



# Iran's Geopolitical Interests in Central Asia: Priorities, Projects and Prospects

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of independence of Central Asian countries, many extra-regional powers—great, mid-ranking or smaller—re-discovered this region and began to fit it into their own global or regional strategies and policies. From their side, Central Asians themselves also re-discovered the world and what are called international community, world order, great, middle and small powers with whom they began to interact.

Central Asian states, have constructed their posture and niche in the international system based on confusion of Realist/Liberal/Constructivist vision of international relations (IR) and world politics. On one hand, they seem to learn from their own experience and from general a priori perception that the system of international relations is

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reflective of the existing hierarchy of actors which stipulated such phenomena as sphere of influence, balance of power, geopolitical rivalry as well as cold war like ideological confrontations. On the other, they have demonstrated their cooperative multi-vector policy to the extent that they indiscriminately established strategic partnership with as many states as possible.

Iran-Central Asia axis is reflective of such perplex vision in which Realist, Liberal and Constructivist approaches to the system of international relations intermingle and, in this respect, spur a somewhat renewed academic interest in the studies of the region. The overall initial mutual interest of Iran and Central Asians in each other stemmed from romantic reference to the deep history of interactions of peoples, nations, empires and civilizations. For some period of time, the rhetoric of Turco-Persian division or conglomerate of Central Asian ecumene had remained quite salient in academic as well as public discourses on regional interactions and trajectory of development of each country of the region. Tajikistan as a Persian nation was supposed to drift towards Iran—a center of Persian civilization, the trend that was taken as an argument against possibility of strong regional integration of all five Central Asian countries.

However, over time, as the euphoria of independence cooled down, the seeming pro-Iranian orientation of Tajikistan also faced modification in favor of Central Asian unity. This doesn't mean that Iran was shifted to the secondary position in Tajikistan's international self-positioning. Meanwhile, Iran itself, pragmatic prone with respect to the newly independent states of Central Asia three decades ago, over time, seems to comprehend its strength and weakness in this region.

When this article was being written, the Israel's and US' military attack on Iran occurred in June 2025. This event became, in some sense, a Litmus Test for Central Asia to check their vision of this situation and to revise their overall international self-positioning with the view of adapting to the emerging new world order (NWO).

This chapter explores the geopolitical aspects of Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia and the dynamics of cooperation relating to trade, energy, transport logistics and security. It considers how Central Asian states perceive Iran's growing regional presence and how they balance their relations with Tehran amid external pressure. The study employs content analysis, observation, and comparison methods. It examines the academic works of Iranian, Central Asian and foreign regionalist, as well

as the knowledge products of research and analytical structures, expert opinions and media publications. Data were collected from open sources.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Iran is more often than not considered as a regional power. In other words, probably, this means it should be treated as a middle power. Conceptualization of such a status requires consideration of a number of characteristics of the state's overall capacities and the degree of its freedom of actions concerning challenges and opportunities within the international system and with respect to the trends of world politics.

As it is known, for many years, researches in IR have been conducted within such separate theoretical schools as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism and some others. More often than not, these schools are considered as mutually exclusive or incompatible. However, contemporary researches reveal and confirm that Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism actually intermingle. Indeed, the term 'power' itself is taking us to the realist vision of IR, especially when it comes to great power politics; but the clarifications such as 'great', 'middle' or 'small' power adds a somewhat nuanced vision of the IR which point to Liberalist approach by showing the limits and opportunities of cooperation of IR actors. Constructivists, in turn, while measuring power, operate with such notions as identity, values, norms, intersubjectivity, etc., as allegedly decisive drivers of IR, nevertheless, they intersect with Realists and Liberals since they cannot avoid contemporary interests-driven and geopolitics-driven cases which overwhelm the IR.

From classical geopolitical perspectives, one has to recall that Iran is a part of the Rimland situating on the continental periphery of Eurasia. N. Spykman noted, "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world". He argued that the maritime-oriented Rimland powers have the advantage of having open access to sea and wider exposure to the outside world. Therefore, the influence of land-oriented heartland power could be kept in check by the peripheral Rimlanders (Mirza & Ayub, 2022; 193). And in the Rimland, as we can see now, Iran became the hottest spot. Central Asia which according to the classical view belongs to the Heartland zone finds itself at the epicenter of Heartland-Rimland turbulence.

Anyhow, the broader record of events and processes along the Iran-Central Asia axis provide with rich material for analyses from IR

perspectives. To begin with, what makes Iran a mid-power? For example, does the possession of the nuclear weapon indicate the certain status of a state? On one hand, Iran is suspected in developing the nuclear weapon program; the incumbent theocratic regime from its onset declared its aspiration to exterminate Israel. On the other hand, Iran remains for many years under international sanctions for its nuclear program; its ideological ambitions seem to be mitigated, but its internal socio-political situation is not stable and resentments about the regime of Ayatollah are growing.

