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Central Asia and Caucasus in the Foreign political strategy of Iran (1991-2018)

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DEFINITIONS

Bipolarity	<p>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[.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
Foreign Policy	<p>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.</p>
Geopolitics	<p>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.</p>
Geostrategy	<p>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,</p>

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[178]. 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.

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

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. 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.

National Interest

Refers to the set of goals, objectives, and priorities that a sovereign state considers vital to its well-being, security, and prosperity. It represents the collective interests of a nation as a whole, encompassing various aspects such as economic, political, military, cultural, and social dimensions. The concept of national interest guides a country's decision-making processes, policies, and actions in domestic and international affairs.

Key Points about National Interest: Goals and Ambitions: National interest reflects a state's aspirations and ambitions,

**Nuclear
Program of
Iran**

which can include economic growth, national security, territorial integrity, protection of citizens' welfare, promotion of cultural values, and preservation of sovereignty. Aim of Government: National interest is considered the primary objective of government, as it represents the well-being and advancement of the nation as a whole. Prioritization: Different aspects of national interest may be prioritized differently based on the specific circumstances and challenges faced by a country. Dynamic Nature: National interest is not static and can evolve over time in response to changing domestic and international conditions.

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.

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

**Regional
Hegemony**

of region, involves the formation of interstate associations or groupings based on regions.

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.

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
IAE	International Atomic Energy Agency
GCC	The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf / Gulf Cooperation Council.
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan
IRGC (Sepah)	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
KTZ	Kazakhstan Temir Zholy
MoU	memorandum of 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, p.108].

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, p.60]

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 hardline 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 been 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. The scientific inquiry into geopolitics has evolved significantly since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it emerged as an integral aspect of political geography. The term "geopolitics" was first introduced into academic discourse by Swedish scholar Rudolf Kjellen in 1916, who defined it as the science of the state, characterizing it as a "geographical organism in space." Several prominent theorists and practitioners, including P. Vidal de la Blanche, A. Mahen, H. Mackinder, N. Spykman, J. Fairgrieve, and K. Haushofer, contributed to the foundational framework of classical geopolitics. This intellectual tradition led to the establishment of distinct national geopolitical schools—French, American, English, and German.

In this research, we adopt H. Mackinder's geopolitical perspective, particularly his conceptualization of the global map in his 1904 essay, "The Geographical Pivot of History." Mackinder defined the "World Island," which encompasses Europe, Asia, and Africa, with its Heartland located in Eastern Europe (the territory of the former Russian Empire). According to Mackinder, "Who rules the Heartland rules the World," a formula that elucidates the ambitions of global actors seeking influence over this pivotal region and its surrounding areas.

Key geopolitical factors under consideration include the region's geographical location, its neighboring states, the positions of influential actors, natural resource availability, demographic characteristics, and political and ideological elements such as regime types, religion, and ideology. Specialists studying the geopolitical landscapes of regions like Iran, the Caucasus, and Central Asia have analyzed their transformations since 1991.

A critical aspect of regional geopolitics impacting security is the religious factor. Scholars such as V. Akaev, Z. Arukhov, D. Makarov, and K. Khanbabaev are actively exploring these dynamics. Additionally, the works of N. Medvedev and Kh. Tkhapsoev focus on conflict factors in the Caucasus, which manifest in geopolitical, ethnic, ideological, administrative, and political contexts.

The analysis of shifts in Iranian policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia—particularly its priorities and efforts to foster cooperation with post-Soviet states—constitutes an important area of contemporary political science research. Arab scholars such as Ammar Jafal, Abbas Fadel Atwan, Ali Muhammad Hussein, and Mahmoud Sari al-Kalam contribute significantly to understanding the foundations of Iran's foreign policy development. Their studies facilitate a deeper comprehension of the evolving trends in international relations, particularly regarding Iran's interactions with Central Asian and Caucasian states.

Modern Russian researchers, including A.T. Abakarov, I.I. Belashov, M.Yu. Bogatov, Ya.V. Galich, Ch.K. Pak, T.N. Pugiev, S.A. Sidorkin, and I.B. Ezhev, have examined the geopolitical dimensions of this issue, focusing on Russia's interests in the Caucasus region.

Additionally, a considerable body of work exists from Iranian scholars and political figures, such as Kaikhon B., Kharzik E., Pahlavon Ch., Mukhamedriz H., Afshurd M., Hasani Saifali, and Kazimi Aliasgar, who explore various aspects of Iran's foreign policy and its ambitions to extend influence over Central Asian sovereign states.

Moreover, significant contributions come from renowned scholars like Sanai Mehdi, Sayyid Javad Husaini, A.N. Makhmadova, M. Shababi, and Sh. Shoismatulloeva, who address diverse elements of foreign policy formulation among 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 achieve its geopolitical plans in Central Asia and Caucasus?
- 3) What are 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 [4, p.52].

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 [5, p.18].

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, p.28].

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, p.19].

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.

Major principles of Iran's foreign policy are outlined in its Constitution. they include the following - Muslim union, special mission of Muslims, Messianic role of Islam and Islamic Republic of Iran, permanent character of Islamic revolution, antagonism between the oppressor and those. The Constitution also emphasizes denial of any dominance over Iran and from part of Iran, preservation of sovereignty in all spheres, territorial integrity, protection of the rights of all Muslims and not taking responsibility before the hegemonic powers, peaceful relations with all states that are not hostile to Iran. One more significant principle is standing against all forms of oppression and injustice.

The Constitution also highlights that Iran restrains from intervention into internal affairs of other states, but at the same time supports legal fight of the oppressed peoples against the oppressors all around the world. The Constitution underlines ban on concluding agreements and treaties leading to establishment of foreign control over

natural and economic resources, culture, army and other spheres of the state, not allowed placement of foreign military bases on the country's territory [8]. The establishment of any kind of foreign military base in Iran, even for peaceful purposes, is forbidden, even for peaceful purposes). One of the particular features of Iran's foreign policy is the export of Islamic revolution as the major instrument for implementation of global mission of the country. The Iranian diplomats must gradually promote Islamic revolution in the countries that are working in. All countries of Dar-i-Islam are categorized as "brotherly, friendly, neutral and hostile". Out of more than 70 Muslims countries only 4 refer to the brotherly ones – Syria, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, the rest - either hostile or neutral [9].

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, nonalignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States [10]. Any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden [11].

The Islamic Republic of Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society, and considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the freedom fighters against the oppressors in every corner of 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 Framework: The study of international relations has contributed to the unification of the behavior of political units. The thesis has benefited from the following theoretical approaches, which have contributed significantly to its construction and analysis:

Classical Political Realism, notably championed by Hans Morgenthau, serves as a significant knowledge model in the field of international relations. It provides analytical

tools for understanding the behavior of political units, with a central focus on the concept of power. In this realist paradigm, power is akin to energy in the physical sciences. However, the power under examination extends beyond conventional military force to encompass National Power in its entirety, including both material and non-material components.

According to classical realists, international politics is fundamentally a struggle for power. This struggle is closely linked to the national interest, which represents the minimum objective of a country's foreign policy: the preservation of survival. The national interest aligns with the maintenance of a strong national structure, together forming a cohesive framework for action. The concept of the Balance of Power is also crucial, as it aims to achieve global peace and security while fostering relationships that do not disrupt this balance. Morgenthau identified three primary motives driving human behavior: the motive of life, the motive of reproduction, and the motive of domination. In a world characterized by scarce resources, these motives lead to a struggle for power—a phenomenon Morgenthau termed the Will to Power, which fundamentally shapes the nature of politics and conflict.

Despite its enduring relevance throughout the Cold War, classical realism struggled to adapt to the significant changes that followed its conclusion. Nevertheless, its analytical tools continue to be employed by major powers in the formulation and execution of their foreign policies [15]

By examine and test this cognitive model against the trends and behaviors of Iranian foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus from 1991 to 2021, we can consider several key factors:

- Power Dynamics: Analyze how Iran's national power—encompassing military, economic, and cultural dimensions—has influenced its foreign policy decisions in these regions.
- National Interests: Investigate the motivations behind Iran's actions, particularly in preserving its sovereignty and regional influence, and how these align with Morgenthau's concept of national interest.
- Balance of Power: Assess Iran's strategies in the context of regional power dynamics, including its relationships with neighboring states and how these contribute to maintaining a balance of power.
- Struggle for Resources: Explore how the scarcity of resources has shaped Iranian foreign policy objectives and actions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, reflecting Morgenthau's notion of the Will to Power.
- Historical Context: Consider the historical developments post-1991, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new states, which have impacted Iran's geopolitical strategies.

By applying the analytical framework of classical political realism, we gained deeper insights into the complexities and motivations underlying Iranian foreign policy in these critical regions over the past three decades.

Structural Realism, an evolution of Classical Political Realism, was notably advanced by Kenneth Waltz. Emerging alongside U.S. President Jimmy Carter's moralistic approach to international relations, Structural Realism builds upon traditional realist concepts while introducing new analytical frameworks. Waltz emphasized the importance of various elements of state power beyond mere military might, incorporating factors such as geographical location, natural resources, population size, economic growth, military development, and political stability [16].

The primary aim of Structural Realism is to achieve the highest possible level of security, which is intrinsically linked to the element of fear. In this view, international conflict arises from the inherent chaos of the international system. Unlike Classical Political Realism, which operates under a multipolar framework, Structural Realism acknowledges a bipolar structure, focusing on how states interact within this context. The theory also emphasizes the concept of Statism, granting states the ability to define their goals and interests in a competitive international arena. By analyzing the extent to which Iranian foreign policy employs Structural Realist tools, we can extract and apply several cognitive frameworks:

- Elements of State Power: Examine how Iran leverages its geographical location, natural resources (such as oil and gas), and demographic factors to enhance its strategic position in the region.
- Security Objectives: Investigate the motivations behind Iran's foreign policy decisions, particularly how they aim to maximize security in response to perceived threats, reflecting the fear element central to Structural Realism.
- International System Dynamics: Analyze Iran's interactions within the bipolar or multipolar structures of the international system, particularly in relation to major powers such as the United States and Russia, to understand its strategic alignments and conflicts.
- Statism and National Interests: Explore how Iran formulates its goals and interests based on its understanding of the international system, and how this shapes its foreign policy initiatives, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus.
- Regional Stability and Conflict: Assess Iran's role in regional stability initiatives and conflicts, considering how its actions contribute to or disrupt the balance of power in the area.

By applying these cognitive frameworks from Structural Realism, we gained comprehensive insights into the strategies and motivations guiding Iranian foreign policy, particularly in the context of its regional aspirations and interactions with global powers.

Neoliberalism Institutionalism. In academic discourse, neoliberalism encompasses three primary strands: economic, social, and political. These strands draw from both realism and liberalism, particularly in addressing security, conflict, and cooperation. A fundamental question within Neoliberal Institutionalism is how to foster and enhance cooperation in an international system characterized by chaos and intense competition among states.

Both new realism and Neoliberalism Institutionalism seek to explain behavioral regularities by examining the decentralized nature of the international system. Neoliberal Institutionalism posits that the creation of international agreements hinges on the ability of states to communicate and cooperate, which is significantly influenced by institutions. In this framework, the state remains central to interpreting international politics.

Neoliberalism Institutionalism relies on two critical conditions: Mutual Interests: There must be shared interests among states and other actors. And Institutional Influence: Changes in the degree of institutionalization exert a powerful influence on state behavior.

Robert Keohane emphasizes that cooperation in the global political economy is feasible when common public interests align with state orientations. Neoliberalism Institutionalism suggests that cooperation is possible despite the chaotic nature of the global system by analyzing concepts such as the "prisoner's dilemma" and "market news models" [17].

By analyze the extent to which Neoliberalism Institutionalism informs Iranian foreign policy strategy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus from 1991 to 2021, we can explore the following avenues:

- Economic Institutions: Investigate how Iran engages with regional economic institutions and agreements, assessing the extent to which these foster mutual interests and enhance cooperation.
- Security Frameworks: Analyze Iran's participation in regional security initiatives and how these frameworks facilitate collaboration despite geopolitical tensions.
- Shared Interests: Explore instances where Iran has aligned its foreign policy with the interests of neighboring states, assessing how these alignments contribute to stability and cooperation in the region.
- Institutionalization: Evaluate the degree of institutionalization in Iran's foreign policy, considering how the presence or absence of strong institutions affects its ability to engage with Central Asia and the Caucasus.
- Behavioral Patterns: Apply the principles of Neoliberal Institutionalism to identify patterns in Iran's foreign policy that reflect rational decision-making aimed at maximizing cooperation and minimizing conflict.

By employing this cognitive model, we gained insights into how economic and security institutions shape Iranian foreign policy strategies in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and assess the consistency of these strategies with the rational approaches advocated by Neoliberal Institutionalism.

Hegemony Stability Theory, the term "hegemony" historically describes the relationship between Athens and other Greek city-states, with the Roman Empire serving as a prominent example of dominance. In the modern context, the concept is often associated with American hegemony, or "Pax Americana," which has prevailed since the mid-20th century. Hegemonic power is defined as the ability to impose rules and norms on the international system, making this theory a popular framework for understanding the United States' status as a superpower [18].

Key contributors to Hegemony Stability Theory include Joseph Nye, Charles P. Kindleberger, and Susan Strange. This theory posits that the world is divided into specific issues and situations, suggesting that hegemony plays a critical role in the distribution of power within a particular system. This distribution extends beyond military might to include the control of ideas and assumptions at a global level. By examine and test Hegemony Stability Theory against the trends and behaviors of Iranian foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus from 1991 to 2021, we can explore the following dimensions:

- Response to Hegemony: Analyze how Iran has responded to American hegemony and its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including its strategies to counterbalance U.S. power in the region.
- Influence of Regional Dynamics: Investigate how Iran's foreign policy reflects its attempts to assert its own influence and establish a regional hegemony, particularly in relation to neighboring states and other powers such as Russia and China.
- Distribution of Power: Assess how Iran's actions contribute to or disrupt the existing distribution of power within the region, considering both military and non-military dimensions.
- Control of Ideas: Explore how Iran has sought to promote particular ideological frameworks or narratives in Central Asia and the Caucasus, aiming to establish its influence over regional politics and public perception.
- Cooperation and Conflict: Evaluate the balance between cooperation and conflict in Iranian foreign policy, considering how it navigates the complexities of a regional system marked by competing interests and hegemonic aspirations.

By applying the principles of Hegemony Stability Theory, we gained insights into the motivations and strategies underpinning Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and assess how these align with or challenge existing hegemonic structures in the international system.

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, p.93].

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, p.56].

