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Iran and Central Asia: Navigating Strategic Partnerships and Regional Challenges

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Abstract

This article explores Iran's evolving relationship with Central Asian states, focusing on the intersections of strategic, economic, and cultural dimensions that underpin these engagements. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran has worked to re-establish connections across Central Asia, driven by shared cultural heritage and mutual economic interests. Central Asia's strategic location and vast natural resources present both an opportunity and a challenge for Iran, especially in light of competing regional powers such as Russia and China, alongside U.S.-led sanctions. Key areas of engagement include energy partnerships, infrastructure development, security cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, all of which support Iran's position as a strategic partner for Central Asia. Despite external pressures, Iran has developed adaptive economic and diplomatic strategies that reinforce its influence in the region.

This analysis demonstrates Iran's role in fostering regional connectivity and stability, particularly through projects like the North-South Transport Corridor, which provide Central Asian states with essential access to international markets. Additionally, Iran's contribution to regional security through counter-terrorism initiatives, border management, and cultural outreach solidifies its partnerships with Central Asian countries. The paper concludes that Iran's engagement with Central Asia offers significant prospects for strengthened economic and security ties, which contribute to a balanced regional order and promote cooperative growth in a multipolar world.

Keywords: *Iran-Central Asia relations, Strategic partnerships, Energy cooperation, Cultural diplomacy, Regional stability, Geopolitical dynamics.*

Introduction

Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is strategically located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, bordered by influential powers such as Russia, China, and Iran. This region, endowed with vast natural resources including oil, gas, and minerals holds

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significant geopolitical value. Since gaining independence after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Central Asia has attracted regional and global powers seeking influence over its energy resources and strategic transit routes (Starr, 2004; Cooley, 2012).

Iran shares historical, cultural, and religious connections with Central Asia, rooted in centuries of shared Persian cultural and linguistic heritage. Persian culture, particularly evident in Tajikistan where Persian (Tajik) remains the national language, continues to form a common bond across the region (Beckwith, 2009; Khalid, 2007). Iran has taken advantage of these cultural ties to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, pursuing policies that emphasise cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and regional security. Following the end of Soviet isolation, Iran quickly sought to re-establish diplomatic and economic ties, aiming to support Central Asia's access to the Persian Gulf and global markets via Iranian ports (Hunter, 2010).

This article explores Iran's multifaceted approach to Central Asia, analysing the strategic partnerships Iran has developed through energy cooperation, trade and transport infrastructure, security alliances, and cultural diplomacy. Additionally, it examines the challenges Iran faces in balancing its influence amid competing interests from Russia, China, and the United States. By assessing Iran's role in Central Asia, this study seeks to understand the implications of Iran's policies on regional stability, connectivity, and resilience in an increasingly multipolar geopolitical landscape (Ehteshami, 2017).

Historical Foundations of Iran-Central Asia

Relations Cultural, Linguistic, and Religious Ties

Iran and Central Asia share deep-rooted cultural, linguistic, and religious connections that date back centuries, with influences reaching their height during the Persian Empire and the Silk Road era. Persian culture, language, and art have left an enduring imprint on the region, particularly in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara, which were prominent centres of Persian learning and culture. Persian poets, such as Rumi and Ferdowsi, remain celebrated figures across Central Asia, and Persian language, known as Tajik in Tajikistan, continues to be a vital part of the cultural fabric of the region (Soucek, 2000).

Religious ties also link Iran and Central Asia through their shared Islamic heritage. While Sunni Islam is predominant in most of Central Asia, historical connections through Sufi traditions, which flourished in the region, continue to resonate. Although Soviet secular policies suppressed religious practice, Islam re-emerged as a central identity marker post-independence, allowing Iran to engage

with Central Asia on shared religious and cultural grounds. Iran's promotion of Shia and Sufi Islamic traditions enhances its cultural influence and provides an ideological link that supports its diplomatic efforts in Central Asia (Khalid, 2007; Menashri, 2001).