These domestic and international turbulences and complexities stipulate the actuality of the following question from both academic and political points of view: What are the geopolitical interests of Iran in Central Asia and what is there in the Tehran's toolkit to be used to realize them as a mid-power? Just like Türkiye, Iran's geographic peculiarities, rich history and contemporary posture in the international system indicate its visible and strategically important niche in the system of world politics.

From theoretical and conceptual perspectives, it is also important that the power rank of the state in the IR system is not a constant index but, in some sense, fluid one reflecting changeable character of all dimensions and criteria of power which ascribe the certain state its rank. That's why the rank of the power is a contested term. Apparently, one of the criteria for evaluating the state in the hierarchy of powers should be the degree of freedom of actions regarding challenges and opportunities it faces.

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991, Iran suddenly re-discovered the new/old reality, namely that it borders to the North not one state but three on the land—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, and four of the Caspian Sea—Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Tripple policy tasks came to Tehran's international agenda in that wake: Realist (geopolitical, peculiar to the Rimland country), Liberal (economic cooperation and transport links), Constructivist (cultural and religious identity-driven). The combination of these three items albeit with different degree of efficiency has determined Iran's northern strategy. Similar point of view was expressed even in early years of independence by scholars studying Iran's policy toward Central Asia who believed that this policy was determined by "how it balances the three elements of its relationships to the region: its radical Islamic ideology, cultural ties, and economic and geopolitical interests" (Undeland & Platt, 1994; 109).

Yet on the dawn of independence scholars noted that "...when describing trends in Central Asian relations with South Asia and the Middle East, writers tend to focus almost exclusively on the Islamic world." However, "analysts must also guard against simplistic notions of Islam and ethnicity... Conceptual confusion has also plagued initial Western analyses of Uzbek foreign policy. What exactly does it mean to say that Uzbekistan might be 'leaning to Iran'? Such phrases are very vague and must be clarified and understood before a serious analysis can be undertaken" (Hele, 1994; 137–138).

Henry Kissinger in his book "World order" devoted a special chapter to Iran in which he particularly distinguished three different approaches of Iran to international order: Westphalian principles; tradition of empire; and cause of jihad. "From which of these traditions does the changed comportment of some high-ranking Iranian officials draw its inspiration?" (Kissinger, 2015; 167).

### IRAN'S POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, five independent republics of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—appeared on the world political map. For the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), which at that time was exhausted by the prolonged war with Iraq, experiencing tremendous Western sanctions pressure, and also facing the threat of internal destabilization due to the death of the founder of the 'Islamic revolution', Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, this shift essentially provided a unique opportunity to take a reformist course for its own economic development and deepen cooperation with new partners in the neighbouring region, which would help the state to ease international isolation.

The geographical proximity, historical and cultural commonality with Central Asia, as well as its strategic location coupled with its raw material resources, served as a good incentive for strengthening Iranian influence in the region. However, for three decades, due to a number of reasons and circumstances, this process has proceeded in different dynamics, demonstrating variable success.

There is no consensus in academic discourse on what we consider to be the two most important aspects of Iran's policy towards Central Asia. First, was ideological expansion Tehran's fundamental goal in its early interactions with the five republics of the region? Second, did Iran

initially perceive Central Asia as a priority area for its foreign policy? On these issues, the positions of scholars and experts are divided.

A number of sources (Peyrouse & Ibraimov, 2010; Sanaei, 2017; Wastnidge, 2017) point to Iran's commitment to regionalism, which first came to prominence in the country's foreign policy in the 1990s and predetermined Tehran's long-term course towards rapprochement with Central Asia as part of a broader 'Look East' strategy. The IRI's desire to establish trustworthy and neighbourly relations with the young, sovereign states of Central Asia, which have enormous resource potential, stemmed from an internal need for market reforms that began during the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani. In these circumstances, priority was given to the development of trade and economic relations with the post-Soviet republics in the north, reflecting the pragmatic approach of Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia and refuting the entrenched view of its purely ideological orientation.

Although authoritative Western thinkers such as Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) noted in their works the Iranian leadership's focus on the revival of Islam in Central Asia, more recent studies cast doubt on this thesis. Contemporary scholars Hale (1994), Grozin (2020), Maleki (2001), and Wastnidge (2017) argue that, given Tehran's prioritization of intensive economic development, the idea of exporting the 'Islamic revolution' or spreading Shi'ite ideology, which became a key value of the Iranian theocracy following the 1979 coup d'état, has lost its former relevance, giving way to national interests. This trend became more pronounced with the coming to power of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, who accelerated the removal of Shi'ite revolutionary ideology from Iran's foreign policy with a view to overcoming its long-standing foreign policy and economic isolation.