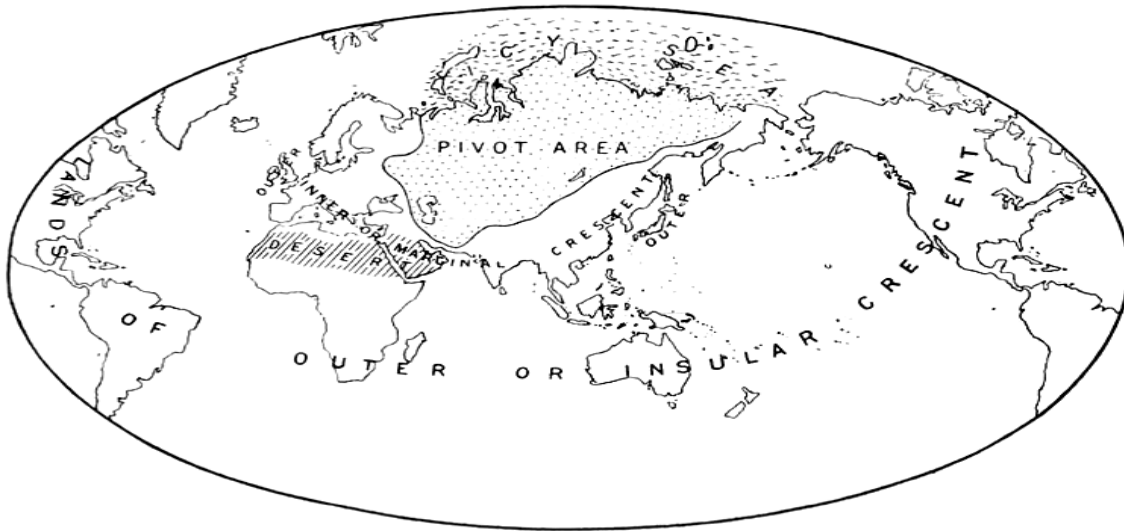


Figure – 1 Map of the "Heartland Theory", as published by Mackinder in 1904 (H. J. Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History* // <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775498>)

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) Geoeconomic Orientation: Countries like China, Iran, India, and Turkey engage in geoeconomic 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, p.56].

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, p.92].



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)

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, p.52].

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, p.47].

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, p.40].

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, p.121].

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, p.9].

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, p.9].

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.

Overall, Nazarbayev's statements reflect a vision for enhanced cooperation and integration among the Caucasus, Iran, and Central Asia, emphasizing the importance of addressing shared challenges and pursuing mutual interests in areas such as security, economic growth, and energy collaboration.

One of the principal strategic frameworks aimed at destabilizing Russia's southern territories, particularly the North Caucasus, is the well-documented Anglo-American initiative known as "Storm over the Caspian." Developed under the auspices of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during the mid-1990s, this plan envisaged a scenario in which the United States and NATO would deploy so-called "peacekeeping" forces in the Caucasus and Caspian regions in the event of unrest—especially in areas critical to the production and export of hydrocarbons or near key pipeline routes [26, p. 10].

Western powers increasingly perceive separatist movements in the North Caucasus as instruments to implement broader geopolitical agendas. This support has intensified since the failure of Georgia's military campaign in South Ossetia. More recently, several republics within the North Caucasus have seen a surge in violent incidents, including terrorist bombings carried out by suicide attackers.

Presently, organizations from nearly 20 countries are either directly or indirectly engaged in backing separatist activity in the region. Operating under the banners of humanitarian aid and human rights advocacy, various foreign actors with divergent motives are active in the Caucasus. During the Chechen conflict, as many as 50 foreign intelligence services were reportedly present. The West appears to have long pursued "fourth-generation" warfare against Russia—comprising asymmetric, low-intensity conflicts characterized by subversion, terrorism, and psychological operations. These tactics include orchestrated criminality, political violence, and the deliberate spread of

fear through both physical and information-based attacks. What distinguishes these operations is that Russia's adversaries are not conventional state actors but irregular militant groups supported from abroad—frequently cloaked in political or religious rhetoric. Their overarching objective is to destabilize Russia's southern frontier [25, p. 125].

The United States and its European allies aim to expand their strategic reach and influence in the region. This involves a thorough examination of the Chechen campaigns and analysis of internal fractures within North Caucasian republics. The behavior and motivations of both the regional elite and emerging counter-elite factions are under continuous scrutiny by Western analysts.

The U.S. State Department has effectively designated the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—excluding Russia—as falling within the American military's sphere of responsibility. Under current Pentagon plans, NATO's Central Command is to oversee the Caspian area, while the European Command (EUCOM) will manage logistics and maintain security along the key corridors connecting the Caspian to Europe. Along Russia's southern periphery, the U.S. is setting up bases, logistical hubs, and rapid deployment infrastructure under the guise of “mobile forces.”

Former British Prime Minister John Major articulated a starkly utilitarian view of Russia's role in global affairs, asserting that Russia's main function is to supply resources to wealthier nations. He controversially claimed that only 50 to 60 million Russians are needed for this role, implicitly suggesting the redundancy of the remainder of the population. Likewise, American geopolitical theorist Samuel Huntington characterized Russia as a nation fated for fragmentation—a state destined to undergo internal strife and territorial disintegration, ultimately leading to the absorption of its components into new geopolitical configurations [25, p. 125].

This suggests a coordinated international strategy aimed at marginalizing Russia's presence in the North Caucasus and fostering internal fragmentation. Developments in the region are seen as pivotal not only for the immediate security landscape but for the structural stability of the Russian Federation as a whole. Despite significant efforts by the federal government, the area remains highly volatile.

The Southern Federal District accounts for a disproportionate share—approximately 84%—of terrorist incidents across the Russian Federation. In the past 18 months alone, Russian authorities have detained over 1,700 key figures and operatives from illegal armed formations, dismantling 61 organized groups, representing roughly one-fifth of such networks nationwide [25, p. 121].

Analysts draw a direct link between the rise in separatist ideologies among youth, increased militant recruitment, and provocative rhetoric from Georgian authorities—all allegedly supported by Western intelligence and policy structures. Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, emphasized in an interview with *RBC Daily* that Western interference and financial backing are persistent and deliberate [25, p. 123].

In recent years, Western focus on the North Caucasus has intensified. Regional developments are under continuous observation, with scenario planning based on their implications for U.S. and EU strategic interests. The area is increasingly regarded as a sphere of future Russian influence that must be contested. This is evidenced by the growing presence of U.S., British, and Israeli telecom firms in sensitive areas such as Kuban, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

The conflicts in Chechnya and South Ossetia, along with the geopolitical maneuvering of Georgia and corresponding Western responses—especially from Washington—highlight renewed attempts to challenge Russia's strategic footing in the Caucasus. The Russian state is under scrutiny for its capacity to assert itself as a global actor and to safeguard its sovereign interests. President Dmitry Medvedev reaffirmed Russia's unwavering stance in the region during his first Federal Assembly address, declaring: “We will not retreat in the Caucasus” [23, p. 35].

Key destabilizing factors contributing to the region's precarious situation include:

1. Geopolitical contestation, notably regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia;
2. Incoherent national policy, undermining internal cohesion;
3. Political turbulence, often involving elite power struggles;
4. Presence of illegal militant factions, which perpetrate violence and disorder;
5. Ethnic and religious plurality, contributing to intergroup tensions;
6. Fragmentation of the legal system, as some republics push for expanded autonomy;
7. Economic disparity and crisis, worsening social stratification;
8. Rising corruption and criminal infiltration in governance structures;
9. Unregulated migration, with broad socio-economic repercussions;
10. Weak strategic communication and informational vulnerabilities [25, p. 125].

Tensions have further escalated following Georgia's incursion into South Ossetia and Russia's subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence. Although Western powers are now more cautious in confronting Moscow directly, they remain committed to their overarching long-term strategies in the region.

In essence, the geopolitical contest for the Caucasus is ongoing. Under these conditions, Russia must formulate a new, adaptive national strategy that accounts for the region's evolving geopolitical complexity.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union unleashed profound transformations across the former Soviet space. Many areas, particularly the Caucasus, have become arenas for global geopolitical rivalry. The strategic significance of this region is underscored by the interest of over 30 nations who now consider it within their geopolitical calculus.

In modern global politics, the competition over control of natural resources, transit routes, and maritime chokepoints plays a central role. While the dynamics of geopolitics are multifaceted, the notion that global powers aim to strategically confine Russia to the northeastern corner of Eurasia is consistent with long-standing historical patterns. 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 holds a special place in Russian politics due to its strategic border location, proximity to NATO's southern flank, closeness to Transcaucasia and Central Asia, and access to the Caspian and Black Seas [25, p.126].

The North Caucasus, with its inherent internal and external contradictions, has recently become a significant source of large-scale threats to Russia's national interests and security. The region has witnessed numerous armed conflicts, notably the Chechen wars, which have resulted in significant casualties and destruction. Other conflicts include the Ossetian-Ingush confrontation, socio-economic and political unrest in Dagestan, ethno-political instability in Karachay-Cherkessia, and challenges in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea. Additionally, the armed conflict between Georgia and Ossetia and the tense

situation in Abkhazia highlight that these issues extend beyond regional concerns, forming part of a larger geopolitical game.

This raises several questions about the global focus on this small region. The North Caucasus, first officially named in 1860, spans 250 thousand square kilometers between the Black and Azov Seas to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, with its northern boundary along the Kuma-Maniche depression and its southern edge along the Main Caucasian Range. The region's geopolitical significance lies in its strategic location and rich natural resources, attracting major global powers' attention.

The North Caucasus is home to around 55 indigenous peoples and up to 120 ethnic minorities, practicing all major world religions. The lack of effective national policies has often led to interethnic conflicts and problems. The domestic political instability in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia benefits several states and entities with vested national (political and economic) interests, aiming to undermine Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space and limit its geostrategic reach.

Historically, Russia has faced geopolitical adversaries in the North Caucasus aiming to weaken its regional influence. As noted by the Russian historian P.N. at the end of the last century, Western countries have long harbored intentions to diminish Russia's power and influence in this region [25, p.118].

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 influences 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 these hurdles, Central Asia's abundant natural resources, particularly energy reserves, attracted the attention of major powers, sparking competition and

geopolitical maneuvering to secure influence and leverage transitions in the region's political landscape. Understanding the geopolitical and strategic importance of Central Asia is crucial for grasping the motivations driving major countries' involvement in the region's affairs. Central Asia, an area of significant geopolitical importance in the contemporary age, consists of five independent republics that were previously part of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Central Asia, positioned between China in the east, Russia in the north, and Iran and Afghanistan in the south, has served as a crucial conduit between Eastern and Western cultures throughout its historical development. The strategic location, ample natural resources, and varied cultural makeup of the region have made it a significant area for great countries to compete and a stage for regional warfare [27, p.49].

From a geopolitical standpoint, the strategic positioning of Central Asia at the intersection of significant transportation and commercial pathways has bestowed upon it a crucial role as a transit hub for the movement of commodities and individuals between Europe and Asia. The geographical positioning of the region has heightened its importance as a crucial element of China's extensive economic expansion endeavors, specifically in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's efforts to establish pipelines, motorways, and railways in Central Asia, with the aim of connecting with Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, have significantly enhanced the region's significance within the global economy.

Besides China, Russia has also sustained its influence in Central Asia, an area that was formerly a fundamental component of its Soviet empire. Russia has maintained military installations in Central Asia and has consistently offered economic and political assistance to the region. The long-lasting impact of this influence has allowed Russia to maintain a protective barrier between itself and China, while also maintaining its interests in the region.

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, p.98].

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, p.99].

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, p.48].

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, p.65].

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, p.56]. 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 Murghab.

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. Kelsay 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, p.40].

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, p.50].

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, p.35].

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, p.36].

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 this 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, p.55].

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, p.208].

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, p.229].

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, p.89].

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, p.112].

- 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, p.125].

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, p.42].

Although these intensive efforts have resulted in a clear Iranian and Turkish presence in Central Asia, since 1993 they have faced difficulties due to the awareness of the leaders of the independent republics of the goals of Tehran and Ankara, which go beyond the mere traditional diplomatic and economic presence to the desire for influence. Those leaders also expressed reservations about the religious activities of Iran, which they saw as an element that might create instability, especially since large social groups in the region suffer from living difficulties that may make them a target for political mobilization paid for from abroad. Also, the Turkish talk about the resurgence of the Turkish nation that extends from China to the Balkans has provoked negative reactions from the political elites in the republics, who feared that Turkey would seek to play the role of a big sister and replace Russia in hegemony and influence [23, p.43].

Central Asia is of great importance and vitality from an economic point of view. Central Asia includes countries rich in natural resources and wealth. Central Asia is bordered by Russia from the north, the Caspian Sea to the west, Iran and Pakistan to the south, and from the east, China and Mongolia. With its location, it is considered a transition zone between Siberia in the north, which is a region characterized by flat surfaces and low temperatures, and Upper Asia, which extends between the two nodes of Armenia and Pamir. The important roads linking this section of Asia with its other parts to the west and east were the Northern Road or It is also called the Central Asia Road, 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, p.37]:

Oil

The countries of Central Asia are rich in natural resources, especially oil, as they occupy one of the first ranks in the world in terms of potential quantities of oil, as they contain the largest reserves in the world after the Arab Gulf region, and Russian sources and American oil companies operating since 1993 in the region report that the total of the

oil in Central Asia and part of Russia bordering the Caspian Sea is about 30 billion tons, in addition to the 20 billion that are contained in the coastal areas of these lands, and the estimated oil reserves in the Tengiz field alone in Kazakhstan are billions of barrels.

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, p.20].

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, p.45].

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, p.69], 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, p.48].

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, p.41].

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. This coincided with it. Turkey, Iran,

and Israel are among the most prominent of these forces at both the international level (the United States of America, Russia, and China) and the regional level (the Middle East). This is because of the competition between these powers to play an influential role in the reality and future of the region, which has made it one of the hottest regions in the world and exposed it to competition between these forces that work to protect their political, economic, and security interests in the region.

The countries of the region vary in terms of what they possess in terms of oil and gas reserves, and here Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan appear to be the most fortunate, thanks to their alignment of the major sedimentary basins on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea that are richer in oil and gas. As for the rest of the countries that do not have large oil fields, they have another importance, which lies in their strategic location to transport oil and gas to the markets of East and Southeast Asia [32, p.167].

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, p.46]. 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, p.87].

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, p.70].

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, p.179].

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, p.78].

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, p.79].

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, p.19].

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, p.79].

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, p.59].

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 Transcaucasia 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 [40].

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.

Due to the potential establishment of NATO military infrastructure in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the Russian Federation perceives these states as posing a significant threat to its national security. These countries could potentially serve as staging grounds for NATO operations directed at Russia.

The rise to power of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia marked an acceleration in the country's integration with NATO and the European Union. Russia withdrew its remaining military bases from Georgia in 2007, except for those in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The brief military conflict in 2008, known as the "five-day war," concluded with Russia recognizing the independence of these separatist regions, despite their location within Georgia's internationally acknowledged borders.

Although relations with Russia were partially restored under Ivanishvili's leadership, Georgia continued to pursue its pro-Western orientation. In 2014, NATO granted Georgia an "enhanced cooperation" package, and in 2012, Tbilisi formalized its relationship with the European Union through an Association Agreement [42, p. 20].

Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Western powers over who will shape the eventual peace agreement continues to play out. With the apparent ineffectiveness of Russia's soft power—its economic and humanitarian outreach—Moscow has sought to influence the internal affairs of South Caucasus countries to realign their foreign policies in Russia's favor [43, p. 89]. However, the limited success of such efforts has led Russia to pursue a more pragmatic regional approach, especially following the Second Karabakh War. Moscow now aims to establish a new regional balance of power, ideally in cooperation with local governments and without significant Western involvement.