Pre-Soviet and Soviet-Era Connections

Before Soviet rule, Iran's interaction with Central Asia was extensive, facilitated by trade routes like the Silk Road, which enabled the movement of goods, culture, and knowledge. However, the Soviet Union's consolidation over Central Asia in the early 20th century drastically reduced Iran's influence, as the USSR imposed secularisation policies that suppressed Islamic identity and cut off Central Asian states from Iran and other neighbouring Islamic countries. This period of Soviet isolation limited Iran's access to Central Asia, forcing it to pursue other diplomatic priorities (Banuazizi & Weiner, 1994; Roy, 2000).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point, as newly independent Central Asian republics sought to re-establish their identities, including Islamic and cultural elements that had been suppressed. Iran seized this opportunity to reconnect with the region, positioning itself as a partner interested in Central Asia's development and stability. Iran's re-engagement was characterised by diplomatic outreach and cultural initiatives, fostering a relationship that revived historical ties while addressing modern economic and political concerns (Starr, 2004; Ehteshami, 2017).

Post-Soviet Independence and Iran's Foreign Policy Shifts

The independence of Central Asian states offered Iran new avenues for regional partnerships. Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia emphasised stability, economic cooperation, and cultural ties, aiming to counterbalance Western and Russian influence in the region. This policy shift positioned Iran as a stabilising force, promoting trade, security, and connectivity projects to strengthen the region's independence and resilience. Central Asia's abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas, added an economic dimension to Iran's foreign policy, as it sought energy collaboration and new trade routes through the region (Hunter, 2010; Cooley, 2012).

A key objective of Iran's post-Soviet engagement has been to position itself as a conduit for Central Asia's access to global markets, especially through the Persian Gulf. Projects like the North-South Transport Corridor, which links India, Iran, and Russia, exemplify Iran's strategic vision for Central Asia as a transit partner. By connecting Central Asian countries to the Indian Ocean, Iran

offers these landlocked states alternatives to Russian and Chinese-controlled routes, reinforcing its relevance as a regional player (Petersen & Barysch, 2017).

Economic and Trade Relations

Overview of Trade Partnerships and Economic Agreements

Since the independence of Central Asian countries in 1991, Iran has actively sought to establish itself as a significant economic partner for the region, capitalising on its geographical proximity and historical ties. Trade partnerships between Iran and Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, have focused on sectors like agriculture, textiles, and heavy machinery. These trade relationships have helped Iran reduce its dependency on Western markets, a strategic move to mitigate the impact of sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western nations (Banuazizi & Weiner, 1994; Kazemi, 2015).

Iran has also leveraged regional organisations like the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) to foster economic integration and promote trade liberalisation with Central Asia. The ECO, which includes Central Asian states, Pakistan, Turkey, and Afghanistan, serves as a platform for multilateral trade agreements and economic collaboration, enhancing Iran's connectivity with Central Asia. This regional alignment reinforces Iran's strategy of establishing an independent economic network in the face of external pressures (Ehteshami, 2017; Cornell, 2017).

Despite the opportunities for mutual economic benefit, Iran's engagement in Central Asia faces challenges due to competition from major powers like Russia and China. These powers also have significant economic and political stakes in Central Asia, which limits the scale of Iran's influence. Nonetheless, Iran's sustained efforts at building trade partnerships demonstrate its commitment to fostering economic resilience and supporting Central Asia's integration with the Middle East and South Asia (Hunter, 2010; Lillis, 2016).

Energy Cooperation (Oil, Gas, and Renewables)

Energy cooperation is a cornerstone of Iran's economic relationships with Central Asia. Iran and Central Asia both are rich in oil and gas reserves, creating ample opportunities for collaboration in energy development, transportation, and investment. Turkmenistan's extensive natural gas reserves have been particularly important for Iran, which imports Turkmen gas to meet its domestic energy demands and as a buffer against international sanctions (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2011; Kazemi, 2015).

