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Islamic Republic of Iran and Central Asia: From Cautious Acting to Active Institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

Central Asia holds great historical, cultural, and civilizational significance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Currently, it shares the broadest geographical and demographic ties with Iran. However, Iran's practical role in economic, political, and cultural relations within the region remains limited. This raises two main questions: What position and role has Iran occupied in influential regional developments, and why has it struggled to achieve significant results in practice? This article argues that Iran's policy in the region has largely been characterized by passivity, caution, and a tendency to maintain the status quo while aligning with Russia's foreign policy. This lack of initiative can be attributed to various challenges at the national, regional, and international levels. These include a weak private economic sector, cautious behavior exhibited by regional elites, and international pressure that impedes Iran from fully utilizing its strategic capabilities. Consequently, Iran's actual role remains minimal despite its importance. It can be perceived as a missing link in terms of cooperation, integration, and regional development. However, since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, and particularly the 2022 war, Iran-Russia relations have grown stronger. This development has ushered in improved opportunities for collaboration between Iran and Central Asia. The neighborhood policy adopted by the new Iranian government in 2021, coupled with its focus on enhancing Eastern policy, is expected to create significant prospects for increased cooperation with Central Asian countries in the coming years. This discussion will initially address key regional issues and developments, followed by an examination of Iran's role in these dynamics. Lastly, the current situation and future prospects will be evaluated.

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Introduction

In 1991, the Islamic Republic of Iran faced a new reality in its northern borders, which it was not fully prepared to handle. The independence of Central Asian countries was one of the major developments of the last decade of the 20th century. This transformation occurred more than a decade after the Iranian Revolution and the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan. At that time, the Iranian government was still in the process of transitioning from the conditions of the revolution and war. In 1989, Imam Khomeini laid the foundation for a new relationship with the Soviet Union by sending a message to Gorbachev. A ten-year agreement for economic and technical cooperation was signed during the visit of the then-speaker of the Iranian parliament to Tehran and Moscow. With the independence of the Central Asian countries, many Iranian officials welcomed this development. Iran recognized the independence of these countries at the first opportunity and began official visits and exchanges with them. Iran also invited the leaders of these countries to join the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Initially, Iran's approach to the region was more cultural and civilizational, but gradually economic cooperation became a special priority.

Now, after three decades of independence of the Central Asian states, it is possible to discuss the regional policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran more clearly. The independent countries of Central Asia found themselves in a position to establish official relations with other governments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among these countries, neighboring countries such as Iran enjoyed a special priority due to their geographical, cultural, and social ties. Common history, language, culture, and literature provided a unique opportunity for Iran to assist these communities in their new identity formation process.

The primary question here pertains to Iran's position and role in significant regional developments, why it has been unable to achieve important outcomes and results and what is the perspective of this situation? The author argues that Iran's policy in the region has predominantly been passive (preventing insecurity and potential threats), cautious in nature, focused on maintaining the status quo, and aligned with Russia's foreign policy, lacking proactive initiatives. Due to challenges at the national, regional, and international levels, such as a weak private economic sector, cautious attitudes among regional elites, and international pressures and constraints, coupled with the denial of Iran's strategic capabilities, its actual role remains limited despite its importance. Iran can be regarded as a missing linkage in regional cooperation, integration, and development, with its strategic capacities overlooked.

An evaluation of the past thirty years' developments and achievements in these relationships can provide insight into assessing them and envisioning a future perspective. But since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, and more importantly, the 2022 war, relations between Russia and Iran have increased day by day, and this issue has provided better opportunities for cooperation between Iran and Central Asia. It is expected that the new government's neighborhood policy from 2021, as well as its emphasis on Eastern policy, will create important opportunities for greater cooperation with Central Asian countries in the coming years.

The primary objective of this article is to identify and analyze four significant trends in the Central Asian region, and subsequently explore Iran's practical relations with these trends. As a consequence, the focus of the article has shifted from examining Iran's relations with the region to examining regional dynamics and Iran's position within them. In order to address the central claim of this article, a comprehensive exploration of the influential subjects and trends in the region during this period is initially conducted. Subsequently, an examination of Iran's role in these trends is undertaken, followed by an evaluation of the current state of affairs and future prospects.

