

Iran-Central Asia: Reminiscing the Past and Looking to the Future

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Cultural and political ties between Iran and Central Asia trace back to very ancient times. The relationship entailed a two-way movement of ideas and military conquests resulting in mutual cultural and political influence. Changing correlation of political and military forces and the dynamics of geopolitical conditions shaped the long history of interaction between the two regions. In the recent past, Iran's vital interests in the south and west hardly warranted an ambitious policy in the north. But the situation is changing under the influence of new international order and economic globalization. Iran has recently showed more interest in pursuing an active policy in the north and the east. The change is inspired by political shifts in the Middle East, intensification of multi-lateral competition in the oil-rich Caspian Sea basin, the rise of Taleban in Afghanistan and growing fears of the spread of Sunni Islamic extremism in the region. This article reviews the legacy of Iran's historical ties with Central Asia and the Caucasus and looks at geopolitical and economic determinants that are likely to shape Iran's future relationship with the region.

Historical Background

One can identify three distinct phases in the history of Iran's interaction with Central Asia: the power struggle on a volatile frontier, the southward military invasions, and a period of political-cultural isolation.

During the first phase that lasted until the 11th century, invasion by nomadic horsemen of the north has been a major security concern for the sedentary regions of the south. As Persia became the master of Western Asia under the Achaemenids, the defense of the sedentary south against the nomadic north became a major challenge for the empire. Cyrus' s campaign against the Scythians (529 B.C.) in Central Asia was followed by Darius's expedition against the turbulent nomadic hordes in southern Russia¹. In the following centuries, Greek conquerors and the Parthians were engaged in long frontier wars with nomadic hordes in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Alexander the Great established a network of frontier posts along the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers and his successors in the region built an elaborate network of security posts from Ferghana to Marv and from Darband to the Black sea². Many of these military colonies became the hubs of future cities. *Hazar Shahr-e Bakhter* (the thousand cities of Bactria), the historical epithet of Bactria³, derived from proliferation of walled cities and towns in the region.⁴ Border security measures included pacification of turbulent areas through

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cultural influence. The spread of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism contributed to the effort. During the Sassanid period (3rd–7th centuries), large-scale nomadic incursions spread to Afghanistan and further east to India. The conquests led to the foundation of Kushan and Euphtalite empires between the second and fifth centuries.

During this period, the borders of Central Asia were identified by the relationship between the sedentary and nomadic people. The turbulent conquests of the later - with transient results - and the laggard influence of the former through absorption and assimilation shaped the history of the two. The legacy of the long frontier war left lasting imprints on the region's folklore generating sensational historical accounts, myths, epics and legends.

Islamization of Central Asia through military conquests opened a new phase of relationships in the area. Beginning in the 11th century, a wave of Central Asian Turks that had adapted the Irano-Islamic culture straddled the historical borders between Iran and Central Asia. They established powerful governments in the region and projected power into the Middle East and India. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the Ghaznavids, Seljuks and Khwarazam Shahids conquered vast areas extending from Punjab in the east to the heart of the Anatolian Peninsula in the west. The southward Turckic push took a dramatic turn in the 13th century as Mongol hordes led by Genghis Khan invaded the region. The early Mongols made unsuccessful attempts to establish the supremacy of the nomadic life in the occupied lands. But, the process changed the conquerors themselves as they adopted the way of life of the people they had conquered. Persianization of Turckic invaders fostered a polygonal cultural merger in mediaeval Iran. Timur's invasion of Iran at the end of the 14th century capped the trend of the steppe riders' encroachments on the sedentary south.

The turn of the 16th century marked a new period of landmark changes that deeply transformed the cultural and political landscape in Central Asia. The region that fostered the emergence of several empires in the past gradually declined into isolation. The rise and growth of three major empires in the region - the Safavid, the Ottoman and the Indian Mogul empires - greatly influenced the future of Central Asia. It changed the historical trend in which Central Asian-based forces projected power to the south. Further, the rise of Shi'aism in Iran drew a religious frontier along the geographic borders between Iran and Central Asia. And finally, extended sedentary territories in Transoxiana managed to resist fleeting nomadic invasions (Kazaks and Oirats) and thus shielding the south against new incursions from the north.

These shifts resulted in a north-south cultural and political split that deepened over the next centuries. The Sunni sect of Islam not only shaped the social behavior of the people in Central Asia but also influenced the legal system, the bureaucracy, theological orientations and educational institutions. As historical ties with Shiite Iran truncated, closer cultural relations were developed between Central Asia, the Volga Tatars and India's Mogul Empire. The split became so acute in the 17th and 18th centuries that the Central Asian Muslim pilgrims to Mecca were inclined to take a circuitous road through Russian dominions to Istanbul and thence to Mecca. The Sunnis of Central Asia felt unsafe to go the most direct pilgrimage road via Iran⁵. The cultural schism continued to widen after the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the 19th Century and as a result of Soviet ideological, legal and educational domination of Central Asia in the 20th century. It was not surprising that the cultural reform of late nineteen and early twentieth centuries

in Central Asia was mostly inspired by Crimean Tatars and Ottoman Turks. During the Soviet period, Iran's limited ties with Central Asia were conditioned by Tehran's uneasy relationship with Moscow.