The Caspian Sea, shared by Iran and several Central Asian states, provides a focal point for joint energy ventures. Iran has facilitated the transit of Central Asian oil and gas through its territory, providing an alternative route to Russian-controlled export pathways. This collaboration allows Central Asian countries to access the Persian Gulf and international markets, reducing their dependency on Russia's infrastructure (Cooley, 2012). Additionally, Iran has promoted renewable energy projects with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, aligning with the region's sustainability goals. Renewable projects in hydroelectric power, solar, and wind energy contribute to sustainable development in both Iran and Central Asia, supporting regional energy security (Koolae & Hafezian, 2010).

Development of Trade Routes and Transport Corridors, Including the North-South Transport Corridor

Iran's geographic location positions it as a critical transit hub between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. One of the central components of Iran's strategy to increase trade with Central Asia is the development of transport corridors like the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC). This multimodal trade route, which links India, Iran, Russia, and eventually extends to Europe, reduces transit costs and time, providing Central Asian countries with efficient access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Petersen & Barysch, 2017; Chandra & Bhonsale, 2016).

Iran's ports, particularly Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, serve as key gateways for Central Asian exports to reach international markets. The Chabahar Port, developed with Indian investment, offers Central Asia an alternative route to bypass Pakistan and gain direct access to the Arabian Sea. This project not only enhances Iran's strategic value but also offers landlocked Central Asian countries greater trade flexibility, promoting regional economic resilience (Dadabaev, 2018; Lillis, 2016).

In addition to the NSTC, the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway, inaugurated in 2014, represents another crucial trade link that enables goods to move efficiently between Central Asia and Iran. This railway bypasses traditional routes dominated by Russia and China, underscoring Iran's efforts to foster independent regional connectivity. Through these infrastructure projects, Iran seeks to position itself as a central transit hub that bridges Central Asia with South Asia, the Middle East, and beyond, contributing to a more interconnected Eurasian economy (Nassibli, 2014; Soucek, 2000).

Security and Strategic Alliances

Regional Security Concerns and Iran's Role

The Central Asian region faces numerous security challenges, including terrorism, drug trafficking, and transnational crime, largely due to its proximity to Afghanistan and the presence of insurgent groups. Iran, sharing long borders with Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, has taken an active role in addressing these issues, positioning itself as a stabilising force in the region. Iran's involvement in Central Asia's security landscape aligns with its national interests, as regional instability directly impacts its own border security and internal stability (Hunter, 2010; Ramazani, 2008).

Iran's approach to regional security reflects its preference for localised solutions over external military interventions, particularly from Western powers. Tehran advocates for a regional security framework that emphasises collaboration between Central Asian states and excludes Western influence. Through security agreements and active participation in regional organisations, Iran aims to mitigate threats like extremism, while supporting a self-reliant security environment that reduces dependency on external actors (Weitz, 2011; Katzman, 2018). By doing so, Iran positions itself as a partner in Central Asia's stability efforts, enhancing its diplomatic standing and regional influence.

Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Cooperation

Counter-terrorism and border security are key areas where Iran collaborates with Central Asian states, recognising the shared threat posed by transnational terrorism, particularly emanating from Afghanistan. The porous borders of the region facilitate the movement of illicit goods, weapons, and militant groups, posing a substantial risk to Iran and its neighbours. Iran has invested in intelligence-sharing initiatives, joint border patrols, and security technology transfers to assist Central Asian states in tackling these issues (Nader & Scotten, 2014; Khalid, 2007).

Iran's collaboration with Turkmenistan provides a clear example of its commitment to regional security. The two countries share a 1,000-kilometre border and have coordinated extensively on border management and counter-trafficking operations to prevent the infiltration of illegal activities. Regular consultations, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and cross-border patrols help both countries maintain stability in their border regions, strengthening their mutual trust and contributing to regional security (Allison, 2018; Menashri, 2001). Iran's support for Central Asian states in counter-terrorism efforts underscores its role as a regional security provider, building alliances that foster stability and enhance its influence in the region.