Main trends in the region

Central Asian countries have experienced more than three decades of independence, during which they have grappled with a range of significant issues. The region can be characterized by several key trends in politics and economy, namely development, security, communication, and institutionalism. This section will critically explore these four trends in the region, offering insights into their dynamics and implications.

a. Development and modernization

The five Central Asian republics did not enjoy a favorable economic situation upon attaining independence, and during the initial years, they grappled with instability and disarray. Privatization

programs further exacerbated the conditions, and despite relatively better periods, particularly for the resource-rich countries of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, they continue to face a challenging situation after three decades. However, the region is changing, and its role needs to be reassessed. The countries of Central Asia have made significant progress in their development. The share of Central Asia in global GDP (PPP) has increased by a factor of 1.8 since 2000. Its countries have established themselves economically, and have far-reaching growth prospects. Central Asia had an aggregate GDP of \$347 billion in 2021. Over the last two decades, the GDP of Central Asia grew more than sevenfold in real terms. Inward FDI stock is estimated at \$211 billion, with foreign trade turnover having increased sixfold since 2000 (Vinokurov, 2022).

Dynamic economic growth is the result of structural economic transformations in the 1990s, and favourable conditions in global commodity markets. The region's growing population provides a capacious sales market, and generates an expanding pool of labour resources. The region's population of 77 million keeps growing at the rate of almost 2% per year. Over the last 20 years, it increased at an average annual rate of 1.6%. The region's population has increased by a factor of 1.4 since 2000 (Vinokurov, 2022). Therefore, unlike the first decade after independence, economic conditions have gradually improved and with the investment and trade of China and some other countries, the process of economic modernization has also improved. Regarding the political modernization, with the developments in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the last six years, it seems that there should be hope for the future of the countries in the region.

b. Security and stability

Central Asian countries experienced new vulnerabilities following the new conditions in Afghanistan. In light of the insecurity and internal conflicts in Afghanistan, religious movements in the region received support from Afghan militants, and some regional soldiers, who had gained combat experience during their deployment to Afghanistan in the 1980s, formed new forces against their own governments. Tajikistan was the first country affected by this situation, as it underwent a severe civil war from 1992 to 1994, resulting in the death of 50,000 individuals and the displacement of one million people. Similarly, serious insecurity emerged in Uzbekistan and continued in the following decade. The events of September 11, 2001 led to the military presence of the United States in Afghanistan and cooperation between regional countries and the United States. Since then, the security of the region has faced various challenges. In this regard, the Andijan incident in 2005 and the events in Tajikistan in 2015 can be mentioned. Particularly after the Arab Spring from 2010 onwards and the emergence of ISIS from 2013, waves of concern have spread throughout the region. The issue of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the events of the past two years, as well as the presence of Central Asian fighters in the Middle East and the Syrian crisis, have further intensified security concerns in Central Asia.

The events of 2022 in Kazakhstan showed how fragile the security of the region is. Security was established only with the presence of the military forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization¹ in this country (Terzyan, 2022). Therefore, organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization² are very important for the security of the region. Therefore, the Central Asian region should still be considered a vulnerable region in the field of security, and collective security cooperation will be the only way to stabilize the situation in dangerous conditions. Also, the war in Ukraine in 2022 and its continuation until today should be considered as a crisis issue for the Central Asian region. Especially since the future outlook of this crisis is still not clear. The developments in the Caucasus since 2020 have clearly shown how dangerous the changing role of Russia can be for Eurasian regions.

c. Communications and transportation

Central Asia is a landlocked region. In ancient times, this area was at the heart of the Silk Road, connecting East and South Asia to Iran, the Middle East, and Europe. During the era of the Khanates, the region became insecure, and on the other hand, with the European Renaissance, international trade routes shifted to the seas and oceans through new maritime navigation. With the dominance of Russia and the Soviet era,

1. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

2. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

the region's communications were tied to Moscow, and interactions beyond territorial and urban settlements were limited. However, in modern times, newly established governments sought new routes and communication lines with the outside world. Consequently, attention was drawn to China, India, and Iran as communication routes with these regions and the wider world.

