographical positioning of this region in the central part of the Eurasian continent has traditionally rendered it a pivotal hub for trade and commercial activities between Europe and Asia. This characteristic is relevant in contemporary times as well. The extensive deposits of oil, gas, and minerals in Central Asia position it as a significant participant in the global energy market. Furthermore, the geopolitical positioning of the region has become it a pivotal subject of global competitiveness and the contestation between major powers.

In recent years, countries such as China, Russia, and the United States have sought to strengthen their ties with Central Asian countries, recognizing the region's importance in terms of security, energy, and trade. At the same time, Central Asian countries themselves have sought to diversify their foreign policy relationships and engage with a range of regional and international actors.

Despite these opportunities, Central Asia also faces a range of challenges, including political instability, weak governance, and economic underdevelopment. Addressing these challenges will require a sustained and coordinated effort by governments, civil society, and the international community.

Overall, Central Asia's geopolitical and strategic importance is likely to continue in the coming years as countries seek to build new trade and transportation corridors, exploit natural resources, and navigate complex regional dynamics. As such, it will be essential to monitor and analyze developments in this region in order to better understand the opportunities and challenges it presents for the global community.

Central Asia, a region situated in the heart of the Eurasian continent, has been strategically significant for centuries. The region comprises five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It is bordered by Russia to the north, China to the east, Iran and Afghanistan to the south, and the Caspian Sea to the west. Central Asia is a region with rich natural resources and a diverse cultural heritage, and its location at the crossroads of major transportation and trade routes has made it a strategic location for centuries.

The strategic importance of Central Asia is driven by several factors, including its location, resources, and demographics. Firstly, Central Asia is situated at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, connecting the East and the West. The region has long been a vital hub for trade and transportation, linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. For

centuries, caravans traversed Central Asia's vast deserts and mountains, carrying silk, spices, and other goods between China and Europe. Today, the region's strategic location continues to be important for global trade, with new transport routes being developed that connect China to Europe via Central Asia [36, 89 p.].

Secondly, Central Asia is rich in natural resources. The region is home to abundant reserves of oil, gas, and minerals, which are essential for the world's energy needs. Kazakhstan, for example, is the world's leading producer of uranium and has significant reserves of other minerals, including copper, iron ore, and coal. Turkmenistan has vast reserves of natural gas, and Uzbekistan has significant reserves of gold and copper. These resources have made Central Asia an attractive destination for foreign investment and have created opportunities for economic development and growth.

Thirdly, Central Asia has a diverse demographic makeup, comprising various ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Turkmen. This diversity has created opportunities for cultural exchange and economic cooperation, as well as for conflict and instability. Ethnic tensions have occasionally boiled over into violence, as in the case of the 2010 ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan. However, the region's diverse population also creates opportunities for international cooperation, particularly in the areas of trade, education, and tourism.

Given its strategic importance, Central Asia has been the focus of great power competition for centuries. Historically, the region has been contested by Russia, China, and Persia, and today, it remains a hotspot for great power competition and regional rivalries. Russia has maintained a strong presence in Central Asia since the days of the Soviet Union and continues to exert significant influence over the region. The Russian military has maintained several bases in the region, including in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the country has continued to provide economic and political support to its former Soviet republics.

China's burgeoning influence in Central Asia cannot be understated. The unveiling of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 has ushered in a new era of economic collaboration between China and Central Asian nations. BRI, a colossal infrastructure endeavor, envisions a labyrinth of highways, railways, and ports linking China to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Central Asia finds itself at the crossroads of this ambitious undertaking, featuring projects like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, poised to reduce transit time between China and Europe to a mere 15 days.

Western powers, including the United States, have also discerned the strategic significance of Central Asia. Since the inception of the War on Terror, the U.S. has maintained a military presence in the region, utilizing bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to support operations in neighboring Afghanistan. Beyond military involvement, the U.S. has extended economic and humanitarian assistance to foster stability and economic progress. Recent years have witnessed a concerted effort by the U.S. to deepen its engagement with Central Asia, with a particular focus on energy and infrastructure development.

The intricacies of Central Asia's strategic landscape are further nuanced by its relationships with neighboring nations. Iran and Afghanistan, both proximate to Central Asia, have left indelible imprints on the region's historical narrative and contemporary dynamics. Iran shares an extensive border with Turkmenistan and has collaborated on energy ventures and cultural exchanges. Iran has also sought to augment its influence by leveraging religious ties with Tajikistan, a predominantly Shia nation. Afghanistan, in contrast, has been a wellspring of instability and turmoil for decades. Its porous borders with Central Asia have inadvertently facilitated drug trafficking and illicit activities. Moreover, the persistent Taliban insurgency has imperiled the security and stability of neighboring states. In response, Central Asian countries have proactively engaged with Afghanistan, extending economic aid and backing peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Central Asia's strategic salience is further compounded by regional security challenges, prominently the specter of terrorism and extremism. Extremist factions like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement have found fertile ground in the region, orchestrating attacks in Central Asia and adjacent territories, thus jeopardizing regional equilibrium. Central Asian nations have mounted concerted efforts to counter this menace, intensifying cooperation on counterterrorism and security matters. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security body founded in 2001, has assumed a pivotal role in fostering security collaboration among its member states, encompassing China, Russia, and Central Asian nations. The SCO's focal points include the combatting of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, catalyzing joint military drills and intelligence sharing.

Central Asia's strategic import emanates from its geographic location, resource wealth, and demographic composition. As a centuries-old nexus for trade and transit, coupled with abundant reservoirs of oil, gas, and minerals, the region beckons foreign investment. The intricate interplay of great power rivalries, regional contests, and security exigencies has left an indelible mark on Central Asia's geopolitical landscape. In response, Central Asian states have bolstered cooperation on security and counterterrorism fronts. As the region continues to evolve and novel infrastructure undertakings materialize, Central Asia's strategic standing is poised for further augmentation in the foreseeable future.

The strategic importance of Central Asia emerges for the following reasons:

- 1) The median geographical location of Central Asia qualified it to be a link between the regional systems of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, in addition to the Eurasian sector of Russia [19, 112 p.].

- 2) Central Asia has become one of the main points of interest for industrialized countries, and the most important characteristic of this region is the political geography that it enjoys. This feature has greater significance for the security of the West than a stock of energy, as the Caspian region is located in the heart of Asian Europe's regional countries and has become dominant in the region [20, p. 384].

3) Kazakhstan possesses strategic nuclear weapons, while other republics possess nuclear tactical weapons, in addition to the presence of uranium ore in their territories and a large number of experts in the nuclear field.

4) Since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the United States of America has been trying to penetrate the Central Asian region and is working to establish bases in the region to closely monitor developments occurring in Russia, China, Iran, and the countries of the region and to be close to the energy resources that will reshape the geopolitical map in Central Asia and control Developing oil reserves as well as controlling pipeline routes that have a great influence on the political and economic future of Russia and Central Asia will have strategic results by reducing dependence on Gulf oil, and controlling pipelines will be a victory for geopolitical influence in Central Asia and the struggle for future roads transferring oil to global markets [21, 125 p.].

The game of competition for new countries began before the collapse of the (former) Soviet Union, as a result of the relaxation of the central Soviet authority and the opening of these countries to the outside world at the end of the eighties. This tendency was strengthened after the fall of the Soviet Union, as regional powers, led by Turkey and Iran, sought to try to contain the new countries and exploit the historical, linguistic, cultural, and geographical ties available to them to enhance their existence. They also used diplomatic, economic, and cultural means and sought to establish regional institutions that used them as a tool to link those republics with it, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization that includes (Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), the Association of Persian Speaking Peoples, and the grouping of Turkish-speaking countries [22, 42 p.].

Despite concerted efforts by Iran and Turkey to establish a presence in Central Asia since 1993, they have encountered challenges. Leaders of the newly independent Central Asian republics have become wary of Tehran and Ankara's ambitions, perceiving their goals as extending beyond traditional diplomacy and economic ties to a desire for broader influence. These leaders have also expressed concerns about Iran's religious activities, fearing they could destabilize the region, particularly given the socio-economic vulnerabilities of local populations to external political mobilization. Similarly, Turkey's rhetoric about a resurgent Turkic nation stretching from China to the Balkans has been met with apprehension by Central Asian political elites, who fear Turkey might seek to replace Russia as the dominant power [23, 43 p.].

Central Asia's economic significance is substantial. The region is rich in natural resources and strategically located, bordered by Russia to the north, the Caspian Sea to the west, Iran and Pakistan to the south, and China and Mongolia to the east. It acts as a transition zone between Siberia's flat, cold terrain and the mountainous regions of Upper Asia, specifically the Armenian and Pamir nodes. Historically, crucial east-west trade routes, such as the Northern Road (also known as the Central Asia Road), have traversed the region, as it is a road taken by merchants from China to Central Asia and the Caspian

Sea and then to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. It is mostly a land road that depends on the movement of caravans, and it seems that this road has several paths, the most famous of which is the Silk Road, which is a wide road. connects all parts of the Asian continent, linking East, South, and West Asia, as well as North and Northeast Africa and Europe, and that economic importance is due to the following factors [24, 37 p.]:

### *Oil*

Central Asia is abundant in natural resources, particularly oil. The region is considered to be among the world's most promising areas for oil reserves, second only to the Arab Gulf region. According to Russian sources and American oil companies operating in the area since 1993, the total oil reserves in Central Asia and the bordering Russian territory near the Caspian Sea are estimated to be around 30 billion tons. An additional 20 billion tons are believed to be located in the coastal regions. The Tengiz field in Kazakhstan alone is estimated to hold billions of barrels of oil.

Despite the substantial oil reserves present in these nations, they continue to encounter challenges related to limited investment in this sector due to their weak economic structures. Consequently, prominent countries such as the United States, China, and Russia have redirected their investments towards this sector, with the United States emerging as a significant player in this domain. The aforementioned circumstance instilled apprehension among Russia over the expanding influence of the United States in the region, including both political and economic domains.

Especially in light of the rush of American oil companies after the collapse of the former Soviet Union to Central Asia in order to exploit the oil wealth there and strengthen economic relations with the countries of the region, especially Kazakhstan, as well as in light of the mounting demands within the United States to pay attention to this region and to consolidate economic, political, and cultural relations with it [25],

Kazakhstan has the largest unexplored oil field, the Tengiz field, and the American Chevron Corporation is its largest developer. In Turkmenistan, an oil field was discovered in Nabetaj [26, 20 p.].

### *Natural Gas*

It is considered one of the most important sources of energy, and preliminary estimates indicated that the volume of confirmed reserves amounted to 170.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. As Saparmurat Niyazov, President of the Republic of Turkmenistan, said when he signed a joint cooperation agreement to deliver natural gas from Turkmenistan to Europe through Turkey in 1991, Turkmenistan has a large source of natural gas, and they welcome businessmen who come to jointly invest this gas [27]. Whereas, the Central Asia region constitutes 2.37% of the global gas reserves and possesses 4.28% of the global natural gas reserves, and its uranium reserves amount to 17% per thousand tons, according to 2008 statistics.

The collapse of the former Soviet Union marked a new stage for the countries of Central Asia, which became a group of newly independent states seeking to build their

states in various fields and exploit the resources and capabilities they possessed to make them able to face their financial and economic problems, coinciding with the increasing international interest in providing resources. New energy sources reduce dependence on traditional energy resources, and this has created a state of competition and conflict between many countries in the region.

The general tendency of Central Asian countries during independence was to exploit Moscow's weakness, build close relations with the West, and move away from Russian control, but this did not materialize in view of the lack of confidence of the West in the new leaderships that were an extension of the Soviet era, which made these countries approach Moscow again, especially in the era of President Vladimir Putin. What is noticeable in these frameworks is Turkmenistan's retreat under the leadership of its late President, Saparmurat Niyazov, who ruled the country for 15 years with his own philosophy and unique method of tyranny. There are other factors contributing to the failure of the official frameworks, including the aspiration of Uzbek President Islam Karimov to play the role of policing in Central Asia due to Uzbekistan's geostrategic location, which borders the four countries that contain the largest human concentration in the region.

The border file remains open for discussion between some Central Asian countries, as it was drawn during communist rule in the 1920s, and nationalities and ethnicities were distributed in a way that served Moscow's interests at the time, but these borders created many problems between these countries after independence. Many nationalities have found themselves as ethnic and national minorities marginalized for the most part, such as the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan; the Tajiks in Uzbekistan; and the Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, especially in the Ferghana Valley triangle where the borders of the three countries converge together, although border disputes and accusations of interference in internal affairs. It did not reach the level of wars and battles between these countries, but Tajik-Uzbek relations are still witnessing continuous tension, reaching the point of closing the borders and exchanging accusations of supporting the armed opposition in each country.

Islamic fundamentalism has been the most important concern of the Central Asian countries that are governed by secular regimes, and perhaps the only exception in the region is Tajikistan, in which the constitution provides for a secular state besides giving the right to establish parties on a religious basis as a conciliatory step between the Islamists and the Tajik government, which fought a five-year civil war between 1992 and 1997 [28, 45 p.].

Despite the strict laws against manifestations of religiosity in general in all republics and the enactment of multiple laws to stop public Islamic work and place Islamic activities within a narrow official framework that the government directly supervises, the public street, especially among Muslim ethnicities, has expressed its Islamism in various forms.

But the problem is not limited to the ethnic and racial conflicts in the region; rather, there are many problems that stand in the way of progress in the countries of the region, and the most important of these obstacles are poverty, corruption, and economic inequality.

Although nature has created a great opportunity for the countries of the region that can be used to support economic progress, which is represented in its richness in natural resources such as gold, oil, and natural gas, these resources are the most attractive areas for foreign investment in the world, but with unjust patterns of development that lead to low standards of living and widespread corruption. Consequently, there must be reasons for the entry of poverty and corruption into the lives of the societies of the region's countries [29, 69 p.], among which:

*Poor Management of State Resources:*

The increase in the state's natural resources provokes an economically directed emigration, polarizing ethnic groups and thus increasing unemployment. This is due to the fact that the state is the one that gets most of the output from the exploitation of natural resources and, in most cases, uses these resources to increase military spending in order to resolve conflicts. and not for the sake of creating a good infrastructure to attract more investments, and thus here occurs mismanagement of economic resources.

*Weakness of Institutions in the State:*

After the independence of the Central Asian countries, these countries began to shift their orientation from the communist system to the free market economy system, but this transformation was not followed by improvement in the state's institutions, so the independent countries retained some institutions that were in the Soviet era, and thus the current institutions became incompatible with the requirements of the economy in its current system, which led to the spread of corruption in these institutions through the provision of bribes and facilities by persons working in economic institutions [30, 48 p.].

For its part, Afghanistan was one of the most important sources of concern for the countries of Central Asia, and the fundamentalist threat coming from the south, especially during the period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, pushed these countries to take more strict measures against the Islamists. Rather, Tashkent and Dushanbe pushed for rapprochement despite their differences, which were represented by supporting the Afghan factions of the Tajiks and the Uzbeks.

The events of September 11 and the subsequent US war on Afghanistan constituted a golden opportunity for the leaders of Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan, to extend cooperation with the United States and open the country to US military bases, and cooperation was evident in taking a hard line on the color revolutions that began in Ukraine and passed in Georgia and finally in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, despite the huge capabilities that these countries possess, especially in the field of energy, the political decisions of the ruling elite deprived the peoples of this region of benefiting from these resources, whether at the level of the countries themselves or at the level of the region as a whole [31, 41 p.].



The economic policies of each country have led to the opening of other hot files between these countries, the most important of which is the water file, in which Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan appear to exchange countries with huge oil and gas reserves. International reports interested in the field of water have warned of the outbreak of conflicts in Central Asia over water if these countries do not agree on the redistribution of proportions.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan account for 90% of the region's water resources, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the two largest users of water resources.

With the Central Asian republics obtaining their independence in a sudden and unexpected way, they rushed towards a paradoxical and turbulent transformation process. These countries began to witness important political changes at the local and external levels. This was evidenced by the attempts of these countries to build the state on different foundations to achieve development and stability. The region's geopolitical significance coincides with the presence of several influential powers, both globally (the US, Russia, and China) and regionally (Turkey, Iran, and Israel). Competition among these actors for influence has made the region a hotspot, exposing it to rivalries as each power seeks to protect its political, economic, and security interests.

The region's countries vary in their oil and gas reserves. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are particularly well-endowed, benefiting from the alignment of major sedimentary basins on the Caspian Sea's eastern coast. While other countries may lack large oil fields, their strategic location remains important for transporting oil and gas to East and Southeast Asian markets [32, 167 p.].

Kazakhstan has the largest area of all the countries in the region and the largest national income, which equates to more than 50% of the total national income of the Central Asian republics combined [33, 46 p.]. It is also the richest country in the region in terms of oil resources. During the 1990s, oil production rose sharply due to the introduction of new fields into service, the drilling of new wells and the rehabilitation of old wells, and the use of new advanced technologies in exploration operations [34, 87 p.].

A number of studies estimate the Kazakh oil reserves at between 30 and 40 billion barrels of crude oil, equivalent to about half of the Russian reserves and 11% of the Saudi counterpart. It is ranked eleventh globally between Nigeria and the United States of America, and it is the eighth global producer of oil. Most of its oil fields are in the west, near the Caspian Sea basin, but the "Karabakh" field is an exception because it is located in the northwest, close to the Russian border [35, 70 p.].

Because of these large reserves of oil and gas and its low energy consumption (only 15% of the Kazakh oil production is consumed domestically), Kazakhstan is emerging as a producer and exporter to global markets, as the large oil production and the small population, in addition to the backwardness of the oil refining industry, are all factors that force Kazakhstan to search for new ways and initiatives to reach potential consumers [36, 179 p.].

As for Turkmenistan, it is the leader in gas production in the region, with reserves of about 2.1 trillion cubic meters, equivalent to 2.1% of global reserves. This places it as the owner of the thirteenth-largest gas reserves in the world. With these large reserves and a small population, Turkmen citizens and companies need only a fraction of the state natural gas companies. In 2002, for example, "Turkmen Gas" and "Turkmen Oil" companies, which are the only players in the Turkmen energy market, produced 71 billion cubic meters of gas, and Turkmen citizens and Turkmen industries only consumed 10 billion cubic meters, or only 21% of the total production. The remaining 80% were destined for export [37].

The oil sector in Turkmenistan is characterized by its modesty according to international standards, but it is likely to rise in the future in terms of production and export because the estimates issued by seismic surveys carried out by Western and American companies under the supervision of the Turkmen government reported the existence of reserves of 11 billion tons of crude oil. Turkmenistan's share of the Caspian Sea basin increases the possibility of its emergence as a producer and exporter of oil, as is the case with natural gas [38].

As for the remaining three countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are considered poor in terms of fossil energy resources compared to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but their importance lies in the fact that their territories are a strategic passage for pipelines to transport gas and oil to consumption markets in Europe and Asia, in addition to their possession of other resources such as water flowing from mountain rivers that enable them to generate electricity and export, minerals and agricultural products, Uzbekistan, for example, is the only country that has common borders with the rest of the other four countries, has the largest population, is the main corridor for transit routes in Central Asia, and has influential communities in neighboring countries that can use it as a lever in its relations with it, complementing with its characteristics the strategic importance of the region [39, 78 p.].

The status quo that has developed in the South Caucasus in recent years, when Russia was the main partner of Azerbaijan and Armenia in trade, economics, and other fields and the main mediator in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is being eroded to a certain extent by regional and even extra-regional players. Some political scientists even started talking about Turkey's leading role in the future development of the South Caucasus.

Based on the principle of "two states, one people," Ankara continues to build up its trade, economic, military, military-technical, and other cooperation with Baku, pushing Ilham Aliyev towards a forceful solution to the Karabakh problem [25, 79 p.].

In turn, the Iranian authorities are afraid of using the territory of Azerbaijan for intelligence and special operations against their state. especially considering that Israel confidently ranks second after Turkey in the field of military-technical cooperation with Azerbaijan. There is information that the Israeli drones and radar equipment supplied to Baku are allegedly being used not so much against Armenia as against Iran.

The Iranian authorities do not intend to give up their positions in the region, demonstrating their interest in preserving the territorial integrity of Armenia and declaring that they do not accept any changes in the borders in the South Caucasus. Relevant statements were made repeatedly at the level of the highest officials.

Tehran makes no secret of its concern over external attempts to stir up national separatism in Iran. As you know, Azerbaijanis (Turks) make up about 16 percent of Iran's population (over 20 million people) and are the country's largest ethnic minority. A quarter of Tehran's residents are Azerbaijanis; others live in the northwest of the country near the border with Azerbaijan. Tehran fears that in the event of further strengthening of Turkey's position in the region, Iran may face the threat of separatist actions and even rejection of its northern provinces with a Turkic-speaking majority [20, 19 p.].

In this regard, as a preventive step, up to 45,000 elite units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) armed with long-range artillery, UAVs of various types, and other modern weapons are deployed in the border northwestern provinces of Iran. The Iranian leadership thus demonstrates that, in the event of a critical situation on its borders, it is ready to respond in the most decisive way. At the same time, it is not hidden that one of the real threats to Iran is the requirement to provide an extraterritorial "Zangezur corridor" connecting the main territory of Azerbaijan with the Nakhichevan autonomy, which calls into question the sovereignty of Armenia and its borders, including the border of Armenia with Iran.

Mohammad Jamshidi, Deputy Head of the Iranian Presidential Administration for Political Affairs, pointed to the "red lines"—this is a "change in historical borders" and "geopolitics of the region." The border of Iran with Armenia can indeed be considered one of the "red lines," because it is through it that the flow of Iranian goods to Europe goes [30, 79 p.].

It is no coincidence that the Iranian IRGC recently conducted another large-scale military exercise code-named "Mighty Iran" south of the Araks River in the provinces of East Azerbaijan and Ardabil. We are talking about parachute-helicopter operations, practicing a night offensive, the actions of combat helicopters and attack drones, and building a pontoon crossing over the Araks with a training capture and control of all nearby communications and command heights.

Tehran is also sympathetic to Armenia's bid to acquire a batch of Iranian drones, although the details of this possible deal in the field of military-technical cooperation have not been disclosed.

Yerevan and Tehran recently agreed to form a common platform with the participation of India for the implementation of the international transport corridor (ITC) "Persian Gulf-Black Sea." This project is important for Iran from a political point of view. The ITC for Tehran is an alternative to routes that may be launched between Turkey and Azerbaijan in the coming years. The launch of uninterrupted land communication with the Black Sea will allow Iran to become a key link between the

countries of Asia, the Persian Gulf basin, and India with Europe and Russia. Iran's alternative route through Armenia will allow it to diversify the supply of goods to the EU and Russia and also balance the influence of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the region in a certain sense [39, 59 p.].

It can be assumed that Iran will continue to take steps towards expanding all-round cooperation with Armenia, Russia, and India based on the coincidence of regional interests.

Thus, with the strengthening of Turkey's position in Azerbaijan and the region as a whole, the Iranian leadership is trying to compensate for the development of bilateral relations in the region. Within the framework of international cooperation, Tehran becomes a full member of the authoritative regional international organization SCO and intends to actively participate in all promising and beneficial regional projects. Thus, it neutralizes the sanctions regime that is being maintained by the West and gets the opportunity to secure the status of a regional power. Objectively, the strengthening of Iran's position in the South Caucasus is also in Russia's interests since it maintains the existing balance of power in the region and does not allow extra-regional forces to strengthen here, leaving Russia a key geopolitical player in the South Caucasus.

On October 28, 2022, at an extraordinary session of the Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), President of the Russian Federation V. Putin noted that Russia is interested in stability in the Transcaucasus and will do everything possible to normalize relations between Yerevan and Baku. Already on October 31, high-level bilateral talks between the Russian Federation and Armenia, the Russian Federation, and Azerbaijan were held in Sochi, and then a trilateral summit of Putin, Aliyev, and Pashinyan took place, at which a joint statement on Nagorno-Karabakh was agreed upon. And although, as the Russian president noted, this statement failed to agree on all the points outlined the day before, another important step towards peace, stability, and security in the region has been taken [37].

Countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, all of which have a history of imperial rule, surround the South Caucasus. At the moment, Russia faces competition in the South Caucasus from not only Turkey and Iran, but also the United States and the European Union.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia acknowledged the South Caucasus as an integral part of the post-Soviet space. It is not a coincidence that the Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the administration of the President of this country are both responsible for regulating the country's relations with the states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the 1990s, Russia placed a greater emphasis on its relationships with Western nations, relegating the South Caucasus to a secondary role. The conflicts in the region froze over, and despite efforts at mediation, there was no progress made in the process of settling the disputes.

The post-Soviet region became more prominent after Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia. In a speech that he gave in 2005, Vladimir Putin referred to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as "the geopolitical catastrophe of the century." In the years that followed, Russia's relations with the post-Soviet countries became more important than even its relations with the partner states with which it collaborates within the framework of a variety of international organizations [37].

"Despite the importance of the region and the efforts made by Moscow, relations with the states of the South Caucasus are developing unevenly." "Optimistic anticipations—the Armenian republic." This nation is currently in the process of becoming a member of both the CSTO and the EAEU [41, 94 p.].

Gyumri serves as the home base for Russia's 102-nd military unit, and Erebuni is where the Russian Air Force has its base of operations. Russia is responsible for the protection of Armenia's airspace as well as the country's borders with neighboring Iran and Turkey.

In the years leading up to the 2007 inauguration of the gas pipeline that connects Iran and Armenia, Russia was Armenia's sole supplier of natural gas. Samvel Karapetyan, a Russian billionaire of Armenian ancestry, is in charge of the operation of the Armenian power grid. ArmGosgazprom is owned by Russia's Gazprom to the extent of 80 percent, and Russia's Inter RAO is in charge of the Metsamor nuclear power plant. The Russian company South Caucasian Railways has been granted a lease and concession to use the railways in Armenia until the year 2038. Russian companies make up two out of Armenia's three mobile phone service providers. Armenia's most important commercial partner and the primary holder of its government debt is the Russian Federation.

Azerbaijan is held to the lowest of expectations. Although it is not a member of either the EAEU or the CSTO, this country has no intention of joining either NATO or the EU in the foreseeable future. separate configurations of the alliance.

Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku is adopting a pragmatic approach toward Russia. During Putin's rule, Russia was able to adequately respond to the policy that was predicted to be implemented by Azerbaijan. Even if some of Azerbaijan's foreign policy actions are not in line with the position taken by the Kremlin, there is no reason to fear for Russia's safety as a result of these moves.

Georgia is the territory that is in danger. This country is portrayed as one that is interested in joining both NATO and the EU.

Because of the possibility that NATO military infrastructure could be deployed in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the Russian Federation views these three post-Soviet states as a threat to their national security. This is due to the fact that NATO could use the territories of these states to wage war against the Russian Federation.

The ascension of Mikheil Saakashvili to power in Georgia has resulted in a quickening of the pace of the country's relations with both NATO and the European Union. The last remaining Russian military bases in Georgia were evacuated in 2007,

with the exception of those located in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The so-called "five-day war" that occurred in 2008 came to an end when Russia acknowledged the independence of the separatist regimes that were located on the territory that is internationally recognized as belonging to Georgia.

The victory of Ivanishvili partially restored relations, but it did not completely remove Georgia from the Western vector of influence. In 2014, Tbilisi was awarded a package of "enhanced cooperation" with NATO, and in 2012, the city of Tbilisi signed an association agreement with the European Union [42, 20p.].

Who else will lead Armenia and Azerbaijan to peace if it is not the Minsk Group?

In the Karabakh conflict, geopolitical hostility and competition between Russia and the West for the role of the "godfather" of the future peace treaty: who will replace the Minsk Group?

"Moscow is unable to develop relations with the countries of the South Caucasus as a result of the ineffectiveness of Russia's soft power, which includes its economic and humanitarian initiatives." For this reason, Russia is attempting to interfere in the internal affairs of these states in the hopes of influencing their foreign policy in a manner that is more favorable to Russia's own objectives [43, 89 p.].

Russia is being forced to adopt a more realistic approach as a result of the failure of these attempts. After the second Karabakh war, Russia is interested in establishing a new equilibrium in the South Caucasus in partnership with the states of the region and without the involvement of the Western powers."

The South Caucasus's location has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on how you look at it.

"From a geographical point of view, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are in contact with one another in the South Caucasus." The South Caucasus is impacted both by the competition and cooperation that exists between these countries, which are the primary protagonists in the Syrian conflict [40, 29 p.].

Energy security and access to Central Asia are two other reasons why Russia's geopolitical rivals, the United States and the European Union, place a significant amount of importance on the South Caucasus region.

In addition to Central Asia, the South Caucasus is regarded as a practical point from which to exert influence over Russia. From this vantage point, it is essential for Russia that there be an appropriate balance of forces in this region.

There are seven autonomous republics and two territories that are considered to be a part of the Russian Federation that are located in the North Caucasus. Russia is also considered to be a Caucasian state.

