

European Union, Iran and Central Asia: Perspectives for Cooperation under Biden Administration

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Abstract

The paper is aimed to acquaint with the role and significance of Central Asia in the restoration and renewal of the European-Iranian relations after the upcoming advent to power in 2021 of the new US president J.Biden; disclose possible orientations for the mutually beneficial common partnership and potentials to balance these relations with Russia and China. To achieve this goal methods of systemic and strategic analysis, comparative and problem approaches have been used. To the present day the topic has not been disclosed within this period and strategic framework, especially based on the Central Asian view to the current international issues. Observations show that European Union is preparing to gradually, in a staged manner, restore full-fledged cooperation with Iran during the Biden administration that coincides with the interests of Iran and CA states. New possibilities appear to develop comprehensive and balanced foreign and security relations between the EU, Iran and CA states, apparently supported by Biden, which can be most efficient if based on the “soft power” instruments and the joint-up approach, as well as on mutually beneficial projects with China and Russia as necessary components of the forming regional security order.

Keywords: New Regionalism, Security, Economic Interests, Constructive Cooperation

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Introduction

One of the important issues regarding the Middle East in early 2021 was the future of Iran's relations with the European Union as the Democrat administration was taking office in Washington. These developments are of vital importance to the destiny of Central Asia, present-day tension in the US-EU and US-Iran relations, the clash of their geopolitical interests in the regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. These issues need to be comprehensively investigated and analyzed to efficiently address the current global challenges and threats and find the proper balance of interests to prevent the new geopolitical challenges, associated also with the Russian and Chinese concepts of development for these regions.

The paper therefore tries to reveal the role and significance of Central Asia in restoration and renewal of the European-Iranian relations after the upcoming advent to power of the new US president J.Biden in January 2020; to disclose possible vectors for the mutually beneficial partnership and potentials to balance these relations with Russian and Chinese presence in these regions. This topic has relatively remained untouched by scholars to the present day.

It is quite clear that European Union is preparing to gradually restore full-fledged cooperation with Iran during the Biden administration. This trend coincides with the interests of Iran and Central Asian states. To preserve peace, stability and development in such a situation, it is appropriate for each state is to conduct constructive dialogue and accelerate building regional and trans-Asian transport and energy networks which create possibilities for mutually beneficial economic cooperation, thus gradually reducing intergovernmental tensions, and contributing to the overall regional and global security. New possibilities will be apparently supported by Biden and could be most efficient if based on the "soft power" instruments and the joint-up approach.

To examine these issues the author first describes the existing theoretical debates on the problem of modern regionalism, reveals state interests and barriers to the actors' policies, gives possible scenarios, recommendations, and a conclusion to the paper.

Theory and Concepts

The investigated issues are relevant to the theories of regionalism, vigorously discussed in recent decades. It is regionalism that supposedly will define the future world order, and it is largely dealt with understanding of indivisibility of security issues in the contemporary world. It is acknowledged that culture, security, and economic policy are the most important dimensions of any process of regionalization. Scholars usually emphasize these dimensions of regionalism.

Ardjun Appadurei, for instance, thinks that global changes in culture will bring us to a complex international order based on cooperation between various alternative cultural blocks of states (*The Global Transformations Reader*, 2000:230-239).

Other investigators pay more attention to the economic dimensions of globalization. Internationalization of the economic activities, growth of economic transnational trends, and free movement of capital, goods, information, and people across national boundaries brought about a qualitatively new state – economic globalization, increase of the global regulating role of the international economic and financial organizations (WTO, World Bank, etc.), development of integration processes and international cooperation in a solution to the global problems. In this context any national economy can become a victim of geoeconomic conflicts. The states therefore should work out their own system of national security, which as rightfully stresses E. Kochetov necessarily cover the economic issues (1999).