Various countries have made efforts to propose different initiatives for this purpose. Russia still emphasizes the previous communication routes. In 2012, the United States introduced the "New Silk Road" initiative, and in 2014, China proposed the "Belt-Road Initiative". Türkiye, on the other hand, focuses more on the east-west axis via the Caspian Sea and Iran. The most important energy transmission lines in the region are dedicated to China and consist of four routes. Some of the region's energy is still transported through the Russian route. In 2015, in line with the American initiative, the TAPI pipeline was initiated and is currently under construction (Escobar, 2022).

In the last two years and since the beginning of the Ukraine war, the Eurasian region has faced a wide competition from the western countries to limit the eastern powers in the field of communication and transportation corridors, especially with regard to the activation of the Belt-Road and the Northern Corridors. In this regard, we should mention the middle corridor plan (The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to European countries)¹ and the southern corridor (from South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean) which is mainly to limit the north-south corridor (Avdaliani, 2023).

d. Integration and institutionalism

The issue of integration in the Central Asia region has been addressed in two forms: regional and extra-regional. In the region, several regional institutional entities have been active. First, there are Russian institutions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). Second, there are Western institutions such as NATO, the European Union (EU), and GUAM (Organization for Democracy and Economic Development). And third, there are joint regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

At the beginning of independence, within the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took the initiative to integrate Central Asia. In January 1994, an agreement was signed in Tashkent to create the Central Asian Union, and Kyrgyzstan soon joined it. This was the beginning of the process of integration in Central Asia, which was aimed at developing and implementing projects to strengthen economic integration, but it was not successful. In the late 1990s, efforts were made to establish a Bank for Cooperation and Development in the region. Additionally, in 2005, attempts were made to form an organization called the Central Asian Economic Community, or the idea of a Free Trade Area in 2006 was proposed, but none of them have been successful to date. Numerous declarations have failed to bring about significant change.

The organization's name changed from the Central Asian Union to the Central Asian Economic Association and later to the Organization of Central Asian States, but it failed to have a significant impact (Zhambekov, 2015: 1-2). Internal conflicts among Central Asian countries and their exploitation by external powers have increasingly undermined the prospects of regional integration. In the latest efforts for integration, it is worth mentioning the meetings of regional officials, especially after the death of Islam Karimov and the arrival of the new government in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev has a stronger inclination toward regional cooperation and convergence, thus reigniting hopes for integration. Despite five rounds of meetings of regional leaders for integration, the last of which was held in the summer of 2023 in the city of Dushanbe, Tajikistan, but the future of convergence in this region is still unclear (<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/15>).

Iran and regional trends

After the Iran-Iraq war in the late of 1980s and from the early 1990s, Iran sought to adopt a moderate policy towards the Central Asian region, which was influenced by the concepts of "construction and development" and "detente" of the president Hashemi Rafsanjani. This approach emphasized

1. <https://middlecorridor.com/en/>

cooperation and interaction with regional countries without prioritizing ideology and followed a pragmatic policy, and from that time until today, Iran's Eurasian policy has continued to be non-ideological. In this section Iran's interaction with key regional trends and its use of these capabilities will be discussed.

a. Iran and regional economic development

During the period when the discourse of economic development was dominant in Iran, Iran entered into cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and presented plans for cooperation including connecting roads, railways and air transportation. Despite the gradual increase in economic exchanges, Iran could not have a significant place in regional economic interactions. In addition, the region's energy resources are largely controlled by Russia, and countries in the region have focused more on routes from Russia and China to transport them. Apart from the inactive and ineffective membership of the regional countries in the ECO organization and Iran's observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran has not had any effective collective activities in this region and is lagging behind in all regional security institutions (Allison and Jonson, 2003: 260).

In the document titled "Twenty-Year Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran," in 2003, Iran is envisioned as a country that should hold the top position in terms of economy, science, and technology in the "Southwest Asia" region, including Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and neighboring countries, by the year 2025. From this perspective, significant portions of what is referred to as Central Eurasia, in terms of historical, cultural, and economic aspects, are linked to Iran and fall within its sphere of influence. The introduction of this document emphasizes the ideal nature as well as the accessibility and attainability of this goal (Document of the Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards 2025).