Maintaining a power equilibrium in the South Caucasus

The collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia as the dominant power in the South Caucasus for the next three decades. During this period, the three South Caucasus states—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—developed relationships with their

geographically close neighbors: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. These relationships operated on multiple levels.

A simplified representation of these power dynamics could look like this:

- Russia: +2 (Armenia alliance, Azerbaijan strategic partnership), -1 (Georgia relations)
- Turkey: +2 (Azerbaijan relationship, Georgia strategic partnership), -1 (Armenia relations)
- Iran: Neutral (Diplomatic ties with all three, no strategic alliances)

Both Russia and Turkey have one ally, one strategic partner, and one state with whom they have strained relations. Crucially, Russia and Turkey's alliances and partnerships differ. Russia's ally is Armenia, while Turkey's ally is Azerbaijan, and Turkey is a strategic partner of Russia. Turkey's challenging relationship is with Armenia, while Russia's is with Georgia.

This configuration creates the potential for the South Caucasus to become a site of renewed conflict between Russia and Turkey. However, Azerbaijan's position—as a friend to Turkey and a strategic partner of Russia—provides a degree of stabilizing influence. Statements from Baku suggest that Azerbaijan does not support Russia's "occupation policy." Political scientist Dzhumshud Nuriev [38] suggests that Russian provocations could shift from Central Asia to the Caucasus, targeting Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The second Karabakh war significantly altered the regional power balance. A Turkish ally (Azerbaijan) triumphed over a Russian ally (Armenia), resulting in the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Russia, which already has military bases in Armenia and Georgia (per the November 10, 2020 trilateral agreement), also deployed peacekeeping forces in Azerbaijan. The formation of a "3+3" format, including regional neighbors but excluding the US and EU, benefits Russia. Finally, there is a possibility of normalized relations between Armenia and Turkey [39, 17 p.].

Discussions between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow and Brussels revealed more differences than similarities.

The beginning of the negotiation process incites apprehension among Armenian society, which also stirs up an expectation of the subsequent concessions to be made to Azerbaijan. Analysts from Armenia offer their perspectives on the various outcomes that could occur.

If these possibilities become a reality, there may be a shift in the current balance of power. Because of the new conditions, Russia's relations with the countries of the region will remain the same; however, there is a possibility that Turkey will receive +3, which has the potential to make it the dominant country in the region. Because Georgia has chosen not to adopt the 3+3 format, the same opportunity is no longer available to the Russian Federation.

"During the immediate aftermath of the conflict, Armenia pursued policies that ran counter to Russia's best interests," you may read. After Pashinyan invited the EU to act

as a mediator, the Kremlin's monopoly on Russia's role as a mediator began to loosen [39, 19 p.]. Prior to Pashinyan's invitation, Russia had been the sole mediator in the conflict.

Armenia has slowed down the implementation of the decisions taken with the mediation of Russia and prefers for the European Union to play the role of mediator in this conflict.

Azerbaijan has voiced their opposition to what they call "US attempts to revive the OSCE Minsk Group."

According to statements made by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, efforts to "revive" the inactive OSCE Minsk Group could result in the United States withdrawing from the process of normalizing relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Under these circumstances, and as a direct result of Armenia's refusal to grant Russia any special rights within the Zangezur corridor, issues have arisen in the bilateral relationship between these two countries. Russia is a supporter of fulfilling the conditions of the tripartite statement and opening regional communications, despite the fact that it is unable to participate in regional processes to the same extent as other countries.

As a result, Russia is unable to play a dominant role in the region at the present time due to its limited resources. Moscow is currently working to define its interests in light of the new situation in the South Caucasus region. The Kremlin has remained silent for the most part for this reason.

Azerbaijan has become the state in the South Caucasus that is the most predictable for Russia, which is another paradox that has arisen as a result of the post-conflict period. "Both geostrategic and economic considerations compel Russia to take into account the positions of the countries in the region, and most importantly, the position of Azerbaijan," [40, 56 p.].

In conclusion, Central Asia is of immense strategic importance due to the location of its natural resources, the significance of its geopolitical role, and the significance of its geographical location. The area is strategically located at the intersection of several important land and air routes that link Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. As a consequence of this, it functions as an important link in terms of commerce, transportation, and communication between these regions.

Because of its wealth of natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and rare earth elements, Central Asia is a key player in the global energy and mineral markets. These resources include oil, gas, minerals, and rare earth elements. Because of its significance in these spheres, global powers like China, Russia, and the United States are engaged in an increasingly cutthroat competition for influence and access to the relevant resources.

In addition, due to the strategic significance of Central Asia, it has become the focal point of concerns regarding regional and international security. This part of the world is home to a number of transnational security concerns, the most prominent of



which are terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. To effectively address these challenges, we will need cooperation from the surrounding regions as well as support from the global community.

In spite of these obstacles, Central Asia possesses the potential to become a focal point for the integration and cooperation of regional economies. In order to accomplish this goal, increased investments need to be made in infrastructure, the economy needs to be diversified, and political institutions need to be strengthened.

### **1.3 Iranian geopolitical interests in Central Asia and Caucasus: new opportunities and challenges.**

Iran's relationship with the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus has evolved significantly in recent years as the Islamic Republic seeks to deepen its engagement with its northern neighbors. These countries, which were once part of the Soviet Union, share cultural, historical, and religious ties with Iran, making them increasingly important partners as Iran aims to expand its influence in the region. This essay explores Iran's strategic inclination towards these republics, examining the motivations behind this engagement, the challenges Iran faces, and the potential implications for regional security and stability.

Several factors have propelled Iran's engagement with the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Economically, Iran aims to bolster its trade and investment relationships with these northern neighbors, which are rich in natural resources like oil, gas, and minerals, presenting lucrative investment opportunities. Iran has sought to leverage these opportunities through initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor, designed to connect Iran with the Caucasus and Central Asia via a comprehensive network of roads, railways, and ports.

Geopolitically, Iran views these republics as crucial partners in countering the influence of regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. By capitalizing on cultural and religious commonalities, Iran aims to forge closer political and strategic alliances to enhance its own security and regional influence.

Despite these motivations, Iran's engagement with the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus has encountered significant obstacles. Competition from external powers like Russia and China, both of which have longstanding ties and their own economic and geopolitical interests in the region, has limited Iran's influence and access to resources.

Security issues also pose a major challenge. The region has historically been a hub for terrorist groups and criminal networks, and Iran has had to navigate the threats of extremism and terrorism in its regional interactions. This challenge has been exacerbated by the increased presence of the Islamic State in the region, which has carried out several attacks.

The growing ties between Iran and the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus carry significant implications for regional security and stability. On one hand, enhanced economic and political cooperation could foster regional stability, particularly in sectors like energy, trade, and transportation. Additionally, Iran's emphasis on security cooperation and counterterrorism could help mitigate some of the region's security challenges.

On the other hand, closer ties with Iran could heighten regional rivalries, especially with Saudi Arabia and Israel, which have their own regional agendas and view Iran's growing influence with concern. This could lead to increased competition for influence and resources, potentially destabilizing the region further.

The historical, cultural, and religious connections between Iran and the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus are significant drivers of Iran's engagement in the region. Geographically neighboring and historically intertwined, these regions share a rich legacy of Persian cultural influence. The Persian language, historically a medium of cultural and intellectual exchange, continues to be a source of pride, particularly among the Tajiks, who see themselves as inheritors of a distinguished cultural heritage bridging Iranian culture with neighboring cultures.

Historically, the Persian Empire extended its reach into Central Asia and the Caucasus, leaving a lasting imprint on the region's cultures and languages. Shared experiences of resistance against external domination further strengthen these ties. Iran, having faced numerous invasions throughout its history, identifies with the struggles of these republics to maintain their independence.

Culturally, the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, renowned for their contributions to literature, art, and philosophy, share many similarities with Iranian culture. These cultural ties continue to influence Iran's interest in the region.

Religiously, the predominantly Muslim populations in these regions are another significant factor. The fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Islamic republics presented Iran with opportunities to break out of regional isolation and benefit from shared historical and cultural bonds. Cultural aid programs, such as offering educational opportunities to students from these republics and promoting the use of the Arabic script in Tajikistan, have been part of Iran's strategy.

The endeavor to spread Iranian religious ideology is an important factor in the Iranian rush towards the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran considers itself a pioneer of an Islamic experience in the modern era, and its revolution is based on principles that need to be spread. The Islamic thesis it adopts is different from the different Islamic viewpoints in the region. The viewpoint of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and that is why Iran found in the ideological vacuum that these republics witnessed in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union an important factor in the orientation towards these republics due to the establishment of Islamic regimes instead of communist ones, taking advantage of the presence of a large majority of Muslims, some

of which converge with them culturally, such as Tajikistan, In others, there are minorities, such as Azerbaijan, that have close sectarian ties to them [41, 94 p.].

In this (religious) field, Iran is keen to present itself as an Islamic model characterized by flexibility, pragmaticity, and a peaceful nature. It has tried hard to convince the countries of the region that it does not pose any threat to their political systems and has encouraged the ruling leaderships to accept cooperation with it in various fields.

It seems that the greatest Iranian success in these republics was especially in Tajikistan due to the close cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties between the two countries and the presence of the majority of Tajiks of Iranian origin. For this reason, Iran has worked to encourage the process of reviving the ties of common cultural heritage that bring Tajiks closer to Iran [42, 15 p.].

and succeeded Iran on August 18, 2008, in the establishment of the International School in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe, which can accommodate up to 1,200 Iranian and Tajik students in the presence of Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki [43].

It has also achieved success with Turkmenistan, taking advantage of the long common borders between them, which helped it move away from the revolutionary rhetoric that may irritate these countries and keep them away from Iran. The Iranian ambassador to Tajikistan has stated that relations between Iran and Tajikistan should be a model for relations in the Central Asian region [44, 15 p.].

Iran's engagement with the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus reflects a complex interplay of economic, geopolitical, and cultural factors. While these countries offer significant opportunities for trade and investment, Iran also views them as strategic partners in countering regional rivals. However, Iran faces considerable challenges, including competition from other major powers and security threats. The future of Iran's relationships with these republics will likely continue to be shaped by these dynamics, with significant implications for regional and global security. As the geopolitical landscape shifts towards a multipolar order, the importance of these relationships is set to grow, highlighting the critical nature of Iran's engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The economic potential of the Central Asian republics was an important motivation behind the Iranian rush towards Central Asia, as Iran sought to invest in the abundance of agricultural production that characterizes these republics, helping it fill the shortage in agricultural products it suffers from [45, 25 p.]. And Iran can provide a solution to the economic problems that these republics suffer from by concluding economic and trade agreements with neighboring countries, and it can provide some manufactured materials in exchange for importing some agricultural products, which establishes strong economic and trade ties [46, 3 p.].

The republics of Central Asia represent an important route for Iran to Europe. Throughout the period of Soviet rule, Turkey was the only passage for Iran to Europe. Now, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of these

republics, access to Europe via the Caucasus or via the Black Sea without passing through Turkish lands became available to Iran as well. opening the path to the Far East through Central Asia, which restores Iran's vitality as a conduit linking the East and the West, and in the context of the same, Iran believes that the Central Asian republics closed countries worldwide deprived of the open seas, and Iran thanks its debut on the open seas, which are 2000 km long, some on the Arabian Gulf and others on the Indian Ocean. It can be a passage for Central Asia towards the open seas.

Iran's desire to establish economic relations with the Central Asian republics to contribute to achieving political and security stability on Iran's northern borders and to enhance its food security by importing food from those republics in exchange for equipping some of its countries with oil and its derivatives and obtaining cheap machinery and spare parts for Iranian factories These republics represent a large market for Iranian products.

In this direction, Iran has not only managed to develop its economic presence in these republics but also to deprive its competitors of any opportunities for economic success in Central Asia by developing a road transport network and new railways between it and Central Asia, so that Iran becomes the link between Central Asia and the world. The external and the Bang-Mashhad railway roads, which Iran began implementing years ago, are two of the most important roads that will help reduce the approximately 900 km of road separating Central Asia and international waters. 2500 km, and thus the distance becomes only 1600 km. This line will help Iran to transport approximately 19 million tons of goods annually and approximately 3 million passengers, and Iran seeks through the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to achieve economic goals and increase its effectiveness and movement in its regional surroundings in order to break the cordon of isolation imposed by the United States of America, and this organization has enabled it to become an important bridge linking the Arab Gulf region with Central Asia and the Caucasus, which enhances Iran's strategic importance. establishing a new organization that includes the states bordering the Caspian Sea, namely Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Its establishment is an Iranian effort to strengthen its ties with the Islamic republics in Central Asia. The goal of the organization is to establish economic cooperation and exploit the resources and marine resources in the Caspian Sea [47, 164 p.]. and focus on connecting the region to a wide network of land and sea transport routes, including pipelines for energy transport, and cooperation in economic fields in order to achieve self-sufficiency for Iran and the Republics of Central Asia [48, 87 p.]. and is the transportation of oil and natural gas from Central Asia through Iran to the world markets of the most prominent Iranian economic interests in the region, which has both Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan on the events of oil pipelines and gas through only Iran's territory to reach the Arabian Gulf, and signed both Iran, Turkey and Turkmenistan on the 14th May 1997 Convention for the transfer of gas from Turkmenistan to Europe via the only Iranian territory and the passage of the land of Turkey, and the rising

importance of Iran in the field of transport of oil and gas because it represents the fastest and most secure way, and least expensive economies of Central Asia, which depend on energy exports , raw materials and industrial raw materials and provide them with A primary source of expertise in the field of oil industries, exploration, extraction, transfer and transportation [49, 45 p.], and in November 2002 called on Iran 's oil producers in the Caspian Sea to transport oil pipelines through Iran and said Mahmoud Khajana director at the Ministry of Energy of Iran by a Golden Gate from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf through Iran has become an open now and can companies operating in the Caspian Sea from transferring its oil exports to world markets ,and despite American opposition to these deals and the attempt to prevent them , it resumed in 2005 as Kazakhstan supplied Iran with 500,000 barrels per day.

Iranian foreign policy started after the Cold War by seeking to achieve Islamic influence, but with Iranian leadership. Iran is located in the midst of national blocs. To the east are Pakistan and Afghanistan; to the west and southwest are the Arab countries; and to the north and northwest are Turkey and the countries of Central Asia. And with the independence of these republics, Iran found the opportunity to revitalize its foreign policy and to search for new relations after its religious orientation had made it lose much of its relations with its regional and international surroundings. These problems still exist between Iran and the countries of its regional neighborhood, and to deepen its role in Central Asia and confront the Turkish role, Iran has been keen to formulate a pragmatic approach that does not focus on revolutionary change. Rather, it presents an Iranian Islamic model that is characterized by a practical and peaceful nature, due to the sectarian divergence on the one hand and to its awareness that the ruling elite in Central Asia has been inspired by secular values, which makes it inclined not to accept the Iranian model on the other hand, and Iran has succeeded in convincing the countries of Central Asia. that it did not pose a threat to its political systems, which prompted it to accept cooperation with Iran, as is the case with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, when their leaders declare that Iran does not pose a threat to them and declare their desire to cooperate with it [50, 45 p.].

There was a set of political and security problems that these republics suffered from, which provided the opportunity to play a political role in them. Iran contributed to the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited both Armenia and Azerbaijan to mediate the ongoing conflict. The two sides responded to the Iranian mediation. The agreement on a ceasefire was a success for Iranian diplomacy in the Central Asian region, especially since Armenia refused Turkish mediation because it was convinced of Turkey's bias towards Azerbaijan [51, 47 p.].

Iran has adopted a pragmatic approach more than an ideological approach, as it prefers to play the role of the effective regional state more than the revolutionary Islamic state, and this is evident in the role played by the Tajik civil war, wherever it did not provide support to the Islamic movement but rather worked to bring together the various

parties to the conflict, and the balanced Iranian efforts culminated in an end to the civil war in 1997 [52, 15 p.].

Because of the ongoing conflicts in this region, the active states sought, especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to find a mechanism for settling disputes, as Turkey, Iran, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia proposed the idea of concluding a pact to monitor peace in the Caucasus region under the auspices of Russia and NATO. Peacekeeping forces, consisting of Turkish, Iranian, and Ukrainian forces, are used to prevent a clash between the different parties, and these forces are formed from non-fighting countries according to the nature of the prevailing conditions; for example, Ukraine and Iran keep peace in Armenia, while Turkey and Ukraine keep peace in Azerbaijan, and it seems that the success of these agreements cannot take place without the consent of NATO and Russia.

Led the events of 11 September and the subsequent presence of US and Western military in the region to the growing concerns of Iran resulting from the concentration of military forces to combat terrorism in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and thus became the security of national Iranian in front of a real threat not particularly after the occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 and the areas adjacent of Iran, the What worries Iran most on the security side is the cooperation of Central Asian countries with NATO, the accession of those countries to the alliance, and then the blockade of Iran through the presence of NATO forces in these countries, as the strong relations between the United States and the countries of Central Asia raised Iranian concerns about the impact of this on unity. In the future, this will be particularly evident in the Iranian presidency's warnings at the Shanghai summit in 2007 about the dangers surrounding the region from the growing NATO presence in the region.

A review of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran should begin with a quote from Ayatollah Khomeini, uttered by him in Qom even before coming to power: "America is worse than England, England is worse than the Soviet Union, and the Soviets are worse than both!" But now America is the epitome of all abominations. Let the President of the United States know that our people hate him the most. All our troubles come from America and Israel. Islamic people hate foreigners in general and Americans and Russians in particular. It is America that supports Israel and its supporters. "It is America that is arming Israel to make the Arabs homeless." In fact, Khomeini declares isolationism, at least in relation to non-Muslim countries [41, 79 p.].

The foreign policy decisions of a nation are formulated based on specific principles and norms that define the country's identity and role within the global community. The Islamic Republic of Iran encompasses a range of norms that contribute to its identity, yet none of these norms exert absolute control over its foreign policy. Iran, being situated in multiple strategic regions and their vicinity, exhibits distinct foreign policy conduct in each of these regions, influenced by varying norms. The foreign policy of Iran in the Transcaucasus region is influenced by a set of principles and norms that, in certain instances, bear resemblance to those guiding Iranian foreign policy in the western part of

Asia, while in other instances, they exhibit divergence. The observed behavioral patterns can be elucidated through the lens of two fundamental concepts: identity and national interests. This study is focused on investigating the significance of identity in shaping Iran's national interests in the Transcaucasus region. It analyzes Iran's foreign policy in this area through the lens of identity. Simultaneously, this article focuses on the examination of the difficulties linked to the principles and norms governing foreign policy, while also highlighting the deficiencies in Iran's foreign policy within the Transcaucasus region.

In light of global instability, the significance of Iran as a pivotal transit and transport center linking China and Central Asia to Europe, and facilitating connectivity between Russia and India through the International North-South Transport Corridor, has experienced a substantial surge.

The administration led by Raisi has established a connection between Iran's economic policy and the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). As part of this approach, the administration has prioritized economic diplomacy with Russia and China, often referred to as "Eastern" powers. Additionally, efforts have been made to enhance infrastructural connections with neighboring countries in Central Asia, thereby strengthening Iran's geopolitical standing.

In the last three decades, subsequent to the establishment of autonomous neighboring nations in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, Iran has actively pursued bilateral and multilateral collaboration as well as regional connections. These endeavors aim to leverage its strategic geographical position at the intersection of the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf.

The countries of Central Asia and the Caspian have generally expressed a positive reception towards Iran's interest in fostering functional cooperation, particularly in the domains of transport and transit, as well as energy development. It is worth noting that these countries have also pursued similar cooperative endeavors with other entities such as the European Union (EU) and Turkey. However, it is important to acknowledge that the motivations behind the approaches of the EU and Turkey have been aimed at diminishing the influence of Iran and Russia.

Iran has implemented a geo-economic strategy aimed at providing reliable and competitive transportation routes that link its landlocked neighboring countries in Central Asia with global markets in Europe and Asia.

Iran and Russia engage in ongoing communication and collaboration with neighboring countries in the region, addressing various matters such as the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, terrorism, and participating together in several regional multilateral organizations. The geo-economic and geopolitical notion of Eurasia is predicated upon fostering communication and security collaboration among the states within the region, while simultaneously excluding non-regional actors.

Central Asia consistently exhibits a tendency to closely align with and adopt Iran's policies and approaches towards the region. Simultaneously, there remains a dearth of

comprehensive information regarding Iran's establishment of distinctive relationships with the Central Asian republics.

Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia generally revolves around fostering diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties, though treating the region as a single entity can be misleading due to significant variations among individual countries. Historically, Tajikistan has stood out as a key partner for Iran, largely because of overlapping linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics. In the 2000s, Iran launched various infrastructure and economic projects in Tajikistan, including the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant and the Istiqlal tunnel—developments partly facilitated by cordial relations between Ahmadinejad and Rahmon. Additionally, intensive international criticism of Iran, particularly concerning its nuclear program, appears to have motivated Tehran to prioritize collaboration within Central Asia. Tensions emerged around 2015, seemingly tied to Babak Zanjani's arrest and heightened further by Muhyiddin Kabiri's visit to Tehran in December of that year [42, 18 p.].

Meanwhile, Iran's dealings with Turkmenistan, although occasionally referencing cultural and linguistic commonalities, are driven primarily by geo-economic interests, especially in energy, transportation, and industrial ventures. Tehran views its partnership with Ashgabat as crucial despite disagreements over gas contracts. Historically, northeastern Iran depended on Turkmen gas in the winter due to limited domestic pipeline capacity, but these imports ceased in January 2017 amid disputes over payments and gas quality. As U.S.-Iranian tensions escalated, Foreign Minister Zarif's mid-May trip to Ashgabat aimed to both bolster regional economic cooperation under growing international isolation and affirm Iran's commitment to neutral, friendly relations with Turkmenistan.

Regarding Uzbekistan, relations under Islam Karimov were notably strained—arguably the toughest among Central Asian states. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency, ties with Iran have shown signs of cautious improvement. Negotiations have explored sending Iranian oil to Uzbekistan by rail to help alleviate persistent energy shortfalls in that country. In recent times, Uzbekistan has endeavored to establish a distinct role for itself by assuming the position of an intermediary in the context of Afghanistan. Iran's significance in achieving a lasting peace agreement in Afghanistan is evident. It is anticipated that ongoing discussions on security matters between Iran and Afghanistan will persist [43, 87 p.].

The bilateral relations between Iran and Kazakhstan have generally been characterized by a predominantly positive trajectory, albeit not devoid of occasional tensions. During the tenure of President Ahmadinejad, President Nazarbayev expressed his dissatisfaction with Iran's lack of willingness to engage in nuclear negotiations. The Kazakh leadership has long advocated for non-proliferation, a normative perspective that highlights the country's historical achievement in nuclear non-proliferation. This approach is employed to enhance Kazakhstan's international standing and garner acknowledgment. This partially elucidates the rationale behind the selection of Almaty



as the venue for the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the G6 in February 2013. Beyond their engagement on nuclear matters, it is noteworthy that Kazakhstan and Iran share a maritime border in the Caspian Sea. In recent years, both countries have held a series of high-level meetings aimed at strengthening economic cooperation.

A similar trend is visible in Iran's interactions with Kyrgyzstan: although their bilateral relationship is generally positive, the pace of progress has been modest, despite sustained efforts by both governments to deepen trade ties. Compared to China, Russia, and Turkey, the volume of trade between Iran and Kyrgyzstan remains relatively small. One potential catalyst for change emerged in May 2018 with an interim agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Iran to establish a free trade area. This pact could boost Iran's commercial engagement with EAEU member states—including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—though much depends on how effectively the EAEU addresses its internal challenges as an economic union.

Because Central Asian nations still rely heavily on overland transport routes, collaborating with Iran to develop international transit corridors linking the region to ports like Bandar Abbas or Chabahar is a key driver for maintaining robust diplomatic ties. Existing rail connections already link parts of Central Asia with the Persian Gulf, but major new projects have largely come from broader undertakings such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the North-South International Transit Corridor.

However, the U.S. decision to exit the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and impose sanctions on Iran complicates matters for Central Asian countries. On the one hand, creating integrated trade and transport networks with Iran could significantly enhance regional connectivity. On the other hand, Central Asian governments generally avoid openly confronting Washington. While they may voice mild criticism of U.S. democratization efforts in the region, they seldom adopt foreign policies that directly challenge American interests. The imposition of sanctions also presents challenges in terms of financial transactions for nations such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which have limited or negligible interactions with the banking institutions of Iran. The suspension of hot-rolled steel deliveries to Iran by Kazakhstan's largest joint-stock steel company was attributed to one of the reasons, which was the reimposition of US sanctions [48, 171 p.].

Iran views Central Asia as an arena where Russia exerts considerable influence, and this recognition reflects Tehran's understanding of Moscow's vested interests in the region. In practice, Russia finds little need to involve itself in Iran's diplomatic dealings with Central Asian nations, and both countries acknowledge each other's limitations regarding their interactions there. Tehran is likewise aware that its policies toward Central Asia must be carefully managed to avoid negatively affecting ties with Moscow. A notable example of shared priorities is the position both states hold on the Caspian Sea, as they concur on rejecting any foreign naval presence—a principle formally stated in Article 3 of the latest Caspian agreement. They also jointly oppose the Trans-Caspian pipeline, and collaborate to combat terrorism and drug trafficking near the Caspian Sea.

Iran and Russia both seek stability in Afghanistan. Historically, alongside Central Asian partners, they supported the Northern Alliance. Under current conditions, Iran may once again work in tandem with Russia in countering the Islamic State or potentially support Russia's gradual diplomatic overtures to the Taliban. In December 2018, after the Moscow format discussions, Tehran held talks with Taliban representatives. Moscow interpreted the timing of these negotiations, shortly following the U.S. withdrawal announcement, as evidence of Iran's commitment to a larger role in maintaining stability in Afghanistan. Iranian outreach to President Ghani's government, showcased during the June 2018 SCO summit in Qingdao, has proven beneficial to Russia's interests—particularly since Russia's relationship with Kabul has been strained in recent months due to its ties with Afghan opposition factions. This situation provides an opportunity for Iran to further align with Moscow's position by establishing closer contacts with Ghani's administration. Economically, Russia, Iran, and India drive the International North-South Transit Corridor, which traverses parts of Central Asia. This route could serve as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, simultaneously enabling Iran to reach global markets.

Iran first sought observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2004 under President Khatami. The following year, Iran, along with India and Pakistan, participated in the Astana summit as observer states. During President Ahmadinejad's term, Iran saw the SCO as a key component of its "Look East" strategy. However, his contentious foreign policy rhetoric raised concerns among Central Asian governments and China, affecting Iran's ambitions within the organization. These concerns revolved around the potential transformation of the organization into an exclusively anti-Western alliance, should Iran be granted membership. Iran expressed its aspiration for potential membership within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) during the Russian presidency in 2009. The realization of this outcome was hindered to some extent due to the occurrence of the Yekaterinburg summit amidst global censure of the Green movement. Furthermore, the escalating dispute surrounding Iran's nuclear program has added an additional layer of complexity to Tehran's potential attainment of complete membership. In 2010, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) implemented a revised membership criterion, explicitly stipulating that prospective members must not be subject to sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council. The aforementioned condition was evidently targeted towards Iran [50, 48 p.].

Following the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, there emerged a sense of optimism regarding Iran's preparedness for attaining complete membership. Nevertheless, during the Tashkent summit held in 2016, the topic of membership was conspicuously absent from the discussions, prompting speculations in the Iranian media that Foreign Minister Zarif departed from the summit as a form of protest. Tajikistan emerged as the primary state expressing opposition towards Iran's membership, citing two key factors: the visit of opposition figure Muhyiddin Kabiri to

Tehran in 2015 and the financial asset scandal involving Babak Zanjani subsequent to his arrest in 2013. There was a prevailing belief that Russia had expressed support for Iran's inclusion in the SCO, which raised concerns in Beijing about the potential for the SCO to adopt an unequivocally anti-Western stance. The primary objective of Russia was to secure simultaneous membership for India and Pakistan in the organization.

Furthermore, concerns arose regarding Delhi's opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative and India's refusal to accept Chinese President Xi Jinping's border security strategy, which raised the possibility of China obstructing India's membership in the organization. The inclusion of India and Pakistan as member states following the Astana Summit in 2017 has posed significant challenges to the coherence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) dedication to combating the "Axis Of Evil." These evil encompass the shared acknowledgment of terrorist, extremist, and separatist organizations within the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). Despite the numerous challenges encountered by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it is my belief that Iran continues to perceive it as a significant avenue for fostering solidarity and normative cohesion with states that share similar values and principles. The manifestation of this fact was notably evident through President Rouhani's participation in the Qingdao summit of 2018. It is highly probable that Iran will attain full membership status in the near future, with a projected timeline ranging from 5 to 15 years.