According to Sebastien Peyrouse and Sadikjan Ibraimov (2010), "religious and political influence of Iran in Central Asia has often been overestimated, and concerns related to the expansion of political Islam inspired by the Shi'ite Iranian model have by and large been exaggerated. Tehran, for instance, has not tried to play the card of religious one-upmanship in Central Asia as it has done in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, nor has it sought to mobilize the small minority of Shi'ites in the region."

There are several explanations for this. Although Islamic identity should have served as a catalyst for Iran to expand its influence in Central Asia (especially given the strong attraction of local Muslims to their

religious roots and their sincere sympathy for Muslim states in the early years of independence), the country's leadership was well aware of the need for moderation in this matter. Tehran did not set itself the fanatical goal of converting the region's multi-million population, most of whom are Sunni Muslims, to Shi'ism, as it most likely understood the senselessness and explosiveness of such actions. It was important for Iran to bring Central Asia closer on the basis of historical and cultural commonality, rather than alienating it by cultivating revolutionary ideology, which would inevitably cause fear and rejection among Central Asian regimes that value their secularism.

According to Mohiaddin Mesbahi (2004), Iran's policy towards Islam in Central Asia is basically pragmatic. Iran emphasises the cultural rather than political aspects of its relations with Central Asia, hoping that 'cultural Islam' will allay the fears of the region's states. However, despite all its caution, the IRI was still unable to avoid negative effects. It is believed that both objective and subjective reasons contributed to this.

The theocracy in the Islamic Republic contrasts sharply with the secular nature of Central Asian states, and it was often perceived by national governments as a threat to their legitimacy. In their view, rapprochement with Shi'ite Iran could lead to a public departure from traditional or depoliticized Islam, as well as to a strengthening of separatist sentiments with all the ensuing consequences for internal stability. Similar concerns were raised by the intensification of contacts with other Muslim powers, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Fear of the 'Islamic threat' particularly stirred up Uzbekistan, which was the only CIS country to join the US sanctions against Iran in 1995, accusing it of exporting Islamic extremism (Efegil & Stone, 2001; 258). However, such caution was not entirely groundless. Tehran's growing role in Central Asia was countered by its main regional opponents—Türkiye, Pakistan and some influential Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which enjoyed US support in limiting Iranian influence. These players promoted their ideological narratives in the region, which led to the popularisation of Pan-Turkism, extreme Salafism and Wahhabism among the masses.

Shireen T. Hunter (2003) states that "Iranian officials began expressing concern about the rapid progress of Turkey in Central Asia. Ankara, after all, was seen as close ally of the United States, and a return of pan-Turkism would endanger Iran's position in the region."

To counterbalance the ambitions of Sunni Middle Eastern powers, Iran opted for an extremely risky tactic—the limited spread of Shi‘ism by creating and financing relevant religious groups, mainly in Tajikistan, and attracting young people from Central Asia to study at its universities. It is important to understand that Shi‘ite propaganda was not an end in itself for Tehran, but rather a way to balance position with Türkiye, Pakistan and the Gulf monarchies, for which the country had to suffer reputational losses. Ideological activity scared off the ruling elites of Central Asian states, followed by distancing from the IRI (Hojatzadeh, 2024).

Another controversial issue in Iran’s policy in Central Asia is the degree of priority given to this region. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country’s foreign policy priorities are primarily focused on neighbouring and Muslim countries, which include the states of Central Asia. However, in reality, the five republics of the region began to acquire significant importance for Tehran only decade after the establishment of diplomatic relations. This was partly due to the lack of a coherent strategic vision on the region. Iranian leaders had no specific ideas about what they might hope to achieve in Central Asia, and they did not consider it to be a priority area (Peyrouse & Ibraimov, 2010).

It was only in 2001, under President Khatami, that Central Asia was declared a foreign policy priority for the Islamic Republic (Mesamed, 2002). This trend was reinforced again with the rise to power of Ibrahim Raisi in 2021, who emphasised a ‘neighbourhood policy’ and ‘economic diplomacy’, creating favourable conditions for the development of regional ties with Asian neighbours (Bonesh, 2024). President Raisi has identified improving relations with Central Asia as one of the main priorities of Iran’s foreign policy.

It should be emphasised that, in the early stages of its engagement with the region, Iran often took a reactive approach rather than pursuing purposeful activism, lacking consistency in its actions (Rahimi, 2024). To date, Tehran has failed to adopt an effective strategy for Central Asia, which can be seen as a major omission in its policy in the region.

Iran’s strategic interests in Central Asia have two dimensions: geopolitical and geo-economic. From a geo-economic perspective, the newly formed independent states in the region were seen by Tehran as potential long-term partners in trade, transport logistics and energy (we will discuss this in detail in the next section). By strengthening economic ties with its neighbours, the Islamic Republic hoped to ease the burden



of international isolation, which predetermined the main geopolitical motive for expanding its presence in Central Asia.