Military and Defence Collaborations

Although Iran's military presence in Central Asia is limited due to sanctions and regional sensitivities, it has pursued modest defence collaborations with some Central Asian countries. Iran's military cooperation primarily focuses on areas such as training, strategic consultations, and limited arms agreements, allowing Iran to establish security relationships while avoiding the complications of a formal military presence (Dorraj & Dodson, 2009; Wehrey et. al., 2009).

With Iran's recent full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), its role in regional security dynamics has been significantly enhanced. The SCO now offers Iran an expanded platform for direct engagement on regional security issues, allowing it to fully align with other key members, such as Russia and China, in advocating for security frameworks that minimise Western influence in Central Asia. As a full member, Iran is better positioned to shape the SCO's policies, reinforcing its vision of a cooperative security framework that strengthens the capabilities of Central Asian states and fosters regional resilience. This status empowers Iran to contribute more robustly to the SCO's collective security agenda, which aims to stabilise and protect the region from external pressures and security threats (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2011; Ziegler, 2020).

Iran's selective approach to military collaboration in Central Asia highlights its adaptability in navigating regional security dynamics. By focusing on training, intelligence-sharing, and joint security operations, Iran ensures that its involvement remains mutually beneficial without provoking tensions with other influential players, such as Russia and China. This pragmatic security strategy reinforces Iran's role as a stabilising force in Central Asia, strengthening its partnerships and contributing to a cooperative regional security framework (Weitz, 2011; Cornell, 2017).

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Iran's Cultural Outreach in Central Asia

Iran has consistently utilised cultural diplomacy as a key strategy to strengthen ties with Central Asia, capitalising on shared heritage and historical connections. Persian culture, language, and literature hold a respected place in the region, especially in countries like Tajikistan, where Persian (locally known as Tajik) is an official language. Iran leverages this cultural affinity by sponsoring literary events, art exhibitions, and academic exchanges that showcase Persian culture and heritage, creating a positive image and fostering goodwill within Central Asia (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015; Akiner, 2013).

Iran's cultural diplomacy extends to promoting its literary icons, such as the poets Rumi and Ferdowsi, whose works resonate deeply within Central Asian societies. By promoting these shared literary traditions, Iran strengthens cultural connections and positions itself as a cultural ally, especially among Central Asian intellectuals and youth. This cultural outreach enhances Iran's influence in the region and aligns with its broader diplomatic strategy of establishing soft power through cultural means (Khalid, 2007; Menashri, 2001).

Influence of Language, Religion, and Education in Bilateral Relations

Language, religion, and education are vital pillars of Iran's cultural engagement in Central Asia. Persian language promotion is particularly prominent in Tajikistan, where it is central to national identity. Iran supports Persian language programs, educational scholarships, and student exchanges that bring Central Asian students to Iranian universities. These educational initiatives foster long-term connections with the region, as students often return with favourable views of Iran and an appreciation for Persian culture (Maleki & Zaccara, 2014; Mohammadi, 2016).

Religious diplomacy also plays a role in Iran's influence in Central Asia, where Islam serves as a shared cultural and spiritual foundation. Although most Central Asian countries are predominantly Sunni, the historical presence of Sufi Islam provides a point of convergence with Iran's Shia and Sufi traditions. Iran sponsors religious studies scholarships, particularly for students interested in Islamic theology, which strengthens ties and supports the preservation of Islamic identity in the region—a heritage suppressed during Soviet times. This religious engagement bolsters Iran's soft power by aligning with Central Asia's cultural revival (Adelkhah, 2012; Menashri, 2001).