Geographically, the South Caucasus represents both a point of contact and contention among Russia, Turkey, and Iran. These three regional powers, all with stakes in the Syrian conflict, interact in the South Caucasus in ways that reflect both cooperation and competition [40, p. 29]. Furthermore, the region's role in ensuring energy security and facilitating access to Central Asia makes it strategically significant for the United States and the European Union, who view it as a critical area from which to influence Russia's position in Eurasia. For Moscow, maintaining a balance of power in this volatile area remains a strategic imperative.

The North Caucasus, which includes seven autonomous republics and two federal territories within the Russian Federation, also highlights Russia's identity as a Caucasian power. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, the South Caucasus maintained a power dynamic that largely favored Russia. The countries of the region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—established varying levels of relations with their powerful neighbors: Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

This geopolitical interplay can be modeled mathematically:

- **Russia** has strong ties with Armenia (a formal ally), a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, and antagonistic relations with Georgia.
- **Turkey** maintains positive relations with Azerbaijan and a strategic partnership with Georgia, while it lacks formal ties with Armenia.
- **Iran**, meanwhile, preserves neutral diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus states, but lacks deep strategic involvement.

Both Russia and Turkey thus maintain one ally, one strategic partner, and one adversarial relationship in the region. The critical difference lies in their alignments: Russia is allied with Armenia, whereas Turkey supports Azerbaijan and maintains a strategic rapport with Georgia. Notably, Azerbaijan serves as a stabilizing actor, fostering balanced relations with both Russia and Turkey. However, as noted by political scientist Dzhamshed Nuriev [38], Russian interference could potentially extend into Georgia and Azerbaijan, triggering broader instability in the region.

Following the Second Karabakh War, the regional balance shifted: Turkey's ally Azerbaijan achieved a significant military victory over Armenia, a traditional Russian ally, restoring much of its territorial claims. According to the trilateral agreement of November 10, 2020, Russia retained military bases in Armenia and Georgia and deployed peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, regional players are working toward a new cooperative framework known as the "3+3 format," which includes the three South Caucasus states plus Russia, Turkey, and Iran—excluding Western powers such as the United States and the European Union, thus aligning with Russian strategic preferences.

Efforts to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey are also gaining momentum [39, p. 17]. However, recent talks held in Moscow and Brussels between Armenia and Azerbaijan have underscored deep-seated divisions, suggesting that reconciliation remains a complex and delicate process.

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," may reading. 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, p.19]. 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, p.56].

In conclusion, Central Asia and the Caucasus 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 and the Caucasus 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 and the Caucasus 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, p.94].

In this (religious) field, Iran is keen to present itself as an Islamic model characterized by flexibility, pragmatism, 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, p.15].

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, p.15].

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, p.25]. 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, p.3].

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, p.164]. 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, p.87]. 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, p.45], 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 [50, p.56].

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 [51, p.180].

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 [52, p.47].

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 [53, p.15].

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[54, p.56].

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 [55, p.79].

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 Transcaucasia 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 Transcaucasia 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 Transcaucasia 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 [56, p.61].

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 [57, p.110].

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 towards Central Asia primarily centers around the cultivation of diplomatic, economic, and cultural connections with the region. However, it is challenging to make overarching statements about Iran's relations with Central Asia as a collective entity. Tajikistan has historically been regarded as a significant ally of Iran in the Central Asian region, primarily owing to the presence of shared linguistic, cultural, and historical affinities between the two nations. Throughout the 2000s, Iran undertook a series of economic and infrastructure initiatives, including the establishment of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power plant and the construction of the Istiqlal tunnel. One contributing factor to this phenomenon can be attributed to the strong rapport between Ahmadinejad and Rahmon. Additionally, it is plausible to argue that the extensive censure of Iran within the global community, coupled with the contentious nature of its nuclear program, has compelled Tehran to prioritize its interactions within the region. Since approximately 2015, the relationship between Dushanbe and Tehran has experienced an escalation in tension. This development seems to have been triggered by the arrest of Babak Zanjani and further intensified by Muhyiddin Kabiri's visit to Tehran in December 2015 [58, p.68].

In contrast to Tajikistan, Iran has frequently underscored shared cultural and linguistic affinities in its relationship with the country. However, the dynamics of Iranian-Turkmen relations primarily revolve around geo-economic considerations, particularly in the domains of energy, transportation, and industrial collaboration. The bilateral partnership between Tehran and Ashgabat holds significant importance for Iran, despite the presence of unresolved disputes pertaining to the purchase of natural gas. In the past, the northeastern region of Iran faced a shortage of domestic pipeline infrastructure, necessitating the importation of gas from Turkmenistan during winter months. However, starting from January 2017, the gas imports from Turkmenistan ceased due to disagreements pertaining to payment and gas quality. In light of escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, the visit of Foreign Minister Zarif to Ashgabat in mid-May served the dual purpose of enhancing regional economic connections amidst global isolation and reiterating Tehran's commitment to fostering amicable relations with Turkmenistan, in line with its stated policy of neutrality [59, p.106].

During the tenure of Islam Karimov, it can be argued that Uzbekistan's relations with Iran were characterized by a significant degree of strain, potentially representing the most challenging dynamic among the Central Asian nations. During the tenure of Islam Karimov, it can be argued that Uzbekistan's relations with Iran were characterized by

significant challenges, potentially representing the most strained among the Central Asian nations. Since assuming office, there has been a discernible, albeit modest, enhancement in the bilateral relations between the two nations under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Discussions have been held regarding the potential exportation of Iranian oil to Uzbekistan via rail, with the aim of mitigating the persistent scarcity of oil and gas within the latter nation. 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 [60, p.201].

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. In addition to the nuclear matter, it is noteworthy that Kazakhstan and Iran possess a mutual maritime boundary in the Caspian Sea. In recent times, these nations have engaged in a series of significant discussions at the highest levels of government, with the aim of augmenting their economic ties.

Similar to the case of Kazakhstan, the bilateral relations between Iran and Kyrgyzstan have generally exhibited a positive trajectory, albeit with limited progress, despite the persistent endeavors of both nations to enhance their trade ties. The trade volume between Kyrgyzstan and Iran exhibits a notable disparity when compared to that of China, Russia, and Turkey. In May 2018, an interim agreement was established between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Iran, with the objective of establishing a free trade area between the two entities. This has the potential to enhance trade relations among Iran and members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The attainment of this objective is contingent upon the EAEU's capacity to effectively address the numerous challenges inherent in its operational efficacy as an economic union [61, p.56].

The nations situated in Central Asia continue to rely significantly on land transportation infrastructure. Consequently, fostering collaboration with Iran to establish international transit corridors that link the region with the Iranian seaports of Bandar Abbas or Chabahar holds considerable significance as a motivating factor in maintaining strong diplomatic ties with Tehran. Central Asia's connection to the Persian Gulf through Iran has been facilitated by existing railway networks. However, the advancement of new communication channels has primarily been influenced by externally initiated endeavors

such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the North-South International Transit Corridor. The decision made by the Trump administration to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and subsequently impose sanctions on Iran has presented a challenging predicament for the nations situated in Central Asia. The establishment of regional trade and transportation networks between Iran and Central Asian nations holds potential advantages in terms of enhancing regional connectivity and fostering integration. However, it is noteworthy that the nations in Central Asia have generally refrained from adopting a foreign policy that openly opposes the United States, despite expressing restrained criticism towards Washington's efforts to promote external democratization within the region. 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 [62, p.171].

Iran perceives Central Asia as a region where Russian influence is prominent, thereby indicating an underlying acknowledgment of Moscow's distinct interests in the area. Iran perceives Central Asia as a region where Russian influence holds sway, thereby indicating an underlying acknowledgment of Moscow's distinct interests in the area. In this context, it is not necessary for Russia to intervene in Iran's diplomatic engagements with the countries of Central Asia. Russia demonstrates a keen understanding of Iran's constraints within the region, while Tehran exhibits a similar awareness of the potential negative implications its Central Asia policy may have on its rapport with Moscow. In relation to the Caspian Sea, it is noteworthy that both Russia and Iran share a comparable normative stance opposing the presence of foreign naval forces. This shared position is explicitly articulated in Article 3 of the recent agreement reached among the Caspian countries. Both nations also expressed their opposition to the development of the Trans-Caspian pipeline. Iran and Russia are currently engaged in collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia, specifically in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea [63, p.56].

Iran and Russia are actively engaged in seeking a resolution to the issue of Afghanistan. Historically, Iran, in conjunction with Russia and the nations of Central Asia, provided support to the Northern Alliance. Given the prevailing circumstances, it is plausible that Iran may once again assume a collaborative role in countering the Islamic State or potentially endorse the Russian endeavor to progressively engage with the Taliban via diplomatic means. In December 2018, subsequent to the discussions held under the Moscow format, negotiations were conducted between the Taliban in Iran. The convening of the Tehran talks shortly after the announcement of the US withdrawal was perceived by Russia as an indication of Iran's increased commitment to assume a greater role in the stabilization of Afghanistan subsequent to the US withdrawal. The positive impact of Iran's endeavors to enhance relations with Afghan President Ghani on Russia's interests

was observed during the SCO summit in Qingdao in June 2018. The diplomatic ties between the Kremlin and the Afghan government have experienced a decline in recent months. This can be attributed to Russian involvement with Afghan opposition figures, which has created an opening for Tehran to align itself with Moscow's Afghanistan policy by establishing connections with President Ghani's administration. Russia, Iran, and India are the primary initiators of the International North-South Transit Corridor, a transportation route that encompasses multiple Central Asian nations, when examined through an economic lens. This corridor has the potential to function as an alternative means of connectivity to China's Belt and Road Initiative, while also facilitating Iran's access to international markets.

In 2004, during the Khatami administration, Iran submitted an application for observer state status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Subsequently, in the following year, Iran, along with India and Pakistan, participated in the Astana summit as observer states. During Ahmadinejad's tenure, the SCO was perceived as a crucial extension of the "Look East" policy. Nevertheless, the utilization of contentious foreign policy discourse by the individual in question gave rise to valid concerns among the Central Asian nations and China. 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 [64, p.48].

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." This evil encompasses 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.

The allegations regarding Iranian ulterior motives in Central Asia, alongside the Tajik government's historical reinterpretation, seem to be primarily influenced by the deterioration of Iran-Tajikistan relations and the increasing influence of Saudi Arabia, rather than concrete evidence of Iranian intervention. In the region of Central Asia, Iran consistently places emphasis on non-intervention and adopts a sovereignty approach that aligns with the language employed in declarations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as in foreign policy statements of Russia and China. Despite the contentious nature of Iran's relationship with Karimov, Tehran has unequivocally regarded the Uzbek government's severe suppression of the Andijan incident as an internal matter. Similar circumstances occurred during the Tulip Revolution and the period of unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. The prioritization of non-intervention may serve as an expression of Iran's distinct normative perspective regarding the region. However, it is plausible to argue that this stance also signifies Iran's refusal to accept the presence or impact of adversarial external forces within the region. Furthermore, in the context of Central Asian countries and Iran, the prioritization of non-intervention and sovereignty plays a crucial role in sustaining the regime's existence despite facing international criticism [65, p.56].

Iran's foreign policy in the Central Asian region exhibits notable distinctions when compared to its policy in the Middle East. Central Asia is evidently positioned lower in the hierarchy of Iranian foreign policy priorities, following the Middle East. The Persian Gulf constitutes the primary locus of security risks for Iran, whereas Central Asia, excluding Afghanistan, has exhibited a comparatively stable environment since the late 1990s. The presence of United States military forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has raised concerns for Iran. Tehran has associated the presence of foreign troops with the proliferation of terrorism and regional instability, although this concern appears to have diminished in recent times. Furthermore, the regional presence of Russia and China imposes constraints on Iran, both in terms of capability and potentially even willingness,

to engage in competition with Moscow or Beijing in the Central Asian context. Following the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), President Rouhani of Iran has expressed the notion of leveraging Iran's regional influence to foster robust relationships with Russia, India, and China within the Eurasian context. This approach aims to facilitate inter-country connectivity through collaborative efforts in security and energy cooperation. The plausibility of the outcome remains uncertain; nevertheless, it will be intriguing to observe its potential success [66,p.50].

Iran possesses a realistic understanding of the status of Islam in Central Asia, yet it typically exercises restraint in interfering with the internal matters of the region and relinquishes foreign policies motivated by the concept of exporting revolution, as documented in source 68, page 29 [9].

The conflict in Iraq resulted in Tehran adopting a pragmatic approach to its foreign policy towards Central Asia, primarily driven by the imperative to mitigate its international isolation. During the 1990s, Iran pursued a regional policy aimed at cultivating diplomatic ties with Central Asian nations and actively engaging in multilateral platforms, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization, which encompasses all five states of Central Asia. In November 1991, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati embarked on a diplomatic tour of all the republics in Central Asia. Additionally, throughout the period of 1991-1992, the presidents of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan reciprocated the visits by traveling to Tehran. Although Tajikistan and Iran do not share a border, the city of Dushanbe has been regarded as a suitable regional partner for Tehran based on their linguistic and cultural similarities. Before the onset of the civil war, Iran had already been establishing cultural and economic connections with Tajikistan. This is evident from President of Tajikistan Rahman Nabiyeu visit to Iran during the period of hostilities in June 1992. There exist multiple reliable reports that suggest Tehran offered moral and, as per certain sources, potentially material assistance to the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan during the initial stages of the civil conflict. Nevertheless, the initiation of the civil war in Tajikistan cannot be attributed to Iranian involvement. Tehran maintained a diplomatic connection with Said Abdullo Nuri, while Iran significantly exerted influence in compelling the opposition to engage in United Nations-sanctioned peace negotiations with the Tajik government [67, p.30]

During the summer of 1993, an incident occurred resulting in the demise of approximately 30 Russian border guards stationed along the Tajik-Afghan border. This event served as a catalyst for Moscow to engage in collaboration with Iran, with the aim of initiating negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations. The presence of instability in the neighboring country of Afghanistan, which encompasses threats to border security and the influx of refugees, has emerged as a significant catalyst prompting collaborative mediation efforts by both Russia and Iran. Following the incident at the Russian border post, the government of Moscow actively pursued diplomatic engagement with Iran. In the memoir titled "Years in Big Politics" by Yevgeny Primakov, the author recounts his trip to Tehran in the autumn of 1993. During this visit, Primakov put forth a

proposition for collaboration between Russia and Iran in the context of Tajikistan. Several months later, in April 1994, the Russian government, with the assistance of Iran acting as external mediators, successfully exerted pressure on both the Tajik government and opposition to engage in negotiations facilitated by the United Nations. By September 1994, the involved parties reached a consensus on the conditions for a ceasefire, which was formalized in Tehran. The impasse in negotiations during a significant portion of 1995 was primarily attributed to disputes arising from the adherence to the ceasefire accord. Nevertheless, following the Taliban's progression towards Kabul in 1996, the geopolitical circumstances prompted a sense of immediacy in Moscow and Tehran, underscoring the imperative for a lasting peace accord. The warring factions experienced heightened pressure from Russia and Iran, which ultimately resulted in a political accord in December 1996. This agreement encompassed the inclusion of the opposition within the government and ultimately facilitated the finalization of the 1997 General Peace Agreement.