Ideology and Foreign Policy under the Islamic Revolution

During the initial years of the Islamic revolution, Iran's ideology-based foreign policy faced an awkward situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The United States and the Soviet Union, both vilified in Iran's revolutionary worldview, were supporting the opposing sides in the Afghan war that pitted the Islamic-led *Mujahedin* forces against a repressive Communist government. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 sharpened the ideological contraposition that dominated the Afghan "*Jahad*." Iran was extremely vocal in condemning the Moscow-backed Kabul regime and supporting the Afghan *Mujahedin* against the Soviet occupation. But, Tehran's actual commitment to the policy hardly matched the rhetoric. The policy was influenced by Tehran's hostility to the United States, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the ideological worldview of the Iranian revolutionaries that paid more attention to the Palestinians than the Afghan *Mujahedin* and favored Lebanese Shi'ites over their Afghan co-religionists.

Revolutionary Iran did try to stir religious activism and influence Islamic movements outside its borders. In Afghanistan, Iranian interference in early nineteen eighties divided the country's Shiite *Hazara* communities at a time when they were engaged in a nationwide struggle against the Soviet occupation. Iranian-backed extremist groups of the "Imam Khomeini line," particularly the *Nasr*, *Sepah-e Pasdaran* and *Hezbollah*, declared war on moderate Shiite groups who pursued nationalistic agenda. "Purge the domestic arrogance before dealing with outside invaders" was the motto of Iranian-inspired Afghan Shiite revolutionaries.⁶ This coincided with a systematic ideological campaign by Iran through radio broadcasts targeting Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Religious programs from Radio Gorgan, near the Turkmenistan border, in Farsi and Turkmen languages, and from Radio Tabriz in Farsi and Azerbaijani were particularly mentioned as the most aggressive broadcasts aimed at inciting Soviet Muslims against the authorities. Iranian radio stations attacked Soviet policies toward Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷

A Shift to Pragmatic Policies

The eventful years following the Islamic revolution changed the worldview upheld by Iran's revolutionary dreamers. Iran's confrontational foreign policy, motivated by Khomeini's Islamic ideology, gradually transformed into a more pragmatic approach as realities of international relations and domestic challenges blunted the country's militant mood. Tehran's foreign policy since 1988 has been heavily influenced by the end of Iran-Iraq war, the death of Khomeini, the Gulf war, the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Iran stayed away from supporting Islamic activism in the Soviet Union during the *Glasnost* era drawing harsh criticism from some radical elements for not taking advantage of the situation for promoting the Islamic ideology.

The break-up of the Soviet Union seemed to open new opportunities for Iranian influence in Central Asia. But, Iran faced major obstacles in the way of reaching the newly independent states in the area. One hurdle was Iran's curtailed insight into the

region. A long period of cultural isolation and frozen political interaction had caused a lack of mutual understanding. Mostly oriented toward the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, Iran had rarely pursued an active foreign policy in the east or northeast since the 16th century. The Russian-inspired Iranian military campaign against Herat in 1837 was part of the "*Great Game*" competition between Russia and Great Britain. Consequently, the wall of estrangement that rose over many centuries clouded Iran's perspectives on the areas east of its borders. Any positive view about the region belonged to the distant past when the region was part of the greater Iranian civilization. A mostly negative view of the area's recent past was epitomized by the Turkmens raids into Iran and the *Ghilzai* Afghans' invasion of Persia in the 18th century, which ended the Safavid dynasty (1722). Therefore geographic distances to the north and east were measured in cultural terms. Distant Bukhara looked closer when identified with ancient Persian Empire while the neighboring Kandahar, the birthplace of *Ghilzai* "usurpers," was a distant land in the east.⁸

Another obstacle was ideological differences between Iran and the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Iran's religious solidarity with the region was eclipsed by the sectarian, ethnic and nationalist identities of the emerging states there. Despite Iran's pragmatic and laissez-faire approach to the region, the secularist states in Central Asia, that feared Islamic militancy harbored a certain level of suspicion and distrust toward Iran. The multi-ethnic Islamic Republic did not see it politically wise to follow Turkey's example and use the ethnic leverage in its relations with Central Asia.