Role of Iranian Cultural Centres and Media in the Region

Iranian cultural centres in Central Asia, situated in cities like Dushanbe, Bishkek, and Ashgabat, serve as focal points for promoting Iranian culture and perspectives. These centres offer Persian language classes, organise cultural festivals, and host events that highlight Iranian art, literature, and religious traditions. Through these cultural centres, Iran strengthens people-to-people connections, builds goodwill, and reinforces its image as a culturally influential partner (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015; Akiner, 2013).

In addition to physical cultural centres, Iran has leveraged media as a tool to project its influence in Central Asia. Iranian broadcasting services, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), provide Central Asian audiences

with Persian-language news and cultural programming. This media outreach offers a counter-narrative to Western and Russian perspectives, allowing Iran to shape regional discourse and promote its viewpoints on global and regional issues. By broadcasting content that reflects Iranian values, these media initiatives help Iran reinforce its soft power in Central Asia and strengthen its regional alliances (Dadandish, 2020; Mohammadi, 2016).

Iran's cultural diplomacy efforts underscore its recognition of soft power as an essential element of its foreign policy in Central Asia. By promoting Persian language, literature, religion, and media, Iran establishes itself as a culturally significant actor and fosters long-lasting diplomatic ties. This soft power approach aligns with Iran's broader strategy of enhancing political and economic integration with Central Asia, positioning it as a valued partner amid competing regional influences.

Impact of Global and Regional Influences

Effects of U.S. Sanctions on Iran and Regional Relations

U.S. sanctions on Iran have had significant implications for its economy and regional strategies, particularly regarding its outreach in Central Asia. The sanctions target critical sectors such as Iran's energy, finance, and industrial production, severely restricting Iran's economic capacity and its ability to engage with international markets. These constraints have prompted Iran to develop alternative strategies for maintaining economic relationships, especially with neighbouring regions like Central Asia, where Iran can circumvent some of the restrictions imposed by Western financial systems (Katzman, 2020; Sadri, 2015).

Iran's approach to trade with Central Asian countries includes barter transactions and currency exchanges that bypass the U.S. dollar, allowing it to sustain economic exchanges without violating sanctions. By focusing on these regional partnerships, Iran reduces its dependency on Western markets, while also strengthening its position as a reliable trade partner for Central Asia. Sanctions have inadvertently increased Central Asia's importance for Iran, making the region an essential component of Iran's strategy to mitigate the economic impact of international isolation (Ellinas, 2019; Kazemi, 2015).

China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Intersection with Iran's Interests

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a major influence in Central Asia, offering substantial investments in infrastructure and enhancing regional connectivity. For Iran, the BRI aligns with its strategic interest in improving transportation and trade routes, as well as accessing broader Asian and

European markets. The North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), connecting Iran, Russia, India, and Central Asia, complements the BRI by offering Central Asian states alternative access to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, circumventing routes controlled by Russia and China (Dadabaev, 2018; Leverett & Mann, 2015).

Iran's role in the BRI includes projects like railways, highways, and port development that support its ambition to serve as a transit hub linking East and West. Iran's Chabahar Port, which provides Central Asia and Afghanistan with direct access to the Arabian Sea, has attracted investments from India, offering Central Asia an alternative to routes passing through Pakistan and aligning with the BRI's vision for inter-regional trade connectivity. By collaborating with China on infrastructure projects, Iran seeks to attract Chinese investment to offset the effects of sanctions, while also enhancing its strategic importance within the BRI framework (Chandra & Bhonsale, 2016; Petersen & Barysch, 2017).

While China's presence in Central Asia introduces an element of competition, it also presents opportunities for Iran to collaborate within a regional framework that aligns with its interests. Iran's engagement with the BRI allows it to benefit from China's economic initiatives while balancing its relationships with other influential powers in Central Asia, ensuring that it remains an independent player rather than becoming overly reliant on any single power (Kazemi, 2015; Ziegler, 2020).