Iran's foreign policy in the Central Asian region exhibits clear differences when set against its approach in the Middle East. Central Asia undeniably occupies a lower position within Iran's hierarchy of foreign policy considerations, coming after the Middle East. The Persian Gulf, in particular, constitutes the foremost area of security concerns for Iran, while most parts of Central Asia, with the exception of Afghanistan, have experienced a comparatively stable climate since the late 1990s. Over the years, Iran has been apprehensive about the stationing of United States military forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, connecting the presence of external troops to a possible increase in terrorist activities and broader regional turbulence. Although such concerns have waned to some extent, they played a significant role in shaping Tehran's cautious outlook toward foreign interference in this part of the world. In addition, Russia and China both wield considerable influence across Central Asia, constraining Iran's capacity, and possibly its willingness, to engage in a contest for supremacy with Moscow or Beijing in these territories.

Subsequent to the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), President Hassan Rouhani publicly suggested using Iran's regional leverage to cement stronger ties with Russia, India, and China in the broader Eurasian milieu. This proposal centers on the idea of improving cross-border links by emphasizing cooperation in areas such as energy and security. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to determine the likelihood of these aims reaching fruition, and observers maintain a watchful eye on the evolving dynamics [38].

Iran demonstrates a pragmatic grasp of Islam's situation within Central Asia. Despite the Islamic Republic's earlier rhetoric on exporting revolution, its practical policy stance in this region has generally revolved around minimizing direct involvement in domestic political arenas. According to available documentation in source 68, page 29 [9], Iran has largely stepped away from trying to impose its revolutionary agenda on Central Asian nations, indicating that Tehran values maintaining diplomatic channels over ideological spread.

Following the conflict in Iraq, Iran's perspective toward Central Asia shifted, guided by a desire to reduce international isolation and safeguard its standing in an increasingly complex global arena. Throughout the 1990s, Tehran designed a regional policy aimed at forming and deepening diplomatic bonds with the nations of Central Asia, while also participating actively in multilateral forums. One such venue is the Economic Cooperation Organization, comprising all five Central Asian republics, which allowed Iran to engage in broad-based dialogue and economic endeavors. In November 1991, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati undertook a comprehensive trip to every Central Asian republic, endeavoring to showcase Iran's interest in fostering constructive ties. During 1991 and 1992, leaders from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all visited Tehran in return, underlining a period of mutually encouraged outreach.

Though Iran shares no direct border with Tajikistan, the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, emerged as a significant regional ally for Tehran because of their common linguistic features and cultural legacies. Even prior to the outbreak of civil war in Tajikistan, Iran had been intent on forging meaningful cultural and economic partnerships with that country. President of Tajikistan Rahman Nabiyeu's trip to Iran in June 1992, which coincided with ongoing hostilities, offers evidence of such early engagement. Multiple credible accounts have noted that Tehran extended moral support, and possibly some level of material assistance, to the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan at the early phase of the conflict. Nevertheless, Iran's actions did not spark the onset of the civil war. In fact, Iran served as a diplomatic link with Said Abdullo Nuri and exerted considerable influence in urging the opposition to enter negotiations backed by the United Nations, with the intent of finding a lasting settlement [69].

During the summer of 1993, violence erupted at the Tajik-Afghan frontier, resulting in the deaths of about 30 Russian border guards. This episode propelled Moscow to explore cooperative measures with Iran in an effort to initiate formal negotiations under United Nations auspices. The insecure state of neighboring Afghanistan, marked by threats to border stability and the displacement of refugees, significantly motivated both Iran and Russia to act as mediators. After the incident that inflicted losses on Russian border personnel, Moscow embarked on a diplomatic strategy involving Tehran. In "Years in Big Politics," Yevgeny Primakov recounted his autumn 1993 visit to Tehran, during which he proposed a Russia-Iran partnership with respect to the Tajik conflict.

Several months on, in April 1994, the Russian government, supported by Iran in an external mediation capacity, placed sufficient pressure on both the administration in Dushanbe and the opposition to join talks facilitated by the United Nations. By September 1994, the involved factions reached a preliminary accord setting out the terms of a ceasefire, formally agreed upon in Tehran. Subsequently, a significant portion of 1995 witnessed a deadlock in negotiations, largely tied to disagreements concerning adherence to the ceasefire provisions. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Taliban's move toward Kabul in 1996 provoked a sense of urgency in both Moscow and Tehran, driving home the need for a resolute political settlement in Tajikistan.

The warring camps felt intensified pressure from both Russia and Iran to cooperate, culminating in a political compromise in December 1996. Under this deal, the opposition secured a place within the governing framework, contributing to the successful enactment of the 1997 General Peace Agreement. The end result not only introduced the opposition into central structures of power but also laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive reconciliation process. These developments underscored the capacity of Russia and Iran to coordinate effectively in situations where they detected mutual threats to regional stability and recognized a shared obligation to reduce the possibility of conflict spillover.

Taken as a whole, Tehran's policy orientation in Central Asia stands apart from its strategic outlook in the Middle East. Central Asia's position in Iranian foreign policy rankings is demonstrably lower, though it continues to hold a particular relevance, especially in view of shifting global pressures and the ongoing reconfiguration of alliances following the U.S. departure from the JCPOA. Whereas the Persian Gulf remains the main locus of Iranian security anxieties, the comparatively calmer environment of Central Asia has allowed Iran to operate through more measured, non-ideological diplomacy, generally eschewing overt interference in local affairs and paying heed to the substantial clout of Moscow and Beijing.

Yet, as circumstances continue to evolve, especially with the potential for new security threats or abrupt policy realignments, Iran's initiatives in the region may gain renewed significance. While Tehran has less incentive to challenge major powers on its northern flank, it still aspires to maintain beneficial ties in order to limit international isolation and diversify its strategic partnerships. By building upon the foundations laid during the 1990s and through the subsequent mediation efforts in Tajikistan, Tehran demonstrates that it can pursue pragmatic, result-oriented engagements in Central Asia when it views such efforts as vital to its broader foreign policy agenda. Recent ambassadorial appointments involving deputy foreign ministers underscore a renewed push to elevate Iran–Tajikistan relations in both capitals. In March 2019, Iran selected Mohammad Taqi Saberi—who was serving as Deputy Foreign Minister for Administrative and Financial Affairs—to become its new Ambassador to Tajikistan. Shortly afterward, he conferred with Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, where they stressed the importance of strengthening ties with Dushanbe. A month later, Tajikistan named

Nizamiddin Zahidi, a former First Deputy Foreign Minister, as its ambassador to Tehran. While these moves clearly symbolize an aspiration for closer engagement, the issue of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan remains unresolved. Moreover, the escalating influence exerted by Saudi Arabia in Tajikistan poses significant challenges for Iran. The recent implementation of the new appointments renders it premature to make a definitive evaluation regarding their efficacy at this time. It is anticipated that officials from Iran and Tajikistan will convene during the forthcoming CIAB summit scheduled to take place in Dushanbe in the month of June. It will be intriguing to observe whether there are indeed indications of amelioration in the relationship over the forthcoming months. According to the source cited as [69],

In 2014–6, many people in Iran believed that as a result of negotiations in the 5+1/JCPOA format, it would be possible to lift the country out of sanctions and enter a different development trajectory, but after Trump came to power, the nuclear deal was unilaterally canceled by the United States. In fact, the American leadership under the Republicans decided that they could achieve better conditions and, in fact, the surrender of Iran, which tough negotiators from Tehran did not agree to. Therefore, within the framework of preserving Tehran's ideological approaches, at first what was happening looked like proof that the principalists and skeptics of improving relations with the West were right. Sentiments for economic self-sufficiency and isolation began to rise, reaching a peak at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. But after it, in view of objective economic difficulties, the reverse process began, since autarky did not produce tangible results either, and, most likely, the voices of those who believe that it is necessary to negotiate with the West at any cost will increase in Iran, which will increase the price of a mistake for Iranian authorities and will force them to fight more and more fiercely for the preservation of power and the entire political system.

In the South Caucasus region, the Islamic Republic of Iran considers its connection with Armenia to be critical, as the IRGC has stated many times. Rakhbar and the president also spoke about this at meetings with Erdogan, Aliyev, and Putin. What caused it?

Given Iran's isolated position, having a more or less stable, friendly neighbor is critically important for Iran, and Armenia has played this role over the past decades. In fact, there are no other stable and friendly states along the perimeter of Iran, so the connection with Armenia plays a stabilizing role for Iran. Secondly, Armenia balances Turkic expansionism and plays an important role in containing Azerbaijani separatism in Iran, supported by Baku and Ankara. Thirdly, through Armenia (and Georgia), Iran can get access to Europe and Russia; that is, this is an alternative route to Turkey to the north and west, and Iran has certain hopes to unfreeze and reactivate these corridors [70].

But, of course, Iran will not interfere in the form in which the Armenians would like to see it. According to a new statement by the IRGC, "Armored and ranger units of the Iranian Armed Forces are ready to intervene directly if some neighbors fail to expel hypocritical agents and separatist terrorists stationed on border lines." In essence, this

means that if Armenia loses control over its territory, then Iran will occupy it. And there are no other alternatives since Armenia and Iran have not created any kind of joint plan, headquarters, conducted exercises, etc. Thus, in this case, it is Armenia that is interested in expanding cooperation with Iran, which has not yet taken place.

As we can see, Iran is a donor of security, both in relation to the Shiite communities of the Middle East, which are highly dependent on support from Iran, and in relation to Armenia. Being a donor of security is very costly, and this also undermines the development of the country since it seriously delays it. The US, Turkey, and the UK also spend a lot on such activities, but they have learned how to make money on them, and countries such as Russia and Iran are pure donors. This was also addressed by some of the slogans at the Iranian rallies, where the demonstrators opposed Palestine and Hezbollah. However, this also applies to Trump supporters in the United States, who would like their country to direct resources inward. Historian Paul Kennedy has advanced the concept of imperial overstretching, which, in the pursuit of hegemony, is strained wherever possible, failing to provide due attention to the entire periphery. This explains the collapse of the USSR. However, everything is not limited to this. Iranian drones performed well in Ukraine, and for many in Russia, it was surprising that Iran seriously outperformed Russia in the technology of creating and manufacturing combat drones. Add to this the nuclear program, which also demonstrates the level of ambition, and the total opposition to it from the West and Israel (and not least regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey), and we get an important characteristic of the current situation in Iran. Preparing for a hybrid war with Russia, the West was planning actions not only in Ukraine but also in the South Caucasus. They "underestimated" one thing: the activity of Iran, which declared its position regarding regional realities [71].

Tehran's position came as an unpleasant surprise to the West. Obviously, the unexpected activity of Iran in the geopolitical arena has confused all the cards in the so-called "united West," waging a hybrid war against Russia. Quite harsh statements on the situation in the South Caucasus, which have recently been made from Tehran, have become a very unpleasant surprise for Washington, Brussels, and other European capitals.

It should be expected that the response rhetoric will soon be heard from high tribunes. The intervention of Iranian diplomacy has confused all the cards in the game that the Americans started through Turkey in the troubled region. In a game that was started with the ultimate goal of at least fundamentally weakening Moscow's influence, if not pushing Russia out of the South Caucasus altogether.

Western analysts, preparing the active part of the hybrid war against Moscow, initially assumed that in the conditions of the global crisis, they would seduce Tehran with the prospect that Washington would eventually return to the framework of the Iranian nuclear agreement. In theory, this should have promised Iran some very significant preferences, which would be difficult to refuse.

For example, the return of serious amounts frozen in Western banks or the lifting of US sanctions with the prospect of the country entering the European consumer and technology markets Not to mention the fact that, in the absence of Russia, the Iranians could compete for the remaining vacant position as the leading supplier of gas and oil energy carriers for the Europeans.

Iranian diplomacy is by no means new to the table.

However, in reality, Iranian diplomacy very soberly assesses such Western "baits," since they have been burned more than once. And most importantly, Tehran has long since come to understand that the upcoming new world order leaves no room for the concept of one "world hegemon," even if this is such a superpower as the United States [71].

In addition, Iran is very skeptical about the future of the European Union. All this, coupled with the understanding that the Americans, playing the card of the South Caucasus, are trying to kill two birds with one stone—to limit the influence of not only Moscow but also Tehran as much as possible—has led Iranian diplomacy to its current position, which is so inconvenient for the West.

Indeed, in the solitaire that Western countries are enthusiastically playing for Yerevan and Baku (involving, of course, NATO Turkey), Washington's desire to replace Moscow and Tehran with Ankara is quite transparent. And Iranian diplomacy is by no means a novice or naive player at this card table. And suddenly it turns out that the centuries-old struggle with Turkey for influence in the region has by no means sunk into oblivion, even when Russia is busy in the Ukrainian foothold [72].

Iran soberly assesses the status of its regional rival as a member of NATO and understands that, following the Turks, their main geopolitical opponents, the Israelis, will begin to settle in the region as they do at home. Then both Azerbaijan and the occupied primordial Armenian territories will become a springboard for a further attack on their territory [73, 36 p.].

There are no altruists in politics, and Iran acts based on its own interests.

It is security considerations that primarily determine the current position of the Iranian government. Moreover, it is by no means limited to harsh diplomatic rhetoric from high tribunes and activation in the regional geopolitical arena. Evidence of this is the presence of Iranian personnel units and the IRGC along the entire perimeter of their northern state border.

And this activity is recorded along the entire perimeter, both along the small (only 40 kilometers) border with Armenia and along the territories of Azerbaijan, Nakhichevan, etc. The Iranians, of course, primarily control Syunik and the proposed territory of the so-called "Zangezur corridor." However, Turkey is also not deprived of attention, and near its borders, in the area of the settlements of Pasve and Piranshahr, military exercises of the Iranian ground forces also began recently [74].

To all this, one should add the opening of an Iranian consulate in Kapan, as opposed to the Turkish one, which Ankara and Baku are planning to open in Shushi.



And we should also add the recently scheduled visit to Armenia by Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian. And also, in Kapan, he spoke in the spirit of "Iran considers the security of Armenia its security." "And the policy of his country presupposes territorial integrity and internationally recognized borders" [75, 37 p.].

And one should also take into account the rather harsh statements of official Tehran regarding the influence of external forces (including Western observers) on intra-regional events. In a word, considering the difficult situation in the South Caucasus, one should take into account the whole range of factors, including the Iranian one.

Turkey and Iran are trying to increase their influence in the South Caucasus. And if, for Ankara, Azerbaijan and, to some extent, Georgia become the base countries of its presence in the region, then Tehran seeks to rely on Armenia without stopping its traditional cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia [76, 15 p.].

In conclusion, Iran has shown a growing interest in the Republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus due to their strategic location, shared cultural ties, and economic potential. The historical connections between Iran and these regions, which date back to the ancient Silk Road trade routes, have provided a basis for cultural and linguistic affinity.

Iran sees Central Asia and the Caucasus as important partners in regional economic and security cooperation and as a means to expand its influence beyond the Middle East. The region's significant natural resources, such as oil and gas, also offer opportunities for economic cooperation and investment. However, Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus have been complicated by competition with other regional powers, such as Russia and China, who also seek to establish influence in the region. Additionally, Iran's own domestic challenges, such as economic sanctions, have limited its ability to fully engage with these countries.

## **2 Central Asia and the Caucasus in Iran foreign policy**

### **2.1 Internal and external factors of Iran's Central Asian strategy.**

Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus has evolved significantly over the past few decades, influenced by a multitude of factors, including regional dynamics, international relations, and economic considerations. In this essay, we will delve into the distinct phases of Iranian foreign policy towards these regions, highlighting the shifts and disparities that have characterized its approach.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented Iran with newfound prospects to establish closer relations with the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the early 1990s, Iran proactively initiated diplomatic ties with the newly independent states within these regions. Simultaneously, Iran sought to bolster its economic connections, becoming a member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which includes several Central Asian countries.

During this period, Iran's foreign policy primarily aimed to extend its influence and assert itself as a pivotal regional player. It strategically leveraged its historical, cultural, and religious affinities to forge deeper bonds with these nations. However, Iran's endeavors faced resistance from other regional heavyweights, most notably Russia. Russia viewed these newly independent states as its traditional sphere of influence and was determined to maintain its dominant position, sparking a prolonged rivalry between Iran and Russia in shaping the region's political landscape.

The second phase of Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus was marked by a heightened emphasis on regional stability and combating terrorism. This period coincided with Islam Karimov's rule in Uzbekistan, a leader who held antagonistic views toward Iran. Iran, therefore, turned its attention toward fostering closer relationships with neighboring countries, particularly Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Iran's objective was to utilize its role as a significant regional actor to promote stability and counterbalance the influence of other regional powers like Russia and China.

Economic considerations were also pivotal during this period. Iran aimed to expand its trade and investment ties with Central Asian and Caucasian nations, positioning itself as a vital economic participant in the region. However, Uzbekistan's opposition to Iran's regional ascendancy, coupled with its strong alliance with the United States and resistance to Iran's nuclear program, created tensions that hindered Iran's ambitions in the region.

The third phase of Iranian foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus has revolved around economic cooperation and the pursuit of regional integration. The passing of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and the emergence of a new generation of leaders in the region marked this era.

During this period, Iran has intensified its efforts to strengthen economic bonds with these regions and establish itself as a major contributor to their economic development. Iran has undertaken various infrastructure projects in the region, including the

construction of railways, highways, and pipelines connecting Central Asia and the Caucasus to Iran and the broader Middle East.

In conclusion, Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus has undergone distinct phases, influenced by changing regional dynamics, international relations, and economic interests. Understanding these stages provides valuable insights into Iran's evolving role and strategy in these crucial geopolitical areas.

For decades, the Soviet Union, and before it, Tsarist Russia, constituted a constant threat to the security and stability of Iran from its northern side, and the Cold War between the two poles was a direct pressure factor on Iran by influencing its foreign policy within the framework of the confrontation between the Soviet Union (the eastern bloc) and the United States. Iran's (Western Bloc) foreign policy has been greatly damaged as a result of its geographical location adjacent to the Soviet Union, which has made it amid a confrontation between its northern neighbor and the West. However, this situation changed completely with the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The one sprawling superpower became independent states and republics from each other; the direct threat to Iran from its northern side disappeared; there has been more than one neighboring country; and the new situation has created many opportunities. And the challenges facing Iran put it in a position of competition and challenge with other regional and Western countries [63].

As much as this development raised opportunities for Iran and made it more powerful and stable than its new neighbors, it also raised the concerns and fears of the Iranian government and put it in a difficult position towards this event. One of the Iranian ambassadors brought to light the contradiction that Iran experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union by saying, "We look at our borders north; we see a hostile power giant, but they give us the impression that they enjoyed stability." We know what this force will do, and we have learned how to deal with it, but today we look north, and we see seven different countries in that region. "The whole lack of stability changes the strategic equation." [64, 45 p.]. The Iranian policy towards the Caucasus region has been based on several factors and has set its sights on achieving a set of goals, the foremost of which are:

- 1) Promoting Iran's economic interests in the countries of the Caucasus region, developing cooperation with these countries, and benefiting from them as new markets for Iranian exports and also as a crossing to the Black Sea and then to the countries of Europe, as well as investing Iran's geographical position as a link between the Caucasus region and the Arabian Gulf and benefiting from it as a transit route for exports from the Caucasus countries to the Arab Gulf states and then to the countries of the world
- 2) Enhancing regional security and stability in the Caucasus countries and preventing the outbreak of ethnic conflicts that may threaten and reflect on the security and stability of Iran
- 3) exiting the international political isolation imposed on Iran by searching for regional partners among the countries of the Caucasus region, which was mainly embodied in

Federal Russia and Armenia, as a counter-tendency to the US policy that relied on Turkey and Azerbaijan to expand its influence in this region.

- 1) Because of the policy of Western hegemony and the attempt of the United States of America to impose its influence in the Caucasus region directly or through its allies, Iran sought to discourage the countries of the region from establishing close relations with the United States of America by strengthening economic relations with these countries [65, 56 p.].
- 2) enhancing Iranian influence in a way that does not provoke the Russian Federation or the regimes in these republics [56, 41 p.].
- 3) The Caucasus region includes natural resources (oil and gas), which is an incentive for Iran to enter the region as a competitor to establish oil projects and oil and gas transmission lines with its experience in oil production and industry [67, 22 p.].

Tehran's policy depends on better possibilities for action toward the Central Asian republics, especially Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. He highlighted the open seas and thus the strategic path available to develop exchanges between these republics and the outside world, as well as the spread of Iranian minorities, long-standing cultural ties, and common long borders.

The Republic of Turkmenistan is at the forefront of Iran's regional ambitions. In February 1992, the Iranian embassy in Ashgabat, the capital of the republic, opened, and it was the first Iranian embassy in Central Asia. This special interest is due to several factors. The most important of these are the long shared borders (1100 km) and the presence of about 2 million Turkmen in Iran, equivalent to half the population of Turkmenistan.

To the east of Turkmenistan, Iranian relations with the Republic of Uzbekistan revived immediately after the collapse of the (former) Soviet Union. This was helped by the privileged position that Persian culture remained in Uzbekistan, where Samarkand and Bukhari are the most important cities of Persian culture in Central Asia, despite the great decline that it has known since the beginning of the past century as a result of the neglect of the Persian language in favor of the local and Russian languages, which have become the main languages of interaction. as a result of the profound social and cultural changes of Soviet policy, which worked to strike religious and cultural ties between the Soviet sphere and the neighboring cultural and civilizational fields of this sphere.

In February 1992, Iran took the initiative to reinvigorate the operations of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), a regional bloc formed in 1985 and consisting of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. The ECO had been created to succeed the Organization for Regional Cooperation for Development, established in 1965 as part of the Cold War alliances [68, 45 p.].

Notably, Tehran actively pursued the inclusion of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan into the ECO while opting against granting membership to Armenia and Georgia, despite maintaining favorable relations

with these two countries. Tehran's strategic approach in this transition period was rooted in its desire to establish a geographical sphere dominated by Muslim-majority nations.

Iran looks at the region from an economic perspective that aims to exploit the region's wealth by various means. Iran has proposed extending railways, transportation routes, and means of communication between it and the Central Asian republics, leading to linking them with the waters of the Arabian Gulf and then international free waters. This offer was embodied in an agreement signed. In December 1991, another agreement between Iran and Russia followed to end the border restrictions between Iran and those republics.

The Iranian government, in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), held a conference on cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation with the republics of Central Asia in November 1992, with a focus on the Persian language and Iranian culture as regional links. The Iranian officials who addressed the conference focused on the centrality of the role of Shiite Islam in their country's relationship with the countries of the region, as the religious factor carries with it the elements of history and culture, and those officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati called to revive the authentic identity of the peoples of the region, to enhance regional cooperation and collective security, by establishing an institutional framework for economic, political, scientific and cultural cooperation that will be hostile to hegemony and combines the specificity of each country's needs and common interests among the countries of the region. Dr. Velayati has pointed out the ethnic, cultural, historical, and religious role of Iran in Central Asia, stressing cultural harmony in light of the Shiite heritage, Iranian culture, and the Persian language as ways to achieve and affirm political independence [69].

Therefore, Iran's strategy to preserve these interests is based on an alliance with Russia and tightening cooperation with it to be a bridge through it to these republics, so Iran denounces the actions of the mujahideen and other jihadist groups within these republics.

Iran was interested in Central Asia and the Caucasus region with the beginning of the disintegration of the (former) Soviet Union and the subsequent escalation of national demands and the emergence of Islamic republics on the international stage, and Iran is trying to play a distinct role in the region to benefit from the economic and political gains. It realized the importance of the role that Turkey plays in the region, taking advantage of the cultural convergence between the independent Islamic republics.

Iran sees itself as a natural candidate for a leadership role in the region because of its privileged location bordering Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, in addition to the cultural, ethnic, and religious ties that have been established for more than two thousand years. Iran is keen to present itself as an Islamic model characterized by flexibility, pragmatism, and peaceful nature, and it has strived hard to convince the countries of the region that it does not pose any threat to their political systems and encouraged the

ruling leadership to accept cooperation with it in various fields. Some countries have responded and accepted cooperation, such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and expressed their desire to establish close relations with it [70].

In 1991, Iran paid official visits at the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Central Asian countries and the Caspian Sea and signed several agreements to open consulates in the capitals of those countries, which resulted in the signing of agreements to open border crossings and reduce restrictions on obtaining a visa to cross the border. It focused on the establishment of close relations with Turkmenistan and proceeded with Iran's closer relationship with Uzbekistan immediately after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Helped by the joint culture between the two Persian cultures, it permeated the relationship through official meetings between the two parties, signed several agreements, and stressed the parties' obligation not to interfere. In internal affairs, Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with Tajikistan to facilitate bilateral cooperation, and despite the difference in views between the two parties on religious matters, there are cultural and historical ties between them. Iran seeks to present its model to Tajik political circles from an economic standpoint to achieve self-sufficiency, and this issue has gained special importance for Tajiks who want to achieve economic reforms.

Iranian interests converge with those of Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus and apply largely to regional conflict issues in Tajikistan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Tehran provides support and assistance for Armenia in its dispute with Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh based on historical considerations and the interests of the geopolitical, and provides a positive image and propaganda counter for propaganda that promotes the fundamentalist character in Iranian politics. Iran supported the Russian position on the Chechen issue and affirmed its eagerness to reach a peaceful settlement based on negotiation and the renunciation of violence [71].

The geographical politics unfolding along the northern fringes of Iran provide a compelling rationale for fostering a cohesive geopolitical entity within the heart of Caspian Central Asia, a concept that can aptly be dubbed as the "Iranian-Caspian Central Asia" logic. Several historical, cultural, and geographical elements converge to render the The Caspian-Central Asian region holds a unique geographical significance. Historically, the people of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, parts of Kazakhstan, and much of the Caucasus have shared a long history of coexisting within various security arrangements. These include pre-Islamic federations like the Parthian and Sasanian, the Abbasid Caliphate, and later, empires such as the Samanids, Seljuks, and Ghaznavids, as well as the Safavid Empire [72].

This extensive interaction over two millennia has fostered a shared cultural heritage among these Central Asian nations. The eastward spread of Islam further strengthened this cultural amalgamation, with Iran, Tajikistan, much of Afghanistan, and parts of Uzbekistan sharing linguistic and religious ties. Persian literature, a traditional center of

Iranian arts and sciences, flourished in cities like Bukhara, Balkh, Taraf, Samarkand, Khafiyah, and Khwarazm.

Iran, located in the Middle East, possesses a rich history and culture that have significantly influenced its neighbors, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The relationships between Iran and these regions have been shaped by a complex interplay of shared history, mutual economic benefits, and regional security concerns.

Historically, Iran has maintained strong cultural and economic links with Central Asia and the Caucasus. During the Silk Road's prominence, Iran served as a major trade hub, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and people between East and West, and extending its influence considerably. As a result, many Central Asian and Caucasian nations share cultural elements with Iran, including language, religion, and culinary traditions.

In addition to cultural affinities, Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus possess common economic interests. The region brims with abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, with Iran holding a prominent role in the energy sector. Several Central Asian and Caucasian nations also boast significant resource wealth, setting the stage for collaboration in energy production and transportation.

Despite these shared interests, the relationship between Iran and these regions faces several challenges. Foremost among these is regional security. The area has long grappled with instability and conflict, with Iran often playing a pivotal role in these disputes. For instance, Iran's support for the Syrian government during its civil war has drawn in various regional actors and strained its relations with some Central Asian and Caucasian countries that maintain a more neutral stance on the conflict.

Another complicating factor is the issue of nuclear proliferation. Iran's nuclear program has aroused international concerns, with many regional nations worried about the potential ramifications of a nuclear-armed Iran on regional stability. Some have even expressed fears that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons could ignite a regional arms race.

Economic challenges also persist in the relationship between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Chief among these is the dearth of infrastructure connecting the region. While various transportation projects have been proposed to link Iran to Central Asia and the Caucasus, progress has been sluggish due to political and economic impediments, curbing the potential for trade and economic cooperation.

Nevertheless, opportunities for collaboration abound in several key areas. Energy presents a promising avenue, with Iran possessing substantial reserves of oil and gas, akin to many Central Asian and Caucasian countries. By pooling resources, these nations could establish a regional energy network that benefits all parties.

Infrastructure development stands out as another promising arena. Iran has made significant investments in transportation and other infrastructure projects, offering valuable expertise to its Central Asian and Caucasian neighbors. This collaboration

could stimulate the creation of new trade routes and foster economic growth in the region.

Cultural and educational initiatives also hold potential. Many Central Asian and Caucasian countries share rich cultural traditions akin to Iran's, opening avenues for cultural exchange and cooperation. Additionally, educational partnerships could thrive, with Iranian universities sharing knowledge with students from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Realizing these opportunities necessitates addressing the challenges that currently impede the relationship. Chief among these is the lack of trust between nations, stemming from historical tensions, conflicts, and divergent political and religious ideologies. Constructive dialogue and peaceful dispute resolution will be pivotal in building trust.

Institutional frameworks for cooperation must also be fortified. While regional organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have emerged in recent years, they have yet to reach their full potential. Enhancing regional cooperation will entail bolstering institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution and economic integration.

Moreover, external interference from major geopolitical players like Russia, China, and the United States complicates regional dynamics. To promote collaboration, Central Asian and Caucasian countries must resist external pressures and work toward cultivating their own regional identities.