An equally important task for Iran was to ensure national security, without which it would be impossible to implement plans for accelerated economic development and to build up its own scientific, technical, industrial, cultural and social potential. This is another reason why Tehran has focused on regionalism in its relations with Central Asian countries. This concept was seen not only as a way to return and establish its role in the region, but also as an opportunity to create a coalition of states belonging to the Iranian-Islamic civilisation area. It is believed that the latter concealed a desire to achieve power in order to create a balance of forces in Central Asia, which the Islamic Republic considered a prerequisite for its long-term stability.

As Mehdi Sanaei (2017) writes, “the Iranian civilisational area is not purely Iranian or exclusively Islamic—Iranian culture and Islam have roots in the regions surrounding the IRI, and from this point of view, they harbour potential that contributes to the growth of Iran’s power.”

‘Building power’ in the context of Iran’s strategic thinking had a different meaning than becoming a superpower that dictates its will to other countries. Such goal-setting most likely meant transforming the country into a central force in the region, capable of taking responsibility for its security, even to the point of persuading such a fierce opponent as the United States to cooperate. One of the key factors shaping Iran’s geopolitical interests in Central Asia were the ideological ambitions of Türkiye, which Tehran perceived as a close ally of the United States. The desire to limit American-Turkish influence in the region prompted Iran to forge close ties with Russia, which, of course, required taking into account its regional ambitions (Efegil & Stone, 2001; 354).

The emphasis on regionalism also predetermined the format of cooperation between Iran and the Central Asian states. The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), which Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan joined in 1992, remains the main platform for Tehran’s multilateral dialogue with the Central Asian five republics. The ECO served as a vehicle for the institutionalisation of their economic ties. Some sources refer to Tehran’s intention to turn the ECO into a power centre or a community of Islamic states with an anti-Western bias (Mesamed, 2010). If such a position did exist, it was short-lived and was soon corrected by Iranian leadership itself.

The participation of the Central Asian republics in multilateral economic cooperation, with Tehran playing a leading role, has not proceeded in a uniform manner. At the early stage of cooperation, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were most integrated into the ECO projects, which mainly covered the transport and energy export sectors. Later, Tajikistan began to show noticeable activity.

During Islam Karimov's presidency, Uzbekistan was dissatisfied with what it considered to be the excessive politicisation of the ECO and the concentration of the organisation's institutional levers of power in the hands of Iran. With the arrival of the new government in 2016, Tashkent changed its categorical position to a pragmatic approach. This was largely facilitated by the updating of geo-economic goals in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, which prioritised the development of trade, economic and transport links with ECO partners. At the same time, there has been a warming of relations between Tashkent and Tehran. In 2022, Uzbekistan assumed the chairmanship of the ECO for the first time and has since taken proactive steps to maximise its potential, particularly with regard to intensifying regional trade, industrial cooperation and transport logistics (President of Uzbekistan, 2021).

Iran's official accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2023 (since 2005, Iran had observer status in the SCO) can be seen as another attempt by the Islamic Republic to strengthen relations with Central Asian states and to assert its international agency. Tehran's interest in this regional association lies mainly in the military-political field. It is obvious that by expressing its desire to join the 'Shanghai family', Iran was counting on the application of the SCO's collective security principle, primarily the support of China and Russia in the event of a military confrontation with the West. However, the 12-day war with Israel in the summer of 2025, in which the United States became involved by attacking Iran's underground nuclear facilities, clearly demonstrated the irrelevance of this theory. The SCO did not provide any real assistance to Iran during the period of resistance to Israeli-American aggression, limiting itself to rhetorical condemnation.

Thus, we can tentatively conclude that a state claiming the status of a "middle power", although it has a significant degree of freedom, is nevertheless limited in its regional and international behaviour by the great power background created by the world powers on the one hand, and the reaction (both positive and negative) of small countries to the intentions of the middle power on the other. Moreover, the following

circumstance acts as a certain constraint on the policy of a middle power: small countries targeted by a middle power have opportunity for geopolitical maneuvering, in particular within the framework of the concept of diversification.

Realist and liberal theories of international relations assume that states are rational actors. However, constructivist theory is based primarily on subjectivist and ideational positions, such as norms, identity, culture, and intersubjectivity. The above analysis leads us to view Iran as a rational actor for whom constructivist positions are undoubtedly important, but who understands and recognizes the external constraints on its international and regional behaviour.

## PRIORITY AREAS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

The strategic importance of the Islamic Republic for the Central Asian states, both in the 1990s and today, lies in its trade and economic, industrial and technological, transit and logistics, and infrastructure potential. This section highlights three areas of mutual cooperation that are developing most actively: trade and investment, energy, and transport communications. It also analyses the dynamics of interaction between the parties in the field of security.

### TRADE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The Iranian economy has traditionally been oriented towards the export of energy resources—oil and natural gas, which account for more than 80% of the country's income (Trading Economics, 2025).