Despite economic relations between Iran and regional countries, particularly with the governments of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Iran's economic role in the region has not been effective for various reasons. Currently, Iran does not have a significant position among the top ten economic partners of regional countries, and less than 5% of their trade is with Iran. Iran's foreign trade with Central Asia is less than 2% of Iran's total foreign trade and is insignificant compared to other competitors such as China and Russia (Ramezani-Bonesh, 2023). The most important reasons for this are the lack of priority given to economic development domestically, resulting in Iran's weakness in investment, technology, and the private sector, the lack of diplomatic priority for the region, and US policy limiting Iran. As a result, Iran's economic relations with the region have remained limited to some extent to a few restricted activities due to the absence of a strong private sector and efficient government sector, and even air transportation routes have become increasingly limited.

Some developments in recent years have given hope for the expansion of cooperation between Iran and Central Asian countries. In this regard, we can refer to the preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union from 2019, the free trade agreement from 2023, Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 2022, the neighborhood policy and the eastern policy of the new government from 2021.

b. Iran and regional stability and security

In various political and security developments in the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently pursued a policy of supporting peace, stability, and refraining from interfering in the affairs of other countries. From the beginning, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to act as a mediator to resolve regional crises, as demonstrated in its involvement in the Karabakh and Tajikistan crises. With such an approach, Iran has focused on expanding economic relations, establishing communication foundations, and engaging in cultural activities within the framework of new political systems. During this period, there were exchanges and visits between officials from both sides, and air routes were established between Tehran and the republics. During the Tajikistan civil war, which took place between various domestic factions and led to the slaughter of tens of thousands of people and widespread displacement, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in cooperation with the Russian Federation, managed to invite the conflicting parties to negotiation and dialogue, resulting in the signing of a peace agreement among them. Since 1997, Tajikistan has enjoyed relative stability and security. Tajikistan, with its stability, has provided a venue for cooperation between Iran and Russia from 1998 to 2001 to strengthen resistance against Taliban movements in Afghanistan alongside Northern Alliance forces. With the support of

certain foreign countries, the Taliban managed to gain control over large portions of Afghanistan, especially since 1997, when they ousted the legitimate Afghan government from Kabul. It was only through the support of Iran, Russia, and Tajikistan that the Afghan government was able to resist the Taliban by forming the Northern Alliance coalition.

After September 11, 2001, Iran played a significant role in the formation of the Afghan government and supported its establishment and strengthening. Iran's bilateral relations with regional countries have also helped to build regional confidence, and given Iran's experience in combating terrorism in Syria and Iraq, regional governments have a positive attitude towards Iran for security support. In 2016, the President of Iran requested the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan to cooperate on security matters between the two countries. Iran's Foreign Minister also warned the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan about the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism and considered its consequences dangerous for Central Asia. It seems that previous joint security concerns between Tehran and Ashgabat could lead to more important security cooperation in Central Asia (Ramani, 2016: 1).

c. Iran's regional communications and transportation

Iran's initiatives in regional politics and security are not limited to its focus on stability and cooperation. In the decades following the region's independence, Iran has made significant efforts to expand its communication and economic infrastructure with the region. These efforts began shortly after the independence of Central Asia and have continued since. The transportation sector is one of the key components of each country's economic infrastructure. It is considered an important indicator of development level. In other words, rail transportation is the driving force behind industrial revolution, and the transportation industry is the driving force behind the economic and social development of any country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, due to its long border with Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Oman Sea, and the Persian Gulf, as well as its effective security, possesses the characteristic of facilitating regional communications and becoming a focal point for economic cooperation. However, this important aspect is not possible without communication infrastructure, and in this regard, significant efforts have been made in recent years. Despite three decades of positive interactions in the Central Asian region, it has not yet been able to establish a significant position in regional communication systems.

In Iran, efforts to establish communication channels with the countries of the region began from the time of their independence. The Mashhad-Sarakhs railway and the "Tajik Bridge" played a crucial role in reviving the Silk Road, while regional countries' membership in ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) was a significant activity for Iran during these years (Koolae, 2005: 57). In addition, the strengthening of internal infrastructure has continued despite the Western sanctions and almost most of the communication routes between Iran and neighboring countries are active.