In conclusion, the relationship between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus is characterized by a range of common interests and shared challenges. While obstacles like regional security, nuclear concerns, and economic barriers persist, there are ample prospects for cooperation in areas such as energy, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange. To harness these opportunities fully, the nations must address existing challenges, nurture trust, strengthen institutional cooperation, and safeguard their regional interests.

Iran occupies a strategically advantageous position with respect to Central Asia, sharing borders with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan while boasting cultural ties that span nearly two millennia across the region. Historically, the region has been a battleground for conflicts involving Persians and Turks in the sixteenth century, followed by Persians and Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of the region's inhabitants once spoke the Persian language, and Iran continues to share commonalities with a significant population of Azeris, numbering approximately nine million individuals with Iranian nationality. Iran maintains robust relations with Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Armenia, often supporting Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, Iran aligns itself with Russia in resisting Turkish influence, deeming it the natural candidate to wield a leading role in Central Asia, given its geographical proximity to Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Iran enjoys geographical



access to the Arabian Gulf and shares linguistic and cultural bonds with the Tajiks, who speak Persian [73, 35 p.].

Iran has been proactive in cultivating its cultural rapport with Central Asian nations and has focused on bolstering its economic footprint in the region. Through a comprehensive package of economic policies, Iran has aimed to expand its economic presence while limiting opportunities for economic competition in Central Asia.

Iran holds significant strategic interests in the Caspian Basin and Central Asian region, driven by economic and geopolitical considerations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape, ushering in new countries with deep historical, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties to Iran. This transformation has posed fresh challenges and tasks for Iranian politics. Iran is wary of the United States' growing influence in the region, particularly its efforts to control the region's oil resources and establish new geopolitical equations. To counter these developments, Iran has actively engaged in consultations and collaborations with several regional countries, especially Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union provided Iran with a golden opportunity to break free from its U.S. isolation by establishing closer ties with Central Asian nations. This engagement has focused on economic and cultural dimensions, distancing itself from the rhetoric of the Islamic revolution, which previously concerned both Iran's friends and foes [74].

Iran's strategic interests lie in maintaining robust political relationships with Central Asian countries, enabling long-term commercial and investment expansion, particularly in the energy sector. Additionally, it aims to counter international isolation and the U.S. blockade by deepening ties with neighboring countries. Iran pursues these objectives through bilateral relations with individual countries and regional alliances like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and seeks full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, supported by China and Russia, despite current challenges due to U.S. pressure.

Iran places considerable emphasis on its relations with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan due to their shared borders and common language and culture with the latter. Other countries have maintained official and regular interactions, but relations have not extended beyond this level. Iran's relations with Turkmenistan encompass joint economic ventures in energy and gas, with infrastructure networks connecting Turkmenistan to Asia, Turkey, and Europe [75, 40 p.].

The Iranian-American conflict remains a significant obstacle preventing Central Asian countries from forging close ties with Tehran. Furthermore, Iran lacks the requisite capabilities to compete on equal footing with major players like Russia, China, and the United States of America in Central Asia. Iran has resorted to secondary roles within the new Chinese-Russian alliance within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, seeking full membership with support from China and Russia. It is unlikely that Iranian relations with Central Asia will see substantial breakthroughs in the foreseeable future,

despite projects aimed at connecting Iran with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan via northern Afghanistan, along with efforts to export Turkmen gas through Iran to global markets.

Iran boasts distinct advantages for enhancing interactions with Central Asian republics, notably Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, owing to geographical factors that provide it access to open seas. This strategic positioning presents Iran with a promising avenue to facilitate exchanges between these republics and the wider world [76, 15 p.].

Iran's stance on Central Asian and Caucasus nations can be succinctly summarized through the following key points:

1) *Diverse Islamic Identity*: Central Asian countries are predominantly Muslim, with varied ethnic backgrounds among their populations. However, they differentiate themselves from typical Islamic nations by integrating Islam into their broader identity, intertwined with national values, traditions, and customs. This amalgamation results in a unique form of Islamic identity distinct from countries like Iran.

2) *Cultural Affinities and Shared Identity*: Central Asian countries share a substantial religious identity with the Islamic Republic of Iran, boasting minimal cultural and religious disparities. Their strong cultural bonds are evident in the celebration of Nowruz and its associated traditions. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Nowruz was reinstated as a vital component of national identity across Central Asian countries, validated by religious recognition [77, 135 p.].

3) *Holistic Collaboration*: Iran underscores the importance of comprehensive cooperation encompassing political, cultural, and economic dimensions within the Central Asian region. Recognizing that these factors are interconnected, Iran asserts that neglecting any one of them could hinder progress. Given the region's ongoing challenges related to social and identity crises, Iran aims to build crucial and strategic partnerships with regional governments through economic investments and expanded political ties. Leveraging linguistic and religious affinities, Iran seeks to foster unity among the diverse peoples of Central Asia around a shared culture.

4) *Norms, Culture, and Social Sciences*: Central Asian countries exhibit a keen interest in Iran's cultural and social sciences, especially in the context of their current identity crisis. Iran's political and economic measures in the region are regarded as essential, with regional countries perceiving Iran's economic activities as vital and continually relying on its social, economic, and cultural support to advance their cultural and even national identities [78, 45 p.].

5) *Cooperation Amid Extremism Concerns*: Despite concerns about extremist religious movements in some pockets of Central Asia, Iran emphasizes the fundamental importance of cooperation in the region. Iran posits that the overarching tendency of Central Asian peoples toward Islam is constructive and rooted in the principle of cooperation, offering the promise of a brighter future for the entire Central Asian region.

Iran's recent interest in extending the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway into its own territory has prompted fresh apprehensions regarding the implications of increased

cooperation with Tehran for Central Asia. Iranian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Said Kharrazi, expressed Iran's eagerness to foster trade and economic relations with Kyrgyzstan during the Iranian-Kazakh business forum held on October 11–12 [76, 15 p.].

Kharrazi proposed resolving logistical challenges to boost trade turnover by extending the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to Iran. This move would provide Kyrgyzstan with access to maritime routes, as he highlighted to Kyrgyz media. Earlier, on September 14, a trilateral agreement on railway construction between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan was signed on the eve of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand. This extensive railway project, which has been under discussion for nearly two decades, encompasses a Chinese section of 165 kilometers from Kashgar in southern Xinjiang to the Kyrgyz border. Subsequently, the Kyrgyz section, spanning 268 kilometers through the Arpa valley (Fergana Range) with access to Uzgen, will be linked to the existing section, ultimately reaching the city of Karasu in Uzbekistan's Andijan region. According to the new agreement, the feasibility study for the Kyrgyzstan territory's construction should be ready in the first half of 2023. This newly established railway segment opens up possibilities for transportation from China through Uzbekistan and the "Southern Corridor" to the Persian Gulf countries [78, 45 p.].

Additionally, Kharrazi highlighted discussions concerning a new transport corridor connecting Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, utilizing the transit capacities of the Bandar Abbas seaport in the Persian Gulf during a meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Investment of Kyrgyzstan, Ruslan Kazakbaev. These developments suggest Iran's aspiration to participate in transport alliances. Nevertheless, analysts have raised questions about Iran's motives in pursuing these endeavors.

Uzbek politician Niagara Khidoyatova, residing in the United States, posits that Iran's motivation involves alleviating international sanctions pressure and actively engaging in regional projects such as China's One Belt, One Road initiative. She underscores that while Iran may lack the vast resources of other geopolitical players, it possesses a lengthy border with Central Asian nations and shares ancient cultural and historical ties with them. Khidoyatova highlights Iran's keen interest in forging closer relations with Central Asian countries [76, 15 p.].

These developments underscore Iran's evolving role in the region and its pursuit of economic and strategic interests, which are met with both opportunities and challenges.

"The indirect participation of Iran in the war against Ukraine on the side of Russia increases the sanctions pressure," Khidoyatova said [78, 46 p.].

"And for the countries of Central Asia, this too is fraught with the danger of falling into disgrace," she says.

"Therefore, I think that the decision on the Iranian infrastructure strategy will be postponed until better days." "For now, everything should be done without Iran," says Khidoyatova [76, 15 p.].

Anvar Nazirov, a political scientist from Tashkent, believes that Iran is trying to get into any integration process to legitimize itself in the international arena. The countries are under sanctions and in international isolation. [78, 46 p.].

He considers cooperation with the Islamic Republic dangerous.

"Iran, Russia, and Belarus are outcast countries." "They are trying to acquire political capital in the Central Asian region and monetize their ideas," Nazirov said. [76].

"They use us to show in the international arena that they are not alone; they have allies," the expert says.

"Iran wants the same." "He has nothing to offer," says Nazirov [79, 370 p.].

"At the same time, neither Iran, Russia, nor China even bother to ask the countries of Central Asia: do they share their point of view?" Their position is that the Central Asian countries will support us in everything. "They have no voice, no opinion." [80, 25 p.].

"Therefore, I believe that it is necessary to keep a distance from Iran and other countries that are in isolation," the expert comments on the situation.

"In light of the revival of integration processes along the China-Central Asia axis, taking place against the backdrop of the geopolitical weakening of Russia, Iran does not want to stand aside." "He wants to play an active role in these processes through such projects," says Alisher Ilkhamov, director of the London-based Central Asia Due Diligence Center.

"He wants to play an active role in these processes through such projects," he added [81, 10 p.].

According to him, Iran also does not want to remain aloof from the observed significant changes in the transport and logistics routes connecting Central Asia with the outside world. These changes are caused by the sanctions adopted by Western countries against Russia because of the war it unleashed in Ukraine [82, 76 p.].

One of the dangers of Iranian economic ambitions is the possibility of fanaticism spreading, warns France-based Murad Kurbanov, leader of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan (DVT) opposition movement.

If Iran gets the opportunity, "imams, mullahs, religious authorities, and various fanatical Islamic movements will be integrated into the Central Asian countries," the analyst warns.

Iran's form of religious governance, distinct from the secular imperialism seen under Russian President Vladimir Putin, is unlikely to foster prosperity in Central Asia [83, 45 p.]. Geopolitically, Iran is regarded as a regional power due to its strategic positioning and Shiism's integration with state ideology, conferring it a unique global standing. Zbigniew Brzezinski's "The Grand Chessboard" positions Iran within the "Eurasian Balkans," recognizing its geopolitical significance, despite its rivalry with Turkey [84, 68 p.]. Recent analyses by Robert Kaplan describe Iran as a central state in the region, pivotal in connecting the Middle East with Central Asia and influencing neighboring Muslim populations [85, 87 p.].

Kaplan emphasizes Iran's cultural and linguistic legacy, noting the Persian suffix "-stan" prevalent in Central Asia. This influence extends historically into Russian administrative terminology. American geopolitical perspectives often highlight Iran's control over strategic valleys, underscoring historical expansions into Mesopotamia, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Stratfor's analysis identifies Iran's geopolitical priorities: securing the Zagros and Elburs mountains, maintaining control over the eastern border, protecting the Persian Gulf's western coast, managing religious and ethnic diversity, and ensuring security against external threats, particularly from the Caucasus [85, 88 p.].

The interactions between Turkey, Iran, and Russia create a complex geopolitical landscape in the Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean, and Central Asia, with a need for careful management to prevent conflicts and instability [86, 45 p.]. Iran's strategy in the Caucasus includes strengthening diplomatic relations with Armenia, influencing Azerbaijan, cultivating pragmatic relations with Russia, and countering Turkish influence. The Kremlin views Turkish ambitions in the Caucasus as a challenge to its interests, blending economic and religious agendas. Geopolitical dynamics in the Caucasus feature intersecting influences, with a north-south axis (Russia, Armenia, Iran) and a west-east axis (Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan), aligning with US interests [87, 79 p.].

Iran's limited influence in the Caucasus is mitigated by its open border with Armenia, facilitating southern transit. Azerbaijani relations are strained by fears of Iranian influence over clerical groups and concerns about the "South Azerbaijan" concept. Tensions are heightened by Azerbaijani-Israeli ties and incidents of alleged Iranian espionage. Diplomatic activities increased post-2008 Georgia war, driven by economic interests and balancing Russian influence. Despite differences, Russia and Iran avoid confrontation in the Caucasus, sharing interests in Caspian energy resources.

Nationalist threats are significant, with many Azerbaijanis in northern Iran potentially swayed by Turkish and Azerbaijani efforts. Iranian experts worry about rising pro-Turkish sentiment, which threatens Iran's territorial integrity. Military concerns include Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation and potential Turkish bases, posing intelligence and sabotage risks. Iran also fears the establishment of American and European bases in Armenia, adding to its security concerns [88].

Iran cannot solve these problems on its own. He is not able to fully control the South Caucasus; there are too many players in this region, and their interests are too strong there. Therefore, Tehran is interested in strengthening those global players in the South Caucasus who do not intend to use the region against Iran, and the only such player is, in fact, Russia. And the Iranians are very worried about the fact that they do not see the obvious position of Russia on this issue. Moreover, by "obvious," Tehran means, first of all, the line of force. That is why the IRGC has to make such tough statements.

In addition to the military-political dimension, the conflict in the Caucasus also has an economic aspect for Iran. The global North-South transport corridor, on which the Iranians place such high hopes, is under threat. They lay it down and believe that Russia

should have the same serious attitude towards him. The International Transport Corridor (ITC) "North-South" was established on September 12, 2000, on the basis of an agreement signed by Russia, Iran, and India. The purpose of the corridor was to reduce (almost twice) the time of transportation of goods from India to Russia and from there to Europe. In subsequent years, 10 more countries joined the corridor, including Azerbaijan.

At first glance, it seems that the corridor is buried by the current status of Russian-Western relations. Europe imposes sanctions against Russia and closes borders, which means that "from there to Europe" is no longer relevant. However, the importance of the corridor for the Iranian economy still remains.

First of all, Iran does not have many opportunities to squander them. "American, European, and global sanctions against Iran have led to the fact that its opportunities in foreign markets have become limited." This means that any new market is necessary and important for him. Especially Russian. Thus, Russia plans to quadruple its purchases of vegetable products from Iran. Also, it seems that either they are planning or they have already begun deliveries of gas turbines, which are produced in Iran. Iranian cars, both cars and trucks (the latter are actually the first generation of Mercedes-Benz Actros), were demonstrated in Moscow, as Ivan Lizan, head of the analytical bureau of the SONAR-2050 project, explains to the VZGLYAD newspaper [89].

In addition, the vectors of Russian thinking have changed. Moscow has always been interested in East-West paradigms, but since now these roads are blocked and Russia needs exits, this corridor becomes interesting for Russia. "Recently, Russia agreed to the transit of 10 million tons of cargo through this corridor." "It is obvious that against the backdrop of unprecedented sanctions, Russian export and import supply chains will be reoriented to Asia and the Middle East," Abbas Juma, a political scientist in the Middle East, explains to the VZGLYAD newspaper [90].

At the same time, we are not only talking about Russian-Iranian trade. Since everyone understands that the sanctions are for a long time, Russia is trying to establish parallel imports as well as long-term trade routes for these imports as alternatives to European ones.

"Iran wants to become the largest hub for imports through its territory to the Russian Federation with the help of the corridor." "This will allow Tehran to make very good money," continues Abbas Juma. That is why Iran is trying to complete all the logistics along the route as soon as possible. In particular, to build 167 kilometers of railway between their cities of Rasht and Astara (the latter is located near the border with Azerbaijan) [91, 45 p.].

However, it is clear that a potential war in the Caucasus stands in the way of these investments as well as Tehran's grandiose economic plans. And its ending through the victory of the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis is also not beneficial for Iran since, in this case, the North-South transport corridor will be under the control of a force hostile to Tehran.

Therefore, the Iranians are already considering an alternative route. The same "North-South," only not on the territory of Azerbaijan but on the water surface of the

Caspian Sea. That is why they are now interested in the implementation of President Putin's plan to build a new Russian port on the Caspian Sea, as well as the seriousness of the Russian approach to this issue. And thus, willingly or unwittingly, Iran becomes Russia's ally in order to maintain the status quo in the Caucasus—a peaceful region and the absence of any encroachment on the territory of Armenia.

In conclusion, there are several common issues that Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus share that have the potential to shape their relations in the coming years. These include economic cooperation, regional security, and cultural and historical ties. Economically, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have significant natural resources, including oil and gas, which can be a source of economic growth for both Iran and these countries. Iran has also expressed interest in expanding its trade relations with these countries, especially in light of its own economic challenges due to sanctions.

On the security front, Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus face similar challenges related to terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. As a result, there is potential for greater cooperation in the areas of counterterrorism and border security.

Culturally, Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus share a rich history and cultural heritage, which can serve as a basis for cultural exchange and cooperation. This is particularly evident in the shared linguistic and cultural ties between Iran and countries like Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. While there are also areas of potential conflict, such as competition for influence with regional powers like Russia and China, the common issues between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus offer opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit.

## **2.2 Oil, Caspian sea, trade, investments transportation networks, “soft power” in Iranian foreign policy arsenal in Central Asia and the Caucasus.**

Soft power is a set of actions executed by a state, regional, or international actor to influence public opinion abroad, thereby enhancing its image and garnering foreign support to promote its own interests using all available tools and modern technologies. This article delves into the measures undertaken by the Iranian government to counteract Iranophobia—a phenomenon characterized by a negative perception of Iran, manifesting in hostility towards its politics, culture, society, economy, and role in international relations. Utilizing tools such as student and cultural exchanges, the establishment of Persian language (Farsi) study centers, cinema, and tourism, along with the efforts of specialized organizations like the Organization for Islamic Culture and Relations, Iran is enhancing its soft power and public diplomacy. This form of diplomacy is crucial for Iran as it aids in strengthening national interests and bolstering influence both regionally and globally.

With the collapse of the USSR, historical ties between the peoples of Iran and Central Asia (CA), which had existed since ancient times, were revived. The newly independent Central Asian republics, reviving their national traditions and recognizing their rich cultural heritage, confirmed the existence of a historical and cultural commonality with the countries of the Muslim world, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran occupies a unique place in Central Asia as an influential yet "non-systemic" player. The Central Asian states, in turn, seek to strengthen their ties with Iran due to historical and cultural commonality, territorial neighborhood, Islamic identity, interest in new transport communication schemes, and similar economic challenges.

The departure of the Soviet Union from the historical stage opened new northern opportunities for Iran, leading to adjustments in its foreign policy. Before this, Iran bordered one of the two world superpowers to the north, which dictated the order of international relations in this region. In the Caspian basin, Iran previously had only one neighbor, and delimitation issues were resolved solely by the former USSR. Post-Soviet Union, Iran acquired numerous neighbors to the north, providing new impetus to its regional policy. Unlike the United States and Russia, Iran has never viewed the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia) as a single region for a unified foreign policy strategy. For Iran, the South Caucasus is a discrete region where cooperation with each country is based on specific, sometimes global, interests. For example, Iran's policy towards Azerbaijan cannot be considered as part of its Caucasian policy; it is rooted in deeper interests such as the Caspian's legal status, disputed oil and gas fields, Israeli and American intelligence presence in Azerbaijan, potential export of the Islamic revolution, and Azerbaijani separatism within Iran itself [92, 76 p.].

Given the wide range of issues that concern Iran, its relations with Azerbaijan play a crucial role in Tehran's foreign policy, often shaping its policy towards Yerevan, which is supported as a counterbalance to Baku. However, there is no consensus among the Iranian political elite on how to develop relations with Baku. Among the presidential candidates, there are two main groups: those advocating for conflict and those supporting gradual Islamization. Surprisingly, two candidates from different political platforms share almost identical views on Azerbaijan. Hassan Rouhani, representing the moderate conservatives, and Ali Akbar Velayati, a "principalist," both consider Azerbaijan a hostile state that needs to be neutralized, although this view is not publicly declared. As Iranian Foreign Minister, Velayati (himself an ethnic Azerbaijani) crafted Iranian-Armenian relations and, along with President Hashemi-Rafsanjani, convinced Supreme Leader Khamenei to indirectly support Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, fearing Turkic nationalism in Azerbaijan might spur separatism in Iran [93, 86 p.].

Rouhani, a long-time Security Council secretary and former General Staff member during the Iran-Iraq war, is one of Iran's most anti-Turkish politicians, viewing Azerbaijan as an extension of Turkey. Rouhani's stance towards Baku is so radical that he risked alienating Iran's Turkic-speaking population by making anti-Azerbaijani statements during his presidential campaign. On June 1, 2013, in an interview with an



Iranian website, Rouhani stated, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that Azerbaijan today poses a serious threat to Iran's national security." Velayati, more cautious in his rhetoric, last criticized Baku publicly in May 2012 but shares a similar hardline view. Their shared approach towards Azerbaijan resembles Tehran's strategy towards Bahrain, where local Shiite opposition is supported to create internal instability [93, 76 p.].

Younger politicians like Security Council Secretary Said Jalili and Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf adopt a more moderate, long-term approach to Azerbaijan, advocating for peace and promoting the interests of Azerbaijani Muslims. During heightened tensions with Baku in 2012-2013, Jalili played a peacemaking role, emphasizing shared cultural and historical heritage and urging Azerbaijan to grant more freedom to Muslims. Similarly, Ghalibaf, during his election campaign, emphasized cultural ties, stating that Azerbaijan is culturally part of Iran, signaling a preference for religious and cultural connections [93, 76 p.].

The Armenian issue is less publicly discussed in Iran. Former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei's claim of supporting Azerbaijan during the Karabakh war appears to be an electoral tactic to gain Azerbaijani votes, not reflective of actual Armenian-Iranian relations. Ghalibaf's pro-Armenian stance is influenced by his Kurdish background, supporting the Armenian community financially. Velayati's pan-Iranian ideology suggests a multinational Iran that includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, reflecting a historical unity.

Iran's interactions with Central Asian countries are multifaceted, spanning various levels. The region's vast, landlocked expanse faces economic, social, and structural challenges. Iran's foreign policy emphasizes stability and security in Central Asia, countering Western fears of Iran spreading Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, Iran's policy focuses on cooperation and political stability, reiterated during meetings and negotiations with Central Asian leaders. Iran's Central Asian policy primarily targets economic goals, balancing relations with Russia and Central Asian states. While the Middle East is Iran's primary foreign policy focus, Central Asia remains significant.

Iran supports the Central Asian states' entry into the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), enhancing non-Arab members' influence and strengthening Iran's decision-making position. Despite limited resources, Iran leverages two strategic advantages: access to the Indian Ocean and cultural influence in Central Asia. These assets are utilized by Iranian diplomacy. Following the USSR's fall, Central Asian transport routes diversified, increasing Iran's regional role. Iran's involvement in initiatives like the Persian Gulf-Iran-Caspian Sea-Volga transport corridor underscores its geopolitical importance.

The attractiveness of Iran's socio-political model to Central Asian countries is debatable. Both Iran and Central Asian states aim to establish systems ensuring people's well-being through a social market economy, focusing on socio-cultural, intellectual, and physical development. After gaining independence, Central Asian republics

emphasized their cultural heritage, including Persian language studies, leading to the establishment of Persian language programs in universities.

Tashkent has a long history of Persian language education, serving as a significant hub. Persian language programs are offered in universities across Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, reflecting Iran's cultural influence. Iranian cultural centers and private institutes in these countries provide Persian lessons. Approximately 10,000 to 20,000 students are enrolled in Persian language programs across Central Asia and the Caucasus. This estimate, based on university data and media reports, highlights Persian as a language of literature, civilization, and culture. In Tajikistan, Persian is the official language and is taught in all educational institutions. In Uzbekistan, Persian is a minority language taught in some schools and universities. Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia also offer Persian language education [94].

Iran supports Persian language education in Central Asia through educational materials, methodological guidance, and technical resources. Iranian specialists facilitate training and internships for teachers and language practice for students. These efforts reinforce Iran's cultural influence. Iran's relations with Central Asian countries also address "Caspian problems," seeking a balanced policy that considers regional states' concerns and non-regional actors' interests. Iran collaborates with Caspian littoral states to address regional challenges through consensus, considering Russia's significant role.

Iran's strategic resources, geographical location, and cultural heritage position it to strengthen ties with Central Asian countries. Cultural influence serves as a valuable reserve, enhancing Iran's regional role when needed.

If we talk about Iran, the antipode of Iran in the region is usually Saudi Arabia. But here it should be noted that neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran consider the region among the priorities of their foreign policies. This, of course, is reflected in the field of cultural and humanitarian contacts and means that both states do not compete for influence in Central Asia. Although in other regions, as you know, it is quite acute [95].

But in this case, I would like to note that in both countries, the tool of "soft power" is religion. And here, as in other Muslim countries, this kind of activity is regarded as an attempt to convert to one's confession and causes a corresponding reaction.

Therefore, the task of promoting a positive image of Iran is solved at the expense of culture through the popularization of the rich pre-Islamic heritage, medieval Persian-language literature, and already modern Iranian art, such as music, cinema, and calligraphy. Although the prospects for tourism in Iran have not been disclosed, individual attempts can be seen in the examples of blog tours, invitations to journalists, and promotional articles in local media. But it seems to me that one should not expect much activity in this direction. The Kazakhstani tourism market, for example, is rather narrow—about 400,000 outbound tourists a year—and its preferences are firmly held by three or four destinations. Iran is not among them.

It is also worth noting that Iran's interests in Central Asia are very modest and not original. It is interested in good neighborly and equal relations, although in terms of its

potential (military, economic, demographic, etc.), it exceeds all the countries of the region combined. what Tehran may have in the form of economic and other "profits" it receives from contacts with other countries, such as Pakistan, Iraq, or Turkey. Rather, the Central Asian countries are more interested in Iran. And his image in the mass consciousness is not a factor contributing to the development and intensification of cultural and humanitarian contacts between Iran and the Central Asian countries. I see this as disproportionate. That is, in order to achieve a high level of bilateral relations with the Central Asian countries, Tehran needs to invest resources that are disproportionate to the potential benefits [96].

In countries and regions in which the Iranians are interested, Tehran is making serious investments. For example, several TV channels from Iran broadcast in English and Arabic at once; there are also channels in Urdu, Balucci, Turkish, Kurdish, and Russian.. In our case, these are editorial offices on Iranian radio, which broadcasts in the official languages of the Central Asian countries. The Kazakh edition is very strong and competent. But due to the minority of the Central Asian direction, its potential remains undiscovered.

It would be great if the Central Asian countries acted as a pool in relations with Iran, something like C5 + 1. This is good for official Tehran, and it is good for the Central Asian states in terms of developing common approaches and interactions in foreign policy. I agree with the statement that Tehran will not seriously invest in cultural and humanitarian cooperation. and will continue to keep it at a minimum level. But exactly as long as the Central Asians themselves—that is, we—do not begin to show interest, I believe that Iran's activation in this direction is possible. And it would be great if the Central Asian countries acted as a pool in relations with Iran, something like C5 + 1. This is good for official Tehran, and it is good for the Central Asian states in terms of developing common approaches and interactions in foreign policy [97].

The linguistic proximity between Tajiks and Persians in bilateral relations helped Tajikistan a lot to get out of the civil war. Tehran played the role of a guarantor in intra-Tajik reconciliation. For a long time, Tajikistan was a net recipient of Iranian aid, including economic aid. Therefore, the cooling of relations, initiated by Dushanbe, allows Tehran to save a little. And it's probably that if Tajikistan reconsiders its views tomorrow, Iran will resume its programs the day after tomorrow.

Tajikistan, as one of the poorest countries in the world, can always count on help. But those who are less poor, that is, we, need to think about where to sell grain and metals and maybe buy something successfully in a country partially isolated due to sanctions.

Therefore, in relations with other Central Asian countries, on the contrary, pragmatic considerations need emotions. And it should be positive emotions, not fear and distrust. Actually, Iran's modest efforts are aimed at this. That is, Tajikistan is more of an exception than a rule.

Everyone had heightened expectations for the "Iran deal." Both those who sympathize with Iran and those who are less benevolent predicted Tehran's greater activity in the region. But the predictions, for the most part, did not come true.

Here, it is important to note the efforts of Astana in concluding the deal. However, it has borne fruit. Cultural, humanitarian, and trade-economic cooperation between our countries has resumed. A million tons of wheat exports and metal supplies to Iran, coupled with a couple of exhibitions and other events a year—this is the level below which relations cannot be lowered.

Therefore, we can assume that the initiatives to intensify relations between Iran and the countries of the region will find both understanding and a response from Tehran. Both Tehran and the Central Asian capitals will know that these relations will not be of a priority or vital nature. In other words, the deal brought Iran out of isolation, and there are first fruits. Perhaps this provides a model for Iranian foreign policy: that if you take the initiative yourself, there will be more fruit [98].

Since we are talking about "Great Game 2.0," Iran's position is advantageous. He declares and confirms in practice that he does not participate in it. This must be used and build relationships outside of that paradigm. That is, the "players" do not have to worry about the appearance of another opponent [98].