In the early 1990s, Iran prioritised accelerated economic development based on an 'export leap' strategy, which implied expanding the geography of markets for non-raw materials. In this regard, economic integration with Central Asia offered Tehran broad prospects. In the first decades of cooperation, trade turnover with all the republics of the region showed steady growth. In 2008, this indicator reached: \$3 bn with Kazakhstan, \$1.6 bn with Turkmenistan, \$600 mln with Uzbekistan, \$216 mln with Tajikistan, and more than \$13 mln with Kyrgyzstan.

By 2010, IRI's share in the foreign trade of Central Asian countries had reached 1%, and by 2015 it had almost doubled (Laruelle &

Peyrouse, 2013; 84). But subsequently, due to political disagreements with some neighbours and a new wave of anti-Iranian sanctions, Iran's 5 billion market in Central Asia shrank to almost a third of its size and began to recover only after the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the results of the 2022–2023 Iranian year, trade turnover between IRI and the region exceeded \$1.6 bn (Rahimi, 2024). Further improvement is expected due to Tehran's integration into regional multilateral formats such as the EAEU and the SCO (Gutbezahl, 2024).

Currently, Turkmenistan leads in non-resource-based bilateral trade with Iran, followed by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. These three countries account for 92% of all cargo shipments from Central Asia to Iran (Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan, 2025; 14). It is noteworthy that in 2024, Tajikistan significantly increased its trade turnover with Tehran to \$377 mln (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025), which is a result of intensified high-level political contacts, that are stimulating the intensification of economic relations between the two countries.

In the early period of Iran's economic expansion into Central Asia, the largest volume of trade was generated by supplies of Kazakh and Turkmen oil, as well as natural gas from Turkmenistan to Iran under a swap scheme (SWAP), i.e., through the swapping raw materials.

Due to its shared border with Iran and vast natural gas reserves, Turkmenistan has traditionally been and remains Iran's key partner in Central Asia. For a long time, Kazakhstan was of similar importance to Tehran. Astana considered transporting oil through Iranian territory to be the best option from an economic and security standpoint. In 1997, swap deliveries of Kazakh oil to Iran began (KazTAG, 2017).

Despite the predominance of resource and raw material interests in establishing trade and economic ties with IRI, Central Asian countries willingly exported finished products from Iran. Iranian-produced fruits and food products were in particular demand (Sanaei, 2017; 119).

The growth in mutual trade was driven not only by Iran's 'turn to the East' with an emphasis on expanding its economic presence in Central Asia. It was also facilitated by intra-regional dynamics aimed at diversifying foreign political and foreign economic ties, where rapprochement with geographically close, much more developed and independent Iran seemed expedient. From the very beginning, Central Asian states, through partnership with Tehran, attempted to gain access to open southern seas, weaken Russian influence, create an opportunity to maintain balance between the interests of great powers, and improve their

economic situation by utilizing Iranian potential in energy, industry, trade, and transport and logistics sectors. The investment activity of the IRI played a significant role in the implementation of these tasks. Iranian businesses invested heavily in the creation and development of critical infrastructure in the countries of the region. Among the major projects in Turkmenistan, it is worth noting the joint construction of the Dusti (Friendship) Dam on the Harirud River and the creation of the Avaza free economic and national tourist zone (Sanaei, 2017; 107).

With Iran's support, the Alma Ata-Astana highway was constructed in Kazakhstan, and in 2014, the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Railway Corridor was launched (Lillis, 2014). In Kyrgyzstan, Iranian companies have reconstructed two dams, built the Osh-Bishkek Road, expanded highways in Jalal-Abad, and erected a large bridge in Uzgen. Iran invested in the construction of the Anzob Tunnel (Pirnazarov, 2006), connecting the southern and northern regions of Tajikistan, and commissioned the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power plant with a capacity of 220 MW (Askarieh, 2014).

The perception of Iran as a source of great opportunities has once again prevailed in the strategic thinking of the region's states in the post-pandemic period. This was particularly evident in Uzbekistan's renewed foreign policy, which is focused on achieving geo-economic goals. Since 2017, Tashkent has intensified its contacts with Tehran. The countries have signed a preferential trade agreement, which includes preferential tariffs on 350 export items on both sides, and there are plans to create a joint investment fund and an industrial committee.

## ENERGY PARTNERSHIP

Pipeline policy is one of the pillars of Iran's economic strategy in Central Asia. Energy has played a significant role in strengthening IRI's importance as a regional power (Atai & Azizi, 2012; 246). Tehran is interested not only in consuming Central Asian energy resources, but also in transporting them to world markets, which, along with material benefits, adds geopolitical weight to the country.

Iran's extensive gas transportation infrastructure, combined with its unique geographical location, has become a magnet for the young states of Central Asia, which possess substantial reserves of oil, gas and other minerals. Turkmenistan has become Tehran's first and largest gas partner in the post-Soviet space, whose resource potential has been for many

years helping IRI solve the issue of energy supply to the northern and north-eastern regions of the country (Efegil & Stone, 2001;356).