Role of Russia and Other International Actors in Iran-Central Asia Dynamics

Russia's traditional influence in Central Asia shapes Iran's relationships with the region. Russia considers Central Asia as part of its historical sphere of influence, and it maintains control over security and economic cooperation through frameworks like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, Russia and Iran share some common interests, particularly in countering Western influence, creating an environment conducive to diplomatic alignment between the two countries (Weitz, 2012; Saikal, 2021).

Beyond Russia, other international actors, such as Turkey and India, also have vested interests in Central Asia. Turkey leverages shared cultural and linguistic ties, particularly in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to promote its influence, posing competition to Iran in the sphere of cultural diplomacy. India's investments in Chabahar Port support its ambition to establish direct trade routes with Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan, which aligns with Iran's goal of enhancing regional connectivity. By supporting India's presence in Central

Asia, Iran benefits from increased economic ties and diversified partnerships (Lillis, 2016; Sadri, 2015).

Iran's diplomatic strategy in Central Asia reflects a pragmatic approach to navigating these competing interests. By fostering balanced relationships with Russia, China, and other international players, Iran ensures that its engagement with Central Asia remains adaptable to shifting geopolitical dynamics. This multi-vector approach strengthens Iran's influence, positioning it as a significant regional actor without becoming overly dependent on any one external power (Dadandish, 2020).

Case Studies of Bilateral Relations

Iran and Kazakhstan: Energy and Economic Ties

Iran and Kazakhstan have developed a cooperative relationship rooted in their shared interests in energy and economic collaboration. Kazakhstan, a major oil and gas producer, has partnered with Iran to expand its export routes beyond Russian-dominated pipelines, using Iran's ports to reach global markets. Iran has facilitated Kazakhstan's access to the Persian Gulf by offering its energy infrastructure and refineries, providing Kazakhstan with a strategic export channel via the Caspian Sea and Iranian territory (Mamedov, 2014; Nourzhanov & Hancock, 2015).

Beyond energy, Iran and Kazakhstan have broadened their trade to include agricultural products, machinery, and industrial goods. Kazakhstan exports wheat, minerals, and metals to Iran, while Iran provides construction materials, food products, and technical expertise. These exchanges have strengthened bilateral trade, with both countries benefiting from reduced tariffs and streamlined customs processes under bilateral agreements. Through economic diplomacy, Iran has positioned itself as a valuable partner for Kazakhstan, reinforcing its role as a trade and transit hub in the region (Allison, 2018; Akiner, 2013).

Iran and Uzbekistan: Trade and Cultural Connections

Uzbekistan, one of the most populous Central Asian countries, has engaged Iran as a partner in areas such as trade, agriculture, and cultural exchange. Iran has actively promoted bilateral trade with Uzbekistan, focusing on textiles, agricultural products, and consumer goods. Both countries have worked to simplify customs procedures and reduce tariffs, which has encouraged direct investment and increased trade volume over recent years (Cooley, 2012; Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

Iran's cultural diplomacy in Uzbekistan leverages historical and linguistic ties, especially given that cities like Samarkand and Bukhara were once vibrant centres of Persian culture. Iran sponsors cultural events, educational exchanges, and Persian language programs in Uzbekistan, helping to strengthen diplomatic relations and cultural connections. These initiatives not only enhance Iran's influence but also preserve and celebrate shared cultural heritage, fostering a positive image of Iran within Uzbek society (Khalid, 2007; Akiner, 2013).

In addition to trade and cultural diplomacy, Iran and Uzbekistan have cooperated on infrastructure projects aimed at improving regional connectivity. Iran has proposed rail and road networks that link Uzbekistan to the Persian Gulf, providing Uzbek exports with direct access to international markets. This infrastructure development aligns with Iran's vision of an interconnected region, promoting Central Asia's economic integration and reducing reliance on Russia's trade routes (Nassibli, 2014; Mohammadi, 2016).