On the other hand, I have serious doubts that religion and Islam, in particular, can act as elements of "soft power." Islam does not have a clear link to nation-states that arose in the recent past. Rather, on the contrary, they need a certain self-justification and legitimation in the language of religion. And you can see a lot of models of relations between Islam and the nation-state, and secularism is one of them.

Moreover, observing the conflicts in the Middle East, one can see that, up to a certain point, religion restrained aggression. And only when the conflict dragged on was there a demarcation in the religious context.

You can dig deeper. Even P. Sorokin noted that religious regroupings, such as a change of religion or confessional affiliation, occur for objective reasons during a period of serious crisis in society. We must give a clear answer: is our society in a crisis that could give rise to religious regroupings?

There is a dynamic in this area, characterized by an uptrend. But it has been fixed since the end of World War II. An illustration for the thesis can be any scientific-atheistic publication from the last 40 years of the history of the USSR. As monuments of cultural history, they are priceless. There is reason to believe that the trend of growing religiosity will last for a long time, regardless of politics, including foreign ones. At the same time, so-called Islamization is only one of its manifestations. It is of most interest to us for objective reasons. But the trend is still global.

Iran has a strong scientific school capable of solving the problems facing society while maintaining close interaction with the rest of the scientific community. In particular, Iranian scientists are working on projects in the field of space exploration. Even during the tenure of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a manned artificial earth

satellite was launched. And he landed on the territory of Iran, delivering the monkey alive and unharmed, which was the only member of the crew of the spacecraft.

As you know, they are working on the problems of the peaceful atom. and the program is generally successful. Hence the general excitement around the Iranian nuclear program. In addition, they are engaged in information and nanotechnology. In a word, all branches of science that can be called "status ones" are of interest to Iran. And the Persians achieve results there, which, not being a specialist, is difficult for me to judge. But judging by the alarmism about them from Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Iranians in these areas have had good results [96].

But none of this would have been possible in complete isolation. Despite all kinds of restrictions and inconveniences, Iranian scientists find ways to maintain and, to the extent possible, strengthen partnerships with colleagues. In these areas, there is an exchange of students and researchers. since attracting foreign students is useful for Iran too. It is no coincidence that all the major research universities in the world make sure that they have foreign students and teachers [96].

If we want to have equal partner relations, in particular with Iran, we must also invest. since this is indeed an attribute of any established state.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long maintained close ties with the countries of Central Asia, which share a history of cultural and economic exchange dating back centuries. However, in recent years, Iran has faced three distinct approaches in its relationship with Central Asia: containment, engagement, and competition. Each of these approaches presents its own set of challenges and opportunities for Iran as it seeks to maintain its influence in the region.

There are three primary approaches to Iran's relationship with the countries of Central Asia, each with its unique implications and challenges.

- 1) *Containment Approach*: Led by the United States and its allies, this approach regards Iran as a destabilizing influence in the region. The strategy involves imposing economic sanctions on Iran and supporting the political and economic development of Central Asian countries. Its goal is to restrict Iran's capacity to export its revolutionary ideology and support militant groups, which are seen as threats to regional stability. For Iran, this approach poses a significant challenge as it limits its ability to engage in economic and political relations with Central Asian countries and exacerbates its economic difficulties.
- 2) *Engagement Approach*: Promoted primarily by Russia and China, this approach sees Iran as a valuable partner in the region. Russia and China seek to strengthen economic and political ties with Iran to enhance regional stability and counterbalance U.S. influence. This approach encourages Iran to engage in regional cooperation while curbing destabilizing activities. From Iran's perspective, engagement offers opportunities to deepen ties with Central Asian nations, exert regional influence, and counterbalance U.S. influence.
- 3) *Competition Approach*: Supported by Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, this approach treats Iran as a regional rival. It aims to limit Iran's influence by backing its opponents and

promoting economic development in Central Asia. This strategy seeks to weaken Iran's position while fostering the political and economic advancement of Central Asian countries. Iran perceives this approach as a challenge, constraining its ability to engage with Central Asian nations, projecting influence, and adding to its economic pressures [97, p.76].

Iran's relationship with Central Asia is further nuanced by three additional approaches:

- a) *Islamic Ideological Approach*
- b) *Cultural Approach*, emphasizing linguistic and cultural affinities, as well as historical convergence
- c) *Pragmatic Approach*, considering political considerations

Given Iran's strained relations with the United States and its awareness of Russia's sensitivities regarding Central Asia, Iran has chosen a pragmatic approach, which combines elements of engagement while defining Central Asia's national interests to align with Russian policies in the region. This approach allows Iran to navigate the complex web of challenges and opportunities, safeguard its influence, and advance its economic and political interests in the region.

By following the historical legacy of the strategic directions of Iranian influence in the regional environment, when following the geographical variable, which is one of the important determinants of the vital sphere of any country, the political regions surrounding Iran, which determine its geostrategic tendency, are divided into four regions, namely:

- a) The Fertile Crescent Region (for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan)
- b) The Caucasus Territory (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia)
- c) Central Asia region (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan)
- d) Southern Region (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Arabian Peninsula)

And when monitoring the geostrategic tendency of Iran during the period from 3200 BC until now, according to the study prepared by Dr. Walid Abdel Hay, as for the repetition of the geostrategic attraction, that is, the number of times that Iranian political entities throughout history have tended to move outside their borders towards previous regions, conclude the following:

- a) The Caucasus region acquired Iran the largest number of times during the geostrategic attraction of Iran, which lasted about 5866 years; the number was 15 times.
- b) The Fertile Crescent ranked second in geostrategic attraction, as it was visited 13 times.
- c) Central Asia ranked third 10 times.
- d) The southern region ranked last only twice [97].

The analysis suggests that Central Asia and the Caucasus region, located in the eastern direction, hold the highest degree of strategic significance for Iran, with a considerable number of iterations, totaling up to 25 times. In contrast, when looking towards the west and south, the number of repetitions decreases significantly, only reaching 15 times. This observation underscores the greater emphasis and focus Iran

places on its strategic interests in the east, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, compared to its interests in the western and southern directions.

The gravitation towards a territory is linked to the distribution of the balance of power within a certain period of time; in politically soft areas, there is a certain stage of increasing attraction towards her. During the period of state power of the Umayyad and Abbasid, Iran gravitated towards extending its influence towards the soft areas in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and around the Caspian or Caucasus Sea.

On the other hand, when reviewing Iranian history, one of the specialized studies says that Iran relies more in its geostrategic interests on its east than on its west, and this is since the first conquest of Greece by Darius the Great in the Fifth century BC and his failure to do so, and the Silk Road from 866 BC to 1566 AD was the most important commercial road linking China, India, and Mesopotamia. Thus, this study concludes that the future of Iran depends more on the eastern neighborhood than on the western neighborhood, and the evidence for this is presented in the contemporary period [98]. The most important of which are:

The most important of which are:

- 1) Iran's presence as an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is in addition to its desire to join it as a permanent member.
- 2) Completion of an oil pipeline through Kazakhstan to the Chinese border that began in 2006.
- 3) The benefits to Iran from its relationship with the East outweigh the gains from its relationship with the West.
- 4) Turning to the West will lead to a conflict with Israel that is useless to Iran, and the "Sunni-Shiite" sectarian conflict will not, in turn, return Iran with any strategic benefits but rather plunge it into side conflicts.
- 5) The Iranian Vision Document for the Year 2025 and the Iranian Hawza Civilization Project, or Greater Iran, indicate the Iranian desire for an eastern orientation.

In addition to the above, we conclude that the Central Asian region has obtained 10 times the frequency of attraction and the geostrategic tendency of Iran, reaching 10 Many times, and this matter is related to the issue of the loose point, meaning that Central Asia suffers from political, economic, social and cultural fragility, so Iran is tending towards it, and on the other hand, Iran is forced to deal and head towards the East to break the state isolation imposed by the United States of America, and get rid of the effects of economic sanctions Imposed on them, and that is heading towards the East to achieve economic cooperation gains, major powers such as Russia, China, and regional powers such as India, as well as promising markets such as the Central Asian market.

On the other hand, the Iranian strategy towards Central Asia, according to the opinion of Ahmet Davutoglu [99], has led to the disappearance of anti-Iranian policies in Central Asia. Despite the fears that the political elites of these countries felt about the ideological developments in Iran, they succeeded in creating an impression of their

tendency to follow a more rational policy that takes into account the existing structures and seeks to achieve compatibility with The regional reality is more than the tendency to form a revolutionary wave that leads to instability in the region.

On the other hand, Davutoglu believes that Iran has taken into account the relations of clash and exclusion that it is exposed to from some countries of the international system, and for this it has established a rational relationship of interest with Russia, and in a parallel side it has sought an approach based on a good study of the internal structure and balances of Central Asia, where it succeeded to create the impression of inclination to pursue a more rational policy of socio-cultural structures take into account in Central Asia, and check compatibility with regional realities, and thus removed the fears of political elites in Central Asia, and thwarted international forces efforts that are trying to exclude them and clash with them, Iran has submitted a letter to the international system of isolation states that it is not the country that is easily isolated from this system, through the agreements it signed regarding the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Gorgan railway project, which links Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey and transfer Oil to Kazakhstan, and therefore the Iranian foreign policy holds great importance in terms of highlighting the delicate and sensitive between the regional impact of international pressure system balance. Iranian diplomacy in Central Asia is one of the most important and prominent indications that Iran, which is successfully using its regional influence based on active diplomacy, will be able to achieve tactical advantages despite the pressures of the international system, which have increased sharply in the current period since Trump's accession to the presidency of the United States in 2017 and his withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018.

Consequently, the changes taking place in the structure of international and regional balances will ultimately lead to the process of rebuilding the current international system, and in some way, the rebuilding of this system will lead to new international alliances. Iran will work to benefit during this stage by confirming its regional role in many circles. The geopolitical measures in the world and the measures taken by the United States of America to impose international isolation on Iran will not lead to achieving their basic objectives; here, as international and regional powers, we are still and in particular dealing with Iran on all political and economic axes, including Russia, China, Turkey, India, and even Japan. The Iranian strategy will remain effective in the Central Asian region.

With the re-emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, Iran participated in the Russian aggression against the Ukrainian people by sending suicide drones and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Crimea. Iran is seizing the opportunity to strengthen what it assumes is an alliance with Russia and, for material considerations, geopolitical competition with Turkey, as well as trying to put pressure on the Americans.

The Iranian side believes that a complete defeat of Russia in this war will necessarily lead to the loss of a card that Tehran could have used to maneuver between major players in the international arena or to balance threats emanating from other



countries. Moreover, Tehran's regional influence is indirectly linked in a number of areas to Russia's policy, such as the situation in Syria, the situation in the Caucasus, and the situation in Central Asia. If Russia is defeated, there will certainly be repercussions for Iranian influence in these areas. In addition, with Iran's recent retreat in these regions in favor of Turkey, it seems that Tehran believes that the best solution to contain the rising Turkish influence in these regions is through cooperation with Russia and persuading it of the need to stop it.

Therefore, Tehran hopes that, with the current support, its demands to block Turkish expansion will resonate within the Russian administration. Moreover, Iran selling local suicide drones to Russia helps the two sides create common interests, strengthen commercial and military relations, and try to intensify efforts to bypass US sanctions. In this context, Iran hopes to promote the notion of participation in its confrontation with America and its allies. Such a narrative raises Iran's balance with some regional and international tendencies of a leftist nature on the one hand and provides Iran with additional cards in case the Americans decide to reactivate negotiations on the nuclear agreement.

Regardless of all the successes and failures in Iran's foreign policy strategy, its determinants, and the factors of its ups and downs, the main challenge to the mullahs' regime in Iran will remain the internal challenge. where millions of people in Iran live under a historical reactionary religious regime from outside the era, trying to impose a medieval way of life, which makes it hated by its people in the first place and vulnerable to several internal disorders.

In summary, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopts three distinct approaches in its relationship with Central Asia: the economic approach, the geopolitical approach, and the cultural approach. The economic approach underscores the significance of trade and economic collaboration between Iran and the Central Asian nations, particularly in the energy sector. Iran regards Central Asia as a crucial partner for energy cooperation and a potential route for exporting Iranian gas to other markets.

The geopolitical approach centers on Iran's strategic interests in the region, encompassing concerns related to regional security and stability, as well as competition with other influential regional powers such as Russia and China. Iran's objective is to establish a more robust regional presence and exert greater influence in Central Asia by strengthening its ties with these countries.

The cultural approach places emphasis on the collective cultural and historical connections that exist between Iran and the countries of Central Asia. Iran possesses a notable populace of ethnic Tajiks and Azeris, who exhibit linguistic and cultural affinities with the inhabitants of Central Asia. This phenomenon establishes a foundation for the interchange of cultural practices and collaboration, while also presenting opportunities for enhanced interpersonal relationships. The forthcoming years are expected to witness a progressive evolution in Iran's association with Central Asia, as each approach brings forth distinct prospects and obstacles. Iran's capacity to pursue

these approaches will be influenced by competition for influence with other regional powers, as well as domestic challenges such as economic sanctions. Furthermore, the trajectory of this relationship will also be influenced by the political and economic developments within Central Asian countries.

Through an examination of the developmental trajectory of Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia, it becomes feasible to discern the shifting priorities in the Islamic Republic's diplomatic endeavors within this particular region. The leadership of Iran transitioned from the paradigm of "exporting the Islamic revolution" to a more pragmatic approach driven by objective logic, with a focus on pursuing their national interests. Iran has consistently employed various "soft power" strategies in its foreign policy endeavors in the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In light of the sanctions imposed by the United States, the Iranian leadership places significant emphasis on enhancing the efficacy of its "soft power" as a means to broaden the scope of collaborative endeavors with the international community. By the conclusion of the 20th century. The Iranian leadership has strategically established the groundwork for its cultural diplomacy in the region, with the aim of exerting influence through the exportation of cultural property.

The Iranian approach to "soft power" in global politics is predicated upon fostering an equitable dialogue among diverse civilizations and upholding the principle of peaceful coexistence among nations and peoples. Iran exerts influence on the population of the Central Asian region primarily through its Persian language, philosophy, literature, and poetry. This influence is particularly evident among the peoples of the Turkic-speaking world, who share significant similarities with the Iranian cultural sphere. The present analysis acknowledges the intricate dynamics of cultural and educational endeavors in Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus regions. It is evident that cultural institutions play a significant role in disseminating the "soft power" of the Islamic Republic, while educational initiatives are actively pursued and executed. Although the region exhibits a greater inclination towards the Turkic world, empirical evidence suggests that the cultural values of Iran also garner support among the local population.

In summary, it can be asserted that the prevailing economic and political challenges currently impede Iran's ability to fully embrace the notion of "pan-Iranism" as a cohesive foreign policy approach. However, the ongoing electoral campaign in the nation reveals that discrete elements of this ideology are present in the political agendas of nearly all prominent candidates.

### **3 Geopolitical projects of Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

#### **3.1 Iranian Foreign Strategy Opportunities in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

The future of Iranian relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus is a complex and multifaceted landscape, influenced by a range of geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. Geopolitical dynamics will continue to play a significant role in shaping Iran's relationship with this region. Iran sits at the crossroads of major global powers like Russia, China, and the United States, all of whom have strategic interests in the area. This necessitates careful navigation of these competing interests to promote regional stability and avoid conflicts.

One noteworthy geopolitical concern is the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, have been actively seeking to limit Iran's influence in the region by supporting its opponents and fostering economic development in the region. This rivalry has led to proxy conflicts, such as the one in Yemen, and tensions in the Persian Gulf. As Iran looks to expand its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, it must manage this regional rivalry without exacerbating tensions or sparking conflict.

Another critical geopolitical factor is the situation in Afghanistan. Iran shares a border with Afghanistan and has played a pivotal role in efforts to stabilize the country. The recent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum that could be exploited by militant groups, posing a threat to regional stability. To address this challenge, Iran and its neighbors must collaborate to promote stability in Afghanistan and prevent the spread of terrorism.

Economic considerations also hold substantial weight in determining the future of Iranian relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran boasts significant economic potential, including vast oil and gas reserves and a sizable, educated population. However, Iran's economy faces hurdles such as economic sanctions, corruption, and mismanagement. As Iran strives to rebuild its economy, it must find ways to harness this potential to foster regional economic development.

Energy cooperation is one area with great potential. Iran is a major producer of oil and gas, as are the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Enhanced collaboration in the energy sector, including the development of new pipelines and infrastructure, can facilitate more effective sharing of energy resources. This would not only boost regional economic growth but also reduce the region's reliance on energy exports to other nations.

Cultural factors also wield influence on future relations. Iran and its neighboring countries have a long history of cultural and economic exchange. There is significant potential for deeper cultural cooperation and exchange, particularly in areas like education, science, and the arts. Collaborations in these domains can foster greater understanding and cooperation among the countries.

In conclusion, the future of Iranian relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus is marked by both challenges and opportunities. Iran's continued influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus hinges on carefully navigating a complex web of regional rivalries, geopolitical considerations, economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and collaborative efforts in security and trade. Balancing relationships with major powers like Russia and China, while also engaging with the United States and other key regional actors, will be crucial for Iran to protect its economic and strategic interests and contribute to regional stability [99].

The future of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus is multifaceted, shaped by a confluence of geopolitical, economic, and cultural forces. Geopolitics will remain a dominant factor. Iran's location at the intersection of major powers—Russia, China, and the US—whose interests converge in the region, requires skillful diplomacy to foster stability and prevent conflict.

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Education stands out as an area of potential cooperation. Iran has a highly educated population and a rich history of scholarship and scientific innovation. Central Asian and Caucasian nations could benefit from increased collaboration with Iran in fields such as science, technology, and engineering. This partnership could drive regional economic development and innovation.

The future of Iranian relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus is marked by both challenges and opportunities. Careful navigation of these complex dynamics, including regional rivalries, geopolitical considerations, economic potential, cultural exchange, and collaborative efforts on security and trade, will be crucial for Iran to maintain its influence in the region, promote its economic and strategic interests, and contribute to regional stability. Balancing relations with regional powers, such as Russia and China, while engaging with the United States and other significant players in the region will be essential for Iran's success in the evolving landscape of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The future of Iranian relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus hinges on a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. While these nations are presented with challenges and uncertainties, there are ample opportunities for enhanced cooperation and engagement, calling for flexibility and adaptability in Iran's approach.

One significant factor influencing these relations is the escalating tension between the United States and Iran, catalyzed by events like the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani at the outset of 2020. The countries of Central Asia occupy a strategically vital position, making them susceptible to the repercussions of this geopolitical turmoil, especially in the event of further escalation[101].

The United States has shown increasing interest in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The region's vast oil wealth and its location adjacent to major powers like Russia, China, and Iran have made it a focal point in global power struggles, particularly in the competition over economic resources and energy transportation routes. Central Asia became even more pivotal after the September 11, 2001, attacks when the U.S. launched its military campaign in Afghanistan, necessitating cooperation with Central Asian nations to support its forces. The region gained additional significance during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 when Turkey declined to provide support, redirecting attention to Central Asia as a potential location for U.S. military bases.

The region's importance has once again come to the fore due to renewed tensions between the United States and Iran. The extent of Central Asia's importance to the U.S. is twofold: it has existing military, political, and economic relationships with most countries in the region, and it is located in close proximity to Iran, making it potentially susceptible to the impacts of a U.S.-Iran escalation.

Historically, Iranian-Uzbek relations were tense during the rule of former Uzbek President Islam Karimov. Karimov made numerous harsh statements rejecting the Iranian model and warning against Iranian interference in Central Asian affairs. However, relations took a positive turn after Shaukat Mirzayev assumed power in Uzbekistan in December 2016. By the end of 2018, trade between the two countries reached \$306 million, with cotton, metals, fertilizers, and fibers among the exports from Uzbekistan to Iran, while imports included building materials, machinery, fruits, dried fruits, and plastics. There are currently 120 joint ventures with Iranian involvement in Uzbekistan, some wholly owned by Iranian investors [102].

Regarding the other Central Asian republics, relations have been marked by caution and a focus on mutual interests. While they have avoided disputes, alliances, or bilateral agreements targeting other parties, political statements have been sensitive when it comes to Iranian matters overlapping with third parties.

Iran played a significant role in supporting Tajikistan's independence, with shared linguistic and ethnic ties bringing the two nations closer. Iran invested in the Sangtuda-2 hydropower station in Tajikistan, and Iranian companies have engaged in various sectors in the country, including energy, construction, agriculture, and transportation. However, relations strained in 2016 when the leader of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party, Muhiddin Kabiri, was invited to an international conference in Tehran. In 2019, experienced diplomats were appointed to key diplomatic posts, suggesting a mutual desire to neutralize political sensitivities in favor of commercial benefits.

The future of Iranian relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus is shaped by an intricate web of geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. As the region evolves and new challenges emerge, Iran must remain adaptable and open to cooperation to promote regional stability, economic development, and cultural exchange. Central Asia's position at the intersection of global powers and its proximity to Iran underscore its significance in the shifting geopolitical landscape.

According to Tajik official statistics, the volume of bilateral Tajik-Iranian trade over the past five years has decreased almost three times: from about \$295 million in 2013 to \$97 million in 2018, and the volume of trade exchange between Iran and Tajikistan for 11 months of 2019 amounted to about 58 million dollars only, a decrease of 35% compared to the same period last year[103, 76 p.].

There were no distinguished relations between Kazakhstan and Iran, despite the fact that they bordered the Caspian Sea, and Kazakhstan always tried not to disturb the United States of America in its relations with Iran. From an economic perspective, the conflict between Iran and the United States is unlikely to pose a serious threat to Kazakhstan, if not vice versa, due to the recent war statements from Tehran and the White House, which indirectly contributed to the rise in oil prices, which in turn contributed to Kazakhstan's interest.

The economic relations between the two countries did not stop even during the years of sanctions, and trade remained at a good level, so that the two countries were

able to establish investment cooperation, and the volume of Iranian-Kazakh trade in 2018 reached about \$520 million, of which about 83 percent was exported by Kazakhstan. Dozens of medium and small companies with Iranian investments operate in Kazakhstan, and Kazakh businessmen are also carrying out investment projects in Iran. The Eurasia Gold Group has invested about \$70 million in one of Iran's mining deposits, which is the largest foreign investment in this country's economy during the years of sanctions [104, 30 p.].

Nor have there been significant developments in relations between Kyrgyzstan and Iran since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. At the same time, the Iranian side was keen not to lose its presence in Kyrgyzstan, according to Kyrgyz diplomats, due to the common borders between the Central Asian Republic and China. The two parties signed cooperation agreements in the fields of transport, customs, trade, and economic relations, and Iranian companies participated in building a highway linking Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital, with Osh, in the south of the country.

In 2018, trade between the two countries grew to \$47 million from \$15 million in 2016, and Iran mainly supplies clothes, nuts, and paint to Kyrgyzstan and imports meat and grains. Today, 180 industrial units operate on the territory of Kyrgyzstan with the support of Tehran [105, 26 p.].

Experts believe that the Iranian-Turkmen relations have a distinctive peculiarity, especially compared to the Iranian Uzbek, so they show great openness. Compared to Iranian Kazakh, it is less dependent on the positions of other cooperation partners and can be summarized as being based on economic necessity and ignoring political differences almost completely.

And there is another, deeper difference, which is that the Turkmen-Iranian version of bilateral relations is largely determined by the mutual benefit of the two parties in the absence of any other option, and both countries are governed by strong bilateral relations. Iran is Turkmenistan's second-largest trading partner after Russia, and the trade exchange between them exceeds one billion dollars. Iran is one of the main importers of Turkmen oil and gas, as well as petrochemicals and textile products, and about 150 companies have been built on the territory of Turkmenistan with the help of Iran.

Within the Iranian move toward the republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, it received the Republic of Azerbaijan with interest from the Iranian government as a result of overlapping ethnicity, as there are more than six million Azeris in Iran, as well as the common border between the two countries, which has a length of 760 km, and the affiliation of most of the population of the two countries to the Shiite sect (the Twelver Imamiyyah). The difference between the two systems is that Azerbaijan is secular; there is no role for religion, while the Iranian regime system is Islamic and Shiite, which is the basis of governance. Iran helped Azerbaijan gain independence in 1991, opening the border between the two countries after it had been closed between them throughout the Soviet era, and the two sides exchanged diplomatic representation that year. Next, political, economic, and cultural relations gradually developed between the two

countries, and in 1992, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati toured the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and during one of his stations in the Azerbaijani capital (Baku), through his presentation, Velayati expressed his country's readiness to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia to resolve the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and end the conflict between them [106].

Several issues have strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. 1 The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the substantial Azeri population within Iran and related secession concerns, mutual accusations of supporting opposing factions, and border demarcation disputes have all presented challenges. Iran's 1992 decision to open a consulate in Nakhchivan and disagreements over Caspian Sea resource sharing further exacerbated tensions and hindered relationship development. These factors contributed to persistent instability in their political relations. 1. Azerbaijan–Iran relations - Wikipedia en.wikipedia.org However, occasional periods of improvement did occur. Iranian President Rafsanjani's 1993 visit to Baku and Iran's occasional support for Azerbaijan regarding Nagorno-Karabakh helped ease tensions somewhat. Conversely, relations were particularly strained during the presidency of Abulfelz Elchibey (1991-1993). His nationalist views, including claims to Iranian Azerbaijan and his pro-US, Turkish, and Israeli leanings, triggered anxiety and hostility from Iran, which persisted until Elchibey's removal from power [107, 7 p.].

After Heydar Aliyev came to power in Azerbaijan in 1993–2003, relations between the two countries did not initially improve due to Aliyev's accusation that Iran was behind the attempt to remove him from power after the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991 and the support of the candidate Abulfelz Elchibey, who assumed the presidency of Azerbaijan after independence, as well as Azerbaijan's orientation towards the United States of America and Iran's opposition to the project proposed by Azerbaijan in 1999 to build an American military base on its territory. Iran officially warned Azerbaijan against continuing with this project because, as it described, it poses a threat to the security and stability of Iran. However, these conditions began to gradually ease after the year 2000 [108], especially after Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) invited Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev to visit Tehran, and the latter accepted the Iranian president's invitation in March 2002, after this visit was postponed three times due to the strained relations between the two countries. He met with Aliyev during his visit to Iran and all of his Iranian counterparts, including Mohammad Khatami, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, President of the Council Shora Iranian Islamist (parliament) Mehdi Karroubi, and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi [109].

Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev held talks with Iranian President Muhammad Khatami that dealt with three axes. The first axis included the issue of the Caspian Sea and defining its legal system, while the second axis dealt with the issue of Iranian mediation between the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia regarding the issue of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region between the two countries, and the third axis In the discussions, they focused on the issue of economic and security cooperation between



Iran and Azerbaijan. The Iranian and Azerbaijani presidents signed a treaty related to the principles of friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries, as well as a number of political, economic, scientific, and cultural agreements and memoranda of understanding. Although the Azerbaijani president's visit did not resolve all issues, it contributed to supporting the relations between the two countries by signing the treaty on the principles of friendly relations and cooperation between the two states. In addition, it would prevent future military clashes between them, which was what the Republic of Azerbaijan was keen on [110, 54 p.].

During the era of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, relations did not develop much, and there was a kind of anxiety, especially after Ilham Aliyev assumed the presidency of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2003 and tried to strengthen the influence of his state in light of the competition for influence between the international and regional powers in the South Caucasus. Because of the relations of the ruling authority in Azerbaijan with the western countries, especially the United States of America, which has the ability to influence this republic, Azerbaijan has become a concern for Iran, and its concerns increased after the government of Ilham Aliyev agreed to have part of its lands used by the United States of America with the aim of reassuring The Iranian government and some Azerbaijani officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov, have confirmed more than once that the lands of the Republic of Azerbaijan cannot be used in any hypothetical American attack on Iran, as announced by Afshar Soleimani, the Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan. Iran has full confidence in the leadership of Azerbaijan, which pledged not to use its lands in any military move against Iran, and Iranian-Azerbaijani relations face a number of problems, foremost of which are:

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a protracted dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan centered on the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a mountainous area located in the South Caucasus. The origins of this conflict date back to the early 20th century, during the time when both Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the Soviet Union. In 1923, the Soviet government assigned the predominantly ethnically Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijan.

Tensions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh escalated significantly in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union began to crumble. In 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, a territorial unit established in the 1920s, voted to secede from Azerbaijan and unify with Armenia. This move was met with strong opposition from Azerbaijan, prompting them to initiate a military campaign aimed at regaining control over the region.

The conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale war, marked by numerous instances of violence and human rights abuses committed by both sides. The war eventually came to a halt in 1994 when a ceasefire was brokered. This ceasefire left Nagorno-Karabakh under the control of Armenian forces but entirely surrounded by Azerbaijani territory.

Unfortunately, the ceasefire has been violated multiple times over the years, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan accusing each other of aggressive actions [110, 76 p.].

The conflict lay dormant until September 2020 when it erupted once again. Azerbaijan initiated a significant military offensive with the goal of reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh. This offensive received support from Turkey, which provided military assistance to Azerbaijan. Armenia, on the other hand, received support from Russia, which maintains a military base in Armenia. The war endured for six weeks and resulted in a substantial loss of life on both sides.