Amid the disruption in international trade and transport routes caused by the Russia—Ukraine war and Western sanctions on Russia, Iran has seen a sudden rise in its importance as a transit and transport hub connecting China and Central Asia to Europe, and also Russia with India along the International North—South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Over the last 30 years since the emergence of independent countries in its neighbourhood in Central Asia and South Caucasus, Iran has sought bilateral and multilateral cooperation and regional linkages to allow it to take advantage of its crossroad location between Caspian Sea—Central Asia and the Persian Gulf (ERAI, 2022).

More than any other factor, the war in Ukraine has had an impact on increasing the role of Iran in the field of regional transportation. From 2022, the North-South Corridor has entered the operational stage. On 18 June 2022, the first freight train carrying Kazakhstan's sulphur cargo destined for Europe arrived in Iran from Incheh Borun at the Iran—Turkmenistan border. A day later, the cargo reached Tehran, where President Ebrahim Raisi, along with the visiting Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev launched the Kazakhstan—Turkmenistan—Iran (KTI) transit corridor, also called the Southern Caspian Sea Corridor to Europe via Turkey. Just a week before Tokayev's visit to Tehran, President of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, also visited Tehran, signing bilateral agreements for advancing economic cooperation, especially in transit and transportation sectors as well as oil and natural gas (ERAI, 2022).

d. Iran and Regional Integration

As mentioned by Edmund Herzig the pursuit of regionalism is primarily driven by considerations of geopolitics and the need to counter the United States' efforts to isolate Iran, emerging from internal dynamics within Iran (Herzig, 2004: 1-2). Iran has endeavored to be actively involved in the sphere of integration. Over the past two decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made efforts to engage in regional institutionalization and become a member of regional organizations. In 1994, Iran proposed the establishment of the "Organization of Caspian Sea Coastal States" during the first summit of the Caspian Sea littoral countries. Although this proposal did not receive a warm reception and did not materialize, gradually, in subsequent meetings, regional officials and experts embarked on a process that has so far paved the way for the formation of this institution. In the third summit of the Caspian Sea coastal countries in Baku in 2010, the Agreement on Security Cooperation in the Caspian Sea was signed by the heads of these countries, in which they agreed to expand their cooperation in ensuring maritime security in the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the adoption of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018, which lays the groundwork for further cooperation in the region.

Another institution that has attracted Iran's attention is the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which aims to strengthen and expand into a significant economic union and bloc. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first summit of ECO member countries was held in Tehran on February 16 and 17, 1992, where the expansion of ECO was approved. With the accession of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the ECO membership increased to eight members. The leaders of member countries declared that peace and security in the region are essential prerequisites for economic development (Koolae, 1999: 32). One regional institution that has attracted Iran's attention is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was established in 1995. This institution has significant overlaps with Iran's regional security and foreign policy objectives. Iran became an observer member in 2006 and then applied for full membership in 2009, and finally became an official member of this organization in 2022. Iran intends to achieve some of its strategic foreign policy objectives by joining this organization and utilizing its capacities.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to utilize institutional tools and expand existing institutions, join them, or create new ones to promote economic cooperation and convergence, as well as establish and maintain regional stability and security. Therefore, Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the signing of the preferential trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union in 2019 and the free trade agreement in 2023 have made Iran's role in strengthening regional integration in Central Asia an effective reality.

The Future Outlook of Iran and Regional Cooperation

Over the past three decades, Iran has pursued its regional interactions with relatively clear objectives and principles. While Iran has ultimately engaged pragmatically with regional countries, governments in the region have exercised caution in their interactions with Iran, influenced by international media and Western pressures. This cautious approach has resulted in limited practical levels of engagement, despite abundant opportunities for cooperation between Iran and regional countries. As a consequence, Iran has been unable to effectively fulfill a commensurate role based on its position. Multiple factors have contributed to this situation. Technical and economic weaknesses, the state-controlled economy, and international pressures have hindered Iran from fully benefiting from its historical, cultural, and geographical advantages in the region. Consequently, Iran has been distanced from communication routes, energy transmission lines, and commercial interactions.