Iran and Turkmenistan: Shared Borders and Security Cooperation

Iran and Turkmenistan share a long border, making border security and regional stability priorities in their bilateral relationship. Iran and Turkmenistan have implemented joint patrols, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and counter-terrorism initiatives to secure their border and prevent illegal trafficking, terrorism, and other cross-border challenges. These security collaborations reflect Iran's commitment to fostering a stable and secure environment with its immediate Central Asian neighbour (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2011; Menashri, 2001).

Energy cooperation is another key area in Iran-Turkmenistan relations. Turkmenistan's natural gas exports to Iran help meet Iran's energy needs, particularly in the northern provinces, which are less connected to Iran's main gas network. The Iran-Turkmenistan gas pipeline underscores their economic interdependence, enabling both countries to benefit from energy trade while bypassing Western markets. By supporting Turkmenistan's gas exports, Iran reinforces its role as a partner for Central Asia's economic growth and diversification (Cornell, 2017; Ramazani, 2008).

Iran also engages with Turkmenistan on cultural initiatives. Iranian cultural centres in Turkmenistan promote Persian language courses, art exhibitions, and religious events that strengthen bilateral relations and highlight shared cultural and historical ties. This cultural diplomacy complements the economic and security collaboration, providing a multi-dimensional framework for Iran-Turkmenistan relations that enhance Iran's influence in the region (Saikal, 2021; Mohammadi, 2016).

Challenges and Opportunities

Geopolitical Challenges, Including External Pressures and Sanctions

Iran's engagement in Central Asia faces substantial geopolitical challenges, particularly due to the pressures imposed by U.S. sanctions, regional competition, and the internal political dynamics within Central Asian states. The U.S. sanctions on Iran severely limit its financial and technological resources, impacting Iran's ability to fund infrastructure projects and participate fully in the global market. These restrictions have made Iran increasingly reliant on alternative trade and financing mechanisms, such as bartering and local currency exchanges, to maintain economic ties with Central Asian countries (Katzman, 2020; Sadri, 2015).

In addition to sanctions, Iran must navigate a complex web of regional influences, particularly from Russia and China, both of whom have significant political and economic interests in Central Asia. Russia maintains a dominant position in the region through institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed Central Asia into a major corridor for infrastructure investment. Iran's ambitions as a trade and transit hub face competition from these powers, necessitating a balanced and pragmatic approach in order to sustain its influence without alienating either Russia or China (Cooley, 2012; Ziegler, 2020).

Central Asian countries' internal politics further complicate Iran's role in the region. The governments of these countries are wary of foreign influence that might destabilise their regimes, which often limits the depth of Iran's influence, especially given Iran's theocratic model. Furthermore, Western pressure on these governments to limit their interactions with Iran creates an additional obstacle. These combined factors require Iran to carefully balance its regional engagement to ensure continued cooperation with Central Asia while managing these constraints (Weitz, 2012; Ellinas, 2019).

Potential for Increased Economic Integration and Interconnectivity

Despite these challenges, Iran and Central Asia hold significant potential for deeper economic integration and connectivity. Iran's location as a bridge between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia offers Central Asian states access to international markets, particularly through Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf. Projects like the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), which links Iran, Russia, and India, highlight Iran's capacity to serve as a major transit route,

providing Central Asian countries with alternatives to Russian-controlled paths (Petersen & Barysch, 2017; Lillis, 2016).

Expanding infrastructure links also provides Central Asian countries with greater economic resilience by reducing dependence on a single route or partner. The Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway, for example, facilitates direct trade links between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, offering a shorter, more economical route to South Asia and beyond. Iran's investment in infrastructure projects supports its ambition to become a transit hub, encouraging economic interdependence that bolsters the region's economic resilience (Nassibli, 2014; Chandra & Bhonsale, 2016).