Besides, as R. Keohane holds, neither states, nor transnational relations can replace one another due to the survival of permanent traditional risks for a state security – border conflicts, civil wars and foreign intervention (*The Global Transformations Reader*, 2000: 109-124). The current instability of the Middle East and Afghanistan, which has far-going negative repercussions for the world community, clearly demonstrates the validity of these thoughts. None of the states and even their transnational ties can withstand the current global challenges and threats alone, whether they refer to terrorism, drug trafficking, migration or economic development, in the more and more interconnected world.

Bjorn Hettne (*The Global Transformations Reader*, 2000: 156-165)

introduced the notion of the “new regionalism”. According to him, the process of regionalization is developing from “below” because of the inner transformations of the newly developing world regions. But it is extremely doubtful, in my mind, that this tendency will lead to the formation of regional states as Hettne predicts.

To a certain degree the phenomenon of the “new regionalism” is still an ongoing process. The example of Central Asian development is obvious enough to prove it. The ongoing internal transformations, security and economic issues require an extension of international ties, first at the regional level. Deepening regional cooperation is an important condition to preserve the peace, stability, and prosperity of Central Asia. Rejecting any autarchy and national isolation, the Central Asian states concentrate on the issues of national security, which include military, political, humanitarian, and ecologic, as well as to economy aspects of their development.

In the development strategy of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021, Uzbek authorities proclaimed ensuring security, religious tolerance and interethnic accord, pursuance of a balanced, mutually advantageous and constructive foreign policy as one of the main tools to go out of the present difficulties. This correlates with the formula, suggested by the first President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov in his speech at the international conference in Denmark in 1995, March 12 (*Rodina svyashenna*, 1996:49), called “To globalism via regionalism”. Within this framework Central Asian policy is oriented at building balanced relations with the regional and global actors, be it kindred Iran or the European Union.

It is admitted in this sense that the overall impact of the European Union on the CA countries in some areas was significant, but today that impact is rather weak (especially in comparison to Russia and China) (Paramonov, Vl., Stokov, Al., Alschen, S. & Abduganieva, Z.,²⁷ March 2018). In this context, to promote a more consolidated Central Asian approach to the processes of regionalization, and to go out of the present international crisis Kazakh experts (Qoraboyev, 2019) pay attention to the example of ASEAN, which allowed its member-states to manage their interdependence by developing cooperation in the spheres of security and economy, simultaneously building relations with China and the US.

For the Central Asian states, it seems more expedient to promote close cooperation not only within the region of Central Asia itself, but also with other regional kindred states of ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey as the main co-founders of the organization (Vzaimo deistvie regionalizama, 27 Dec. 2020). This platform seems suitable to build more productive relations with the global powers.

Thus, development of regionalism is interdependent with the processes of globalism. Indivisibility of security issues in the contemporary world, cultural closeness and geoeconomic challenges, as well as internal changes and the growth of economic demands of the national states dictate constructive cooperation with all regional and global actors when necessary.

Interests and Barriers

European Union and Central Asia and Iran are united by common continental existence, the experience of trade relations in the historical past and vast potential for present-day cooperation. Iran and Central Asian states – are a vast market, rising industry and infrastructure, natural resources, and raw materials, whereas EU is the source of high technology, investments, and know-how. Nowadays this vast area comes across similar challenges and threats, connected with the global environment (terrorism, drug trafficking, migration, etc.); geopolitical tension, aggravated by the Trump policy, and pandemic difficulties.

Still, there are immense opportunities for the energy-starving Eurozone to join resources of Iran and Central Asia to settle its economic issues and be connected to the transport and energy corridors transiting these countries.

It is worth mentioning here that one of the biggest Iranian economic projects passes through Chabahar port. This corridor is sponsored by India and will provide the landlocked Central Asian states with access to the world markets. Thus, it will create enormous trade opportunities for all involved regional and global sides, including the European Union – one of the potential destinations for corridors like North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) crossing Chabahar (see Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Possibilities of the Chabahar port
Source: Pars Today (2020, February 16).