The recent appointment of deputy foreign ministers as ambassadors signifies the significance of enhancing diplomatic ties between Iran and Tajikistan, in both the capitals of Dushanbe and Tehran. In March 2019, the city of Tehran designated Mohammad Taqi Saberi, who concurrently held the position of Deputy Foreign Minister for Administrative and Financial Affairs, as its recently appointed Ambassador to Tajikistan. Following his recent appointment, Ambassador Saberi held a meeting with Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, during which they emphasized the imperative of enhancing diplomatic ties with Tajikistan. One month later, the city of Dushanbe designated Nizamiddin Zahidi, a former First Deputy Foreign Minister, to serve as the ambassador to Tehran. Although the symbolism in this context is evident, there remain unresolved matters pertaining to the proscribed Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. 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 [68,p.50].

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. Rahbar 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 [69].

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 [70].

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, p.36].

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 Pasveh and Piran Shahr, 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, p.37].

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, p.15].

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.

Section Abstract

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.

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, p.45]. 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.
- 4) 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, p.56].
- 5) Enhancing Iranian influence in a way that does not provoke the Russian Federation or the regimes in these republics [66, p.41].
- 6) 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, p.22].

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, p.45].

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 Caspian-Central Asia region uniquely significant from a geographical perspective.

Historically, the peoples of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, parts of Kazakhstan, and much of the Caucasus have shared a rich history of coexistence within various security federations. These associations span back in time, encompassing the Parthenian and Sasanian federations in pre-Islamic eras, through the Abbasid Caliphate, and later within the Persian and Turkish empires, including the Samanids, Seljuks, and Ghaznavids. More recently, the Safavid Empire further solidified these connections.

Over two millennia of interaction among Central Asian nations have given rise to a cultural blend that binds these countries together. The spread of Islam in the east has added another layer to this cultural amalgamation, with Iran, Tajikistan, most of Afghanistan, and segments of Uzbekistan sharing linguistic and religious commonalities. Persian literature thrives as a traditional center of Iranian arts and sciences, with cities such as

Bukhara, Balkh, Taraf, Samarkand, Khafiyah, and Khwarazm contributing significantly to its enrichment [72].

Iran, situated in the Middle East, boasts a storied history and culture that have left an indelible mark on neighboring regions, particularly Central Asia and the Caucasus. The ties between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have been molded by a myriad of shared interests, encompassing historical bonds, mutual economic advantages, and regional security considerations.

Historically, Iran has maintained robust cultural and economic connections with these regions, dating back to the ancient Silk Road's heyday when it facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and people between the East and West. Iran served as a prominent trade hub along this route, extending its influence far beyond its borders. Consequently, many Central Asian and Caucasian nations share a cultural heritage with Iran, encompassing language, religion, and cuisine.

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, p.35].

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, p.40].

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, p.15].

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, p.135].

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, p.45].

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, p.15].

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, p.45].

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, p.15].

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, p.15].

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, p.46]. 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, p.370]. "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, p.25]. "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, p.10] 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, p.76].

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, p.45]. 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, p.68]. 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, p.87].

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 Elburz 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, p.88].

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, p.45]. 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, p.79].

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, p.45].

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, p.76].

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, p.86].

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, p.76].

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, p.76].

The Armenian issue is less publicly discussed in Iran. Former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai'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 considers 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, Baluch, 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:

1. Islamic Ideological Approach
2. Cultural Approach, emphasizing linguistic and cultural affinities, as well as historical convergence
3. 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.

Section Abstract

In my view, Central Asia and the Caucasus are strategic regions that are gaining increasing importance in Iranian foreign policy. This importance is due to the economic, cultural, and geopolitical factors that influence the formation of relations between Iran and the countries of these regions.

Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shaped by various factors, including regional dynamics, international relations, and economic considerations. This essay will explore 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 opened new opportunities for Iran to establish closer relations with the newly independent nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the early 1990s, Iran actively initiated diplomatic ties with these states and sought to enhance its economic connections by becoming a member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which includes several Central Asian countries.

During this initial phase, Iran's foreign policy aimed to extend its influence and establish itself as a key regional player. It strategically leveraged historical, cultural, and religious ties to forge deeper connections with these nations. However, Iran faced resistance from other regional powers, particularly Russia, which viewed these newly independent states as part of its traditional sphere of influence and sought to maintain its dominance, resulting in 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 saw a heightened focus on regional stability and counterterrorism. This period coincided with

the rule of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, a leader who held antagonistic views toward Iran. Consequently, Iran shifted its attention to fostering closer relations with neighboring countries, particularly Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Iran aimed to leverage its status as a significant regional actor to promote stability and counterbalance the influence of other powers like Russia and China.

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

The third phase of Iranian foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus has focused on 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 phase, Iran has intensified its efforts to strengthen economic ties with these regions and establish itself as a major contributor to their development. Iran has undertaken various infrastructure projects, including the construction of railways, highways, and pipelines connecting Central Asia and the Caucasus to Iran and the broader Middle East.

Iran's foreign policy toward 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 critical geopolitical areas.

Iran's strategy in Central Asia and the Caucasus is affected by several internal and external factors, most notably: cultural and religious identity, as Iran is considered a center for Shiites in the world, which enhances its ability to influence countries with a Shiite majority or those with Shiite minorities. Iran seeks to strengthen this identity by spreading cultural and religious values. Security issues are also one of the main axes of Iranian foreign policy. Iran suffers from threats related to terrorist groups, especially in light of the instability in some neighboring countries. Therefore, Iran seeks to achieve stability in Central Asia and the Caucasus to ensure the security of its borders. Iran also faces major economic challenges, including Western sanctions and internal economic pressures.

Therefore, Iran seeks to strengthen its trade relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus to strengthen its economy and mitigate the effects of sanctions. On the other hand, this Iranian strategy is also affected by external factors, such as regional competition, as Central Asia and the Caucasus witness competition between major powers, such as Russia, China, India, Turkey, the Europeans, and the United States. Iran seeks to find a balance in its relations with these powers to enhance its influence. Despite the decline of American influence in some regions, Iran still sees it as a threat. Therefore, it seeks to strengthen its presence in Central Asia as a means of countering American influence. Energy resources are also considered one of the main factors in foreign policy.

Iran seeks to exploit its geographical location as a link between Central Asia and global energy markets. Oil is one of the main factors influencing Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia. Iran has large oil and gas reserves and seeks to benefit from these resources to enhance its role as a regional energy hub. Oil and gas discoveries in the Caspian Sea have paved the way for cooperation between the countries bordering the sea. Iran seeks to use these resources to strengthen its relations with its neighbors, especially in light of the increasing competition with Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Despite these opportunities, Iran faces challenges in the Caspian Sea, including competition over resources as other countries seek to assert their rights to exploit the sea's resources. This requires Iran to enhance its understanding with other countries to avoid conflicts. The complex legal status of the Caspian Sea hinders the development of the necessary infrastructure for the transportation of oil and gas.

Trade is a key tool for strengthening relations between Iran and Central Asian countries. Iran seeks to establish trade partnerships with these countries, which enhances its economic stability by facilitating trade through the establishment of joint free zones and simplifying customs procedures with its neighbors. And developing joint projects in the fields of energy and transportation, which enhances its economic interests. Transportation networks and investments are an essential part of Iran's strategy to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, as Iran is working to develop trade corridors linking it to Central Asian countries via rail and road. It is encouraged to invest in infrastructure projects in neighboring countries, which contributes to strengthening economic relations.

"Soft power" is one of the main tools Iran uses to enhance its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This power includes culture and arts, as Iran seeks to enhance the influence of its culture and arts in the region, which contributes to improving its image and strengthening its cultural relations. Iran also provides scholarships to students from Central Asian countries, which helps build long-term relations with new generations. Iran faces competition from countries such as Turkey, which is also seeking to increase its cultural influence in the region. It also suffers from a negative image in some international circles, which affects its ability to use its soft power effectively.

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 [100].

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. 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 [99].

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, Muhyiddin 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, p.76].

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, p.30].

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, p.26].

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].

The issue of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the presence of a large percentage of Iranians of Azeri origin in Iran, the concern over the demand for secession, and the mutual

accusations between the two countries regarding support for some parties in both countries, as well as the problem of border demarcation, were some of the most prominent challenges in the relations between the two countries.

Iran's decision to open a consulate in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Region within the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1992 and the sharing of the Caspian Sea's wealth were additional factors that increased the tension in the relations between the two countries and contributed directly to impeding their development. These factors contributed to the continuing instability of the two countries' political relations. However, the visit of Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) to the Azerbaijani capital (Baku) in 1993, and Iran's tendency at times towards supporting Azerbaijan in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, contributed to the improvement of relations between the two countries for some time, and the tension prevailed in the relations of the two countries during the rule of the Azerbaijani president Abolfazl Elchibey (1991-1993) and who assumed the presidency immediately after independence in 1991, due to his nationalist inclinations, and his claim to the Iranian region of Azerbaijan, and his tendencies towards the United States of America, Turkey and Israel, and this tendency aroused Iran's anxiety and hostility to Azerbaijan that continued until Abolfazl Elchibey left power in Azerbaijan [107, p.7].

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 Abolfazl 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, p.54].

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, p.76].

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, p.137]. The land area was estimated at 20% of the total area of Azerbaijan [115, p.60].

This development was reflected in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, as Azerbaijani President Abolfazl 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 Nakhichevan 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, p.135].

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 is believed to harbor vast reserves of oil and gas, making the distribution of these resources a matter of critical economic significance for the littoral states. Negotiations aimed to facilitate the development of these resources while ensuring a fair distribution of revenues.

After protracted negotiations, a significant breakthrough occurred in August 2018 when the five littoral states signed 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, p.46].

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.

Transitioning to the topic of Central Asia, the region has become an arena of interest and contention among major global players, with Iran, the United States, and Russia vying for influence.

The Central Asian republics, situated in a strategic location bordering Russia, China, and Iran, hold immense economic potential and significant energy resources. The region has garnered the attention of major powers, primarily the United States, due to its vast oil wealth and proximity to key geopolitical players.

The significance of Central Asia became pronounced after the September 11, 2001, events when the United States launched a military campaign in Afghanistan. Central Asia, given its geographical proximity to Afghanistan, became crucial for providing logistical support to U.S. forces operating there. This underscored the region's importance to U.S. interests [121].

Furthermore, the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq in 2003 heightened the region's relevance. When the Turkish parliament denied the use of Turkish lands for the military operation, attention shifted toward Central Asia, where the U.S. established military bases.

Recently, with escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, Central Asian countries have come into 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, p.130].

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 Muhyiddin 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 direct proximity to Afghanistan made it crucial for supplying U.S. forces. The region's significance was further emphasized during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 when Central Asia, particularly its military bases, gained attention [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 [125].

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 is believed to harbor vast reserves of oil and gas, making the distribution of these resources a matter of critical economic significance for the littoral states. Negotiations aim to facilitate the development of these resources while ensuring a fair distribution of revenues.

After lengthy negotiations, a significant breakthrough occurred in August 2018 when the five littoral states signed 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 resource division and delineation of EEZ boundaries.

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, p.16].

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, p.129].

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 (Shariq , Aluf, and Alazar) 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, p.49].

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, p.87].

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 Nagorno 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. Some political and economic changes contributed in support of this tendency and expanded their influence in the Caucasus region, especially after Azerbaijan agreed in 1999 to allow the United States of America to establish a military base on its territory, as well as the increasing military cooperation between Turkey and Israel that began in 1996 and Azerbaijan's announcement of its readiness to attend the joint military exercises between Turkey and Israel, as reflected in the rivalry between the United States of America and Russia in the Caucasus region, as an observer of Iranian-Armenian relations [133]. This was evident in the increasing inclination of the United States of America towards Azerbaijan, which at the same time also pushed Armenia to expand its relations with Russia. Accordingly, Robert Kocharyan, President of Armenia in 1998, visited Iran in December 2001, as the visit contributed to strengthening rapprochement between the two countries, especially in the economic field [133].

The rapprochement between the two countries increased after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic in 2005, and Armenia sent an official delegation to Iran with the aim of discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh case with the Iranian government, which in turn promised Armenia to seek to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh case in exchange for Armenia's help in suppressing the Azerbaijani separatist movements in the region [134, p.105], as well as following up the Azerbaijani opposition political movements.

Armenia is Iran's only strategic partner in the South Caucasus region. 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. Besides 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, p.78].

Iran's engagement with the Caucasus has been shaped by a combination of political, economic, and security-driven calculations. These strategic considerations enabled Tehran to cultivate constructive relations with regional countries—most notably Armenia, where bilateral ties evolved into a partnership-level cooperation. Conversely, Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan has largely been marked by friction and instability, stemming from unresolved disputes such as the equitable distribution of Caspian Sea resources and the status of the Azerbaijani minority residing in Iran. Despite these challenges, Tehran has made concerted efforts to improve ties with Baku, primarily motivated by the potential to collaborate in exploiting Azerbaijan's oil reserves in the Caspian Sea alongside other Caucasian nations. However, Iran's position in the Caucasus has been influenced by broader regional and global power rivalries, especially the strategic competition for influence between the Russian Federation and the United States, both of which vie for dominance and lucrative investment opportunities in the region.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran's ambition to deepen cooperation with Central Asian republics was constrained by several historical, cultural, political, and economic factors. Key among the obstacles were:

1. **Iran's protracted standoff with Western powers**, which led to both international and unilateral sanctions that significantly hampered Tehran's capacity to foster robust political and economic ties with Central Asian states.
2. **The absence of durable regional allies**, notwithstanding relatively close ties with Armenia and Tajikistan. These relationships remain limited in scope, given that most countries in the region maintain complex, often competing affiliations with major powers like the United States and Russia.
3. **Disagreements surrounding the legal regime of the Caspian Sea**, where Iran's stance failed to gain traction with other littoral states, notably Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, thereby exacerbating tensions.

A notable shift in Iran's diplomatic orientation toward Central Asia and the Caucasus began to take shape during President Hassan Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013. The attendance of high-ranking officials—such as Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan, the Azerbaijani parliamentary speaker Ogtay Asadov, Uzbek Senate President Ilgizar Sobirov, and a Georgian minister—signaled a renewed interest among regional actors in Iran's new administration and its prospective foreign policy agenda.

This shift, reinforced by the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, the volatile dynamics in the Arab Middle East, and the Rouhani administration's proactive

diplomacy, injected fresh momentum into Iran's regional foreign policy. While Rouhani's approach has not been immune to criticism, his re-election assured continuity in Iran's diplomatic discourse and strategy. An analysis of Central Asian and Caucasian governments' responses to Rouhani's first term reveals a more nuanced understanding of Tehran's foreign policy priorities, setting the stage for more refined engagement during his second term [136, p.10].

