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The Role of Tajikistan in Iran's Eurasian Policy

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, the Eurasian macro-region has gained significance within the strategic frameworks of successive governments. All subsystems of the Eurasian macro-region, including Central Asia, are geographically situated around Iran; from this perspective, Eurasianism constitutes a priority of Iran's foreign policy. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of Tajikistan within Iran's Eurasianist approach. Accordingly, the central question is: what role does Tajikistan play in Iran's Eurasianist policy, and how can this role be explained? The findings indicate that Tajikistan is significant in diversifying Iran's foreign relations and in strengthening political and economic cooperation motives within Iran's Eurasian policy. Moreover, Tajikistan plays a role in Iran's Eurasianist policy in areas such as counterterrorism, energy cooperation, advancing Iran's transformation into a regional power, military cooperation, cooperation during the post-American transition period, and economic collaboration. This article examines the subject using a descriptive–analytical method and relying on library-based and online sources.

Keywords: *Iran, Tajikistan, Eurasia, international system*

Introduction

The Eurasian region, in geopolitical logic, consists of the countries of Asia and Europe. This macro-region has acquired significant importance in global politics, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reasons for this include the presence of abundant natural and energy resources, the existence of ancient civilizations, and competitive power relations within the international system between the United States and Eurasian powers (1, 2). Eurasia constitutes a decisive macro-region for Iran, because Iran shares borders with the subsystems of this macro-region, including the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia; developments in each of these areas influence Iran's foreign policy within the overarching framework of Eurasianism (3, 4).

Eurasianism is regarded as a long-standing approach in Iran's foreign policy that has become more pronounced over the past decade. Following the Iran–Iraq War, this approach manifested itself in economic policies during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. During the Khatami administration, Eurasianism was articulated primarily through an emphasis on Iran's cultural continuities. Under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, this approach attracted greater attention and was operationalized through the “Look to the East” policy and the expansion of relations with China,



Russia, and India (5, 6). During the Rouhani administration, despite an initial turn toward developing relations with the West to resolve the nuclear issue, Iran renewed its emphasis on relations with Eurasian powers after the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. During the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi, owing to intensified sanctions against Iran and structural transformations in the international system, attention to Eurasia increased within the framework of the neighborhood policy and the expansion of relations with Eurasian subsystems surrounding Iran (7, 8).

The research literature on the importance of Eurasia and the approaches of successive Iranian governments toward this macro-region remains limited. Nouri (2021), in the article “Neo-Eurasianism in Iran’s Foreign Policy during the Hassan Rouhani Era,” examines the drivers of Iran’s new Eurasianism and analyzes its objectives and outlook during the Rouhani period, concluding that although U.S. pressure constitutes a significant coercive factor, efforts to adapt to accelerating international and Eurasian transformations during the transition to a new order also represent an important voluntary variable in shaping this policy (7). Mir-Mohammadi (2020), in a master’s thesis entitled “A Comparative Study of the Foreign Policy Strategies of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani toward Eurasia,” argues that Iran, given its neighborhood ties and shared religious and cultural affinities with many Eurasian countries, possesses significant cultural, economic, and political influence. Iran’s foreign policy, according to this view, is guided by relatively stable principles that have been pursued across different periods and sub-discourses (9).

Doraj and Falahatpisheh (2019), in the article “The Alignment of Iran, Russia, and China against the United States in the Eurasian Geopolitical Landscape,” highlight the balancing of Eurasian powers against the United States. From this perspective, Russia, China, and Iran, while opposing the imposition of U.S. global hegemony, take steps toward containing and constraining this dominant actor, thereby shaping regional arrangements and an alternative order aimed at securing their regional objectives and policies within Eurasian politics (10). Sazmand and Sour-Anari (2019), in the article “The Impact of Russia’s Identity Discourses on Iran’s Eurasian Role-Finding,” regard Iran’s Eurasianism as a subset of Russia’s policy and argue that changes in Russia’s perception of Eurasia lead to transformations in Iran’s roles within Russian policy and in preferences for cooperation across various domains (11). Rezaei and Jahanian (2015), in the article “Regional Security in the Territory of Eurasia and the Position of Iran,” consider multiple influencing variables and, taking into account the potential expansion of Iran’s role in Eurasia, attempt to present Iran’s regional security behavior and approach based on rationality and relative optimality (12).

Within this framework, the Central Asian region—and particularly Tajikistan—has received comparatively limited scholarly attention in analyses of Iran’s Eurasian policy. Central Asia, and especially Tajikistan, is relevant to key objectives of Iran’s Eurasian policy, including the diversification of Iran’s foreign relations, the growing importance of economic motivations as a driving force—particularly over the past decade—and the utilization of shared cultural and historical legacies that link Iran to Eurasia and Central Asia as one of its principal subsystems (4, 13). Accordingly, this article seeks, while explaining the importance of Eurasianism in Iran’s foreign policy and the priority of Central Asia as one of its main subsystems, to examine various dimensions of Iran–Tajikistan relations within the context of Eurasianism.