The strategic capabilities of Iran in relation to the region have been weakened and constrained, leading to various descriptions such as the "bouquet policy" (Haliday, 1995: 220), the "reluctant actor" (Cornell, 2001: 44), and "pragmatism" (Hunter Spring, 2003: 133) being applied to Iran's role. Furthermore, Western analysts have viewed Iran's policy in the region as one focused on maintaining the existing status quo and characterized by pragmatism. Sébastien Peyrouse, for instance, explicitly refers to Iran's pragmatism and considers it to be lacking an ideological approach to the region (Peyrouse, 2014: 2).

Despite Iran's significant role in the political and security developments of the region over the past three decades, its serious institutionalization and extensive capabilities have not received much

attention. Unfortunately, despite Iran's stabilizing, mediating, and positive role in maintaining peace and security in Central and South Asia, US policy of "everything but Iran" has led to Iran's role being overlooked and its extensive cultural, economic, transportation, and communication capabilities being ignored. Despite Iran's constructive role in the political and security sphere of the region, as well as its creation of communication infrastructure to connect regional countries to the open seas, the two priority factors of economic interests and foreign power have been perceived as obstacles.

Iran's approach to the region has been primarily economic, with less involvement of political elements. However, this has only been in relation to regional countries, and since Iran's priorities are non-economic compared to other regions, it has provided conditions for Western governments to exploit Iran's political and religious face. This has led to a wider role of fear in Iranian politics. Although Iran is geographically, naturally, and geographically close to the Central Asian and Caucasus regions, and is affected by their developments, has an impact on them, and is geographically close to them, the countries of the region have not considered Iran as part of the region. This perception has not been formed in the perception of the statesmen of the region that Iran is part of this region (Hajiyousefi, 2005: 7-86).

Sebastian Peyrouse has correctly pointed out that the West has prevented the establishment of relations and access of regional countries to Iran at the expense of Central Asia. It is hoped that the end of the nuclear dispute can lead to the development of regional and bilateral economic exchanges. If Iran can play a greater economic role in the region, it will benefit all regional countries, and Iran's geographical position in the eyes of Central Asian countries, which have always been interested in finding ways to expand and gain access to southern seas, is an important opportunity. There are important projects for connecting the Central Asian Road and railway network to Iran, as well as to Turkey and Afghanistan, but they have remained completely unused due to current geopolitical conditions (Peyrouse, 2014: 4). In the International Peace Foundation, Karen Gromer and her colleagues have referred to Iran's return to the region after sanctions and predicted important opportunities in the political, economic, and strategic areas for Iran. From their perspective, with a population of over 80 million, a land border with Turkmenistan, and access to the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, Iran plays a major role in the global energy market and is a regional transportation hub, gradually becoming a unique and significant partner for Central Asian countries (Rumer et. al., 2016: 14).

Despite this, after the developments related to the Ukraine crisis since 2014 and then the JCPOA agreement, the conditions for cooperation between Iran and Central Asia have gradually increased. This issue has become more important especially considering the agreements between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union since 2019, the official membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2022, as well as the improvement of relations with Uzbekistan since 2017 and the restoration of relations with Tajikistan since 2020 (Bifolchi, 2022).

President Raisi's administration has prioritised neighbourhood policy as a key pillar of 'resistance economy', which is aimed at reducing vulnerability to sanctions. Recently, describing it as 'strategic' policy, Raisi argued that neighbourhood focus will not change with international developments. Raisi's first official visit abroad was to attend the summit of Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO)—made up of Central Asian and Caucasus states, apart from Iran, Turkey, Pakistan—in Ashgabat in November 2021. On the sidelines of the summit, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding on railroad cooperation (ERAI, 2022).

Therefore, it seems that recently has Central Asia become a policy priority for Tehran, which now sees the region as a potential "bridge" between Iran and the East. The "Look East" policy constitutes a key aspect of Iran's approach to international relations, and it has sprung engagement with nations within the region on an individual, bilateral basis in particular in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Woods and Baker, 2022).