In the South Caucasus, one of the most significant achievements of President Hassan Rouhani's first administration was the marked improvement in Iran's relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan. The two countries overcame a period of strained and sometimes tense ties from 2007 to 2013, reflected in over five high-level bilateral visits—three by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Tehran and two by Rouhani to Baku. Additionally, both sides participated in three multilateral forums: the 13th OSCE Summit in Istanbul, the UN General Assembly in New York, and the 44th World Economic Forum in Davos. A notable breakthrough was the formation of a trilateral mechanism involving Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia to advance the North-South Transport Corridor through railway integration [137].

The remaining segments of the Caspian–Rasht–Astara railway are expected to become operational during Rouhani's second term. Iran has also sought a more active role in Azerbaijan's energy sector, particularly in developing Phase II of the Shah Deniz gas field. Ongoing bilateral negotiations aim to address pricing disputes for European-bound gas exports and Iran's involvement in the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP). These developments are anticipated to enhance both countries' positions in European energy markets, especially amid continued tensions between the EU and Russia over the Ukraine crisis [137].

Iran-Armenia relations remained stable over the same period, strengthened by the removal of visa restrictions. Several Armenian officials—including the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the National Assembly, and Foreign Minister—visited Tehran. Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri's visit in October 2015, along with Javad Zarif's visits, helped to address perceptions of imbalance in Iran's regional diplomacy. Moving forward, Iran is expected to engage more closely with Armenia, particularly in connection with the “North-South Investment Corridor” initiative. Infrastructure projects such as the reconstruction of the Armenian-Georgian road and the proposed Iran-Armenia railway aim to complement Iran's Azerbaijan rail links, enhancing Tehran's strategic position in the region [138].

Iran's relations with Georgia remained modest throughout Rouhani's first term, despite renewed visa exemptions and diplomatic activity. A diplomatic shift occurred in 2017 with the visit of the Georgian Foreign Minister to Tehran to attend Rafsanjani's funeral, followed shortly by Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif's visit to Tbilisi, and Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili's reciprocal trip to Tehran. Post-nuclear agreement, Iran pushed to expand economic ties, with mutual visa waivers supporting tourism—especially given the presence of Georgian communities in regions like Fereydunshahr,

Isfahan. Iran also proposed joint projects in dam and hydroelectric power construction, refinery development in Batumi, and port infrastructure upgrades. Strengthened transit links, including the Bandar Abbas–Batumi corridor and regional power grid connections, would allow Iranian gas exports to Georgia via Armenia. Realizing these goals depends on renewed strategic planning from both governments [138].

In Central Asia, Iran faced more complicated dynamics. Despite traditionally close ties with Tajikistan, relations deteriorated due to financial and political tensions. Rouhani's 2013 inauguration saw the attendance of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, and Rouhani visited Tajikistan in 2014 for the SCO summit. However, financial fallout linked to Iranian businessman Babak Zanjani's operations in Tajikistan and outrage over the 2015 Tehran visit of Muhyiddin Kabiri, head of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, strained relations. These tensions overshadowed previously close cooperation, including a 2013 bilateral agreement on security cooperation supported by Deputy Minister Ebrahim Rahimpour. Rebuilding relations with Tajikistan emerged as a diplomatic priority for Rouhani's second term [139].

Iran's engagement with Uzbekistan remained limited, continuing a long-standing pattern of distance during Islam Karimov's presidency. Between 2013 and 2016, no direct meetings occurred between Rouhani and Karimov. Following Karimov's death in 2016, Javad Zarif represented Iran at the funeral in Samarkand and expressed hope for improved ties with the new Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Despite this diplomatic opening, no major breakthroughs followed, and Iran-Uzbekistan relations remained relatively static [140, p.5].

Uzbekistan remains the most hesitant country to strengthen its ties with Iran for several reasons. The Uzbek government has historically viewed any potential regional rival with suspicion, was driven by concerns over Islamist insurgency, and until 2005 positioned itself as the primary ally of the United States in the region. As a result, any shift in Uzbekistan's policy could prompt a gradual expansion of relations with Tehran, albeit likely in a cautious manner. While trade with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is relatively minor, Tajikistan has long been a conduit for Iranian influence in Central Asia.

Geographically, Uzbekistan occupies a central position in Central Asia, covering 447,000 square kilometers and with a population nearing 30 million, which accounts for half of the region's population. The spread of the Uzbek diaspora across Central Asia and Afghanistan further enhances its influence throughout the region. Consequently, Uzbekistan plays a critical "balancing" role and serves as a "stabilizing" force in Central Asia's geopolitical landscape, making it a key player in any potential diplomatic developments with Iran.

Regarding bilateral relations, Iran's trade links with Central Asia are largely overshadowed by other regional powers. Kazakhstan dominates regional exchanges, while Turkmenistan is Iran's sixth-largest trading partner and Tajikistan ranks seventh. However, Iran's overall trade share in the region remains limited, constituting just 0.3%

to 6.7% of the imports and exports of most countries, excluding Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

During President Hassan Rouhani's first term, Iran's relations with Kyrgyzstan strengthened significantly, with a series of reciprocal visits between Tehran and Bishkek. This led to enhanced cooperation in sectors like transportation, energy, and counterterrorism. The second term of Rouhani's administration is expected to focus on further developing these relations, including easing visa requirements in three phases, which would facilitate trade, tourism, and economic cooperation. The China-Kyrgyzstan railway, linking Iran through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, will likely also play a crucial role in these developments.

Iran, despite challenges like economic sanctions and political isolation, remains a key player in the Middle East and Central Asia. Historically, Iran has maintained robust ties with Central Asia and the Caucasus, with its involvement in the ancient Silk Road bolstering economic and cultural exchange. Today, Iran seeks to enhance its influence in the region through economic, political, and cultural strategies.

Economically, Iran has leveraged its vast energy resources and strategic location to forge partnerships with countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. One significant initiative is the North-South Transport Corridor, which connects Iran to Russia via Azerbaijan, offering an alternative to heavily relied-upon trade routes like the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal. This corridor is expected to facilitate increased trade between Iran and Central Asia, while also granting these countries access to European markets.

Iran's bilateral economic ties include agreements with Kazakhstan, a major regional economy, and a joint commission with Uzbekistan aimed at boosting cooperation. Iran has also signed agreements with Azerbaijan, a key regional player, and Armenia, which maintains strong ties with Iran due to its significant diaspora in the country.

Despite these efforts, Iran's economic influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus has been constrained by the region's dependency on Russia and China for trade and investment, as well as the impact of Western sanctions. Iran's limited access to international markets has hindered its ability to expand these relationships further.

On the political front, Iran has sought to deepen its alliances in Central Asia and the Caucasus, often positioning itself as a mediator in regional conflicts. One of the challenges Iran faces in the region is the competing influence of external powers like the United States and Russia, which have sought to expand their reach through military presence, economic aid, and political alliances. In response, Iran has cultivated strategic partnerships, particularly with Russia, to counter Western influence and promote cooperation on security, energy, and trade.

Iran has also actively engaged in peace processes in the region, such as the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Through these efforts, Iran has worked to maintain stability and security, positioning itself as a key political actor in the region.

Another way that Iran has sought to expand its political influence in the region is through cultural diplomacy. Iran has a rich cultural heritage and has sought to use this heritage to promote its political interests in the region. For example, Iran has established a number of cultural centers in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus that are aimed at promoting Iranian culture and language.

Iran has also sought to promote Islamic solidarity in the region and has sought to use its status as a Shia Muslim country to establish partnerships with other Shia countries in the region. For example, Iran has sought to establish close ties with Azerbaijan, which has a significant Shia Muslim population. Iran has also sought to establish partnerships with other Shia countries in the region, such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Despite Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the country faces a number of challenges in the region. One of the main challenges is the competition from other regional powers, such as Russia and China. These powers have significant economic, political, and military influence in the region and have sought to use this influence to expand their own interests.

Another challenge that Iran faces in the region is the threat of terrorism and extremism. Central Asia and the Caucasus are home to a number of extremist groups, and Iran has sought to counter these groups through its support for regional security and stability.

The economic sanctions that have been imposed on Iran by the United States and other Western countries have also limited Iran's ability to expand its influence in the region. These sanctions have made it difficult for Iran to access international markets and finance and have limited Iran's ability to engage in economic and political partnerships with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus [141].

Despite the challenges that Iran faces in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the country has been able to maintain its strategic interests in the region through its economic, political, and cultural ties. Iran has sought to expand its influence in the region through a variety of means, including the construction of the North-South Transport Corridor, the establishment of economic and political partnerships with the countries of the region, and the promotion of its cultural heritage and Islamic identity.

However, Iran faces significant competition from other regional powers, and the economic sanctions that have been imposed on the country have limited its ability to expand its influence in the region. Nonetheless, Iran's strategic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus are likely to remain important in the years to come, and the country will continue to play an important role in regional politics and economics.

In short, the legacy of Iranian foreign policy in the Asian and Caucasus regions in Hassan Rouhani's first government shows that after the nuclear deal and in the prevailing conditions governing the Arab Middle East, more attention is being paid to the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus as one of the important regions in Iran's periphery. Significant achievements have been made in this regard. However, criticism has been directed at the approach and practice of Iranian foreign policy at this stage, which is

expected to be more comprehensive in planning and targeting Iran's foreign interests in the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus than in the past. The undeniable areas of Iranian culture and civilization, as well as an important part of West Asia, represent a 20-year vision for the Islamic Republic of Iran on the horizon of 2025. Whereas, Hassan Rouhani's re-election is a stabilization of the dialogue of interactions and detente, confronting Iran's concerns and security, and a dynamic diplomacy regarding Iran's relations with other countries, especially its neighbors, which provides Iran and Asian countries with a suitable opportunity, which is central to the development of bilateral and regional relations.

As a result of the sanctions that have been adopted and the separation of Iranian banks from the SWIFT system, all of Iran's trading partners faced great difficulties in making compromises with Iran, and only countries consuming Iranian oil could maintain trade volume as payments for oil supplies and for Iran to receive products from its trading partners [142].

At the same time, the difference between the official rate of the Iranian Riyal set by the Central Bank of Iran and the free rate of the Iranian Riyal has forced Iranian businessmen to adapt to the current situation and to find schemes and mechanisms to circumvent Iranian banks and the foreign exchange rate set by the government when transferring money to Iran.

In order to enable Iran to expand its cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan in Central Asia and Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Caucasus, it is necessary to show more mobility in the four areas.

Iran has a long history of engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus, two regions that are strategically important to Iran's foreign policy goals. Iran's proximity to these regions, its historical, cultural, and economic ties with the countries in these regions, and the geopolitical dynamics in the region provide opportunities for Iran to enhance its strategic influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

This paper will examine the strategic opportunities that Iran can leverage in these regions, including economic ties, cultural and historical affinities, geopolitical considerations, and changing regional dynamics. It will also analyze the challenges that Iran faces in pursuing its strategic interests 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, p.160].

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 and 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, p.70]

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.

Competition from other regional powers like Russia and China also poses a significant challenge to Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus. These powers hold substantial economic, political, and military sway in the region and have been expanding their interests.

Russia, for instance, has deep historical and cultural ties to many countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus and has been active in the region for centuries. Meanwhile, China has been increasing its economic and political influence through its Belt and Road Initiative, a vast infrastructure project aimed at linking China to Europe and the Middle East [125].

Iran's rivalry with Russia and China has hindered its ability to expand its influence and form partnerships in the region.

Despite these challenges, Iran has maintained its strategic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus by establishing economic and political partnerships, promoting its cultural heritage and Islamic identity, and supporting regional security and stability. Although the obstacles to Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus are significant, they are not insurmountable, and Iran will continue to play a vital role in regional politics and economics in the future.

In conclusion, while there are considerable opportunities for cooperation and partnership between Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, there are also significant challenges that need to be addressed. By tackling these challenges, such as competition with other regional powers, economic sanctions, and security issues, Iran and the Central

Asian and Caucasian countries can strengthen their relationships and contribute to greater regional 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, p.311].

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, p.72].

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, p.95].

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, p.58].

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, p.35].

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, p.36].

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.

Opportunities:

- 1) Regional infrastructure development: Projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative can create economic opportunities for Iran.
- 2) Cooperation on security issues: Cooperation on counter-terrorism and border security can enhance regional stability.
- 3) Outreach to Shiites: Iran can build bridges with Shiite communities to strengthen cultural and religious ties.
- 4) Flexibility of foreign policy strategy: Changing priorities may lead to a more active and engaged Iranian foreign policy toward the region.
- 5) 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.

3.3 A Comprehensive Analysis of Trends and Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Toward Central Asia and the Caucasus

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the political and economic responses of Iran's foreign policy strategy toward the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). It draws on primary sources, including examining the Iranian constitution, bilateral agreements, official statements of heads of state, cooperation projects, and official statistics, to provide an in-depth understanding of these crucial regional relationships. The findings reveal Iran's foreign policy strategy's continued focus on good neighborly relations, based on the principles of rejecting hegemony, preserving independence, and fostering mutually beneficial partnerships. While economic responses, particularly in the areas of transportation and energy, constitute an important aspect of these relationships, the political dimensions are shaped by a complex interplay of shared cultural and historical heritage, geopolitical alliances, and, at times, competing interests. The evolution of these relations reveals a dynamic landscape, influenced by regional developments and global dynamics, presenting both opportunities and challenges for Iran's strategic engagement.

The Constitutional Foundations of Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy

Iran's foreign policy strategy is rooted in its constitution, which sets out the fundamental principles guiding its interactions with other states. Article 4 establishes the principle of Islamic governance, which, while primarily focused on domestic affairs, can extend to foreign policy objectives, particularly in the context of relations with the Muslim-majority states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹ However, the practical application of this principle in the diverse religious landscapes of these regions constrains Iran's foreign policy strategy to a delicate approach, balancing ideological considerations with practical geopolitical and economic interests. This is particularly true given its clash with the secular nature of governments in countries such as Uzbekistan and Georgia, and its arousal of numerous concerns among neighboring states [160].