Another promising area is the Black sea-Caspian region, which is also considered to be one of the most important communication hubs and energy projects areas and involves many regional and global actors, including Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia as littoral states, and Europe among external actors. There are not only traditional ways of energy supply from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus, Turkey and the Black sea ports, but newly built corridors, which allow transit to the south of Europe. It is the focus for transition of the most important communications along the East-West and North-South axis, which will supposedly involve different forces in Iran, Russia and India. One of them is the “Caspian-Persian Gulf” navigable channel via Iran (Gorbachev, S., 05 Dec. 2020).

As a whole, we see the network of the perspective international corridors involving Iran, Central Asian states, Russia and China in the following map (Fig.2). Most of them are planned to be stretched till Europe.

Thus, there is an objective necessity to unite forces and energy between the European Union, Iran and Central Asian states. Such kind of close cooperation is necessary also to preserve the security of these mutually beneficial corridors. On the other hand, this would allow attracting other potential partners, such as Russia and China that can

sufficiently decrease if not fully remove geopolitical tension in the region.



Fig. 2. International Transport Corridors

Source: Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Despite the common willingness between Iran, Central Asian states and the EU to cooperate in such projects, there are some barriers that can restrict their partnership to a certain degree.

- Energy, if it is used wisely, may be a factor of cooperation, but on the other hand it may also become a divisive factor as it is today (Akin, Ebru Kunt, 2011). This has been enough demonstrated by the long-lasting political disputes over the Caspian and Black sea energy resources and regional corridors.
- Disparities on some issues of the European and Eastern norms, stereotypes and standards. Not everything, as our recent history has showed, can be put into force in the Middle East and Central Asia. This requires cautious and selective approach in Iran and

Central Asian states to choose values and norms most appropriate for their societies.

- Discrepancies on understanding some Moslem values and symbols that can lead to mutual misunderstanding and religious intolerance. The recent French events have clearly proved that. This necessitates conducting interreligious dialogue and joint studies on religious themes.
- Present-day geopolitical competition between the European Union, Russia and China in these regions, as well as the US-Iran confrontation can seriously damage, as the past years have shown, regional development and cause never-ending intergovernmental conflicts. To minimize it we should properly use the above-mentioned possibilities and develop mutually beneficial projects able to balance these relations and partially remove existing antagonisms. Trans-continental corridors, like those planned via Chabahar and the Caspian region can be most fruitful to pacify the region and balance all interests.

Possible Scenarios

Much depends at that on the Iranian policy of the future Biden administration. We can observe two possible scenarios in this regard:

1. There won't be any changes in the US policy towards the Iran nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and Iran as a whole.
2. The JCPOA mechanism will be restored, but in a new form, considering recent changes in the international situation and Iran's response to it.

Under the first scenario, foreseeing the continuation of the present-day US policy on the JCPOA, we could observe efforts to realize the European Union's Global Strategy for 2020-2025. This means consolidation of the European Union proclaimed autonomy (The European Union's Global Strategy, 2019), including in strategic terms, formation of the new European security architecture, based on multilateralism and inclusiveness, addressing common challenges in areas such as migration, counterterrorism, energy, transport, economy and trade, cyber-criminality, and hybrid threats. Inclusiveness assumes balanced cooperation with all regional actors and gradual involvement

of Iran by means of cultural and economic diplomacy. Simultaneously initiated European new strategy in Central Asia (Djurayev&Muratalieva, March 2020) can in the long-term result into joining Central Asia and Iran into one social-economic space and source of energy. The tendency for inclusiveness and connectivity in the European policy logically means also cooperation with the Eurasian Union and SCO, correspondingly with the leading powers – Russia and China, as well as with India. Iran will obviously prefer relying on more stable Russian and Chinese support, relations with the EU depending on the efficiency of the adopted strategy. Its strategic opponent – the US will be virtually excluded from the regional processes.

This, however, can come across the US`s new ambitious plans for the region, which are obviously supported and can be realized by the Biden administration to solve the US inner and external problems and restore its lost image in the world.