The conflict eventually came to an end through a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement. As part of this ceasefire, Azerbaijan regained control of certain territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian peacekeeping forces were also deployed to oversee and maintain the ceasefire. This protracted conflict has had severe consequences for the region, leading to the displacement of thousands of people and causing extensive damage to infrastructure.

The conflict has deep historical and cultural roots, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan claiming the region as part of their national identity. The Nagorno-Karabakh region has been predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians for centuries, and the region has historical and cultural significance for Armenians. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, sees Nagorno-Karabakh as an integral part of its territory and has accused Armenia of occupying its lands.

The conflict has also been exacerbated by geopolitical tensions in the region. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have strong ties to regional powers, with Armenia having close ties to Russia and Azerbaijan having close ties to Turkey. The involvement of these regional powers has further complicated the conflict and made it more difficult to find a peaceful resolution [111].

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is a complex issue that has defied resolution for decades. The conflict has its roots in historical and cultural tensions as well as geopolitical rivalries in the region. The recent escalation of the conflict has resulted in a devastating human toll, with thousands of people losing their lives and many more being displaced. The conflict underscores the need for a peaceful resolution that takes into account the interests of all parties involved.

Nagorno-Karabakh is indeed a region located within the borders of Azerbaijan. However, it's essential to clarify the historical context and sequence of events surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The majority of Nagorno-Karabakh's population is ethnically Armenian. When signs of weakness and disintegration of the Soviet Union began to emerge in 1988, Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region declared their desire to separate from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and instead become part of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. This declaration was followed by the establishment of the National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh, representing the political aspirations of the Armenians in the region. They sought reunification with Armenia.

This move by the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh generated strong opposition within the Azerbaijani Republic. The situation became increasingly tense, prompting the Soviet authorities in Moscow to intervene. Soviet military forces were deployed to Azerbaijan in an attempt to maintain control, mitigate the growing unrest, and prevent further escalation of the conflict.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which eventually escalated into a full-scale war in the early 1990s, was rooted in historical, ethnic, and territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has been a longstanding and complex conflict with deep-seated historical grievances and political complexities. The conflict resulted in significant casualties, population displacements, and ongoing geopolitical tensions in the South Caucasus region

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the rest of the Soviet republics declared their independence, and direct conflict began between the two sides over the region.

The Iranian role in this issue has emerged since 1991, when the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, announced during his visit to Azerbaijan that Iran was ready to carry out a role. This position was based on several mediation considerations to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan:

- 1) Iran shares common borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia, thus increasing the possibility of developments in both countries reflecting on Iran.
- 2) The presence of minorities in Iran belonging to the nationalities of both countries
- 3) enhancing Iran's influence and standing regionally.
- 4) strengthening relations with Armenia and trying to maintain its strength in front of both Azerbaijan and Turkey.
- 5) Trying to use this issue in Iran's interest to put pressure on the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, according to Iranian interests [112],
- 6) The pressure of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran on the Iranian government, through some political organizations and press articles in the Shura Council, to intervene in the solution of the conflict, provided that it is in the interest of Azerbaijan [113],
- 7) Military operations along its borders represent a direct threat to the security and stability of Iran, and their continuation may lead to strengthening the role of the Russian Federation, which may end this conflict according to its terms, contrary to Iran's security interests.
- 8) Prolonging the conflict may lead to the displacement of thousands of refugees from war zones towards Iran, which negatively affects and is a burden on Iran [114].

Accordingly, in 1992, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Armenia and Azerbaijan again to mediate between the two countries on this issue and stated, "Iran, as a close neighbor to Azerbaijan and Armenia, does everything it can to help bring about peace, and it is our duty." The Armenians and Azerbaijanis are our friends and brothers [83].

The Armenian and Azerbaijani sides responded to the Iranian mediation. In May 1992, Iran formally extended an invitation to both the Armenian President Levon Ter Petrosyan (1991–1998) and the Azerbaijani President in the Agency Yagub Mammadov to visit Iran. The two presidents came to Tehran and signed an agreement providing for a moratorium, followed by the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed by the shooting between the two sides, but this agreement is between the two parties and not between each other [84]. Then, the exchange of prisoners between the two sides did not last for long, as it quickly suffered a setback due to the Armenian attack in the same year on the remainder of the region's lands that were in the possession of Azerbaijan. The Iranian government expressed its dissatisfaction with the Armenian position, denouncing the Armenian attack and considering it blatant aggression. And Azerbaijan tried to regain lost lands by various means but did not succeed [85, 137 p.]. The land area was estimated at 20% of the total area of Azerbaijan [115, 60 p.].

This development was reflected in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, as Azerbaijani President Abulfelz Elchibey accused Iran of being behind the Armenian attack. "That what Armenia achieved in regional gains did not happen except with Iranian mediation," he alluded to the situation of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran, referring to the possibility of Azerbaijan provoking it against the Iranian government [87].

After that, Azerbaijan refused any Iranian mediation to solve this conflict, and the tension in the relations between the two sides led to an increase in rapprochement between Iran and Armenia, but after that, Iran was able to improve its relations with Azerbaijan after Heydar Aliyev took over the presidency of the republic in 1993, and it sought again to contain and prevent the conflict between the two sides from extending to the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan. In order to release Iran's supportive stance towards Azerbaijan, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, visited Tabriz, one of the largest and most important Iranian cities, home to the majority of Azeris, in July 1993 and stressed that Iran would not remain indifferent towards the further encroachment on the territory of Azerbaijan, and he attacked Armenian politics [116].

In 1993, Armenian forces attacked the Nakhchivan region, which prompted the Iranian government to send some of its military units to the borders with the aim of securing them and providing the necessary camps for the Azerbaijani refugees, but the Russian Federation rejected the Iranian move, threatened to respond militarily to it, and warned Iran against interfering in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its rejection of any measures taken by the Iranian government towards the conflict, whatever the reasons. Meanwhile, Armenia took Iran's position into consideration, so the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia sent a letter to his Iranian counterpart, during which he confirmed that the Armenian forces did not undertake new military operations in the region. Nakhchivan and the problem of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh are still present, and the political and military conflict over the region continues between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Iranian interest in the region

continues and has not been absent from Iran's foreign policy, which is keen to play the mediating role to resolve this conflict according to the dictates of Iranian interests [117, 135 p.].

The Caspian Sea has been a longstanding source of dispute among the five countries bordering it: Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan. The central issue revolves around how to divide the region's vast oil and gas reserves, considered among the largest in the world.

Historically, the Caspian Sea has seen a series of agreements and claims, leading to considerable complexity in resolving the dispute. Iran initially sought to maintain the division of 41% of the Caspian Sea's wealth, based on historical agreements with the Soviet Union. Iran argued for preserving the 1921 and 1940 agreements that granted it 50% of the sea's resources. However, the newly independent states bordering the Caspian Sea rejected this claim, emphasizing that they were successors to the Soviet Union and thus entitled to a share of the sea.

The Caspian Sea's legal status compounded the complexity. Officially recognized as a lake by the United Nations, the sea's classification created challenges in applying international law and norms governing resource divisions in maritime regions. The status fueled debates about whether the Caspian Sea should be treated as a lake, involving equal resource sharing, or as a sea, allowing each country a more substantial share within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Geopolitical interests have played a pivotal role in the Caspian Sea dispute. Historically, Russia exerted considerable influence in the region, striving to maintain its dominant position in Central Asia and Caucasus in. Concurrently, other littoral states, including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, aimed to assert their independence and exploit their energy resources. Iran, too, sought to safeguard its influence and interests in the Caspian Sea.

Economic considerations were also instrumental in the dispute. The Caspian Sea's substantial oil and gas reserves make resource distribution a crucial economic issue for its bordering nations. Discussions have focused on facilitating resource development while ensuring equitable revenue sharing. A major step forward occurred in August 2018, with the five littoral states signing the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea.

This groundbreaking convention established the Caspian Sea as a "special legal regime," a novel classification permitting each country to divide the sea's resources based on its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This marked substantial progress in the dispute, though challenges remain, particularly concerning the delineation of EEZ boundaries [118, 46 p.].

Environmental concerns have arisen due to the potential consequences of oil and gas development in the Caspian Sea on its fragile ecosystem. The sea hosts various species, including the critically endangered sturgeon, necessitating measures to safeguard its environment.

Furthermore, the role of external powers, such as the United States and the European Union, has raised apprehensions among the littoral states. These external actors have displayed interest in the region's energy resources, fueling concerns of interference in the negotiations.

In summary, the Caspian Sea dispute is a multifaceted and long-standing issue. While the 2018 convention represented significant progress, obstacles persist, especially concerning resource division and environmental protection. The littoral states must maintain cooperation and dialogue to ensure the sustainable and equitable development of the Caspian Sea's resources while preserving its unique ecosystem.

Moving to another significant regional issue, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has deep roots in the early 20th century when Armenia and Azerbaijan were both part of the Soviet Union. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Armenians, was assigned to Azerbaijan by the Soviet government in 1923.

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. In 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, created in the 1920s, voted to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia. This move encountered resistance from Azerbaijan, which launched a military offensive to regain control of the region[119].

The conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale war, marked by atrocities committed by both sides. In 1994, a ceasefire was brokered, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh under Armenian control but encircled by Azerbaijani territory. The ceasefire has been violated multiple times over the years, with both sides accusing each other of aggression.

In September 2020, the conflict reignited when Azerbaijan launched a major military offensive to retake Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey backed Azerbaijan, providing military support. Armenia, in turn, received support from Russia, which maintains a military base in the country. The war endured for six weeks and resulted in thousands of casualties on both sides [120].

The conflict ultimately concluded with a Russian-brokered ceasefire, granting Azerbaijan control over some territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian peacekeepers were deployed to oversee the ceasefire. The conflict inflicted severe devastation on the region, displacing thousands and causing significant infrastructure damage.

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh highlights historical and ethnic complexities within the South Caucasus region. It remains a volatile issue with implications for regional stability and security. In light of these complexities, it is imperative for the involved parties to engage in meaningful dialogue and conflict resolution efforts to achieve lasting peace.

Central Asia has become a contested space, attracting the attention of major global powers like Iran, the United States, and Russia, all vying for influence. These Central Asian republics, strategically positioned near Russia, China, and Iran, possess

considerable economic potential and substantial energy reserves. Their oil wealth and proximity to key geopolitical actors have made them particularly attractive to the US.

Central Asia's importance became particularly evident after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US military action in Afghanistan. Its location near Afghanistan made it essential for supplying US forces [121]. The 2003 invasion of Iraq further amplified the region's significance. Following Turkey's refusal to allow troop passage through its territory, Central Asia became a crucial alternative, leading to the establishment of US military bases there. More recently, rising US-Iran tensions have again brought the Central Asian nations into sharper focus.

Observers link the region's importance to the U.S., driven by its military, political, and economic relationships with most Central Asian countries. Simultaneously, concerns arise regarding the potential impact of further U.S.-Iranian escalation on the region, given Iran's immediate proximity to Central Asia.

Examining specific relations within Central Asia, Iranian-Uzbek relations have seen notable shifts. During the rule of former Uzbek President Islam Karimov, relations were tense and unfriendly. Karimov's harsh statements regarding Iran's model and its potential influence in the region, as well as concerns about Iranian interference in Central Asian countries' internal affairs, characterized this period.

However, relations improved significantly after Shaukat Mirzayev assumed power in Uzbekistan in December 2016. By the end of 2018, trade between Iran and Uzbekistan reached \$306 million. Uzbekistan exported cotton, metals, mineral fertilizers, and chemical fibers to Iran, while importing building materials, machinery, fruits, dried fruits, and plastic products. Numerous joint ventures involving Iranian investors were established in Uzbekistan [122, 130 p.].

In contrast, other Central Asian republics maintained cautious and interest-based relations with Iran, avoiding disputes, alliances, or bilateral agreements that might target third parties. Even political statements were approached sensitively when dealing with Iranian matters that intersected with third-party interests.

Iran played a pivotal role in recognizing Tajikistan's independence, with shared linguistic and ethnic ties facilitating relations. Tehran supported the construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydropower station in Tajikistan and invested in various government projects. Many Iranian companies operated in Tajikistan across energy, construction, agriculture, and transportation sectors.

However, relations experienced a downturn in 2016 when Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan, was invited to an international conference in Tehran. In early 2019, experienced diplomats were appointed to head diplomatic missions for Tajikistan in Tehran and Iran in Dushanbe, reflecting efforts to mitigate political sensitivities and prioritize commercial benefits [123].

In conclusion, the future of Iranian relations with Central Asia is a complex interplay of geopolitics, economics, and culture. The region's importance is underscored

by its position at the crossroads of global powers. Iran must deftly navigate these dynamics to promote regional stability, economic development, and cultural exchange.

In an era marked by heightened tensions between the United States and Iran, the countries of Central Asia, occupying a critical geostrategic position, have garnered significant attention. Their vulnerability to the ramifications of escalating U.S.-Iranian relations, especially following the Ukrainian plane incident in January 2020, has made Central Asia a focal point.

Central Asia's relevance to major powers, including the United States, has grown since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The region's vast oil wealth and its proximity to Russia, China, and Iran have made it a battleground for economic resources and oil and gas transit routes.

The region's geopolitical importance became evident with the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. Central Asia's geographical location near Afghanistan made it a vital logistical hub for supplying American troops. The region's strategic importance was further amplified during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, as its military bases became a focal point [124].

Central Asia has returned to the spotlight amid the renewed tension between the United States and Iran. Observers link the region's importance to the U.S.'s need for military, political, and economic ties with its countries. Additionally, the extent to which these countries would be affected by an escalation in U.S.-Iranian relations is a pressing concern, given Iran's immediate proximity to Central Asia.

As the geopolitical landscape evolves, Central Asia presents a multifaceted dynamic for Iran. Economic factors will play a significant role, with Iran possessing substantial economic potential, including oil and gas reserves and an educated population. Yet, Iran's economic growth has been hindered by sanctions, corruption, and mismanagement. To rebuild its economy, Iran must harness its potential and promote regional economic development.

Energy cooperation is one promising avenue. Iran is a major producer of oil and gas, as are the Central Asian countries. Collaborating on energy projects, including pipelines and infrastructure development, holds significant potential for mutual benefit. Such cooperation can stimulate regional economic growth and reduce dependence on external energy markets.

Cultural ties also factor into Iranian relations with Central Asia. Historically, Iran and its Central Asian neighbors share a deep-rooted history of cultural and economic exchange. Leveraging this cultural affinity presents opportunities for collaboration in education, science, and the arts. Enhanced cooperation in areas such as education, science, technology, and engineering can drive regional economic development and innovation.

The future of Iranian relations with Central Asia hinges on a delicate balance of geopolitics, economics, and culture. As the region faces security threats like terrorism,



drug trafficking, and organized crime, security cooperation emerges as a potential area of collaboration to promote regional stability.

Trade and investment also hold promise. Iran and its Central Asian neighbors possess significant economic potential, making increased trade and investment a catalyst for regional economic development and reduced dependence on external powers. However, Iran must address its economic challenges, including corruption, mismanagement, and the impact of sanctions, to fully realize this potential.

Ultimately, the future of Iranian relations with Central Asia is shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. The region's evolving dynamics require flexibility and adaptability in Iran's approach to foster regional stability, economic development, and cultural exchange.

Shifting our focus to the Caspian Sea, this immense inland body of water has long been a subject of contention among the five surrounding nations: Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan. The primary source of disagreement pertains to how to distribute the substantial oil and gas reserves believed to be among the world's largest.

The Caspian Sea's history is marked by a series of agreements and claims that contribute to its intricate dispute. Initially, Iran sought to preserve the division of 41% of the Caspian Sea's wealth, rooted in historical agreements with the Soviet Union. Iran argued for upholding the 1921 and 1940 agreements that granted it 50% of the sea's resources. However, the newly independent states neighboring the Caspian Sea rejected this claim, asserting their succession from the Soviet Union and entitlement to a share of the sea [126].

The Caspian Sea's legal status compounds the complexity of the dispute. Officially recognized as a lake by the United Nations, this classification poses challenges in applying international law and norms governing resource divisions in maritime regions. This status fuels debates over whether the Caspian Sea should be treated as a lake, involving equal resource sharing, or as a sea, allowing each country a more substantial share within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) [127].

Geopolitical interests significantly influence the Caspian Sea dispute. Russia has historically held substantial power in the region and has sought to maintain its influence in Central Asia and Caucasus in. Conversely, other littoral states, including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, aim to assert their independence and exploit their energy resources. Iran, too, seeks to safeguard its influence and interests in the Caspian Sea.

Economic considerations are another pivotal aspect of the dispute. The Caspian Sea's vast oil and gas reserves make their distribution a matter of paramount economic importance for the bordering nations. These resources represent a significant source of potential wealth, and thus, negotiations have centered on how to facilitate their responsible development while simultaneously ensuring a fair and equitable distribution of the resulting revenues. This complex issue has required careful consideration of the competing interests of the various littoral states.

Following years of protracted discussions and diplomatic efforts, a notable breakthrough was achieved in August 2018. The five nations bordering the Caspian Sea—Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan—signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. This landmark agreement established a unique legal framework for the sea, designating it as a body with a "special legal regime." This novel classification allows each country to delineate its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ), within which it has sovereign rights for the exploration and exploitation of marine resources. This convention represented a substantial step forward in resolving the long-standing disputes surrounding the Caspian Sea's resources. It provided a foundation for cooperation and a mechanism for managing the complex issues related to resource allocation.

However, despite this significant achievement, challenges persist. The convention, while establishing the principle of EEZs, still leaves room for interpretation and potential disagreement regarding the precise division of resources. The actual delineation of these EEZ boundaries remains a complex technical and political undertaking. Further negotiations and agreements will be necessary to definitively establish these boundaries and ensure that all parties are satisfied with the outcome. Moreover, the long-term implications of the "special legal regime" designation will need to be carefully monitored and managed to prevent future disputes and ensure the sustainable development of the Caspian Sea's resources. The convention, while a major step, is not the final word on the matter, and continued dialogue and cooperation among the littoral states will be essential for realizing the full potential of the Caspian Sea's resources while preserving its unique ecosystem.

Environmental concerns have also arisen due to the potential consequences of oil and gas development in the Caspian Sea on its fragile ecosystem. The sea hosts various species, including the critically endangered sturgeon, necessitating measures to safeguard its environment.

Furthermore, the role of external powers, such as the United States and the European Union, has raised apprehensions among the littoral states. These external actors have displayed interest in the region's energy resources, fueling concerns of interference in the negotiations.

In summary, the Caspian Sea dispute is a multifaceted and long-standing issue. While the 2018 convention represented significant progress, obstacles persist, especially concerning resource division and environmental protection. The littoral states must maintain cooperation and dialogue to ensure the sustainable and equitable development of the Caspian Sea's resources while preserving its unique ecosystem.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a protracted dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, centers on the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the South Caucasus. This mountainous region has a history rooted in the early 20th century when both Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the Soviet Union. In 1923, the Soviet government assigned the predominantly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijan [128].

The conflict escalated in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union began to crumble. In 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast voted to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia. This move was met with resistance from Azerbaijan, which launched a military offensive to regain control of the region [129, 16 p.].

The conflict swiftly escalated into a full-scale war characterized by atrocities committed by both sides. In 1994, a ceasefire was brokered, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh under Armenian control but surrounded by Azerbaijani territory. Over the years, this ceasefire has been violated multiple times, with both sides accusing each other of aggression.

In September 2020, the conflict rekindled when Azerbaijan launched a major military offensive, backed by Turkey, to retake Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia received support from Russia, which maintains a military base in the country. The war endured for six weeks, resulting in thousands of casualties on both sides [130].

The conflict concluded with a Russian-brokered ceasefire that granted Azerbaijan control over some territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian peacekeepers were deployed to monitor the ceasefire. The conflict inflicted severe devastation on the region, displacing thousands and causing significant infrastructure damage.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict underscores historical and ethnic complexities within the South Caucasus. It remains a volatile issue with implications for regional stability and security. Meaningful dialogue and conflict resolution efforts are imperative for achieving lasting peace in the region.

Iran supports the Russian Federation regarding "joint sovereignty" over the Caspian Sea, and both countries are based on some historical facts that say that the Caspian Sea is a Russian-Iranian bilateral sea, but these allegations contradict the reality of the Soviet republics that used to exploit the sea according to the principle of division, which is the principle that regulates the relationship between Soviet Russia and the rest of the republics. The part of Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea is the richest in oil and gas compared to the rest of the regions, and the number of fields it contains is estimated at between 25 and 32. It is estimated that there is an estimated oil reserve of 27 billion barrels, in addition to the fact that this oil wealth is relatively near the sea level, which makes the cost of extracting it relatively low compared to other Caspian Sea regions [92, 129 p.].

From this standpoint, Azerbaijan has become more attractive to foreign investment companies, but the opposition of the riparian countries to any single action by Azerbaijan to invest in these fields prevents the freedom to dispose of them, and the Caspian Sea countries consider any agreement to invest them as illegal, without reaching a full and consensual agreement on the legal status. For the Caspian Sea to the satisfaction of all parties, and the point of disagreement between Iran and Azerbaijan is centered on the oil fields within Iranian regional waters almost, and includes three fields, namely ( Sharq , Aluf, and Alazer ) and the last field is the most important for the two

countries as it contains nearly 20 billion barrels, and this region occupies an area estimated between 17-22% of the Caspian Sea shores [93, 49 p.].

This issue caused tension in the relations between the two countries more than once between the years 1993 and 2001, and the stage of Iran's threat to use military force reached after Iran objected to contracts it had signed with foreign companies to invest in the wealth of the sea. The issue of sharing agreements is still illegal and null [94], and it does not have any legal status. The Caspian Sea resources are an axis of contention and competition not only between Iran and Azerbaijan but between the five countries bordering it, and it has not been resolved until this writing of these lines despite the holding of the Caspian Sea Cooperation Organization at the summit level more than once, the last of which was on October 16, 2007.

As for the Republic of Armenia, which is one of the republics of the Caucasus region and became independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Iran quickly recognized its independence and exchanged diplomatic representation with it. Just like the rest of the Soviet republics, Armenia shares 35 km of borders with Iran, as well as the presence of more than 200 thousand people of Armenian origin in Iran, which makes them an influential factor in the Iranian community [131, 87 p.].

Iran has sought, since 1991, to establish good relations with Armenia through its efforts to mediate a solution to the conflict with Azerbaijan over the region of Nakorno Karabakh, including Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati's visit to the Armenian capital (Yerevan) in 1992, and this issue has at times contributed to an increase in Iranian rapprochement with Armenia, according to the positions and dictates of Iranian interests [96].

Iran has tried to maintain its relations with Armenia and seek to strengthen them, with the aim of putting pressure on Azerbaijan in response to the interference of Azerbaijan in the affairs of the Azerbaijani minority in northern Iran, as Iran and Armenia share some security concerns, including concern about the emergence of a Turkish front or bloc between Azerbaijan and Turkey [132].

Despite the difference in the political system and the great disparity between them (Iran is a large country ruled by an Islamic regime, while Armenia is a small Christian country), both countries have been keen to strengthen bilateral relations and expand cooperation between them in a direction that helps strengthen their relations. Several political and economic shifts bolstered certain powers' influence in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan's 1999 agreement to host a US military base [133], coupled with growing Turkish-Israeli military cooperation (starting in 1996) and Azerbaijan's expressed interest in joint Turkish-Israeli military exercises, intensified the US-Russia rivalry in the region, impacting Iranian-Armenian relations. The US's growing alignment with Azerbaijan simultaneously encouraged Armenia to strengthen its ties with Russia. Consequently, Armenian President Robert Kocharyan's 2001 visit to Iran fostered closer relations, particularly economically [133].

This warming of relations intensified after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2005 election as Iranian president. Armenia dispatched a delegation to Iran to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Iran reportedly pledged to seek a resolution to the conflict in return for Armenia's assistance in quelling Azerbaijani separatist movements [134, 105 p.] and monitoring Azerbaijani opposition groups. Armenia remains Iran's sole strategic ally in the South Caucasus.

Perhaps this partnership came about as a result of competition and conflict between Armenia on the one hand and Turkey and Azerbaijan on the other, as well as the ongoing tension between Tehran and Baku. The importance of this partnership lies in Armenia's desire to reduce its dependence on energy supplies from Russia through Georgian territory after the Russian Federation raised gas export prices in 2007, in addition to the fact that this partnership strengthens Armenia's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh region by obtaining Iranian support. As for Iran, compensating it and strengthening its relations with Armenia is focused mainly on security, which is an attempt to prevent the spread of American political and military influence in the southern Caucasus region. Beside that, the partnership between Iran and Armenia contributes to strengthening each other's position vis-à-vis Turkey and Azerbaijan, but against the background of the criticisms and accusations directed against Iran regarding its nuclear program, especially by the United States of America, some Armenian political leaders believe that it is better to limit relations with Iran and not appear in this manner. To do so, Armenia appears to be an ally of Tehran, but at the same time, the Armenian military leaders stress the importance and necessity of maintaining Armenia's relations with Iran as they are, especially if the negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh region ended in failure and the military operations between the two countries were renewed [135, 78 p.].

The Iranian policy towards the Caucasus region started with several political, economic, and security considerations, through which Iran was able to build good relations with the countries of this region, especially with Armenia, which expanded its relations and cooperation with Iran until it reached the stage of partnership, in contrast to the Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, which most of the time were characterized by tension and instability due to the issues and problems between them, especially the issue of sharing the Caspian Sea's wealth and the Azeri minority in Iran. Despite this, Iran has sought to open up to Azerbaijan and improve relations with it, with the aim of investing Azerbaijan's oil wealth in the Caspian Sea with the countries of the Caucasus region. Iran's relations with the countries of the Caucasus have been affected by regional and international rivalries, including the struggle for influence, especially between the Russian Federation and the United States of America, and the attempts to dominate and obtain the largest economic investment projects in this region.

For various historical, cultural, political, and economic reasons, Iran was unable to expand its cooperation with Central Asian countries as long as it was necessary after the

collapse of the Soviet Union, and various factors contributed to this occurring, the most important of which are the following:

1) Tehran's confrontation with the West led to the imposition of unilateral and international sanctions against Tehran, which made it difficult to develop Iran's economic and political cooperation with the countries of the region.

2) Due to the lack of sustainable allies for Iran in the region (although Iranian-Armenian-Tajik relations are among the closest with Central Asia and the Caucasus), these relations also have a transversal nature, as these countries are also affected by their relationships with the United States of America and Russia.

3) Iran's position on the legal system of the Caspian Sea and the failure to persuade the parties to accept this position led to an increase in the dispute between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

The beginning of a relative change has emerged in the foreign political atmosphere of Iran in the Central Asia and the Caucasus with the presence of leaders and senior officials in these areas in the inauguration ceremony of Hassan Rowhani, in August 2013, where he attended President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov; The President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, and President of the Azerbaijani Parliament, Ogtay Asadov; And the President of the Uzbek Senate Ilheiser Sabrov and the Georgian Minister of State attended the official opening ceremony of Hassan Rouhani in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, which indicated the serious interest of the leaders and officials of Central Asian and Caucasus countries in the new government of Iran with a different discourse on foreign policy.

This change, together with the Iranian nuclear deal with the great powers, the tremendous conditions prevailing in the Arab Middle East, and the attention that the new diplomatic team brought to the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus, led to a new momentum in Iran's foreign policy.

Although there are also criticisms regarding the approach and practice of Iran's foreign policy at this stage, the re-election of Hassan Rouhani as the elected president of Iran means the stability of the government's discourse and foreign policy over the next four years, and by analyzing the position of the governments in the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus towards the first government of Hassan Rouhani, there was a better understanding of Iranian foreign policy expectations and perspectives towards the countries of these regions in the second government of Hassan Rouhani, indicating important points [136, 10 p.].

A key achievement of Rouhani's first term in the South Caucasus was the marked improvement in Iran-Azerbaijan relations, a stark contrast to the less cordial period from 2007 to 2013. This warming trend was evident in numerous high-level exchanges, including multiple bilateral visits and several multilateral meetings. The establishment of a trilateral framework involving Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia to advance the North-South transport corridor, particularly the railway link, further underscored this progress. Continued work on the Caspian-Rasht-Astara railway is anticipated, alongside increased

Iranian economic activity in Azerbaijan, notably in the Shah Deniz gas field's second development phase. Ongoing discussions regarding gas export pricing to Europe, and potential Iranian involvement in the TAP and TANAP pipelines, could significantly elevate the roles of both Iran and Azerbaijan in European energy supply, especially given Europe's ongoing energy disputes with Russia.

Iran-Armenia relations remained relatively stable. Visa requirements were lifted, and high-level visits, including those by Armenian leaders, contributed to this stability. Visits by Iranian officials helped address any imbalances stemming from Iran's relationships with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Future relations with Yerevan are expected to be more balanced, with a focus on the "North-South Investment Road" initiative. The planned renovation of the Armenian-Georgian highway and the construction of an Iran-Armenia railway suggest the potential for two crucial southern corridors for Iran, complementing the Iran-Azerbaijan rail project.