Expecting a power vacuum in the region Tehran's interests were more of concern than ambitions. Fears of development of pan-Turckic nationalism under Turkey's influence or the hold of Sunni fundamentalism under the influence of Saudi-backed movements made Iran's policy toward Central Asia a reactive undertaking rather than a systematic long-term vision. Far from being able to fill the vacuum itself, Iran favored Russia's presence as a balancing power in a potentially chaotic environment and chose to cooperate with Moscow. Such partnership was well demonstrated in Tajikistan where Iran and Russia worked together mediating a settlement between the Moscow-backed government and the Islamic-led United Tajik opposition (UTO) over which Iran had some influence. Further, Iran refused to get involved in Chechnya where Chechens' armed struggle for independence from Russia had strong Islamic underpinnings. Further, Iran saw its partnership with Russia and Armenia a strategic response to U.S. efforts for influence in the area through its ties with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. This polarization alignment of forces was also reflected in pipeline politics pitting the north-south axis against the east-west corridor.

In fact it is the geography and not the history that offers incentives for the land-locked energy-rich Central Asia and the Caucasus to forge closer ties with Iran. Iran provides the most economic and the shortest export route for the region's oil and gas reserves to international markets. However, Iran's geographic appeal is marred by geopolitical impediments. Driven by its revolutionary policy in the Middle East, Iran long ignored the significance of its potential role in the Caspian basin. The initiation of the Middle East peace process in 1994 and U.S. sanctions against Iran under the Iran-Libya Sanction Act (ILSA) in 1995 further isolated Iran and blocked its emergence as a major player in oil and gas pipeline politics.

The Outlook

The future of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus depends on a number of factors including domestic developments in Iran and Central Asia. The new trend of Russian assertiveness in Central Asia and U.S. policy shift from Central Asia to the Caucasus are the two major external factors. Iran's relations with the United States, the situation in Afghanistan and other unstable points in the region and changes in the world energy market constitute other important variants that can influence the situation.

The ongoing social and political changes both in Iran and Central Asia are expected to create new conditions for bilateral and multilateral relations. In Iran, the Islamic regime is under popular pressure to introduce social and political liberalization and improve relations with the West including the United States. Despite the recent conservative-led crackdown on reformist movement in Iran, the country is likely to stay the course of reform. A reformed Islamic Republic can play a leading role in transporting the Caspian energy resources to international markets.

On the other hand, fears of the spillover from armed conflicts in Afghanistan, the threat of religious and political extremism and drug trafficking are considered immediate security challenges in Central Asia. The situation firms up the ongoing move toward a more authoritarian rule in Central Asian states with a strong emphasis on security policies. The situation leads to Moscow's increased influence in the region at the expense of U.S. efforts. The dramatic rise in political violence in Central Asia and the Caucasus last year brought Russia and Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, into a closer security partnership. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that fear Uzbekistan's hegemony in the region seek closer strategic ties with Moscow. The threshold for Russian involvement in the area is considered much higher than that of Uzbek involvement. Further, unlike the Caucasus, no other foreign power has the capability to compete with Russia in providing security guarantees to Central Asian states. The United States sees the region too remote to effectively counter Russian influence. Therefore, closer ties and cooperation with Moscow, as reflected in the recent Moscow-backed anti-terrorism pact between Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, will be considered a preferred mechanism for responding to perceived threats.

Iran shares the region's security concerns but it can hardly match Moscow's security influence in Central Asia. Although Iran and Russia see eye to eye on many regional issues they have divergent security and economic interests. Moscow parted ways with Tehran in May 1998 when it partially agreed with other Caspian lateral states, except Iran, on territorial division of Caspian natural resources. Moscow opposes the U.S.-backed east-west pipeline route for unlocking energy resources of the Caspian basin but does not favor an Iranian route as an alternative. With the completion of the Tengiz-Novorossysk oil pipeline next year (2001) Kazakstan's export of oil via Russia will triple. Further, dealing with Russia is an attractive option for Turkmenistan to export its enormous gas reserves to hard currency markets. The Central Asian states still show interest in an Iranian export route but not Russia's expense. Moscow and Tehran both support the anti-Taleban forces in Afghanistan out of security concerns, but Russia also exploits the Afghan situation for rebuilding a sphere of influence in Central Asia.

It is also notable that the Central Asian states are moving toward a redefinition of their national identity. While they rediscover their pre-Soviet cultural and historical

values, they are reluctant to ignore the legacy of their Russian-Soviet past which constitute a bridge for them to European culture⁹. All these countries inherited membership in the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe and joined the NATO's Partnership for Peace program. They also try to join other European Community institutions. Their common interests with China are epitomized in the so-called Shanghai-Five pact that groups Russia, China and their three Central Asian neighbors (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). These factors water-down the significance of the "common cultural heritage" which Iran some times refers to as an element in its future relations with Central Asia.