Tehran may be pursuing a much more ambitious goal from raw material deals with its neighbours—to establish itself as a regional gas hub.

In 1996, Iran financed the construction of the Korpeje-Kurtkui Gas Pipeline, costing \$200 mln and with a capacity of 8 billion cubic metres (bcm) per year. This project was planned as the first phase of a transcontinental pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Iran, Türkiye and Europe. In 2006, Tehran and Ashgabat signed a 25-year gas agreement under which IRI undertook to purchase 14 bcm of Turkmen gas per year (Tehran Times, 2006).

The second gas pipeline, Dovletabad-Sarabs-Hangeran, designed to supply 12.5 bcm of gas annually, was opened in 2010 to transport Turkmen gas to the markets of Türkiye and Europe via Iran. With the help of Iranian transit, Turkmenistan was also able to establish electricity exports to Türkiye. These initiatives allowed Ashgabat to begin diversifying its energy flows, reducing its dependence on Russian pipelines and leading the country to greater independence in determining its foreign trade partners.

Iran's proactive energy diplomacy in Central Asia could not go unnoticed by Moscow and Washington. According to Edward Westnidge (2017), "American interests have always dictated that any routes must bypass the Islamic Republic, despite the fact that Iran offers the shortest route to the world's oceans for Caspian resources, which are essentially landlocked. However, Tehran has always found ways to circumvent US attempts to exclude it from Caspian energy deals by reversing the flow."

The export of Central Asian oil and gas through Iran also ran counter to the interests of Russia, which sought to keep the countries of the region under its influence. It cannot be said that the Central Asian republics were completely open to energy cooperation with Tehran. The restraining factor, as in the case of trade, was the fear of coming under pressure from great powers.

Nevertheless, Iran has continued to export and transit energy resources from Central Asia over the years, mainly using swap schemes, which are economically viable given the IRI's shrinking opportunities to invest in pipeline infrastructure. Under a 2021 trilateral swap deal, Iran is supplying 2 bcm of Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan (Reuters, 2021). Tehran may also receive 10 mln cubic metres of gas per day for its own use (Baghishov, 2023).

In July 2024, Tehran and Ashgabat signed another gas exchange agreement, which involves supplying 10 bcm of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Iraq via Iran. In addition, Iranian companies will build a new 125-kilometre gas pipeline and three gas pressure booster stations, which will increase annual gas supplies to Iran to 40 bcm and expand the potential for gas transit and swaps between the two countries (Tehran Times, 2024). On 11 February 2025, Ankara and Ashgabat signed an agreement to begin the gas flow to Türkiye via the Dovletabad-Saraks-Hangeran Gas Pipeline (Dutton, 2025).

### TRANSPORT AND LOGISTICS CONNECTIONS

An important advantage Iran has in its relations with Central Asian states is its access to the World Ocean. IRI borders 15 countries by land and sea, serving as a strategic hub for intercontinental transport along the “East–West” and “North–South” axes. Central Asia is also located at the intersection of international trade routes, but it is far removed from the open seas, which hinders the region’s economic development. It is this vulnerability that has helped Tehran gain the support of the five Central Asian countries in implementing and promoting initiatives to strengthen regional connectivity, which has had a multiplier effect for both sides. Pragmatic Iran has managed to convert its transit capabilities into a valuable geopolitical asset, which has served as a catalyst for the country’s trade and economic integration with Central Asia.

In the 1990s, Central Asia was in a state of transport isolation, with no direct land links to external partners in the south, east and west. Therefore, after gaining independence, the countries of the region faced the task of creating new logistics chains and diversifying freight transport flows. On the southern flank, this opportunity was provided by Iran.

In 1996, the Tejen-Sarakhs-Mashhad railway was launched, becoming a successful example of Iranian-Turkmen cooperation (Economic Cooperation Organization, 2025). In 2009, this road was extended to Bandar Abbas, Iran’s largest port on the Persian Gulf. Thus, a stable trade route has emerged for transporting Central Asian products to markets in the Middle East, South Asia, Türkiye and Europe.

By the end of the 2000s, the annual volume of traffic on the Tejen-Sarakhs-Mashhad railway amounted to 2.5 mln tonnes out of the planned 7 mln tonnes (Sanaei, 2017; 105). To achieve greater results, the Central Asia-Persian Gulf multimodal transport and transit corridor

was initiated on the basis of the Ashgabat Agreement signed by Iran, Oman, Qatar, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on 25 April 2011. Qatar withdrew from the agreement in 2013. One part of the corridor runs along the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, the other part runs by sea from the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar to the Omani coast of the Persian Gulf. The route began operating in 2016 but was soon suspended. It is believed that the main reason for this was the international sanctions against Iran, a new wave of which came at the end of the first decade of this century. In this regard, the Central Asian states were forced to weaken their cooperation with IRI, which had a negative impact on the implementation of joint infrastructure projects (Umarova, 2024).