Iran's relationship with Georgia, while initially slow to develop, gained momentum in 2017. High-level visits signaled a renewed commitment to strengthening ties. Since the nuclear deal, Iran has prioritized economic cooperation with Georgia, facilitated by visa-free travel. This policy has the potential to boost tourism, particularly given the presence of Georgian communities in Iran. Iranian expertise in dam construction, hydroelectric projects, and potential port development in Batumi offer further avenues for collaboration. Plans to expand transit links under the North-South corridor, connecting Bandar Abbas to Batumi, and potentially synchronizing power transmission through Armenia, Georgia, and Russia, are also being explored. The prospect of Iranian natural gas exports to Georgia via Armenia represents a promising area for environmental and commercial partnerships. However, realizing this potential requires careful political planning by both governments to create a conducive environment for joint ventures.

Turning to Central Asia, the principal issue for Rouhani's first administration was the growing friction and volatility that emerged in the historically strong partnership between Iran and the Republic of Tajikistan. Although Tajik President Emomali Rahmon was present at Rouhani's official inauguration ceremony in the Islamic Consultative Assembly in August 2013, and Rouhani later visited Tajikistan in 2014 to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, such gestures did not suffice to counter tensions. The negative consequences linked to Babak Zanjani's financial network in Tajikistan, along with the Tajik authorities' objection to the attendance of the head of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, Muhiddin Kabiri, at the Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran in December 1994, exemplified the fragile and fraught state of bilateral ties.

Although the official opening ceremony and subsequent interactions had indicated a period of relative progress, the financial controversies and disagreements surrounding the Islamist opposition revealed deeper strains in the relationship. Tajikistan's critical response to Kabiri's participation highlighted Dushanbe's sensitivity over Iran's

perceived acceptance or acknowledgment of groups it deems unlawful. Iran, for its part, cited a commitment to broader regional religious and cultural engagement, but this stance did not mitigate the Tajik government's strong reaction. As a result, interactions between Tehran and Dushanbe remained tumultuous, overshadowing earlier optimism and showing how quickly diplomacy can be undermined by core disputes.

Overall, the first term of Hassan Rouhani involved both advancements and setbacks in Iran's dealings with South Caucasus and Central Asian neighbors. While the Iranian-Azerbaijani relationship recorded remarkable gains, including high-level talks and plans for expanded railway projects, and Armenian ties remained steady, the progress with Georgia was modest before 2017. Once that year began, renewed diplomatic efforts opened new opportunities for economic and energy collaborations. At the same time, thorny problems with Tajikistan demonstrated that external disputes, financial controversies, and differences over the role of opposition groups can abruptly erode established bonds. The years to come may be defined by Iran's ability to manage these complexities, seek balanced relationships with both Yerevan and Baku, and rebuild trust with Dushanbe wherever possible. Through pragmatic economic partnerships and a commitment to regional dialogues, Iran will likely continue aiming to strengthen its footprint in the Caucasus region while striving to keep channels open in Central Asia [139].

The severe impact of these issues, especially the presence of Muhiddin Kabiri in Tehran on Iranian-Tajik relations, and their continuation for two years, had little to do with the past of the close and traditional relations between the two countries, and according to the visit of Deputy Minister Avraham Rakhimpour, in February 2013 to approve the draft security cooperation law and law enforcement between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Tajikistan in the Islamic Shura Council at the time, which was a bit of a message of goodwill to the side of the Tajik, between Iran and Tajikistan, and therefore, one of the most important expectations in Hassan Rouhani's second government is the increasing effort to improve relations between Iran and Tajikistan [139].

In the first government of Hassan Rouhani, relations between Iran and Uzbekistan, compared to other Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, did not receive much attention, and this was not new, led by Islam Karimov, as the relations between the two sides were not high and close. For this reason, and despite developments in Iranian foreign policy in the first government of Hassan Rouhani, no bilateral meeting took place between Hassan Rouhani and Islam Karimov in Tehran and Tashkent during 2013-2016 and after the sudden death of Islam Karimov in September 2016, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif participated in Karimov's funeral in Samarkand, and expressed his interest in the new President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirzayev, to improve relations with Iran, and despite this, in practice, there has been no particular change in relations between Tehran and Tashkent given the great changes that have occurred in Tajikistan for example, especially in the context of Improving its cold



and fragile relations with Tajikistan, in the second government of Hassan Rouhani, it is expected that capabilities and conditions will be established in Uzbekistan, after Islam Karimov, will benefit more effectively from the atmosphere of the visit of the presidents of the two countries after a very long period.

Uzbekistan remains the country most reluctant to develop its relations with Iran for several reasons: The Uzbek regime was suspicious of any rival regional power, was based on fear of Islamist insurgency, and until 2005 positioned itself as the Uzbek state, the main ally of the United States in the region [140]. Consequently, any potential change might incite Tashkent to further develop relations with Tehran, perhaps in a very moderate way. Trade relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are insignificant, even if the latter has long been a gateway to Iranian influence in Central Asia.

It should be noted that Uzbekistan is a country with an area of 447 thousand square kilometers, located in the heart of Central Asia, with a population of nearly 30 million people, representing half of the region's population, given the dispersion of a large minority of the Uzbek people throughout Central Asia and Afghanistan and their influence and powers of influence throughout the region. Therefore, given these characteristics, Uzbekistan is a "balance of power" and a "port of stability" in the geopolitical region of Central Asia, which has a dual significance for improving relations between Iran and Uzbekistan at the present time [141, 55 p.].

In addition to the regional political game, there are also some bilateral relationships that can be reviewed: Stock exchanges are dominated by Kazakhstan, followed by Turkmenistan. Iran is the sixth-largest trading partner of Turkmenistan and the seventh-largest trading partner of Tajikistan, but this is much less important for other countries, and the numbers should not cause any illusions: With the exception of Turkmen and Tajik exports, Iran accounts for only 0.3 to 6.7% of the region's imports and exports [141].

In the first government of Hassan Rouhani, relations between Iran and Kyrgyzstan witnessed an escalation, and a series of reciprocal meetings were held in Tehran and Bishkek, which led to the development of relations between the two countries in various fields, such as transportation, energy transfer, and combating terrorism and extremism, which were very effective. In Hassan Rouhani's second government, it is expected that besides maintaining and developing relations between Tehran and Bishkek, there will be important issues such as facilitating consular relations, establishing a direct line between the two capitals, and gradually raising the visa in three stages. In the first stage, visas for merchants, businessmen, industrial sectors, and businessmen and manufacturers can be canceled; in the second stage, for tourism groups; and in the third stage, for all citizens of the two countries, which can play an important role in promoting the tourism industry and economic and commercial relations between the two countries. The China-Kyrgyzstan railway, linking through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with Iran, is also a major transit capacity and is expected to take a more serious look at Hassan Rouhani's second government.

Iran, a country with a long and rich history, has always been an important player in the Middle East and beyond. Despite facing a number of challenges, such as economic sanctions and political isolation, Iran has been able to maintain its strategic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In this essay, we will explore Iran's foreign strategic opportunities in these regions, focusing on its economic, political, and cultural ties.

Historically, Iran has had strong ties with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran was a major player in the ancient Silk Road, which connected Asia and Europe, and this trade route helped to establish economic and cultural ties between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the modern era, Iran has maintained close ties with these regions and has sought to strengthen its influence there through a variety of means.

One of the main areas in which Iran has sought to expand its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus is through economic ties. Iran has a number of advantages in this regard, including its vast oil and gas reserves, its strategic location, and its experience as a regional economic power. Iran has sought to use these advantages to establish economic partnerships with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

One of the key economic projects that Iran has pursued in the region is the construction of the North-South Transport Corridor. This transport corridor, which will link Iran with Russia via Azerbaijan, is intended to provide an alternative to existing trade routes, which are heavily reliant on the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal. The North-South Transport Corridor will enable Iran to increase its trade with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus and will also enable these countries to access the markets of Europe and beyond.

In addition to the North-South Transport Corridor, Iran has also sought to establish bilateral economic ties with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. For example, Iran has signed a number of economic cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, which is one of the largest economies in Central Asia. Iran has also established a joint economic commission with Uzbekistan, which is aimed at promoting economic cooperation between the two countries.

Iran has also sought to expand its economic ties with the countries of the Caucasus. For example, Iran has signed a number of agreements with Azerbaijan, which is a key player in the region due to its strategic location and its vast oil and gas reserves. Iran has also sought to increase its economic ties with Armenia, which has a strong Diaspora in Iran and is strategically located between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Despite these efforts, Iran's economic ties with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have been limited by a number of factors. One of the main factors is the region's dependence on Russia and China for trade and investment. Another factor is the economic sanctions that have been imposed on Iran by the United States and other Western countries, which have limited Iran's ability to access international markets and finance.

In addition to its economic ties, Iran has also sought to expand its political ties with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran has traditionally been viewed as a mediator in regional conflicts and has sought to use this reputation to establish political partnerships with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

One of the main political challenges that Iran has faced in the region is the influence of external powers, such as the United States and Russia. These powers have sought to expand their influence in the region through a variety of means, including military intervention, economic aid, and political alliances. Iran has sought to counter this influence by promoting its own political interests in the region.

One way that Iran has sought to do this is by establishing alliances with other countries in the region. For example, Iran has established a strategic partnership with Russia, which is one of the most powerful players in the region. This partnership has been aimed at countering the influence of the United States and other Western powers and has involved cooperation on a range of issues, including regional security, energy, and trade.

Iran's pursuit of political partnerships in Central Asia and the Caucasus is evident in its engagement with regional conflicts. For instance, its involvement in the Afghan peace process and its support of the Minsk Group in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demonstrates its commitment to regional stability. Cultural diplomacy also plays a key role, with Iranian cultural centers promoting Iranian culture and language throughout the region. Furthermore, Iran leverages its Shia identity to foster alliances, particularly with Azerbaijan and other nations with sizable Shia populations.

Despite these efforts, Iran encounters significant obstacles. Competition from Russia and China, with their considerable economic, political, and military weight, poses a major challenge. The threat of terrorism and extremism within Central Asia and the Caucasus also requires attention, prompting Iran to advocate for regional security. Economic sanctions, imposed by the US and other Western countries, further constrain Iran's ability to expand its influence, limiting access to international markets and hindering economic and political partnerships.

Nevertheless, Iran has managed to maintain its strategic interests through a combination of economic, political, and cultural initiatives. Projects like the North-South Transport Corridor, along with economic and political partnerships, and the promotion of its cultural and Islamic identity, exemplify this approach. However, the aforementioned competition and sanctions continue to impede Iran's progress. Despite these challenges, Iran's strategic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus are likely to persist, ensuring its continued involvement in regional affairs.

In essence, the Rouhani administration's initial focus on Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly following the nuclear deal, highlights the regions' growing importance in Iran's foreign policy. While progress has been made, critiques suggest the need for a more comprehensive strategy. Iran's cultural and civilizational legacy, integral to its West Asian identity, informs its long-term vision for 2025. Rouhani's re-election

signals a commitment to dialogue and détente, addressing Iran's security concerns and fostering dynamic diplomacy, particularly with neighboring countries. This creates opportunities for Iran and Asian nations to strengthen bilateral and regional relations.

Sanctions, which cut Iranian banks off from SWIFT, have severely hampered international transactions with Iran. Only oil-dependent nations maintained trade, often through barter systems. The disparity between the official and free market exchange rates for the Iranian rial compelled Iranian businesses to find alternative channels for repatriating funds, bypassing Iranian financial institutions and government exchange rate policies.

For Iran to deepen engagement with Central Asian and Caucasian nations, greater flexibility is required in several key areas. Iran's historical ties to these regions, coupled with its geographical proximity, cultural and economic links, and regional geopolitical dynamics, present opportunities for increased strategic influence. This paper will analyze these opportunities, including economic ties, cultural and historical affinities, geopolitical considerations, and evolving regional dynamics. It will also examine the challenges Iran faces and the potential implications for regional stability and security.

Iran's economic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus are significant, particularly in the areas of energy, trade, and investment. Iran is a major energy producer and exporter, and Central Asia and the Caucasus are rich in natural resources, making these regions important markets for Iranian energy exports. Iran has established energy partnerships with several countries in the region, including Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. For example, Iran and Turkmenistan have signed several agreements to develop joint gas fields and construct pipelines to transport Turkmen gas to Iran and beyond. Iran also has a stake in the Caspian Sea's energy resources and has been negotiating with other littoral states to resolve issues related to the Caspian's legal status and resource sharing.

In addition to energy, Iran has an interest in expanding trade and investment ties with Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran is well-positioned to provide a market for the region's agricultural and mineral exports and has established trade agreements with several countries in the region, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Iran has also invested in infrastructure projects in the region, such as the construction of roads and railways that connect Iran with Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Iran has a shared history and cultural heritage with Central Asia and the Caucasus, which can be leveraged to enhance its influence in these regions. Iran's Persian language, culture, and religion have had a significant impact on the region, particularly in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, where the Persian language and culture have had a lasting influence. Iran has also maintained strong cultural and educational ties with the region, providing scholarships for students from Central Asia and the Caucasus to study in Iran and establishing cultural centers in several countries in the region.

Iran's geopolitical position and regional ambitions also provide opportunities for strategic engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran sees itself as a regional

power and seeks to exert its influence beyond its borders. Iran's engagement with the region can serve to counterbalance the influence of other regional powers, such as Russia and China, and advance its strategic interests.

Iran's involvement in regional security issues, such as the war in Syria and the fight against ISIS, has also brought it closer to countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus that share its security concerns. Iran has provided support to governments in the region, such as Armenia and Tajikistan, to counter terrorist threats and enhance regional security cooperation.

The changing geopolitical landscape in the region provides both opportunities and challenges for Iran's engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus. The recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has highlighted the potential for regional instability and the risk of Iran being caught in the middle of conflicts between its neighbors. At the same time, the normalization of relations between some countries in the region, such as Azerbaijan and Armenia, provides opportunities for increased economic and diplomatic cooperation.

1) Iran can define a new strategy where Iran's priorities can be redefined in Central Asia and the Caucasus and what should be focused on in the next four years.

2) It is necessary to review Iran's objectives and the means to achieve them in Central Asia and the Caucasus by knowing external strategic interests and working towards achieving them.

3) Iran should have a comprehensive plan to coordinate all affairs in the target countries or at least establish outcomes for diplomatic action through which goals and policies can change.

4) Iran's current opponents at the regional level, namely Russia, China, India, and Turkey, have a more open hand than Iran until Iran solves its problems with the United States and the European Union on nuclear issues. Thus, Iran can solve its problems with the United States and the European Union on the one hand, increase its negotiating ability against opponents on the other, and provide a favorable environment for the development of its cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

5) The comparative advantage of Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus is the rich historical and cultural background that these countries share. So it is better to focus on the priority of cultural cooperation with these countries where Iran has used this comparative advantage for many reasons over the past few years, and if Iran has to strengthen cultural ties with Central Asia and the Caucasus countries, it will be more favorable for economic and political cooperation activities because culture, first, is the basis for economic activity and political cooperation in these areas. Second, in this region of Iran, there are greater commonalities and comparative advantages than in the competing countries' common history, common culture, and common religion in Asia [143].

6) As for economic cooperation between Iran and the countries of the region, the countries of Central Asia and the two countries of the South Caucasus can use Iran's roads and sign joint contracts for the transportation of gas, oil, roads, and railways, as well as cultural activities, because they do not enjoy free water. However, as soon as the countries of the region are encouraged to cooperate more with Iran, the necessary arrangements must be made for this cooperation, and their common interests should be considered without being threatened. Cultural cooperation plays the role of an elixir in this area [144].

7) Identification of joint projects in the private sector: after all these years, the Iranian private sector has not yet been able to link with the private sector in neighboring countries.

8) Recognition of Iran's current capabilities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, such as manufacturing building products and providing technical and engineering services, and the existence of export incentives between Iran and the Central Asian countries

9) cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in the construction of a railway line and the construction of a tripartite oil pipeline between Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan along the coast of the Caspian Sea [145, 160 p.].

In conclusion, there are significant strategic opportunities for Iran in its relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus. These opportunities are shaped by Iran's desire to expand its regional influence, diversify its trade relations, and address its domestic economic challenges.

First, Iran sees the Central Asian and Caucasian countries as important partners for expanding its regional influence. This includes cooperating on regional security issues as well as pursuing common economic and cultural interests. By deepening ties with these countries, Iran can enhance its presence and influence beyond the Middle East.

Second, the Central Asian and Caucasian countries are important potential markets for Iranian goods and services. By diversifying its trade relations, Iran can reduce its reliance on traditional partners in the Middle East and Europe and pursue new opportunities for economic growth.

Third, the natural resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly oil and gas, offer significant potential for economic cooperation and investment. Iran has expressed interest in pursuing energy projects and trade agreements with these countries, which could provide a boost to its own energy sector and economic growth.

While there are also challenges to deepening Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus, including competition with other regional powers and domestic economic challenges, the strategic opportunities presented by these countries make them an important focus for Iranian foreign policy.

### **3.2. Prospects of the Iranian politics in the Caucasus ad Central Asia .**

Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus has encountered numerous hurdles in recent years, restricting its influence in the region. This essay will critically examine some of the existing obstacles and issues in Iran's policies towards Central Asia and the Caucasus.

- 1) Limited range of Iranian exports
- 2) Weak banking connections between Iran and regional countries
- 3) Issues with transportation and transit of goods
- 4) Lack of a joint chamber of commerce between Iran and regional countries, unlike the Iranian-Kazakhstan Joint Chamber of Commerce
- 5) Technical challenges and internal barriers in regional countries left by the former communist regime, along with issues in Iranian institutions that still engage with European countries
- 6) Absence of a clear strategy for economic cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, despite many cultural ties
- 7) Trade barriers including extensive tariffs
- 8) Persistent bureaucracy in exporting and importing goods
- 9) Weak banking system hindering commercial and economic relations
- 10) Multiple decision-making centers and lack of coordination between public and private sectors in Iran
- 11) Structural weaknesses in guiding traders and exporters and failure to follow up on joint economic approvals
- 12) Lack of commitment to fulfilling signed agreements from other parties
- 13) Limited understanding of regional markets and consumer behavior among Iranian businessmen, considering local culture, customs, and traditions
- 14) Absence of a unified system for exporting and marketing goods, hindering economic cooperation expansion
- 15) Structural weaknesses in guiding traders and exporters and failure to follow up on joint economic approvals [146, 70 p.]

A major obstacle to Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus has been economic sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western countries. These sanctions have restricted Iran's access to international markets and finance, hindering its ability to engage in economic and political partnerships with regional countries.

For example, the North-South Transport Corridor, an infrastructure project intended to link Iran, Central Asia, and Russia, has faced delays due to sanctions. The project requires significant investment from international partners, but sanctions have made securing necessary funding difficult.

Another challenge to Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus is the threat of terrorism and extremism. Central Asia and the Caucasus host several extremist

groups, and Iran has attempted to counter these groups by supporting regional security and stability.

However, Iran's support for regional security and stability has sometimes been met with suspicion by other regional countries. For instance, Iran's support for the Assad regime in Syria, seen as a sponsor of terrorism, has tarnished Iran's image and complicated its efforts to build partnerships with other nations.

Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus faces significant headwinds, primarily due to competition from established regional powers. Russia and China exert considerable economic, political, and military influence, actively expanding their regional interests. Russia's historical and cultural ties within the region, cultivated over centuries, provide a strong foundation for its engagement. Concurrently, China's Belt and Road Initiative, a large-scale infrastructure project, is amplifying its economic and political presence, linking it strategically to Europe and the Middle East. This competition constrains Iran's ability to cultivate influence and forge partnerships.

Despite these challenges, Iran remains committed to its strategic interests. It pursues these interests through various avenues, including establishing economic and political collaborations, promoting its cultural and religious identity, and advocating for regional stability. While these obstacles are substantial, they are not insurmountable. Iran is poised to continue playing a significant role in the region's political and economic landscape.

In summary, the potential for cooperation between Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus exists alongside considerable challenges. Addressing these challenges, such as competition with other regional powers, the impact of economic sanctions, and prevailing security concerns, is crucial. Successful navigation of these issues will enable Iran and regional states to strengthen their relationships, fostering greater stability and prosperity.

Iran and Russia acted as allies in the civil war in Syria, supporting the Assad regime. Their collaboration began no later than 2015. According to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, a pivotal moment was Qasem Soleimani's visit to Moscow in 2015, which influenced Russia to join the war in Syria on Assad's side [125].

Until the summer of 2022, Iran maintained a neutral stance on the Ukraine war, similar to China and India. The Iranian Foreign Minister attributed the war's onset to "NATO provocations," while calling for a ceasefire and a political resolution [126]. Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi expressed support to Putin to halt NATO's expansion. However, during Putin's visit on July 19, Iran's top leader Ali Khamenei referred to Russia's actions in Ukraine as "preventive measures," marking a shift to a pro-Russian stance. Some Iranian media echoed Russian positions [8].

Economic cooperation between Iran and Russia has grown amidst the invasion. By October, Iranian exports to Russia had increased by 70%, and trade turnover rose by



nearly 40% for the first eight months of 2022. This surge was attributed to sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and the EU [147].

During Putin's July 2022 visit to Tehran, Iran and Russia signed a strategic partnership agreement. Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak announced that Russia had begun supplying oil products to Iran, with Gazprom investing \$40 billion in Iran's oil and gas sector. Iranian products, including cars and aircraft parts, would be exported to Russia. Additionally, Iran agreed to a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union [148, 311 p.].

According to a senior US official, Iran's involvement in the Ukraine war was a strategic decision approved by top leaders, bringing limited financial benefits at the time [126]. On November 5, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian admitted to supplying drones to Russia but claimed they were delivered before the war started. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Iran of lying, stating Ukrainian forces shoot down Iranian drones daily and that Iranian instructors trained Russians to use them. Former Iranian ambassador to Russia, Nematollah Izadi, suggested the Iranian Foreign Ministry might have been unaware of the drone deals [149, 72 p.].

In early November, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev visited Iran. Analysts speculated the visit aimed to discuss purchasing ballistic missiles. Reports indicated a deal for UAVs worth 200 million euros. By November, Russian and Iranian officials finalized a plan to produce combat drones in Russia, set to begin within months. This move was seen as a strategy to avoid new sanctions by assembling drones in Russia [150].

A June 2022 IAEA resolution criticized Iran's non-cooperation with nuclear inspections. Concurrently, Russian delegations visited Iran to inspect combat drones later used in Ukraine [151]. Foreign Policy suggested Iran could use the Ukraine conflict to showcase its military technology and refine its drones and missiles [142].

Markus Keim of the Berlin Science and Politics Foundation (SWP) noted that Iran and Russia view themselves as targets of Western sanctions, fostering mutual cooperation. He suggested Iranian arms exports to Russia could lead to further non-military cooperation. The war in Ukraine might distract the West from opposing Iran's ambitions in the Middle East. Eric Brewer of the Nuclear Threat Initiative indicated Iran's actions were a warning to the US, Gulf countries, and Israel [152, 95 p.].

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) suggested Iran's requests for nuclear assistance and acknowledgment of drone deliveries indicated a desire for a more balanced security relationship with Russia [35]. ISW experts noted that Iranian media publicized Patrushev's visit, highlighting Iran's strengthening ties with Russia and its support in the Ukraine war [153, 58 p.].

The war in Ukraine has disrupted post-Soviet configurations, with countries like the Baltics integrating into Europe. The war placed Central Asian countries in a difficult position, balancing relations with Russia and the West. Uzbekistan, for instance,

maintained neutrality but called for an end to hostilities, refusing to recognize separatist regions in Ukraine [154, 35 p.].

Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Zhaparov also advocated for neutrality and peace, despite Russian media misrepresenting his stance. Kazakhstan's President Tokayev called for negotiations and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, maintaining a neutral yet critical stance towards Russia's actions [154, 36 p.].

Tajikistan favored an early end to the war, maintaining good relations with both Russia and Ukraine. Turkmenistan, officially neutral, leaned towards Russia in its media coverage. Georgia's government avoided strong anti-Russian statements, though public sentiment strongly supported Ukraine [155].

The media war between Russia and Azerbaijan escalated, with mutual blocking of news sites. Armenia refused CSTO exercises on its soil, citing dissatisfaction with the organization's stance on Azerbaijan [156].

Despite these complex dynamics, Iran continues to navigate its foreign policy in the region, balancing its interests amid shifting geopolitical landscapes and enduring challenges.

Fortunately, the countries of Central Asia still retain a certain commonality that has not been disturbed by recent turbulent events and intra-regional contradictions. Regional rapprochement is noted in various parameters: in the economy, transport, investment, cultural and humanitarian areas, and in the military sphere. Longstanding disputes are partially resolved, and sensitive and problematic issues are regulated. In the context of civilizational understanding, a certain Central Asian regional identity is formed on the basis of common interests.

Perhaps it is too early to say that the old identity has died and a new one has been born. So far, the orientation towards Russia of economic ties, energy arteries, and, in general, the economies of a large number of countries in this space remains quite strong. But here, too, certain changes are taking place under the influence of economic incentives coming from China and more widely from Asia, technological changes, and new transport routes.

Undoubtedly, in the next thirty years, all these growing processes will finally leave the Soviet past far behind. But today, the issue of diversifying the external relations of the countries of Central Asia must be addressed in parallel with issues of regional security and the stability of existing states in the emerging new regional order.

The events of the last year, among other things, actualized the issues of identity for most of the countries that were part of the Soviet Union. And now the term "post-Soviet space" is becoming increasingly difficult to use to unite these countries. The accelerated process of moving away from Russia allows us to say that here in Central Asia, new landmarks are being formed, most likely built on national identity.

Many experts agree that we are now witnessing an acceleration of the disintegration of post-Soviet space. Although, in general, it has been disintegrating for quite a long time, it has been disintegrating for the third decade already. Nevertheless,

there are still some visible results. The fact is that we traditionally divided the post-Soviet space into three sub-regions. This is Central Asia; in fact, this is the South Caucasus and the Eastern European part. From the point of view of the CIS, we called this part the European part of the CIS. But now the events of recent years—for example, the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, internal political events in Armenia, the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine—all these processes make it quite reasonable to ask the question of whether there is a post-Soviet space in the classical sense. There are also other terms. These are, for example, "new independent states"—former Soviet republics that were formed on the territory of the USSR. There is another term that is used in the Western lexicon: "post-communist states." By this term, we can mean the states of the former Warsaw Pact. These include Eastern and Central Europe—those countries that were once under the influence of the Soviet Union. There are also the Baltic countries, but they have integrated quite organically into the European economic space. Now the language does not turn to attribute them to the post-Soviet space. Therefore, it is clear that we are witnessing a process of identity change. There used to be the term "Soviet people," but now I don't think that the new generation that lives in these states calls themselves post-Soviet people. All of them are first and foremost citizens of their state [157].

And there is one more thing. Now we are witnessing the development of regional identities. In Central Asia, at first, it was quite difficult to determine how to classify oneself as a region in a political sense. Geography probably played a big role. But now, for example, the expression that you are a Central Asian or from Central Asia already sounds quite natural on various platforms. Moreover, these are not citizens who travel abroad for study, trade, business, and so on.

There is one more such feature: we can classify anyone as belonging to any region, but if people do not feel some kind of commonality, our people abroad, in fact, will be everyone on their own. They will look at the representative of another state as a foreign one. Now, for example, I often observe this: if we take Central Asia, then the citizens of Central Asia are quite organically attracted to each other. Take, for example, the various conferences that take place in our field, and representatives of Central Asia, as a rule, can quite organically retire with their company; there are no borders, and there is a more friendly atmosphere. and it noticeably distinguishes them from the backgrounds of others.

The same thing happens: there are processes of regional identity formation in the South Caucasus that, for obvious reasons, cause conflicts. This process may be delayed.

Finally, if take the European part of the CIS, it is difficult to relate this region to the CIS since we see that Ukraine is denouncing treaties and withdrawing from the CIS. Moldova: There has recently been a change of government, and there were statements that Moldova decided to denounce several dozen documents previously signed on the basis of the CIS. That is, the two countries will no longer be members of the CIS in the near future. and they will drift smoothly towards Eastern Europe. Well, they themselves

feel like Eastern European states. Remains Belarus. It is clear that at the moment Belarus is still politically linking its fate with Russia, with the CIS, and with the Eurasian space. But in the fall of 2020, it suspended the level of its participation in the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, it seems that Belarus has yet to make its choice or establish itself in the existing choice that Minsk has made.

