

Analyzing Iran's Security Ties with Central Asia Based on the "Regional Security Complexes" Theory

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Abstract

As a country in the immediate neighborhood of Central Asia, Iran has always had the potential to be affected by the security situation in the region. While studying Iran's security interests in Central Asia, this article tries to examine the major threats and challenges facing Iran in the region. The main question of the article is that why the security situation in Central Asia affects Iran's national security and national interests? The article claims that the level and intensity of Iran's security ties with Central Asia has caused the country to become a part of Central Asian Regional Security Complex. The article analyzes the issue based on the theory-testing method, using Barry Buzan's theory of Regional Security Complexes as the basis of its analysis.

Iran has always been worried about any extension of security ties between the Central Asian countries, the United States and Israel. It has also criticized – though more cautiously – the presence of NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Central Asia. In case of NATO, more than being sensitive toward the presence of Central Asian states in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program, Iran's criticisms have been directed toward the use of NATO framework by some individual member-states, such as Turkey and the United States to establish a series of bilateral security ties with the Central Asian states, thereby influencing their decision making processes in the security sphere. In fact, Iran's main concern regarding the activities of both NATO and OSCE in Central Asia, is related to the long-term implications of the involvement of these organizations in the region. As such, Iran worries that the scale of both organizations' plans could be gradually expanded, so that Iran would see itself on the opposite side of an alignment shaped around an extended Euro-Atlantic security zone.

Iran's concerns about the security situation in Central Asia at the regional level could also be better understood in the context of more wide-range threats arising from the security situation in Afghanistan. Iran has always believed that instability in Afghanistan could spread to different parts of

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Central Asia through Tajikistan. In addition, during the recent decades, Iran has always hosted a large number of Afghan refugees, who, not only impose high economic costs on Iran, but also cause many social problems and tensions. Countering opium and heroin trafficking from Afghanistan requires a large military concentration along the 945-kilometer border between the two countries. Not only Iran faces serious challenges as a country at the forefront of international drug trafficking, but also suffers from domestic drug-related problems. Considering these points, as well as the fact that Iran, along with the Central Asian states, located on the northern route of drug trafficking to Russia and Europe, there's a common interest for Iran and these states to fight against drug trafficking.

On the other hand, Iran's interests in the Caspian Sea are related to determining the legal regime of the sea on one hand, and its militarization on the other. From the viewpoint of environmental security, the critical environmental situation in the Caspian could pose a threat to Iran. The issue of the Caspian Sea legal regime was raised as a regional problem following the collapse of the Soviet Union and because of the increasing attempts made by the former Soviet states to exploit energy resources of the seabed. On the legal status of the Caspian, there hasn't been any consensus among the littoral states. The lack of a consensual legal regime contains the risk of conflict of interests, and even direct conflicts between the various sides, in case of unilateral actions by each party to exploit the resources.

Meanwhile, from the very first days after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been said that Iran could provide the Central Asian states' energy resources with the shortest transit route. Putting this idea into practice, Iran would grab the attention of the Central Asian energy suppliers and the European consumers. However, the most important driving force behind the lucrative project is the Central Asian inclination toward the diversification of energy transit routes and the European desire to diversify its energy resources.

Another issue is that given the intertwined nature of security ties among the Central Asian states on the one hand and between Iran and the region on the other, any instability in these countries could have wider impacts on the whole region, thereby on Iran's national security and interests. The most important threat to the Central Asian republics at the state level, derives from the structural and functional weaknesses of their governments.

Lack of effective institutionalization, as well as widespread corruption in these countries, makes any effective management of security threats by the governments much more difficult and causes them to be always obsessed with their domestic security. Iran's overall policy in this area is based on supporting stability in Central Asia, because in case of the collapse of the existing governments, extremist groups might take the lead, or the territories of these countries could turn into safe havens for terrorists and separatists. In the same vein, Iran interprets the efforts by the Western countries, especially

the US to infiltrate Central Asia through plots such as "color revolutions" as having the same negative impacts on the regional security and stability.

Based on these facts, it could be said that Iran's security ties with Central Asia involve interests as well as challenges at the three system, regional and state levels. These ties has been developing since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, so that it's now even possible to speak about a new "Regional Security Complex" having been shaped among the Central Asian states, Iran, as well as Russia and China as two great powers at the immediate neighborhood of the region with a set of similar security concerns to that of Iran and the Central Asian republics.

Keywords: Barry Buzan, Central Asia, Iran, Regional Security Complex, Security.