Chapter 10 of the constitution, comprising Articles 152-155, provides clear details on Iran's foreign policy framework [158]. Article 152 sets forth fundamental principles such as the rejection of all forms of hegemony, the preservation of national independence and territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of Muslims worldwide, adherence to a policy of non-alignment with hegemonic powers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states [161, p.25]. These principles provide a foundational framework for Iran's engagement with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, emphasizing sovereignty, mutual respect, and a potential role in defending Muslim interests at the regional level. The principle of non-alignment is particularly important in understanding Iran's efforts to maintain balanced relations with various global powers active in these areas of strategic importance. Furthermore, Article 153 reinforces the emphasis on national sovereignty by prohibiting any agreements that might

lead to foreign control over Iran's natural resources, economy, military, or culture, thus shaping Iran's approach to investment and strategic partnerships [161, p.14] Article 154 outlines Iran's broader international aspirations, expressing support for "the just struggle of the mustad'afin (oppressed) against the mustakbirin (oppressors) in every corner of the globe" and promoting the ideals of independence, justice, truth, and happiness for all people [162] This ideological stance can influence Iran's discourse and engagement with regional partners, potentially resonating with populations that perceive themselves as facing external pressures. Finally, Article 155 addresses the issue of political asylum, allowing the government to grant asylum to those it deems deserving [162] Along with these specific articles, the preamble to the constitution emphasizes the Islamic character of the Iranian revolution, its goal of supporting the oppressed, and its vision of strengthening international relations with other Islamic movements and peoples to work toward a unified global community [162] This foundational document thus provides a comprehensive ideological and practical framework that underpins Iran's foreign policy strategy and its interactions with the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy: Partnerships and Complexities

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy toward Kazakhstan: Bilateral relations between Iran and Kazakhstan have witnessed significant developments, supported by a series of agreements and strong political will on the part of the leadership of both countries. In a recent display of strengthening trade relations, Kazakhstan and Iran signed 10 trade agreements worth US\$92.8 million during a business forum held in Tehran [163] As part of these agreements, Kazakhstan committed to supplying 75 different types of products to Iran, with an estimated value of US\$250 million [164] This growing economic partnership highlights the focus on agricultural trade, with Kazakhstan being a major grain exporter and Iran an important market [165] The two governments have also set an ambitious goal of reaching US\$3.0 billion in bilateral trade, as outlined in the Roadmap Agreement [166, p.22] Recognizing the challenges posed by banking regulations, the trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, which both Iran and Kazakhstan have signed, is expected to facilitate transactions between banks, thus paving the way for increased trade [166, p.21] The historical trajectory of bilateral agreements underscores the ongoing efforts to build a strong relationship across various sectors, including the establishment of a joint intergovernmental commission. In 1992, economic agreements in the transport, transit, oil, and gas sectors were signed in 1996 and 1999, an agreement on international land transport and a roadmap for trade, economic, and investment cooperation in 2014, and more than 60 bilateral documents, including 48 trade agreements worth \$1.1 billion, were signed in 2016 [167, p.14] Official statements issued by the leadership of both countries reflect a strong commitment to strengthening these relations. Iranian President Pezeshkian emphasized that strengthening relations with Kazakhstan is a priority for Iranian foreign policy, highlighting the potential for cooperation in the fields of transportation, energy, and regional initiatives [168, p.24] He also emphasized the importance of serious implementation of previously reached agreements [169, p.25] Echoing this sentiment,

Kazakh President Tokayev emphasized the strategic importance of Kazakhstan's relationship with Iran, especially in the Caspian Sea region, and affirmed Kazakhstan's unwavering commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and ensuring the effective implementation of mutual agreements [170, p.45] Former Iranian Presidents Raisi and Rouhani have also consistently emphasized the need to strengthen strategic economic relations, implement signed agreements, and fully utilize the transit potential between the two countries Cooperation projects between Iran and Kazakhstan cover several key areas of interest. The focus is largely on transit and transportation, with both countries aiming to increase the transit of goods through Iran, setting a target of up to five million tons over the next five years. Cooperation extends to railways, sea, and land transport, with the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway corridor serving as a vital link [171, p.29] Agriculture is also a crucial element of their cooperation, with Kazakhstan being a major exporter of grain to Iran, and both countries exploring opportunities for meat exports, alongside active participation in joint agricultural committees and research cooperation. In the energy sector, although Kazakhstan has significant energy reserves, there is potential for Iran to contribute its expertise, particularly in power plant construction, and to complement existing cooperation on oil and gas projects [172, p.33] Official statistics illustrate the evolving nature of their political and economic clashes. Trade between the two countries reached US\$340 million in 2023, a 12.3% increase compared to the previous year, although still well below the target of US\$3 billion. Agricultural trade showed particularly strong growth, increasing by 33.3% to US\$219.8 million in 2024. Iran's non-oil exports to Kazakhstan reached US\$202.5 million in the first nine months of the Iranian calendar year [172, p.34] Historically, trade between the two countries increased fivefold between 2003 and 2009, exceeding US\$2 billion [173, p.33] Despite this growth, Iran ranked as Kazakhstan's 16th largest trading partner, indicating room for further expansion in Kazakhstan's broader trade portfolio [173, p.35] Overall, the relationship between Iran and Kazakhstan is characterized by a strong political commitment to promoting trade and cooperation, particularly in the strategically important areas of transportation and agriculture. The Eurasian Economic Union represents a significant opportunity to facilitate deeper economic integration. Addressing current challenges in banking and logistics will be critical to achieving ambitious trade goals. The historical precedent of significant growth in economic relations points to promising prospects for the future of this partnership, provided that current obstacles such as Kazakhstan's ideological concerns and economic sanctions on Iran are effectively overcome.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy toward Kyrgyzstan: Iran and Kyrgyzstan share a common interest in strengthening their bilateral relations, with a particular focus on enhancing trade, economic, and investment cooperation. The two countries expressed their determination to intensify cooperation to increase the volume of bilateral trade, attract more investments, and strengthen ties in vital sectors such as transportation, logistics, agriculture, and tourism [174] To facilitate the achievement of these goals, Kyrgyzstan proposed a joint action plan that includes implementing the protocol from the

13th meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission held in 2023, establishing chambers of commerce in both Bishkek and Tehran and organizing mutual exhibitions to showcase each other's products [175] Furthermore, there is a shared recognition of the shortcomings in the effective implementation of existing agreements and memoranda of understanding and the importance of adhering to their signing, along with a commitment to make more effective use of the Joint Cooperation Commission [168, p. 238] This includes the important step towards enhancing Kyrgyzstan's access to international trade routes through the agreement between the two countries to develop a joint logistics center in Iran's southern ports [175]. Official statements issued by the leaders of both Iran and Kyrgyzstan confirm the positive trajectory of their relationship and their commitment to further expansion. The late Iranian President Raisi expressed Iran's willingness to share its experiences and achievements with Kyrgyzstan, emphasizing the need to develop bilateral economic relations between the two countries [174] Kyrgyz President Japarov described relations between Tehran and Bishkek as developing based on friendship and trust, expressing particular interest in strengthening cooperation in the trade, economic, and investment fields, and emphasizing that developing relations with Iran is a priority for his government [169, p. 42] Iranian First Vice President Aref also affirmed Iran's commitment to strengthening relations with Kyrgyzstan, emphasizing the need to implement already signed agreements and highlighting the potential for deepening relations through their joint membership in important regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union [170,p.64]

Cooperation projects between Iran and Kyrgyzstan focus on strategic areas aimed at enhancing economic and trade communication. The joint development of a logistics hub in Iran's southern ports is a major initiative designed to boost Eurasian trade and provide landlocked Kyrgyzstan with vital access to the open seas [174] Kyrgyzstan has also expressed hope for increased Iranian investment in its economy. Leveraging multilateral frameworks, Kyrgyzstan is actively working within the Eurasian Economic Union to establish a comprehensive free trade agreement with Iran, which is expected to provide significant benefits by granting preferential access to Iranian markets and enhancing export opportunities for Kyrgyz products [169, p.48] Official statistics provide insight into the economic interactions between the two countries. In the first ten months of 2016, trade between Kyrgyzstan and Iran reached \$12.3 million, a significant increase of 82.7% compared to the same period in 2015 [174] Notably, Kyrgyzstan significantly increased its fruit imports from Iran in the first nine months of 2014, doubling the trade volume compared to the previous year. In 2012, Iran's exports to Kyrgyzstan reached \$32.8 million, while Kyrgyzstan's total exports to Iran reached \$13.5 million [175] In short, the relationship between Iran and Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a strong mutual political will to strengthen relations, particularly in the economic sphere. The focus is on improving trade and transit infrastructure, with the joint logistics center project representing an important step forward. Kyrgyzstan is actively seeking to increase Iranian investment, and

both countries are exploring the benefits of a free trade agreement through the Eurasian Economic Union. While current trade volume remains relatively modest, there is clear growth potential, particularly in specific sectors such as agriculture, indicating a positive trajectory for future economic cooperation.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy toward Tajikistan: The Islamic Republic of Iran and Tajikistan share deep historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, which form a solid foundation for their bilateral relations. In January 2025, the two countries significantly deepened their relations by signing 22 memoranda of understanding during high-level meetings in Dushanbe, covering a wide range of sectors, including trade, energy, infrastructure, cultural exchange, and security [176]. The main focus of these agreements is on simplifying customs procedures and removing barriers to trade to facilitate increased economic exchanges. Recognizing shared concerns about regional stability, particularly regarding Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan also committed to enhancing cooperation on counterterrorism and border security. To further strengthen people-to-people ties, a visa-free travel regime was introduced in 2024 to promote cultural exchanges and tourism between the two countries. Demonstrating a long-term strategic vision for their partnership, Iran and Tajikistan are also working to implement a 50-year cooperation document. Official statements issued by the leadership of both countries reflect the strategic importance they place on this relationship. Iranian President Pezeshkian described Tajikistan as one of Iran's strategic partners in the region, emphasizing the depth of good neighborly relations and the commitment to strengthening their partnerships, especially in the economic and trade fields [177]. He also highlighted the significant cultural and historical commonalities between the two countries. Tajik President Rahmon welcomed the strengthening and expansion of relations with Iran in all relevant aspects, emphasizing the positive impact of the visa-free regime and expressing interest in enhancing cooperation in key economic sectors such as mining, pharmaceuticals, industry, transportation, and agriculture. Joint statements issued by the two countries affirm their commitment to mutual cooperation across a wide range of sectors, including culture, education, politics, economy, trade, transportation, and customs [176].

Cooperation projects between Iran and Tajikistan include vital areas related to infrastructure, culture, and security. Iran has played a significant role in Tajikistan's infrastructure development, including financing major projects such as the Anzob Tunnel and the Sangtuda-2 Hydropower Plant. Discussions are also underway regarding the possibility of Tajikistan exploiting Iran's Chabahar and Bandar Abbas ports to enhance its transportation capabilities. The two countries are also committed to reviving the historic Silk Road by developing highways linking China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. To strengthen cultural ties between the two countries, the Tajik Persian Culture Research Institute has been established, and cooperation in areas such as cinema, films, TV series, and tourism is actively underway [177]. To address shared security concerns, Iran and Tajikistan signed a memorandum of understanding on security and defense cooperation, with a focus on combating terrorism and drug trafficking. Official statistics reveal a

positive trend in economic interactions between Iran and Tajikistan. Trade volume between the two countries reached US\$336.8 million in the first eleven months of 2024, representing a significant 50% growth compared to the previous year. This upward trend is also evident in the trade turnover, which exceeded US\$216 million in the first eleven months of 2023, representing a 4% increase over the same period in 2022. Despite this growth, Iran's share of Tajikistan's total import market remains relatively small at 3.5%, indicating significant potential for further expansion. Historically, bilateral trade has tripled from US\$40 million in 2000 to US\$140 million in 2007. As of 2011, Iran was the second largest investor in Tajikistan, after China, highlighting the previous level of strong economic engagement[178].

In conclusion, the relationship between Iran and Tajikistan is characterized by the fact that they share strong profound political, economic, and cultural ties, greatly enhanced by their shared linguistic and historical heritage. The significant increase in trade volume in recent years underscores the growing economic partnership. Cooperation in vital areas such as infrastructure, energy, and security further strengthen their strategic alliance. The implementation of the visa-free regime is expected to further enhance people-to-people exchanges. Iran views this partnership as essential to countering Western sanctions and expanding its influence in Eurasia, while Tajikistan seeks to diversify its economic partners and gain access to Iranian seaports, creating a mutually beneficial dynamic.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy towards Turkmenistan: The relationship between Iran and Turkmenistan is characterized by a strong focus on energy cooperation, particularly in the areas of gas and electricity exchange. The two countries agreed to enhance their cooperation in these sectors, recognizing their mutual benefits as energy-rich countries. An important aspect of this cooperation is a gas exchange agreement that enables Turkmenistan to supply natural gas to Iraq via Iran, with Iran serving as a critical transit hub. Discussions also took place regarding the possibility of constructing an energy transmission line from Turkmenistan to Iran, which could further enhance the energy connectivity between the two countries. To facilitate smoother trade, Iran and Turkmenistan also reached an agreement on developing customs cooperation. During the meeting, the two sides also signed four cooperation documents, specifically in the areas of gas and customs [179].

Official statements issued by the leaders of both Iran and Turkmenistan highlight their commitment to a broad and deep partnership. Iranian President Pezeshkian has consistently emphasized the strategic nature of the relationship, emphasizing the potential for cooperation in gas exchanges, transportation, and electricity exchanges. He also welcomed the expansion of cooperation with Turkmenistan in all areas. Turkmenistan's leader, Berdimuhamedow, echoed these sentiments, calling for strengthening bilateral relations, especially in key areas such as gas exchange and transportation. Joint statements issued by the two countries emphasize their shared priorities for cooperation, particularly in the energy, transit, and electricity sectors. Numerous cooperative projects underscore the energy-focused nature of the relationship between Iran and Turkmenistan. The

Dowlatabad-Sarakhs and Kurbaja-Kurdkuy gas pipelines are currently operating, facilitating existing gas trade between the two countries. Iran plays a crucial role in the trilateral gas swap agreement with Azerbaijan, importing gas from Turkmenistan and delivering a similar amount to Azerbaijan. Looking to the future, the two countries have agreed to develop infrastructure to transport larger volumes of gas, moving beyond current swap operations. In addition, Iran and Turkmenistan are committed to increasing freight transport along the eastern route of the North-South Transport Corridor, to enhance regional connectivity. Official statistics reveal that bilateral trade between Iran and Turkmenistan is approximately \$500 million. Historically, the trade volume peaked at over \$3.7 billion in 2012 but subsequently declined to around \$1 billion in 2017–2018 [179]. In the broader context of Iran's trade relations, Turkmenistan ranks eighth as a trading partner. Recently, Iranian exports to Turkmenistan have shown a positive trend, increasing by 14.6% in the first half of the Iranian calendar year. Another historic peak in economic exchanges was recorded in 2008 when trade exceeded \$2.9 billion [180]. In short, the relationship between Iran and Turkmenistan focuses largely on energy cooperation, with gas exchange and transit being of particular importance. This cooperation offers mutual benefits, as Iran secures gas supplies to its northern regions and Turkmenistan gains access to diversified export routes. While current trade volume is below its historic peak, indicating untapped potential and missed opportunities, both countries are nonetheless actively engaged in cooperative projects, including the development of transportation infrastructure along the North-South Corridor.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Towards Uzbekistan: Iran and Uzbekistan are actively strengthening their economic relations, with a shared vision of significantly increasing bilateral trade. The two countries have signed formal agreements to cooperate in a variety of sectors, including agriculture, transportation, oil and gas extraction, construction, pharmaceuticals, and finance [181]. An important step toward facilitating smoother trade was the mutual abolition of the \$400 transit fee for freight vehicles, effective February 2, 2025. Furthermore, Iran and Uzbekistan reached a preliminary agreement to sign a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), which is expected to boost trade by reducing tariffs.⁶³ Discussions are also underway regarding the establishment of a joint investment fund to promote investment and cooperative projects between the two countries [181]. Official statements issued by the leaders of both Iran and Uzbekistan reflect a strong political will to strengthen bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sphere. Iranian President Pezeshkian reiterated Iran's commitment to strengthening relations with Uzbekistan, emphasizing their shared cultural and historical heritage. He also expressed Iran's determination to develop trade, economic, and cultural cooperation, highlighting the country's willingness to facilitate Uzbekistan's trade interactions with other countries through the North-South Corridor. Uzbek President Mirziyoyev reciprocated these positive sentiments, expressing Uzbekistan's keen interest in strengthening cooperation with Iran, especially in the trade and economic sectors, and expressing his country's willingness to establish a joint commission to facilitate private

sector activities in both countries [182] Other Iranian officials emphasized the ambitious goal of increasing trade exchanges with Uzbekistan to \$5 billion, indicating Iran's willingness to engage in economic, technical, and development cooperation across various sectors such as refineries, power plants, and infrastructure projects [183].