Future Prospects for Cooperation and Areas for Policy Improvement

Looking ahead, Iran and Central Asia have substantial opportunities to expand cooperation across several strategic areas, including technology, agriculture, counter-terrorism, and cultural exchange. Strengthening partnerships with Central Asia offers Iran economic benefits while reinforcing its diplomatic standing by demonstrating Iran's capacity for constructive regional engagement. Technological collaboration, such as in digital infrastructure and scientific research, provides both Iran and Central Asian countries with opportunities for economic modernisation, particularly in nations like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which aim to diversify their economies (Dadandish, 2020; Saikal, 2021).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined the depth and complexity of Iran's relationships with Central Asian states, highlighting the strategic, economic, and cultural dimensions that underpin these connections. Iran's approach to Central Asia is rooted in historical ties and shared cultural heritage, and it is shaped by a combination of economic interests and security needs. The findings reveal that Iran's engagement with Central Asia is both pragmatic and adaptive, as it seeks to strengthen trade, energy cooperation, security alliances, and cultural ties. Despite facing challenges, including U.S. sanctions and regional competition from powers like Russia and China, Iran has maintained resilient and multi-faceted partnerships with Central Asian states, enhancing its role as a key regional actor (Hunter, 2010; Kazemi, 2015).

Iran's partnerships with Central Asian countries reflect a commitment to mutual benefits, aligning with Central Asia's objectives of economic diversification, regional connectivity, and political stability. By positioning itself

as a transit hub that offers access to the Persian Gulf and global markets, Iran underscores its economic relevance to Central Asia. Similarly, through security cooperation and cultural outreach, Iran fosters regional stability and goodwill, which strengthens its diplomatic and economic presence in the region (Ehteshami, 2017; Sadri, 2015).

Implications for Regional Stability and Connectivity

The deepening of Iran-Central Asia relations carries important implications for regional stability and connectivity. By providing Central Asia with alternative routes for trade and transport, particularly through projects like the North-South Transport Corridor, Iran plays a vital role in supporting Central Asia's economic independence. These infrastructure initiatives enhance regional resilience by diversifying trade options, reducing reliance on single-market access points, and fostering a more interconnected regional economy (Lillis, 2016; Nassibli, 2014).

In the realm of security, Iran's engagement contributes to Central Asia's counter-terrorism and border stability efforts. Through joint border management initiatives, intelligence-sharing, and counter-terrorism strategies, Iran supports regional security frameworks that minimise the need for external military presence. This collaboration aligns with Iran's interest in fostering a self-sufficient security landscape that empowers local actors, thereby reducing dependence on Western interventions and reinforcing stability (Nader & Scotten, 2014; Allison, 2018).

Final Thoughts on the Future of Iran-Central Asia Relations

Looking ahead, Iran and Central Asia have significant potential for expanding their partnerships across economic, technological, and cultural domains. Iran's investments in renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and scientific research align with Central Asia's developmental goals, creating opportunities for collaboration that will modernise the region's economy. Additionally, agricultural cooperation and food security initiatives offer Iran and Central Asia a path toward sustainable growth and mutual dependency, fostering long-term resilience and economic integration (Dadandish, 2020; Saikal, 2021).

To fully harness these opportunities, Iran and Central Asian states must address existing policy barriers, including trade restrictions, logistical inefficiencies, and insufficient legal protections for investors. Policy reforms that enhance border logistics, streamline customs processes, and establish clear investment protections would create a more conducive environment for cooperation. Iran's engagement with multilateral organisations, such as the

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, provides additional avenues for dialogue, allowing both Iran and Central Asia to pursue shared regional goals within a framework that accommodates diverse interests (Menashri, 2001; Ziegler, 2020).

Ultimately, Iran's relationship with Central Asia is likely to play an increasingly vital role in the region's geopolitical landscape. By building on its historical ties and adapting to contemporary economic and political realities, Iran has positioned itself as a valuable partner in Central Asia's development. This partnership has the potential to strengthen regional stability, support economic diversification, and foster a multi-polar order that benefits both Iran and Central Asia.

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