Looking forward, Iran must continue to engage the states of Central Asia on a bilateral basis, determining the most mutually beneficial avenues for meaningful rapprochement. Tehran should also look to sell its economic vision for the region through enhanced collaboration with regional economic integration projects. Continuing along this path and in the process raising Iran's profile beyond an unknown and alien actor in the eyes of ordinary citizens in Central Asia would present both Iran and Central Asia with a unique position (Woods and Baker, 2022).

Considering the current situation in the region and the efforts that Iran has made in recent decades, it seems necessary to prioritize the economy and public welfare as the top national policies in the governments of the region, alongside the three main elements of regional necessities and needs, the

attitudes and stances of statesmen towards each other, and communication and transportation infrastructure, in order to achieve broader regional cooperation and initiate the process of regional integration in the common area of Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia. Iran's role is crucial in this regard, and given the attitudes of statesmen and peoples in the region towards Iran, it is necessary for Iran to take important steps in this area. Another step that the Islamic Republic of Iran should take, especially because this variable has been used by the West and particularly the United States to ignore Iran and empty its capacities, is to prioritize the economy and public welfare as the top national policies in the governments of the region.

Conclusion

Iran has taken important steps towards stability, security, and development in the region over the past three decades, with a pragmatic approach to the region and within the framework of bilateral and regional relations. Strengthening bilateral relations, maintaining the status quo in relation to political systems, creating communication and transportation infrastructure and energy transfer within Iran and from Eurasian borders to the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, and creating and strengthening port systems have been among Iran's most important measures to expand regional interactions. Iran's actions can be seen in its non-ideological approach to the region, attention to economic and cultural relations, mediation in regional crises, assistance in peace, stability, and reconciliation, and efforts to institutionalize regionalism through the expansion of the Regional Economic Organization (ECO) and the proposal to establish an organization of littoral states of the Caspian Sea during the summit of the Caspian Sea littoral states in Tehran.

In practice, Iran's relations with regional countries have placed it at a maximum of tenth place among their economic partners. The situation of these relationships is as follows: none of the eight energy transmission lines in the region pass through Iran; a maximum of 5% of goods transportation is through Iran; approximately 3% of passengers use Iranian airports and routes for foreign exchange; and about 5% of regional trade is with Iran. Consequently, despite Iran's importance, its actual role is minimal, and it can be considered a missing link in regional cooperation and convergence, as Iran's strategic capacities have not been utilized.

The most important reasons for Iran's denied strategic and geopolitical position can be viewed at three levels: national, regional, and international. At the national level, the lack of priority for economic development within the country and, as a result, Iran's weakness in investment, technology, and the private sector are significant factors. At the regional level, the perspective of regional states towards cooperation with Iran is influenced by their perception of Iran as a revolutionary country with a religious and ideological political system, which is largely shaped by the international media. At the international level, the restrictive policies of the United States and Western countries towards Iran, and the "everything but Iran" policy, significantly affect the decisions of regional states, particularly in important economic areas such as energy transmission lines or major projects.

Therefore, due to the aforementioned reasons, Iran's strategic and geopolitical position has been denied in the past three decades, and its strategic capacities have been deliberately emptied. To put it another way, Iran has been reduced to a missing link in fundamental economic, integration, transportation, and energy plans, and its extensive cultural, economic, transportation, communication, and transportation capabilities have been overlooked. Despite Iran's constructive role in the region's politics and security and its creation of communication infrastructure to connect regional countries to the open seas, doubts among regional elites and external structural pressures are significant obstacles.

Iran's approach to the region has been primarily economic and less political, but this has only been in relation to regional countries, and as its priorities are non-economic compared to other regions, it has provided conditions for Western governments to demonize Iran's political and religious face. Overall, Iran's policy in the region can be considered more defensive (preventing insecurity and potential threats), cautious, maintaining the status quo, and moving alongside Russia's foreign policy, and practical initiative cannot be observed in it. In fact, while Iran may not have lost any points, it has not gained any points either. Iran's policy in this region remains under the shadow of its relationships in other regions and issues such as its conflict with the United States. The events that have unfolded since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, along with the escalation of the war in 2022 and the policies of the new Iranian

government, have indicated a clear perspective of expanding relations with neighboring countries and increasing Iran's role in the region.

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