Cooperative projects between Iran and Uzbekistan strategically focus on enhancing transportation and transit capabilities, as well as strengthening cooperation in key economic sectors. Both countries are committed to streamlining multimodal transportation between them by utilizing Iranian ports located in the country's northern and southern regions. Particular emphasis is placed on leveraging the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) and establishing joint regional corridors to facilitate the smooth movement of Uzbek goods to markets in Russia and India [182]. In the agricultural sector, Iran has expressed its willingness to share its agricultural knowledge and technology with Uzbekistan, offering to supply necessary agricultural machinery and exploring the possibility of barter trade involving commodities such as potatoes and legumes. The current level of economic engagement is further evidenced by the presence of 120 joint ventures operating in Uzbekistan with the participation of Iranian investors. Official statistics indicate a growing trend in economic interactions between Iran and Uzbekistan. In 2024, trade volume reached \$496.6 million, a slight decrease from the \$503.6 million recorded in 2023 [183] However, both countries have set an ambitious goal of increasing their annual trade exchanges to \$5 billion. Historically, trade volume between Iran and Uzbekistan exceeded \$600 million in 2008 [184]. Uzbekistan's ambassador to Iran has publicly stated his country's intention to increase trade volume with Iran by expanding bilateral relations. Notably, trade between Uzbekistan and Iran nearly doubled in the three years leading up to July 2024. Within the broader context of Uzbekistan's international trade relations, Iran is among its top 20 trading partners [185].

In conclusion, Iran and Uzbekistan demonstrate a clear commitment to expanding their economic relations, with a particular focus on significantly increasing bilateral trade volume to \$5 billion. Cooperation in the field of transport and transit, leveraging Iran's strategic access to the sea, is a key priority. Cooperation in the agricultural sector and the existing presence of Iranian investments in Uzbekistan contribute to the growing economic partnership between the two countries. While current trade volume stands at approximately \$500 million, recent trends point to a positive growth trajectory, suggesting that ambitious goals for future economic exchange are within reach. It is worth noting that the late Uzbek President Islam Karimov was a major obstacle to the expansion of Iran's foreign policy strategy in Uzbekistan and throughout Central Asia.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Towards Armenia: Despite their different religious and ideological systems, Iran and Armenia have maintained broad-based, friendly, and strategic bilateral relations. The cornerstone of their energy cooperation is the “gas for electricity” deal, whereby Armenia receives Iranian natural gas in exchange for electricity [185]. This agreement has been extended and expanded until at least 2030, highlighting its importance for Armenia’s energy security and reducing its dependence on Russia.

Efforts to diversify trade beyond energy are evident in a memorandum of understanding that focuses on expanding ties in sectors such as food, household appliances, and mining. To circumvent the impact of US sanctions, the two countries also signed a barter trade agreement. Looking toward a deeper strategic alliance, Iran and Armenia are actively working toward an expanded comprehensive strategic agreement [186]. The potential for enhanced trade is significant with ongoing discussions on a bilateral free trade agreement [187] and the expected implementation of a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), of which Armenia is a member, and Iran [188]. Official statements from the leadership of both countries reflect a commitment to strengthening their relations. Iranian President Pezeshkian welcomed the peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, reaffirmed Iran's commitment to regional peace, emphasized good and advanced relations with Armenia, and called for the rapid implementation of existing bilateral agreements. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan affirmed Armenia's unwavering commitment to deepening relations with Iran in all areas, emphasizing the special importance of these friendly relations and the need for balanced relations with Iran, the European Union, and Russia. The Iranian ambassador to Armenia also confirmed that Yerevan and Tehran are cooperating on an expanded comprehensive strategic agreement, noting that the US-Armenia strategic agreement does not conflict with the strong bilateral relations between Iran and Armenia [185]

Cooperative projects between Iran and Armenia extend to vital sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and technology. In the energy sector, in addition to the "gas for electricity" agreement, the two countries have jointly built hydroelectric power plants on the Araks River and high-voltage transmission lines [187]. They are also part of the North-South Electric Power Corridor project, which includes Russia and Georgia [186]. To improve connectivity and facilitate trade, infrastructure projects are underway, including the expansion of the North-South Highway and the modernization of border crossings, with Iranian companies actively participating in road construction in Armenia [187]. Recognizing the importance of emerging technologies, a joint technology park has been established in Yerevan, focusing on cooperation in information technology and biotechnology. To promote Iranian exports and trade, a major Iranian trade center has been opened in Yerevan. Official statistics highlight the important economic role Iran plays for Armenia, as its third largest trading partner. Bilateral trade has seen strong growth recently, increasing by 43% in 2023 to nearly \$600 million, with expectations of reaching \$1 billion in 2024. Trade volume figures show a steady upward trend, reaching \$693 million in 2023, \$710 million in 2022, and \$504 million in 2021 [186] It is worth noting that an estimated 30% of Armenia's international trade passes through Iran, underscoring the crucial role Iran plays as a trade route, especially given Armenia's closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan [188] The Eurasian Economic Union's preferential trade arrangements have also contributed to the increase in trade, with Iranian exports to the Eurasian Union, including Armenia, increasing by 22% recently [187].

Finally, the relationship between Iran and Armenia is characterized by strong and friendly relations, especially in the energy sector, where cooperation is vital for Armenia's energy security. Iran serves as an important trading partner and transit route for Armenia, especially in the context of the regional blockade. The recent significant growth in bilateral trade, coupled with the potential benefits of the Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement, points to a stronger economic partnership in the future. The continued development of the strategic partnership underscores the depth and importance of this relationship for both countries.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Towards Azerbaijan: The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan is characterized by a complex interplay of shared cultural and religious heritage, close ethnic and demographic overlap, and significant geopolitical tensions. Despite these complexities, the two countries have engaged in various bilateral agreements. The long-term energy partnership is reflected in a 25-year gas exchange contract for constructing a pipeline supplying gas to the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan, which has been in operation since 2004–2005 [189]. The commitment to peaceful coexistence is reflected in the Non-Aggression Pact signed in 2005. Efforts to enhance regional connectivity are underway through an agreement to expand the North-South Corridor, and a strategically important agreement on the Aras Corridor railway project aims to connect mainland Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan region via Iranian territory, including the provision of fiber optic and electricity lines. To enhance cooperation in the agricultural sector, the two countries also agreed to establish a joint agricultural cooperation commission [190]. Official statements from the leadership of both Iran and Azerbaijan reveal a desire to establish strong bilateral relations, albeit with underlying sensitivities. Iranian President Pezeshkian emphasized the "special importance" of relations with Azerbaijan and Iran's commitment to expanding them in all sectors. He also expressed Iran's determination to strengthen comprehensive relations and support regional peace and stability. Azerbaijani President Aliyev acknowledged the shared religious, cultural, and fraternal ties underlying their relationship, highlighting the great importance Azerbaijan attaches to these relations. However, President Aliyev has publicly criticized Iran for underestimating them, indicating areas of tension. Despite these political complexities, discussions are ongoing at various levels, focusing on expanding banking and insurance contacts, increasing electricity exchange, and forming joint working groups in the energy sector [190].

Cooperative projects between Iran and Azerbaijan focus primarily on enhancing communication and cooperation in the energy sector. Several transportation infrastructure projects are underway or have been completed, including the Astara border bridge, the near completion of the Agband bridge, and the development of railway and road projects in the Aras Corridor. In the energy sector, the two countries exchange electricity, and there are discussions about a potential power line linking Russia to Iran via Azerbaijan. To strengthen agricultural relations, a joint committee for agricultural cooperation has been formed to promote cooperation and trade in this sector [189].

Official statistics indicate a growing trend in economic interactions between Iran and Azerbaijan. Trade between the two countries reached \$480 million in 2023, increasing by 20% to \$580 million in 2024, with a long-term goal of reaching \$10 billion. Iranian non-oil exports to Azerbaijan increased by 14.5% in the first ten months of the Iranian calendar year. According to Azerbaijani data, trade volume from January to October 2024 reached \$3,841. million, a figure likely including oil and gas exports. In the same period in 2023, trade volume reached \$394.9 million, a slight decrease from the previous year. Trade volume from January to May 2023 reached \$212.6 million [190].

In conclusion, the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan is characterized by strong economic ties, as evidenced by the significant growth in trade volume, alongside ongoing political tensions. Cooperation in strategically important areas such as transportation and energy infrastructure continue to develop. While both countries express a desire to build stronger ties and have set ambitious long-term trade goals, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and Azerbaijan's close relationship with Israel remain major points of contention that impact the overall dynamics of their bilateral relations.

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Towards Georgia: Iran and Georgia have a long history of interaction, with formal diplomatic relations established in 1992. Over the years, the two countries have signed 47 bilateral agreements covering a wide range of areas, including air transport, investment promotion, avoidance of double taxation, economic, commercial, scientific, and technical cooperation, and specific trade cooperation. A Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) has been in force since 2005, aiming to promote and protect investments between the two countries. Visa policies have fluctuated, with visa-free travel introduced in 2011, subsequently reinstated, and then eased again, reflecting the evolving political landscape [191].

Official statements from the leadership of Iran and Georgia indicate a mutual interest in strengthening relations, particularly in the economic sphere. Iranian President Pezeshkian emphasized the mutually beneficial nature of developing relations with Georgia for both countries and the wider region, prioritizing deepening economic and trade ties [192]. Georgian Prime Minister Kobakhidze echoed this sentiment, affirming his government's commitment to cooperating with Iran to strengthen relations between them and emphasizing the importance of expanding economic cooperation to further strengthen political ties. Discussions between officials also focused on potential cooperation in key sectors such as transportation, transit, and energy [193].

Cooperative projects between Iran and Georgia explore opportunities in the energy and transportation sectors. Iran has the potential to become an important gas supplier to Georgia and Eastern Europe, providing an alternative energy source. Cooperation in electricity trade between Armenia and Georgia is also being considered. The Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Multipurpose Transport Corridor is a major project aimed at leveraging Georgia's strategic location for transit between Iran and Europe [194]. Both countries also recognize the importance of leveraging Georgia's transportation potential to enhance regional connectivity. Furthermore, cultural agreements and scientific and

academic cooperation initiatives have been established to foster people-to-people ties and knowledge exchange [195].

Official statistics reveal a growing trend in economic interactions between Iran and Georgia. The trade volume in 2024 amounted to approximately \$322 million, of which \$37 million were exports from Georgia and \$285 million were imports from Iran, a significant increase from the \$119 million recorded in 2012. The number of Iranian citizens registered for companies in Georgia also saw a significant increase, with 9,300 companies registered between 2013 and 2024, compared to 2,370 in the previous twelve years. Iranian tourism to Georgia also increased significantly, with 145,670 visitors in 2024, more than double the 82,885 visitors in 2012 [196]. Direct investments from Iran also showed a positive trend, reaching \$40 million between 2013 and 2024, a fivefold increase from the \$8 million invested in the previous period. However, Data from the Georgian Statistical Office indicates a significant decline in trade volume by \$44.37 million in 2024, indicating potential discrepancies in reporting methodologies or coverage [197].

In conclusion, the relationship between Iran and Georgia is characterized by growing economic ties, particularly in trade, investment, and tourism. Georgia's strategic location as a transit corridor is of great importance to Iran, and there is potential for enhanced cooperation in the energy sector. Despite the growing economic engagement, political relations are affected by Georgia's strong pro-Western orientation and its complex relationship with Russia, which represents a unique dynamic in its interactions with Iran.

Comprehensive comparative analysis of trends and patterns:

A comparative analysis of Iran's foreign policy strategy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus reveals several common themes, cultural overlaps, and key differences. Transit plays a crucial role in both regions. Iran's strategic geographic advantage provides landlocked Central Asian states with access to open seas and serves as a land bridge between Asia and Europe for the Caucasus. Energy cooperation is also an important factor, albeit with varying manifestations. With Central Asia, particularly Turkmenistan, Iran is conducting gas exchanges and exploring electricity interconnection. In the Caucasus, a "gas for electricity" agreement with Armenia stands out.

However, the intensity and nature of Iranian engagement differ between the two regions. Relations with Central Asia appear to focus more on economic partnerships, driven by trade and transit opportunities. Shared cultural and historical ties, particularly with Persian-speaking Tajikistan and, to some extent, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, provide an additional layer of closeness. The Caucasus, on the other hand, presents a more complex picture. While economic relations with Armenia are strong and growing, they are also influenced by geopolitical considerations, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia's need for reliable transit routes. Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan is characterized by a combination of growing economic cooperation and persistent political tensions, often stemming from differing geopolitical alliances and historical sensitivities. Georgia's pro-Western orientation and tense relations with Russia constitute

a unique dynamic in its dealings with Iran, where its economic interests are increasingly prominent despite political differences. Overarching patterns in Iran's regional engagement strategy include a continued focus on neighborhood relations and the pursuit of mutually beneficial economic partnerships. Iran leverages multilateral platforms, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to strengthen these relationships. The impact of international sanctions on Iranian economic engagement is a recurring challenge in both regions, often requiring innovative solutions such as barter trade. Competition from other regional and global powers, such as Russia, China, India, the European Union, Turkey, and the United States, shapes the dynamics of Iran's interactions with these countries. Iran faces a complex set of challenges in developing its political and economic relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The impact of international sanctions remains a significant obstacle, often hindering economic engagement and necessitating alternative trade mechanisms [167, p.86].

Competition from other regional and global powers, each with its strategic interests in these regions, also poses a significant challenge. Geopolitical complexities and divergent alliances among regional states, such as Georgia's pro-Western stance and Azerbaijan's close ties with Turkey and Israel, could lead to friction and limit the scope of cooperation [168, p. 16]. Historical sensitivities and political differences, particularly evident in Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan, also require careful consideration.

Logistical and infrastructure constraints, as well as challenges related to banking and financial transactions, also limit the potential for enhanced economic engagement on a large scale. Despite these challenges, Iran has several significant opportunities to enhance its regional interactions. Iran's strategic geographic location makes it a vital transportation and trade hub between Asia and Europe, providing significant benefits to the landlocked countries of Central Asia [169, p.23]. The potential for energy cooperation, particularly with Turkmenistan and Armenia, provides a solid foundation for mutually beneficial partnerships. The growing markets in Central Asia and the Caucasus offer significant opportunities for Iranian exports and investments. Cultural and historical ties with countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan can be leveraged to enhance understanding and cooperation [170, p.54]. Iran's active participation in multilateral platforms, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, offers avenues for enhancing regional economic integration and political dialogue. Finally, a focus on South-South cooperation could open new avenues for partnership and economic exchange, especially in sectors where Iran has greater expertise [171, p.32].

The analysis indicates that Iran has developed diverse and sophisticated relations with Central Asian and Caucasian countries, driven by a combination of geopolitical strategy, economic interests, and cultural affinities. While challenges such as international sanctions and regional power dynamics remain, there are significant opportunities for Iran to further strengthen these relations.