Events in the Caucasus are likely to move in a different direction. There, Russia lacks the leverages similar to those it has in Central Asia. Iran and Turkey have the potential to play a more influential role there and the United State is in a better position to counter Russian influence. As the competition gets tougher over pipeline politics in the Caspian, a new security alliance is likely to emerge around the U.S.- backed Baku-Ceyhan main export pipeline. The regional economic alliance of GUUAM that groups Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Moldova, is already considered by Moscow as a pro-Western political alignment intended to undermine the CIS from within. The Moscow-Erevan-Tehran axis is intended to counter the pact. The polarization can turn into opposed military groupings if the competition turns into a zero-sum game.

Ironically it is in the Caucasus, and not in the Russian influenced Central Asia, that Iran can play a more influential role. Expected consolidation of the status quo in the Middle East, the development of a spirit of cooperation in the Persian Gulf, and compelling economic and security interests in the north support a shift in Iran's policy toward the oil-rich Caspian. Iran can use its geographic advantage to influence the multi-lateral economic dealings in the region. However, the governments in the region which seek strong strategic ties with Washington, would see little incentives to engage Iran as long as U.S. anti-Iranian sanctions continue. So the road to Iran's expanded business ties with the Caucasus somehow passes through Washington. Only when Iran opens up to the world, the United States may review its opposition to business dealings between the energy-rich Central Asian states and Iran. Such a development will serve the interests of all parties. Iran offers the shortest way for export of Central Asian oil and natural gas to international markets. However, Iran can be a spoiler if its strategic interests are ignored. Iran's Vice-President Hasan Habibi warned (April 27, 2000) that big power rivalries around the Caspian and excluding Iran from the pipeline routes could become a source of instability in the oil-rich region.¹⁰

And finally, changed market demands can override political restrictions imposed on pipeline routes. While Iran sees itself politically disadvantaged in the Caspian pipeline competition, it focuses on the economic appeal of its position assuming that in the long run economic efficiency will determine the main pipeline routes. In the meantime, Iran tries to expand its oil swap deals with Central Asian states and Azerbaijan. According to these arrangements, crude oil from the region is swapped with refineries in northern Iran in exchange for proceeds from delivery of equal amounts of Iranian oil for export at Persian Gulf ports. Iran has four refineries in the north of the country with a total capacity of 810,000 barrels per day. The refineries are currently supplied with oil that is shipped from the south of the country¹¹. Iran would like to buy or swap Caspian crude into these refineries and save the cost of shipping its oil north. The deal is also more cost effective

to the crude suppliers. Currently, minor amounts of oil from Turkmenistan are swapped through an existing pipeline from the northeastern Caspian port of Neka to the Tehran refinery. Iran intends to build a new 370,000 barrel-per-day oil pipeline from Neka to Tehran to provide an outlet for Caspian oil. While these measures support short-term projects, Tehran hopes that a changed market situation in the future will offer a larger role for Iran. In the long run, a multiple pipeline approach that includes an Iranian route can prove to be politically and economically desirable solution.

Endnotes

- ¹ Herodotus quoted by Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, Rutgers University Press 1999, p. 9' Encyclopedia Britannica, Central Asia
- ² See Tarn, W.W., *Greeks in Bactria and India*, South Asia Books 1980, p. 117
- ³ The ancient country between the Oxus River and the Hindu Kush Mountains
- ⁴ See Barthold, V.V., *The History of Turks in Central Asia*, Persian translation by Ghafar Hosseini, Tehran 1997/1376, pp. 52-53
- ⁵ Allworth, Edward, Ed., *Central Asia 130 Years of Russian Dominance*, 3rd Edition, Duke University Press 1994, pp. 3-4
- ⁶ Author's interviews with the late Akbar Maqsoodi, leader of the Islamic Alliance of Afghanistan Mujahedin (*Etehadīya-e Islami Mujahedin-e Afghanistan*), and another prominent Hazara political figure Sayed Es'haq, Quetta, June 1984.
- ⁷ Bennigsen, Alexander, *Mullahs, Mujahedin and Soviet Muslims*; in *Problems of Communism*, November-December 1984, pp 28-44
- ⁸ Kandahar symbolizes remoteness in Iranians daily parlance. "He is gone to Kandahar" equals to the Western expression of "he is gone to China." Kandahar is about 300 miles from the Iranian border.
- ⁹ Author's discussion with renown Kyrgyz writer/philosopher Chinggiz Aytmatov, Bishkek June 1996, Minneapolis 1997
- ¹⁰ Reuters, April 27, 2000
- ¹¹ Testimony of J. Robinson West, Chairman, the Petroleum Finance Company on Caspian Sea Infrastructure Projects before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on International Economic Policy, Export and Trade Promotion, April 12, 2000