The Ashgabat Agreement was revived in 2022 thanks to the efforts of the Uzbek-Turkmen working group on transport issues. As a result, Iranian transit has once again begun to gain popularity in Central Asia. The political will of Uzbekistan played a major role in this, as it is pursuing economic cooperation with IRI in the name of its geo-economic goals, despite external pressure. Tashkent is consistently promoting the southern transit corridor through Iran to connect with the EU. In 2022, the Türkiye-Iran-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan railway route was launched. The project is being expanded to Kazakhstan and China.

The accelerated development of the deep-water port of Chabahar in southern Iran, which has direct access to the ocean and is not subject to anti-Iranian sanctions, is giving additional impetus to transport cooperation with Tehran.

Chabahar's infrastructure development is being handled by India. Uzbekistan, in partnership with New Delhi and Tehran, has launched a trilateral working group mechanism for the joint use of the Shahid Beheshti terminal. In 2022, Iran approved Tashkent's application to join the Chabahar Agreement<sup>1</sup> (Jalilov, 2022). There are plans to build warehouses and a terminal on the port's territory. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are considering a similar issue. Astana also intends to construct a specialised terminal and logistics centre in the port of Shahid Rajaei, which is part of the port of Bandar Abbas (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2025). These cases point to growing interaction between Central Asian states and Iran, which is fuelled not only from within—by the mutual desire of the parties to strengthen foreign trade and increase their own transit potential—but also by external factors. Iran has very close trade and economic ties with Russia and China. Iran has very close trade and



economic ties with Russia and China, from which it is geographically separated, but logistically connected by the Central Asian region.

Beijing, as Tehran's largest trading partner in the East with mutual trade amounting to \$34.1 bn, views Iran as an important element of its broader strategy in Central Asia and beyond. In 2021, the parties signed a 25-year cooperation agreement, marking IRI's official accession to China's Belt and Road Initiative. This paved the way for the activation of land routes along the China–Europe–China axis through Iran. Work is underway to establish a China–Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Türkiye–EU Railway Corridor. This development highlights the critical role of Central Asian transit for both IRI and other regional and global powers, including Russia.

### SECURITY INTERESTS

Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia is characterised by a regionalist approach, reflecting the country's desire not to dominate over its partners, despite its status as a middle power, but to build equitable relations with them. In this context, Tehran encourages regional economic cooperation, viewing this aspect as a guarantee of its own security. The more intensive the integration process, the more actively the region's vulnerability to external and internal threats is reduced.

After gaining independence, the republics of Central Asia faced acute problems of public and state development. In 1992, internal political differences in Tajikistan led to the outbreak of civil war, which threatened to destabilise the entire region. The difficult socio-economic situation in Central Asian countries further exacerbated such fears. To secure its geopolitical space, Iran sought to quell potential hotbeds of crisis in neighbouring regions.

Iran, along with Russia, made considerable efforts to resolve the conflict in Tajikistan. In 1995, negotiations were held in Tehran between Emomali Rahmon, the country's president, and Said Abdullo Nuri, the leader of the united Tajik opposition (Sanaei, 2017; 15). Two years later, the conflicting parties signed a peace agreement.

The security situation on the northern borders has always been under scrutiny of the Iranian leadership. This is due to the presence of a number of internal conflict generators in Central Asia, ranging from social tensions to such non-traditional threats as extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational crime. An additional cause for concern is the

excessive interest in the neighbouring region shown by Iran's ideological opponents—the United States and Türkiye.

According to M. Sanaei (2017), “the Persian Gulf and Central Asia play an important geopolitical and geostrategic role in the entire future world system as major sources of energy carriers. Hence, any issue related to security in these two regions will attract the closest attention of influential global and regional players.” But Central Asia's resource wealth does not guarantee its peace and stability. On the contrary, the desire to control or manage these resources usually spurs great powers to engage in fierce competition and intensify their expansionist policies in the region. Iran must have taken such security risks very seriously, understanding their side effect both for its own stability and for its long-term interests in the region.

Tehran considers it preferable for Central Asian countries to establish a collective security mechanism that would serve as a shield against external threats. However, the young states of the region were more inclined to establish close ties with the superpowers—the United States and Russia—and relied mainly on their ‘security umbrella’. Nevertheless, some attempts at consolidation were made.

Amid growing geopolitical tensions in the world, Central Asia is once again recognising the need to form a sustainable regional security system. Contacts with foreign partners in the field of defence and security are expanding. Tajikistan has built a factory to produce Iranian Ababil-2 drones (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2022). The office of the IRI military attaché is operational (Peyrouse, S. & Ibraimov, S. 2010). Dushanbe and Tehran are coordinating their efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking and to establish stability in Afghanistan.

