

The Motives of Iranian-Russian Security Cooperation in Central Asia

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(Date received: 24 Jul. 2019 - Date approved: 4 Nov. 2019)

Abstract

The present article seeks to analyze the security policy of Iran and Russia in the Central Asian region and to establish their respective motivations for cooperation in the region. This article attempts to answer the key question of what constitutes the most important factor in encouraging Iran-Russia cooperation in the Central Asia post 9/11. The hypothesis of the article posits that the common threats arising from the international system level or related to it are the most important motivations for Iran-Russia cooperation in the Central Asia. Accordingly, although regional and domestic factors also play a role in the cooperation of the two countries in the region, the most important relevant level of analysis is the international level. Iran and Russia do not tolerate US activities in Central Asia and are concerned about US presence and activities in the region since Iran and Russia see the expanding of the US security umbrella in Central Asia post 9/11 under the pretext of fighting terrorism at the detriment of their interests in the region. Using a neo-realistic perspective, this paper shows that in parallel with the increasing American desire to be active in Central Asia post 9/11, along with factors such as operations against the spread of terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, Iran's and Russia's motivations to counter US influence in the region have been stepped up. In this paper, a descriptive-analytical method has been used to collect data from library and documentary sources. To systematize the research findings, a neo-realist theoretical framework has been adopted.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia faced two domestic and regional geopolitical developments. Besides political, ethnic, identity, and border issues inherited from the Soviet era, the Central Asian countries faced with geopolitical problems. Another development was the post-Cold War atmosphere that created new geopolitical realities in the region. These

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developments, on the one hand, created a power vacuum in the region due to the prevailing conditions in Russia. Furthermore, it set the stage for regional and extra-regional power competition. In these new conditions, the United States sought to infiltrate Central Asia to complete its Eurasian rings. In contrast, Russia, which regarded Central Asia as part of its security environment, sought to prevent the American influence in the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region, with its unique security features, has become a common security environment for Iran and Russia, and any threat to the security and stability of the region is a matter of concern for both Iran and Russia.

This article seeks to answer the key question of what constitutes the most important factor which encourages Iran-Russia cooperation in Central Asia post 9/11. The main hypothesis of the article is that the common threats arising from the international system and the relevant international level are the most important motivations for Iran-Russia cooperation in Central Asia. Accordingly, while regional and domestic factors playing a role in the cooperation of the two countries, the most important level of analysis is the international level. In this paper, a descriptive-analytical method has been used to collect data from library and documentary sources and the analysis has been carried out within the chosen theoretical framework. To systematize the research findings, a realist theoretical framework has been adopted.

Waltz believes that the international system plays a decisive role in defining and shaping the state's foreign behavior. Therefore, any change in the international system would alter state behavior in the international arena. Arguing that state foreign policies are hugely influenced by their position in the international system, Waltz refers to the US behavior in the post-Cold War period as a clear example of this trend. He argues that the reaction of the great powers to the US provides evidence that the states usually try to balance the superpower.

The orientation of the US policy in Central Asia before 9/11 has shown that it had no vital interests in the region and was essentially seeking secondary interests which included minor military cooperation or integration of the regional countries in second-rate security structures such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Nonetheless, since 9/11, the United States has had specific security and military policy and a strong and active presence in the region. In this regard, the US troops' deployment in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan indicates that it does not want to leave the region. The geopolitical significance of the region has also taken prominence in US policy and strategy post 9/11, especially after the US-led

invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Overall, the containment and isolation of Iran, the prevention of Russia's excessive influence in Central Asia, attempts to provide a model for regional countries and military-security goals are among the main pillars defining the American interests in Central Asia.

Therefore, based on a sense of common threat, Iran and Russia have established close ties to counter the growing US influence in the region. Accordingly, one of the most important goals of Iran-Russia security cooperation in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea is to oppose the policies pursued by the US and its regional allies. Some experts even believe that Iran-Russia military cooperation, strengthened by close bilateral relations, has been elevated to strategic alliance because of the common the strategic interests in restraining the influence of the US and its regional allies in Central Asia and the Caspian region.

Indeed, in addition to the US threat, both countries are concerned about the soft security threats - from drug trafficking to extremism and the spread of terrorism. However, there is a shared understanding among the leaders of both countries that many regional issues – especially ones that breed extremism and terrorism – are rooted in the international system and the US policies, particularly in Afghanistan and the Middle East. As such, Iran and Russia have come to a common understanding of peace and stability in Central Asia while agreeing that the presence of the US military forces is detrimental to regional security. Therefore, the security cooperation between Iran and Russia in Central Asia is based on mutual interests and two parallel approaches of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

In general, the factors that lead to Iran-Russia security cooperation and alignment in Central Asia include: Countering US, Turkish and Israeli influence in areas of common interest and based on the national security approaches of Iran and Russia; the Islamic Republic of Iran's efforts to take advantage of bilateral relations to further enhance its role and influence in resolving regional crises; controlling the extremist groups in Russia's peripheral regions; countering NATO's eastward expansion toward the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Finally, in analyzing the motivations of Iran-Russia cooperation in Central Asia in the context of the neo-realist theory, it could be said that although factors at the domestic and regional levels influence Iran-Russia cooperation in Central Asia, the most important incentive has been to mitigate the structural pressures of the international system arising from the US and its regional allies. As such, factors related to the international level have played a major role in this regard. Both countries oppose the presence and influence of the trans-regional powers, especially the United States, in

Central Asia. To summarize, it could be said that confronting the US influence and preventing the spread of radicalism and regional extremism – a factor which is also closely linked to the international level – has been the main motivation for cooperation between the two countries in Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, Cooperation, Iran, Neo-Realism, Russia, Security Policy.