To enhance its engagement with Central Asian countries, Iran should prioritize the development of a robust transportation infrastructure and streamlined customs procedures to fully leverage its geographic advantage. Ongoing cooperation in the agricultural sector, particularly with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, should be enhanced through joint ventures and technology transfer initiatives. Effectively leveraging the Eurasian Economic Union framework to expand trade with member states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and potentially Uzbekistan, is crucial. For Tajikistan, it is recommended to build on existing strong cultural and linguistic ties with a focus on joint economic projects, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors. For Turkmenistan, the energy sector should remain a key focus, with continued efforts to facilitate gas exchanges and explore new avenues for energy transit and cooperation. Regarding the Caucasus, Iran should continue to strengthen its strategic partnership with Armenia, particularly in the energy sector by facilitating its role as a gateway to the Eurasian Economic Union markets. While overcoming the complexities surrounding its relationship with Azerbaijan, Iran should focus on expanding economic cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as transportation and energy infrastructure, while seeking avenues for constructive dialogue on political differences. Regarding Georgia, despite its pro-Western orientation, Iran should continue to explore opportunities for economic cooperation, particularly in trade and investment, and leverage Georgia's potential as a transit route to Europe through initiatives such as the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor.

Overall, Iran should adopt a pragmatic and multifaceted approach to its regional policy, focusing on building strong economic partnerships, leveraging its strategic location, and nurturing cultural and historical ties, while taking into account the complex geopolitical landscape and diverse interests of the Central Asian and Caucasian states.

Section Abstract

We believe that Central Asia and the Caucasus are geographical regions of great strategic importance to Iran, where many political, economic, and cultural interests overlap. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Iran has sought to strengthen its presence in these regions, exploiting the available opportunities to achieve its strategic goals. Central Asia has rich oil, gas, and mineral resources. Iran seeks to exploit these resources to strengthen its domestic economy. For example, Iran can play a role in developing gas and oil pipelines that connect the countries of the region to global markets. This cooperation can contribute to securing energy sources for Iran and enhance its ability to compete in the global market. Iran's geographical location is a meeting point between Central Asia and the Caucasus, making it a strategic point for transportation and trade. Iran can exploit this location to develop major transportation projects, such as trade corridors linking the Central Asian countries and the Arabian Gulf. These corridors can contribute to enhancing regional trade and facilitating the movement of goods. Iran also shares a common history and similar culture with many Central Asian and Caucasian countries, in addition to religious ties, as there are Shiite minorities in some of these

countries. Iran is trying to exploit these ties to strengthen its cultural and religious relations, which contributes to improving its image and increasing its influence in the region.

Iran seeks to enhance economic cooperation with Central Asian countries, especially in the fields of agriculture, industry, and trade. These partnerships can provide new opportunities for economic development, which contributes to achieving stability in the region. By improving trade relations, Iran can enhance its ability to confront Western sanctions. Security challenges, such as terrorism and extremism, are major issues affecting the stability of the region. Iran can play a major role in enhancing security cooperation with Central Asian countries, which contributes to jointly confronting these challenges. This cooperation can include intelligence sharing and coordinating efforts to combat terrorism.

We believe that Iranian policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia has broad prospects if Iran seeks to develop its bilateral relations with the Caucasus and Central Asian countries, by enhancing cooperation in various fields. Iran can benefit from strategies such as establishing bilateral committees for cooperation in the fields of economy, security, and culture. This cooperation can contribute to achieving stability and strengthening diplomatic relations. Regional initiatives are an important tool for enhancing Iran's influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran can participate in organizing regional conferences aimed at enhancing political and economic cooperation. These initiatives can contribute to developing joint strategies to address regional challenges.

Iran seeks to strengthen its economic presence in Central Asia by investing in strategic projects. Iran can invest in developing infrastructure, such as railways, roads, and ports. These investments can enhance its economic influence and open up new markets. Iran seeks to play a major role in enhancing regional security by cooperating with neighboring countries. Iran can contribute to establishing joint security mechanisms to confront security threats, which will enhance regional stability and reduce tensions. "Soft power" is also an important tool in Iranian foreign policy. Iran can enhance its cultural influence by offering educational and cultural programs, which will contribute to building positive relations with countries in the region. These programs could include providing scholarships for foreign students and cultural and artistic exchanges.

Iran faces geopolitical challenges in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including competition with major powers such as Russia and China. Iran will have to adopt flexible strategies to address these challenges. Iran can seek to build alliances with countries that share interests, which will enhance its competitiveness. 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.

Central Asia and the Caucasus are vital strategic regions for Iran, as it seeks to expand its influence and strengthen its relations with the countries of these regions. The opportunities for Iranian foreign strategy are to exploit natural resources, enhance economic cooperation, confront security challenges, and use soft power. At the same time, the prospects of Iranian policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia require developing strong bilateral relations, participating in regional initiatives, and strengthening economic presence. If Iran can achieve these goals, it will be able to enhance its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which will contribute to its stability and national security. However, the current situation requires flexible strategies and effective cooperation with neighboring countries to confront the growing challenges in the region.

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) 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. p) International economic sanctions on Iran constitute the main obstacle to developing any relations of any kind with neighboring countries.

9) Iran faces numerous challenges, including a sluggish economy, domestic political unrest, the ongoing repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and costly interventions in countries like Syria and Iraq. The last thing Tehran requires right now is a disruption to the relatively stable situation it has maintained in the South Caucasus for the past 30 years. A full-scale, 45-day war erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia following military clashes on September 27, 2020. Iran finds itself at a disadvantage in this conflict for three main reasons. First, Azeris are the second-largest ethnic group in Iran. During the conflict, there were significant pro-Azerbaijani sentiments expressed

through protests and social media support for Baku from ethnic Azeris. Although Iran attempted to maintain a neutral stance, it suppressed many of these protests. There is a persistent low-level demand for greater autonomy in northern Iran, home to a large Azeri population, which, although not yet a widespread movement for independence, still causes unease within Iran's leadership. Second, Iran will need to allocate resources, time, and military forces to adjust to the new geopolitical realities along its northern border with Azerbaijan. This shift in focus could potentially divert attention and resources from other critical areas, such as the Gulf or Syria. Some parts of the Azerbaijan-Iran border were under Armenian control since 1994, but now that Azerbaijan has regained control, the security dynamics between the two nations have shifted. Additionally, the stationing of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers near the Iranian border—just 100 kilometers away—is a significant concern for Tehran. Despite recent cordial relations between Russia and Iran, their historical rivalry in the region raises suspicions in Tehran. In response, Iran has already increased its military presence along its northern frontier. Third, Azerbaijan has historically maintained friendly ties with Iran, particularly due to the latter's role in providing access to airspace and territory for the supply of Azerbaijan's exclave, Nakhchivan, which borders Armenia and Turkey. However, following a recent peace agreement, Armenia has agreed to open a corridor for Azerbaijan to directly connect to Nakhchivan, and Turkey has also introduced a new gas pipeline to supply the region. As a result, Azerbaijan's reliance on Iran has diminished, and this shift is likely to alter the dynamics of the bilateral relationship, favoring Baku.

10) In 2022, Iran became involved in Russia's aggression against Ukraine by sending suicide drones and deploying members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to Crimea. Iran sees this as an opportunity to solidify what it perceives as a strategic alliance with Russia, while also engaging in geopolitical competition with Turkey and seeking to exert pressure on the United States. Tehran views the potential defeat of Russia in the war as detrimental to its own strategic interests, as it would lose a key partner in balancing power dynamics internationally. Iran's regional influence, particularly in Syria, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, is closely tied to Russian policies. A Russian defeat could have severe consequences for Iran's influence in these areas. Furthermore, given Iran's recent setbacks in these regions in favor of Turkish influence, Tehran seems to believe that cooperation with Russia is the best way to counter Turkey's rising dominance. This alignment provides Iran with leverage in case the U.S. decides to resume negotiations on the nuclear deal.

11) Despite the successes and failures of Iran's foreign policy, the primary challenge to the regime remains internal. Millions of Iranians continue to live under a historically reactionary religious regime that seeks to impose a medieval lifestyle, which has made the government deeply unpopular. This internal discontent leaves the regime vulnerable to further instability and disorder.

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Appendix A

Iran Opportunities Trans Caspian Map



Appendix B

Iran's Foreign Policy Structure Visual



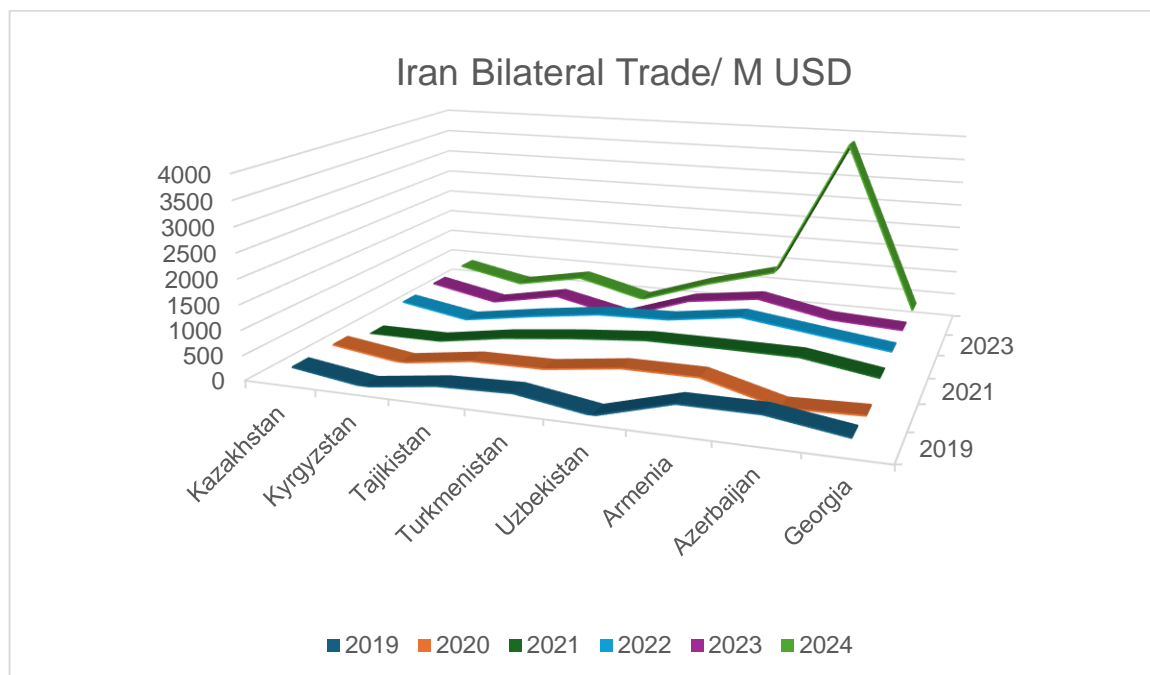
Appendix C

Iran Russia Trade 1996-2022



Appendix D

Bilateral Trade Volume between Iran and Central Asian and Caucasian Countries (2019-2024) (in Million USD)



Appendix E

Official visits of heads of Central Asian states to selected states outside Central Asia since 1991

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	

Source: <https://osce-academy.net/upload/CADGAT/CADGAT7.pdf>

Appendix F

Iran's trade with Central Asian states (2019, \$ million)

Kazakhstan	380
Kyrgyzstan	32.9
Tajikistan	46.3
Turkmenistan	409 (2018)
Uzbekistan	412

Appendix G

Iran-Uzbekistan trade cooperation

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

Source: <https://www.iess.ir/en/analysis/3493/>

Appendix H

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

			<p>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 Sang Tuda 2 Hydroelectric Power Plant by video conference</p>
November 12-13, 2014	Azerbaijan	Official visit, bilateral talks	<p>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.</p>
March 10-11, 2015	Turkmenistan	Official visit	<p>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</p>

			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	

Appendix J

Visits of Iran's presidents to Central Asia and Caucasus

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

President Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 3 August 2005)

<i>Country</i>
Turkmenistan
Kazakhstan
Turkmenistan
Kazakhstan
Uzbekistan
Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan
Azerbaijan
Armenia
Tajikistan

Appendix K

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
<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

Appendix L

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 Aliyev, 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 Aliyev, 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, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	March 27, 2010	1st Norouz Festival
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	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, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	March 27, 2011	2nd Norouz Festival
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president	August 26–31, 2012	16th Non-Aligned Summit

Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	August 26–31, 2012	16th Non-Aligned Summit
Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, president	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, president	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev president	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, president	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	August 4, 2013	first inauguration of Hassan Rouhani
Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, president	September 5, 2015	
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliiev, president	November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Kazakhstan, Karim Massimov, prime minister	November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, president	November 23, 2015	Third GECF summit
Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliiev, president	February 23, 2016	
Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, president	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 Aliiev, 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 Aliiev, 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 Smaiyllov, prime Minister	April 25, 2023	
Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, prime Minister	November 1, 2022	

Appendix M

Bilateral Trade Volume between Iran and Central Asian and Caucasian Countries (2019-2024) (in Million USD)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Kazakhstan	211	207	N/A	298.2	340	395
Kyrgyzstan	28~	40~	40~	46.3	47.1	94.8
Tajikistan	190	201	226.3	269	321	367.8
Turkmenistan	234	214	382	460	~500	~800
Uzbekistan	N/A	401	504	503.8	496.6	497.6
Armenia	409	401	504	710	693	899
Azerbaijan	410	300~	493	506.2	394.9	3841.27
Georgia	187.1	45.2	255	307	314	322

Appendix N

Key Cooperative Projects between Iran and Central Asian and Caucasian Countries

Project	Partner Country	Sector	Objectives	Reported Outcomes
Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Railway Corridor	Kazakhstan	Transport	Provide Central Asia with direct connection to the Persian Gulf	~300 km completed by July 2010, capacity of 10-20 million tons of freight annually expected.
Joint Logistics Center in Iranian Ports	Kyrgyzstan	Transport	Enhance Eurasian trade, provide Kyrgyzstan with access to open seas	Agreement reached, Kyrgyz private sector investment expected.
Anzob Tunnel	Tajikistan	Infrastructure	Connect Tajikistan's north and south, facilitate transport	Strategically significant.
Sangtuda-2 Hydropower Plant	Tajikistan	Energy	Increase Tajikistan's electricity generation capacity	Funded by Iran.
"Gas for Electricity" Deal	Armenia	Energy	Iran provides gas, Armenia provides electricity, reducing Armenia's energy dependence on Russia	Extended and expanded until at least 2030.
North-South Highway Expansion	Armenia	Infrastructure	Improve connectivity with Iran	Part of five major infrastructure projects implemented in 2023.
Aras Corridor Railway	Azerbaijan	Transport	Connect Azerbaijan's East Zangezur region and Nakhchivan exclave through Iran, alternative to Zangezur	Agreement reached, construction underway, aims to boost Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Central Asia trade and is a

				vital link in INSTC for Iran.
Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor	Georgia	Transport	Connect Iran to Europe via Georgia and the Black Sea	Initiative proposed by Iran, aims to diversify transit options and boost trade, potential to link with EEU.