Improving security in Afghanistan and its socio-economic recovery are also of mutual interest to Iran and Uzbekistan. Extensive cooperation has been initiated in the field of intelligence, and meetings of the Joint Security Commission are held annually. In March 2022, the parties signed a document on the establishment of a joint commission on security and combating transnational organised crime (Rahmani, 2022).

One of the factors that indirectly affect the perception of IRI's foreign policy is the Tehran's nuclear ambitions which stipulated the imposition of international sanctions on it. The sudden attacks on Iran first by Israel and then by the U.S. in June 2025, where, among other things, an unintentional attempt to diminish Iran's middle power status in the regional and international system. Tehran's future positioning and freedom of

maneuvering will also reckon on friends' support. Central Asia cannot keep blind eye on aggression against Iran and endorse this aggression, but Central Asia can't endorse Iran's military assistance provided to Russia in the latter's war against Ukraine, either.

## CONCLUSION

Iran's pragmatic foreign policy in Central Asia, based on the idea of regionalism, has generally justified Tehran's strategic calculation to strengthen its internal power through mutually beneficial cooperation with the newly sovereign states in the north. IRI, being a middle power, initially viewed the young Central Asian republics as equal partners, prioritizing joint economic prosperity over ideological ambitions. This approach during the first decades of Iran's presence in the region enabled steady growth in mutual trade and the successful implementation of major infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors. However, pressure from the United States, as well as the desire of the region's states to balance between the interests of the great powers—primarily neighboring Russia and China—held back the full development of Iranian–Central Asian relations.

Conversely, the theocratic regime in Iran caused excessive caution among the Central Asian elites, affecting their perception of Iranian policy in the region from an early stage of interaction. Nevertheless, our analysis revealed that Tehran did not intend to export political Islam to Central Asia, understanding the dangers of such actions for its own security.

In both Iran and Central Asia alongside external, great power-related challenges, internal identity-related changes are increasing.

Domestically, Iran is currently facing rising public moods concerning the type of state—transformation from theocracy to more modernized system. Controversial debates about dilemma—religious power or ancient secular civilization—is well reflected in one interesting analysis of former President Makhmud Ahmadinejad's efforts to combine these two modalities: the analysis points out to Ahmadinejad's discourse distinct from both the Pahlavis' non-Islamic nationalism and the Islamic Republic's Shi'i hegemony. "By summoning these fragments Ahmadinejad converted the epistemic gap of the Iranian historical consciousness into a productive political and cultural site within a vertically

fissured ruling class, horizontally fractured society, and the opposing international context” (Fozi, 2016; p 232).

Intra-regionally, Central Asia is facing the new stage of integration. It is also a controversial process which in particular, is associated with their ridding themselves of legacy and remnants of the Soviet past—on the one hand, and making strategically wise policy towards the future (Tolipov, 2024).

Internationally, both Iran and Central Asia are making zealous efforts to get their strategic autonomy in the context of growing power struggle and NWO formation. Interesting question arises for the further exploration as to what strategic autonomy means for Iran and for Central Asia. Interesting observation was made recently by Uzbek scholars: “If last month’s Iran-Israel confrontation had escalated into a broader regional conflict, it would have severely curtailed Central Asia’s strategic maneuverability, disrupted critical trade routes, and forced the region into geopolitical choices it has long sought to avoid” (Komilov & Akromov, 2025). Relationships with Iran, just like relationships with other countries of the world—great or middle powers notwithstanding—will, among other things, serve Central Asians simultaneously as a vital experience, strategic challenge as well as test of their regional unity which they declared right after gaining independence in 1991.

It has to be pointed out that IRI is the only state among great and middle powers having strategic interests in Central Asia, with which “C5 + IRI” format wasn’t yet set up. Also, despite its long-standing presence in the region and the declaration of Central Asia as a priority of its foreign policy, Iran has yet to develop its own Central Asian strategy.

It is not unlikely that Iranian leadership decides to “Make Iran great again”. “Geography alone—and certainly in combination with the lifting of sanctions—guarantees that Iran’s connectivity with the world will surge in the coming years” (Khanna, 2015). Central Asia already has accrued quite impressive and meaningful experience of cooperation with Iran in a very challenging and turbulent geopolitical time; but more challenges are ahead of their near future and their power toolkit—hard, soft, smart—will be tested then. Given the growing number, significance and visibility of “C5 + 1” formats, the idea arises as to initiation by C5 of such format with Iran. This is the question for further investigation.

## NOTES

1. The Chabahar Agreement was signed on 23 May 2016 and provides for the establishment of an international transport and transit corridor between India, Iran and Afghanistan, making use of the port facilities at Chabahar in Iran.

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**Ethics Approval** This study did not involve human participants. Therefore, ethics approval and informed consent not required.

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