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**CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS IN IRAN'S FOREIGN
POLICY STRATEGY 1991-2021**

Abstract

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) Cooperation between 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

8. The main obstacles to the progress of Iran's foreign policy strategy are: a) the limited scope of Iranian exports. b) The lack of healthy banking relations between Iran and the countries of the region. c) Problems with the transportation and transit of goods d) The absence of a joint chamber of commerce between Iran and the countries of the region; e) There are some technical problems and internal barriers in the countries of the region that the former communist regime left behind, as well as problems existing in institutions and centers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. 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

9. Iran has many problems. a stagnant economy, political unrest at home, the fallout from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the never-ending costly interventions in places such as Syria and Iraq. The last thing Tehran needs right now is a change to the cozy status quo it has enjoyed in the South Caucasus for the past three decades. A 45-day full-blown conventional war broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia following border military clashes on September 27, 2020. There are three reasons why Iran is a big loser in this conflict: First, Azeris are the second-largest ethnic group in Iran. During the conflict, there was a lot of pro-Azerbaijani rhetoric and protests on social media and on the streets in support of Baku by ethnic Azeris. The Iranian regime was very careful to appear balanced during the conflict, but at the same time, it stifled many of these pro-Azerbaijani protests. There is a constant low-level push for self-determination and increased autonomy in northern Iran for the Azeri minority. Although this has not materialized into a mass movement for independence, it makes some in the Iranian leadership nervous.

Secondly, Iran will have to devote time, resources, and troops to adjusting to the new geopolitical reality along its northern border with Azerbaijan. This could mean less Iranian focus on other places, such as the Gulf and Syria. Part of the Azerbaijan-Iran state border has been under Armenian occupation since 1994. Now that this border is back under the control of Baku, a new security dynamic has been created between the two countries. Also, the presence of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers—now only 100 kilometers from the Iranian border—is bound to make many in Tehran nervous. Although Russia and Iran have enjoyed good relations in recent times, the two have been rival powers in the region for centuries. Iran has already started to deploy more military assets along its northern border. Finally, Azerbaijan has strived to maintain cordial relations with Iran because it relies on access to Iranian airspace and territory to supply its

autonomous region of Nakhchivan, an exclave of Azerbaijan nestled between Iran, Armenia, and Turkey. In addition to transit rights, Azerbaijan also relied on Iran to provide natural gas to Nakhchivan. As part of the recent peace deal, Armenia is opening up a corridor through its territory to allow Azerbaijan to transport goods directly to Nakhchivan. In addition, earlier this year, Turkey announced a new natural gas pipeline to supply Nakhchivan with energy. Iran is less important for Azerbaijan now, and it is likely that the dynamics of the bilateral relationship will change in Baku's favor.

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.

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 .