Therefore, it is understandable that national identity still prevails. Nevertheless, there are processes for the development of a common regional identity. However, of course, a third question arises: is there any kind of macro-regional identity? For example, the Eurasian people do not feel like Eurasians or CIS members; it has not yet sounded like that. But if we take, say, the Eurasian identity, then, there is more of a kind of overlap between the two concepts. Politically, if we take the Eurasian Economic Union, such an identity has not yet been formed. But if we take a broader context as inhabitants of the Eurasian continent, if we take a cultural and civilizational approach: not Europe and not Asia—Eurasianism Or if we take that huge layer of literature, the same Lev Gumilyov or the Eurasians who preceded him, then it is understandable that the concept of Eurasianism has taken root here from the point of view of the cultural aspect but not in any way economic or political. This is not a reference to the current integration processes; it is a reference to the last century, to that reality [158].

At the same time, the term "post-Soviet space" has another side that is not very connected with politics and narratives, and this is exactly what you are talking about now: the economic component. Nevertheless, economic ties with Russia in most countries of the post-Soviet space remain at a high level. For example, last year, despite various forecasts, the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries and Russia remained quite high. And Russia really remains the most important economic partner for these countries. The interests of all states intersect in one way or another within the framework of various other formats of cooperation, primarily the EAEU.

In the region, there are two main risks. Firstly, there is a difficult social situation. Secondly, there are unresolved territorial issues. In recent years, there has been an armed conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, there are also positive developments; Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are in the process of settling their territorial claims, which is a significant step forward. Hopefully, this process will spread to other areas.

The basis for the future in Central Asia is, first of all, the settlement of territorial issues. The third is overcoming barriers to intra-regional trade. They need to be cleaned up. Fourth, we talk a lot about transport. There is a need for a unified transport system in the region. There are various projects, and they need to reach the level of coordination of transport strategies.

On the positive side, there is also the political will to expand political dialogue in Central Asia. And this is a good basis for strengthening the regional identity. There is a good potential to create a united market that will be attractive both for our countries

themselves and for investors, since individually many companies do not enter our market due to the fact that there are tens of millions, and their business simply will not pay off. But on a regional scale, there is a good basis for creating a common market along the lines of European integration.

The countries of Central Asia need to move towards expanding cooperation among themselves. In the future, to the expansion of the level of political dialogue and to the institutionalization of political dialogue, since only together is it possible to solve various regional issues. This will also increase overall resilience to various security risks [159].

There is quite an interesting moment. Last autumn, a summit was held similar to the C5+1 summit with the United States: a summit of the Central Asian five plus Russia at the level of presidents. In previous years, Russia looked rather distrustful of this format. But last year, such a summit did take place. This suggests that we need to work with external partners and show that such formats are of great benefit. For example, the formats are Central Asia + India, China, South Korea, Japan, the Persian Gulf countries, and the USA. And now Russia has joined these countries. This suggests that there is a regional identity. It is necessary to invest in it and, in the future, to enter the greater subjectivity of Central Asia on the world stage. But at the same time, it is necessary to build close, constructive, and predictable relations with Russia, China, and other major world powers.

*SWOT Analysis: Central Asia and the Caucasus in Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy (1991-2023)*

Strength point:

- 1) Geographical location: Iran shares borders with both regions, making it a natural bridge for trade and transit.
- 2) Cultural and historical relations: Shared history and cultural heritage form the basis of positive relations.
- 3) Security Concerns: Shared security threats such as extremism and instability can enhance cooperation.
- 4) Economic Potential: Central Asia's resources and the location of the Caucasus provide economic opportunities for Iran.
- 5) Shiite Muslim Population: Iran, a Shiite-majority country, can reach out to Shiite minorities in Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Limited Economic Engagement: The economic struggles Iran faces have hampered deep economic ties.
- 2) Competition with regional powers: Russia, Turkey, and China compete for influence in the region.
- 3) Domestic political instability: Political tensions in Iran could limit its ability to formulate a stable foreign policy.
- 4) Nuclear program and international sanctions: Tense relations with the West could

limit Iran's regional influence.

- 5) Historical mistrust: Past conflicts and border disputes can create tensions with some countries.
- 6) Opportunities:
- 7) Regional infrastructure development: Projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative can create economic opportunities for Iran.
- 8) Cooperation on security issues: Cooperation on counter-terrorism and border security can enhance regional stability.
- 9) Outreach to Shiites: Iran can build bridges with Shiite communities to strengthen cultural and religious ties.
- 10) Flexibility of foreign policy strategy: Changing priorities may lead to a more active and engaged Iranian foreign policy toward the region.
- 11) Potential for mediation: Iran could play a role in resolving regional conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh.

#### Threats:

- 1) Instability in Afghanistan: Spillover effects from a turbulent Afghanistan could destabilize Iran's borders.
- 2) Greater influence of regional rivals: Increased involvement of Russia, Türkiye, or China could marginalize Iran.
- 3) Ethnic and sectarian conflicts: Ethnic and sectarian tensions within the region could create instability near Iran's borders.
- 4) Competition over resources: Competition over water and energy resources in Central Asia can lead to friction.
- 5) Rising tensions between the United States and Iran: Rising tensions between Iran and the United States could negatively impact relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In my opinion, the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus is a complex area in which many regional and international powers intersect, and historical and cultural factors intertwine and relations are diverse. What distinguishes this region is its unique blend of cultures, religions, and languages, all strategically concentrated at the crossroads of historical trade routes that historically linked the two great continents of Europe and Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the region witnessed radical shifts in political and economic systems, affecting interstate relations and geopolitical interests, especially for Iran. The geopolitical importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus is deeply rooted in its strategic location and abundant resources. This vast region serves as a natural corridor linking the Caspian Sea to China, facilitating vital connections between the Caucasus, South Asia, and the wider world. In addition, Central Asia and the Caucasus have significant reserves of oil, natural gas, and minerals,

making them a pivotal energy provider for the global economy. The region's geographical location has historically been an important factor influencing the aspirations of empires and world powers seeking to assert dominance and expand their territories. Central Asia has consistently attracted the attention of major world powers. The term "The Great Game," coined by British colonialists in the 19th century, embodies the strategic rivalry between the British and Russian empires as they competed for dominance in Central Asia. This rivalry was driven by recognition of the region's vast resources and trade routes, both of which were seen as central to their colonial aspirations throughout Asia.

Iran's foreign policy in its interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus is based on several fundamental principles, the most important of which is the promotion of Islamic identity in the region, as it considers itself a center for Shiism and promotes Islamic values as part of its foreign policy. Iran also rejects Western hegemony, especially from the United States, and seeks to build alliances with other countries to counter this influence. Iran also works to enhance regional cooperation with its neighbors in Central Asia and the Caucasus, taking advantage of cultural and historical ties. Iran also seeks to secure its borders and prevent any threats from extremist groups or hostile states, making national security a major focus of its policy.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia and the Caucasus entered a new "great game" of agendas, resources, challenges, and actors, the political agendas of major powers such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union in the region are diverse. Russia seeks to maintain its traditional influence, while China seeks ways to enhance its "Belt and Road" initiative through infrastructure investment. Central Asia has rich oil and gas resources, making it an attractive region for global powers. Iran also seeks to benefit from these resources to boost its economy. This raises political challenges such as instability in some countries, border conflicts, and the presence of terrorist groups. These challenges require effective cooperation strategies. The main players in the region include Russia, China, India, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States. Each country seeks to achieve its interests, which complicates relations. These multiple powers compete for major projects in the region such as oil and gas pipelines and economic initiatives, which aim to connect markets and enhance cooperation between countries.

Iran's geopolitical interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus are well-established. Iran faces many opportunities and challenges in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The most prominent opportunities available are the possibility for Iran to play a major role in energy trade by linking Central Asia to global markets through its ports. Iran also aspires to strengthen its regional relations with neighboring countries in the areas of trade and investment, which will enhance its regional influence. On the other hand, Iran faces many challenges, most notably the strong regional competition from major powers such as Russia and China, which seek to expand their influence in the region. And the international sanctions imposed on Iran, which negatively affect its ability to engage in

economic projects. In conclusion, the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus after 1991 represents a dynamic field that requires Iran to respond and adapt strategically to advance its geopolitical interests. The current situation requires effective cooperation with neighboring countries, in addition to developing flexible strategies to confront ongoing challenges.



## Conclusion

Since the dawn of Iranian history, Iran's eyes, heart, emotions, and entities have been moving towards the East, a tendency that the Iranian foreign policy strategy seeks to root in its relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. This approach has its causes and benefits, as well as its challenges and obstacles, and this is what this study has sought to explain, detail, and clarify. The above work allows us to formulate the following results:

1) Central Asia as a geographical region is considered an open door towards the Gulf region and the East in general, and whoever controls it can control the East and the countries of the Caucasus. The strategic importance of its countries has doubled due to their proximity to hot spots in Asia, in which major international and regional powers struggle, most notably Afghanistan and Iran, as well as their proximity to the Arab Gulf region and Iraq, in addition to the traditional competition between Russia and the United States of America to extend their hegemony over the region.

2) The republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus represent a route for Iran to Europe. During the period of Soviet rule, Turkey was the only passage for Iran to Europe, and after the independence of these regions, traveling to Europe via the Caucasus or passing through the Black Sea without going through Turkish territory became available. It also opened a road for it to the Far East through Central Asia, which would restore Iran's vitality as a corridor linking East and West. In the same context, Iran believes that these republics are globally closed countries deprived of open seas, and Iran, thanks to its 2000 km view of the open seas, some of which are on the Arabian Gulf and others on the Indian Ocean can be a passage for Central Asia towards the open seas.

3) Iran seeks to maximize its opportunities from the enormous economic resources in Central Asia and the Caucasus and to increase its effectiveness and movement in its regional environment in order to break the cordon of isolation imposed by the United States of America. It has become an important bridge linking the Arab Gulf region with the region of Central Asia and the Caucasus, which enhances the importance of Iran. The strategy and focus on linking the region with a wide network of land and sea transport routes, including energy pipelines and cooperation in economic fields, in order to achieve self-sufficiency for Iran and the Central Asian and Caucasus republics, and the transportation of oil and natural gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus via Iran to global markets, are two of Iran's most prominent economic interests in the region.

4) Iran's goals in Central Asia and the Caucasus are summarized in: a) Promoting Iran's economic interests in these countries, developing cooperation with these countries, and benefiting from them as a passage also to the Black Sea and then to the countries of Europe, as well as investing Iran's geographical position as a link between the region and the Gulf and as a transit route for the exports of region countries

to the Arab Gulf states and then to the countries of the world. b) Enhancing regional security and stability in the region's countries and preventing the outbreak of ethnic conflicts that may threaten and reflect on the security and stability of Iran. c) Get out of the international political isolation imposed on Iran by searching for regional partners among the countries of the region. d) Discourage the countries of the region from establishing close relations with the United States of America by strengthening economic relations with these countries. e) Strengthening Iranian influence in a way that does not provoke the Russian Federation or the regimes of government in these republics f) The region includes natural resources (oil and gas), which is an incentive for Iran to enter the region as a competitor to establish oil projects and oil and gas transmission lines with its experience in oil production and industry.

5) According to Iran's beliefs, norms, cultural and social sciences, and the identity of Iran's civilization, as in the past and in view of the identity crisis currently facing the countries of the region, these are of interest to Central Asian countries. Iran has political and economic measures in the Central Asian region, and the countries of the region consider Iran's economic activities a necessity and always need Iran's social, economic, and cultural assistance to achieve cultural and even national identity.

6) The Islamic Republic of Iran faces three approaches in its relationship with Central Asia: the Islamic ideological approach, a cultural approach that emphasizes linguistic and cultural similarities and historical convergence, and a pragmatic approach with regard to political considerations.

7) In order to enable Iran to expand its cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, it is necessary to show more mobility in: a) It is necessary to review Iran's objectives and the means to achieve them by knowing external strategic interests and going towards achieving them. b) Iran should have a comprehensive plan to coordinate all affairs in the target countries or at least establish outcomes for diplomatic action through which goals and policies can change. c) Iran's current opponents at the regional level, namely: Russia, China, India, and Turkey, have a more open hand than Iran until Iran solves its problems with the United States and the European Union on nuclear issues. Thus, Iran can solve its problems with the United States and the European Union on the one hand, increase its negotiating ability against opponents on the other, and provide a favorable environment for the development of its cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. d) The comparative advantage of Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus is the rich historical and cultural background that these countries share. So it is better to focus on the priority of cultural cooperation with these countries because culture is first and foremost the basis for economic activity and political cooperation in these areas. Second, in this region, there are greater commonalities and comparative advantages than in the competing countries' common history, common culture, and common religion in Asia. e) As for economic cooperation between Iran and the countries of the region, the countries of Central Asia and the two countries of the South Caucasus can use Iran's roads and sign joint contracts

for the transportation of gas, oil, roads, and railways, as well as cultural activities, because they do not enjoy free water. However, as soon as the countries of the region are encouraged to cooperate more with Iran, the necessary arrangements must be made for this cooperation, and their common interests should be considered without being threatened. Cultural cooperation plays the role of an elixir in this area. f) Identification of joint projects in the private sector: after all these years, the Iranian private sector has not yet been able to link with the private sector in neighboring countries. g) Recognition of Iran's current capabilities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, such as manufacturing building products, providing technical and engineering services, and the existence of export incentives between Iran and the Central Asian countries. h) Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are exploring collaborative ventures, notably a railway line and a shared oil pipeline running along the Caspian Sea's coast

8) Iran's foreign policy faces several hurdles: Limited export diversity, strained banking relationships with regional partners, logistical challenges in goods transport, the absence of a joint chamber of commerce, and lingering technical and institutional issues within both Iran and its neighbors, some stemming from the communist era. f) Lack of a clear and coherent strategy to support economic cooperation between the states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia There are also many common cultural ties. g) Barriers to trade development include a wide range of tariffs. h) Long-standing bureaucracy in the export and import of goods; i) Weakness of the banking system in establishing and facilitating commercial and economic relations; j) The multiplicity of decision-making centers and the weaknesses of the responsible authorities in coordination between the public and private sectors in Iran; k) Structural weakness in guiding traders, craftsmen, and exporters of technical services and failure to follow up on joint and issued economic approvals l) Lack of will to complete the signed agreements in the opposite direction m) Lack of understanding of regional markets and lack of awareness of consumer behavior among private sector businesses among Iranian businessmen and authorities; n) The lack of a unified system for exporting and disposing of goods in packaging and marketing is one of the problems and obstacles that undermine the expansion of economic cooperation. o) Structural weakness in guiding traders, craftsmen, and exporters of technical services and failure to follow up on joint and issued economic approvals. p) International economic sanctions on Iran constitute the main obstacle to developing any relations of any kind with neighboring countries.

9) Iran is facing a lot of problems right now. Its economy isn't growing, there's political unrest inside the country, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being felt, and it's spending a lot of money on interventions in places like Syria and Iraq. The last thing Tehran wants is for the stable situation it's had in the South Caucasus over the last 30 years to change. But that's exactly what's happening after a 45-day war broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September 2020, starting with border clashes. This conflict has made Iran one of the biggest losers, and here's why. First, Azeris are the second-largest ethnic group in Iran. During the war, there was a lot

of support for Azerbaijan on social media and in the streets, with many ethnic Azeris in Iran protesting and speaking out in favor of Baku. The Iranian government tried to stay neutral during the conflict, but it also cracked down on these pro-Azerbaijani protests. There's always been a quiet push for more autonomy or even independence among the Azeri minority in northern Iran. While it hasn't turned into a full-blown independence movement, it's enough to make some Iranian leaders nervous. Second, Iran now has to deal with changes along its northern border with Azerbaijan. This new situation could take away resources and attention from other important areas, like the Persian Gulf or Syria. Parts of the Azerbaijan-Iran border were controlled by Armenia since 1994, but now that Azerbaijan has taken them back, the security dynamic between the two countries has changed. Adding to Iran's worries is the presence of around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers stationed about 100 kilometers from its border. Even though Iran and Russia have been getting along lately, they've historically competed for influence in the region. To counter this, Iran has already increased its military presence near the border. Finally, Azerbaijan used to have a good relationship with Iran because it needed Iranian territory and airspace to reach its exclave, Nakhchivan, which is surrounded by Iran, Armenia, and Turkey. Azerbaijan also relied on Iran to supply natural gas to Nakhchivan. But under the new peace agreement, Armenia is opening a route through its own territory, allowing Azerbaijan to connect directly to Nakhchivan. At the same time, Turkey is building a new gas pipeline to serve the same area. As a result, Iran's role in helping Azerbaijan might become less important, which could shift the balance of power between the two countries in favor of Baku.

10) Iran participated in the Russian aggression against the Ukrainian people in 2022 by sending suicide drones and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Crimea. Iran is seizing the opportunity to strengthen what it assumes is an alliance with Russia and, for material considerations, geopolitical competition with Turkey, as well as trying to put pressure on the Americans. The Iranian side believes that a complete defeat of Russia in this war will necessarily lead to the loss of a card that Tehran could have used to maneuver between major players in the international arena or to balance threats emanating from other countries. Moreover, Tehran's regional influence is indirectly linked in a number of areas to Russia's policy, such as the situation in Syria, the situation in the Caucasus, and the situation in Central Asia. If Russia is defeated, there will certainly be repercussions for Iranian influence in these areas. In addition, with Iran's recent retreat in these regions in favor of Turkey, it seems that Tehran believes that the best solution to contain the rising Turkish influence in these regions is through cooperation with Russia and persuading it of the need to stop it. Such a narrative provides Iran with additional cards in case the Americans decide to reactivate negotiations on the nuclear agreement.

11) Regardless of all the successes and failures in Iran's foreign policy strategy, its determinants, and the factors of its ups and downs, the main challenge to the mullahs' regime in Iran will remain the internal challenge, where millions of people in Iran live

under a historical reactionary religious regime from outside the era, trying to impose a medieval way of life, which makes it hated by its people in the first place and vulnerable to several internal disorders .

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## Appendices

Table – 1 Official visits of heads of Central Asian states to selected states outside Central Asia since 1991 (Source: <https://osce-academy.net/upload/CADGAT/CADGAT7.pdf>)

Visits of C.A. leaders to non-region countries	Russia	China	USA	Turkey	Iran	Germany	S. Korea	Japan
Kazakhstan	51	13	8	10	4			
Kyrgyzstan	27	3	2	3	4			
Tajikistan	8	2	2		1			
Turkmenistan	17			1214				
Uzbekistan	12						6	

Table – 2 Iran’s trade with Central Asian states (2019, \$ million)

Kazakhstan	380
Kyrgyzstan	32.9
Tajikistan	46.3
Turkmenistan	409 (2018)
Uzbekistan	412

Table–3 Table Iran-Uzbekistan trade cooperation (Source: <https://www.iess.ir/en/analysis/3493/>)

Industry	Growth rate in 2022	Total exports
Textile products	8.6%	3.18 billion dollars
Fruits and vegetables	19.7%	1.15 billion dollars
Gas	25.4%	910.9 million dollars
Oil and oil derivatives	210%	168.1 million dollars
All kinds of fertilizers	18.3%	409.9 million dollars
Grains	19.7%	357.7 million dollars
Machinery and equipment for electricity production	510%	172.9 million dollars
Industrial machinery and its parts	280%	81.6 million dollars

Table –4 Irian’s presidents

President	in office	
Ali Akbar Hashemi Bahramani Rafsanjani	1989 to 1997	Built relations with countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan//Mohaddessin, Mohammad, Islamic Fundamentalism, Anmol, 2003, pp.70–72

Muhammad Khatami	1997 to 3 August 2005	2002-visited Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, participated in the Caspian summit
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2005 to 2013	
Hassan Rouhani	2013 to 2021	
Ebrahim Raisi	Since 2021 onwards	

Table – 5 President Rouhani visits to Central Asia and Caucasus

Time	Countries	Objective of visit	Agenda
13, September 2013	Kyrgyzstan	SCO head of states summit	He chaired the summit as the second spokesperson after Kyrgyzstan's Almazbek Atambayev. He said that deems disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation necessary for international peace and stability, reiterating that Tehran is committed to the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) based on its “legal commitments, religious and moral tenets and strategic considerations.” President further called for political will, mutual respect, and confidence-building measures to resolve the West's nuclear dispute with Iran. He said that the Islamic Republic insists on the “inalienable right of all NPT member states to enjoy peaceful nuclear technology.” Rouhani also said Russia's plan for placing the Syrian chemical weapons under international control and Syria's response to the proposed plan inspire hope for avoiding war. He also met with Almazbek Atambayev of Kyrgyzstan, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, Xi Jinping of People's Republic of China, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj of Mongolia, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Salman Khurshid of India.//
September 8-10, 2014	Kazakhstan	Official visit	A high-ranking political and economic delegation, including a number of cabinet ministers, were accompanying Rouhani in his visit to Kazakhstan. President Rouhani pointed that Kazakhstan is an important neighbor of Iran, added that there is an extensive relation between Iran and the Kazakhstan in economy, science and technology fields. Iran and Kazakhstan also signed several agreements on

			cooperation in the fields of transportation, trade exchange and industry.
September 10-13, 2014	Tajikistan	SCO summit	Rouhani met Tajik president Emomali Rahmon and conferred with his Chinese, Russian, Uzbek, Turkmen and Afghan presidents, as well as the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi during his two-day visit of Tajikistan. He discussed with Russian president Vladimir Putin on the course of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1 and voiced support for reaching a comprehensive solution between the negotiating parties by the November 24 deadline. Rouhani also attended the unveiling ceremony of Sangtuda 2 Hydroelectric Power Plant by video conference
November 12-13, 2014	Azerbaijan	Official visit, bilateral talks	emphasis of the government on promotion of relations with neighbors, huge economic capacities of Iran and the country's remarkable progress in various scientific and technological fields have prepared the ground for cooperation with Azerbaijan, a Muslim and neighboring country. President Rouhani called the expansion of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, and promoting the level of cooperation as the most important goals of his trip. Five agreements on bilateral cooperation signed between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan during visit to Baku of President Hassan Rouhani. Iran and Azerbaijan agreed to expand cooperation in the fields of energy, industry, transport and communications.
March 10-11, 2015	Turkmenistan	Official visit	President Rouhani visited Iran's northeastern neighbor at the top of a high-ranking political, economic, and cultural delegation attended a dinner banquet thrown in his honor by his Turkmen counterpart, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. In addition to meeting and holding talks with President Berdimuhamedow, President Rouhani attended the meeting of the two countries' high ranking delegations. It was at the end of that meeting the 17 cooperation documents were signed by the high-

			ranking officials of the two countries in the presence of both countries' presidents. Offering an address at the meeting of merchants and economic activists of Iran and Turkmenistan and participation in a joint press conference were among the other activities of the Iranian president in this visit.
August 7–9, 2016	Azerbaijan		
December 21, 2016	Armenia		
December 21–22, 2016	Kazakhstan		
December 22–23, 2016	Kyrgyzstan		
September 2017	Kazakhstan	1st OIC Summits on Science and Technology	
March 2018	Azerbaijan	Joint economic project launch	Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev attended the opening of the Khazar joint car manufacturing factory in Neftçala, Azerbaijan.
March 27 2018	Turkmenistan		
August 12, 2018	Kazakhstan		
June 14, 2019	Kyrgyzstan		
October 1, 2019	Armenia		
October 23–24, 2019	Azerbaijan	Non-Aligned Movement meeting	

Table – 6 Visits of Iran’s presidents to Central Asia and Caucasus (President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (from 1989 to 1997))

Country	When
Turkmenistan	May 9, 1992 May 11, 1992
Uzbekistan	October 18, 1993 October 20, 1993
Kyrgyzstan	October 20, 1993 October 22, 1993
Turkmenistan	October 22, 1993 October 25, 1993
Kazakhstan	October 25, 1993 October 26, 1993
Azerbaijan	October 26, 1993 October 28, 1993
Turkmenistan	October 26, 1994 October 27, 1994
Georgia	April 19, 1995 April 21, 1995
Turkmenistan	May 13 - 15, 1996
Tajikistan	May 9 - 11, 1997
Turkmenistan	May 11 -14, 1997

Table – 7 President Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 3 August 2005)

<i>Country</i>
Turkmenistan
Kazakhstan
Turkmenistan
Kazakhstan
Uzbekistan
Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan
Azerbaijan
Armenia
Tajikistan

Table – 8 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (from 2005 to 2013)

<i>Country</i>	<i>When</i>
Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan	December 20- 21, 2005
Azerbaijan	May 5, 2006 May 5, 2006
Turkmenistan	July 24- 25, 2006
Tajikistan	July 25- 27, 2006
Turkmenistan	August 14, 2007
Kyrgyzstan	August 15, 2007
Azerbaijan	August 21, 2007
Tajikistan	August 26, 2008
Kazakhstan	April 12, 2009
Tajikistan	January 3, 2010
Turkmenistan	January 4, 2010
Azerbaijan	November 17 - 18, 2010
Kazakhstan	June 14- 15, 2011
Tajikistan	October 5, 2011
Armenia	December 23, 2011
Tajikistan	March 20, 2012
Azerbaijan	October 16, 2012
Turkmenistan	March 20, 2013

Table – 9 President Hassan Rouhani (from 2013 to 2021)

<i>Country</i>	<i>When</i>
Kyrgyzstan	September 12 - 13, 2013
Kazakhstan	September 8 - 10, 2014
Tajikistan	September 10- 13, 201
Azerbaijan	November 12 - 13, 2014
Turkmenistan	March 10 - 11, 2015
Azerbaijan	August 7 - 9, 2016
Kazakhstan	December 21 - 22, 2016
Kyrgyzstan	December 22 - 23, 2016
Kazakhstan	September 7 - 11, 2017
Turkmenistan	March 27- 27, 2018
Azerbaijan	March 28, 2018
Kazakhstan	August 12, 2018

Kyrgyzstan	June 13 - 14, 2019
Tajikistan	June 14 - 15, 2019
Armenia	October 1, 2019

Table – 10 President Ebrahim Raisi (from 2021 onwards)

When visited	Countries	Main issues discussed
September 16-18, 2021	Tajikistan	
November 27-28, 2021	Turkmenistan	
June 29 -30, 2022	Turkmenistan	
September 14 - 16, 2022	Uzbekistan, Samarkand	
October 11 - 12, 2022	Kazakhstan	
November 8, 2023	Tajikistan	
November 9, 2023	Uzbekistan	

Table – 11 Visits of Central Asian leaders to Iran

Country, president	When	Main agenda
Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutallibov, president	February 16–17, 1992	1st ECO Summit
Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazov, president	February 16–17, 1992	1st ECO Summit
Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, president	December 9–11, 1997	OIC 8th Summit
Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazov, president	June 10, 2000	ECO 6th Summit
Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, prime minister	June 10, 2000	ECO 6th Summit
Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev, president	June 10, 2000	ECO 6th Summit
Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, president	June 10, 2000	ECO 6th Summit
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmonov, president	June 10, 2000	ECO 6th Summit
Armenia, Robert Kocharyan, president	July 5–6, 2006	
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	June 16, 2007	
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president	October 16, 2007	2nd Caspian Summit
Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, president	October 16, 2007	2nd Caspian Summit
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	October 16, 2007	2nd Caspian Summit
Kazakhstan, Karim Massimov, prime minister	January 3–4, 2009	
Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, prime minister	January 3–4, 2009	
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president	March 10–11, 2009	10th summit of the ECO
Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, president	March 10–11, 2009	10th summit of the ECO
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president	March 10–11, 2009	10th summit of the ECO
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	March 10–11, 2009	10th summit of the ECO
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president	March 27, 2010	1st Norouz Festival

Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	March 27, 2010	1st Norouz Festival
Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	April 17–18, 2010	Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation
Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, president		March 27, 2011	2nd Norouz Festival
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president		March 27, 2011	2nd Norouz Festival
Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	March 27, 2011	2nd Norouz Festival
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president		August 26–31, 2012	16th Non-Aligned Summit
Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	August 26–31, 2012	16th Non-Aligned Summit
Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, president		August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kyrgyzstan, president	Almazbek Atambayev,	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kazakhstan, president	Nursultan Nazarbayev	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president		August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kyrgyzstan, president	Almazbek Atambayev,	September 5, 2015	
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president		November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Kazakhstan, minister	Karim Massimov, prime	November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, president	Gurbanguly	November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president		February 23, 2016	
Kazakhstan, president	Nursultan Nazarbayev,	April 11-12, 2016	Collaboration in transport and logistics, environmental protection, tourism development and Caspian Sea navigation. Signed 65 agreements (worth of \$2 billion) in the areas of metallurgy, mining, agriculture, transport and logistics, tourism, science and education, medicine.
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president		March 6–7, 2017	
Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, president		April 22–23, 2017	



Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, president	August 5, 2017	Second inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Armenia, Karen Karapetyan, prime minister	October 9, 2017	
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, president	November 1, 2017	
Tajikistan, Sirodjidin Aslov, prime minister	June 1, 2019	
Armenia, Nicol Pashinyan, prime minister	August 5, 2021	inauguration of Ebrahim Raisi
Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon, president	May 29, 2022	
Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, president	June 15, 2022	
Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, president	June 19, 2022	
Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, president	June 18, 2023	
Kazakhstan, Älihan Smaiylov, prime Minister	April 25, 2023	
Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, prime Minister	November 1, 2022	