Under the second scenario, that seems more probable, the EU and US will gradually, in a phased manner, restore their partnership, including on the issues of Iran and CA. The linchpin of this process will probably be India, the US strategic partner. The essence of this policy is revealed in the slogan of the US-India Global Comprehensive Partnership (Anderson, 31 Oct.2020), foreseeing the US-Indian cooperation in the wider Indo-Asia-Pacific zone, including the CA states and Iran.

It is quite clear that even if the Biden administration concentrate the first months at its inner issues it cannot fully solve them due to their interconnectedness – migration, drugs, challenges to the American companies, etc. – with the preserved security problems in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Therefore, eventually the European Union`s Global Strategy can be developed parallel to the US-India Global Partnership and supplement each other on issues of common interest within the big Indo-Asia-Pacific zone strategy.

At the same time, the global security and economic interdependency will most probably force the US and EU to cooperate with China and Russia on some issues. As the American Ambassador to Russia John J. Sullivan says: “Our approach is we treat both countries separately. We don't consider them an alliance against the

United States. ... the U.S. is the largest investor of any other country in Russia at this time, [with] over 1,000 U.S. companies doing business here. We have even greater economic ties with China". He then predicts that whether next year or the year after – the United States and Russia will be engaging with China on the strategic nuclear and broader national security issues related to each of them (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 21 Dec.2020). China is already trying to contribute to the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

Considering the above-said, Iran in this scenario cannot fully turn back to the West and base its regional policy solely on Chinese or Russian support. But it will take time to achieve mutual trust between the West and Iran and settle the long-term US-Iran discrepancies. Meanwhile it's worth adding here that even in Israel there are those who are inclined to participate in the future Iran-West negotiations and don't reject the importance of Russia as a regional actor (*Gulf International Forum*, 05 Jan. 2021). Such situation presupposes that the JCPOA mechanism will be restored step-by-step, but in the improved form, considering recent Iranian nuclear activities and changes in the international situation.

Recommendations

Independent from any scenarios, integrated European strategy towards Iran and Central Asia would be welcomed in the region, making it resistant to any geopolitical or global challenges.

It would be better with this purpose if the EU, Iran and CA countries concentrated their efforts first on the issues of providing a comprehensive security environment and elaboration of the coordinated single approach to conflicts and crises in the surrounding regions. This prioritizes their peace-building cooperation in *Afghanistan*, embracing exchange of information, training and retraining of the militaries, providing high technology, coordinated work against cyber-criminality, hybrid and ecological threats, consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

The security cooperation should also *deepen traditional instruments* of the European "soft" policy – assistance in good governance and education, as well as consolidation of the joined-up approach on economic, cultural and digital diplomacy. To achieve

better results it would be desirable to make an accent on the *transport and energy issues* (Chabahar, NSTC and Caspian corridors through the Gulf), which can accelerate the finding of solution to the common social-economic difficulties.

Another urgent field for cooperation is *ecology and health issues*, where the joint coordination and joint-up approach with involvement of the civil societies would be very productive.

Conclusion

In any case, neither Europe, nor Central Asian states are ready to postpone their efforts to normalize ties with Iran due to the growth of their social-economic difficulties, domestic explosive situations, and instability in the Middle Eastern and Central Asian regions. Hence, in the first months of the Biden administration we can observe the deepening of the Iranian-European dialogue, accompanied by the more active involvement of the EU into Central Asian states. First steps will apparently be taken to start up the process of returning to the JCPOA agenda.

But it will certainly take time to restore confidence between the West and Iran due to many complex issues necessary to solve. Everything depends on the political will and readiness of the sides to accomplish the projected goals and build comprehensive and constructive cooperation. Meanwhile, the European Union, Iran and CA states should focus on regional security issues, transformation of Afghanistan, transport, energy and health projects, which can be a driving force in advancing their fruitful cooperation.

Authors' Statement: The author declares that she has fully abided by all ethical requirements regarding issues including plagiarism, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, data fabrication and/or falsification, informed consent, misconduct, etc.

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