Theoretical Framework

Although it is difficult to rely on a single theory to analyze the foreign policy of a state in a dynamic region over a forty-year period marked by multiple fluctuations, international relations theory provides a conceptual framework for examining the behavior and characteristics of actors in this arena (6). Within this framework, states and institutions that constitute international society establish political, economic, and cultural relations and form reciprocal interactions. Relations among states occur along a spectrum ranging from conflict to cooperation. From this perspective, liberal theories—such as interdependence and communication—emphasize cooperation among states. Interdependence refers to a system in which states move up and down the international hierarchy in terms of economic balance, power, welfare, and access to information and technology (14). From this viewpoint, states consider interaction more effective than confrontation in securing their interests. Arms control agreements and trade agreements exemplify interactions that generate benefits for states, as cooperation with others enables them to enhance their economic wealth.

The degree of interdependence among states varies. For example, wealthy states such as China, although significantly affected by other states, can afford to sacrifice parts of their economy and wealth in pursuit of other objectives. In contrast, poorer states face substantial constraints in determining their foreign policy behavior. It should also be noted that interdependence may sometimes yield counterproductive outcomes: as ties between states intensify in certain areas, opportunities for conflict and tension over shared interests may also increase. For instance, European states are highly dependent on China in certain technological and economic domains (9, 15).

Communication theory in the field of regional integration is closely linked to interdependence. This theory explains the process of integration based on communication and exchange among regional states. According to Karl Deutsch, who initially formulated this theory, political integration refers to the attainment of a sense of shared, powerful, and comprehensive practices that ensure expectations of peaceful change among countries over a long period. Deutsch does not assume that the final stage of regional integration necessarily entails the formation of a unified supranational state. From the communications perspective, such integration cannot be achieved without interdependence, which itself is generated through the establishment of reciprocal communications and exchanges. Consequently, integration and cooperation among states are outcomes of communication and close linkages (16).

Eurasia, as a geopolitical concept characterized by cultural, geographical, political, and economic features, represents a continental geopolitical perspective that enhances political and economic cooperation among states and peoples within the subsystems of the Persian Gulf, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian region surrounding Iran. From the standpoint of interdependence and communication, Iran's relations in Eurasia—and Iran's Eurasianist policy more broadly—are based on integrative approaches toward actors such as Russia, China, and regional countries like Tajikistan within Central Asia (17, 18). In this context, what brings various states together under a single framework in the Eurasian macro-region in the contemporary era is the existence of shared perceptions of threats and interests within a network of economic, political, historical, and cultural interactions (19).

The Geopolitics of Eurasia

The Eurasian domain is a flexible region and represents an image of a fluid and indeterminate space. Nevertheless, it constitutes a fundamental concept for understanding the post-Soviet environment and serves as a basis for interpreting the behavior of other actors in this region (12). Eurasia emerged from the combination of

Europe and Asia and was first introduced in the 1880s by the Austrian geologist Eduard Suess. Competition over Eurasia became a prominent feature of global politics following the end of the Cold War (3).

The Eurasian supercontinent, with an area of approximately 55 million square kilometers, accounts for more than one quarter of the Earth's landmass. It extends from the Atlantic Ocean to Russia's easternmost point at the Bering Strait between the Arctic and Pacific Oceans. Eurasia comprises 93 countries (all 48 European states, 17 West Asian states, 27 Asian states, and East Timor in Oceania). Its population is approximately 5.4 billion people, representing about 71 percent of the world's population. The supercontinent holds roughly 60 percent of global gross production and 75 percent of the world's energy resources. All nuclear powers except the United States are located in Eurasia (2).

Access to open seas, energy resources, the role of a communication bridge, and the presence of nuclear powers are among the factors that have positioned Eurasia as the محور of global supremacy. Many international relations scholars refer to Eurasia as a supercontinent in which clashes and conflicts of interest among great powers are clearly evident, viewing it as a smaller-scale representation of the global order. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. National Security Advisor, argues in *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* that geopolitical competition in regions outside Eurasia is secondary and peripheral, whereas struggles for power and global dominance unfold primarily in Eurasia. He characterizes Eurasia as the "geopolitical pivot" and the "central arena of world politics," identifying countries such as Iran, Turkey, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan as geopolitical pivots. Given that Eurasia constitutes a decisive geopolitical chessboard, policies should no longer focus exclusively on either Europe or Asia alone (1).

The Mutual Importance of Iran and Eurasia

Since World War II, Iran's relative position has become more significant for two main reasons: its geostrategic value derived from geographic proximity to the Soviet Union and entanglement in great-power competition, and its strategic national resources—particularly its energy endowments. From the 1990s onward—when the United States abandoned its earlier view of Iran as a strategic buffer between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf—Iran's regional security environment also became more complex. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. concerns about Iran's potential influence in the region intensified. From the U.S. perspective, acting in Eurasia is necessary for sustaining a hegemonic role and preserving status in the international system. Reference should also be made to the control of the Middle East, because Eurasia is culturally and politically closely connected to Iran, and presence there complements presence in the Middle East and the containment of Iran (12). In general, Iran is important in Eurasia across political–security, geographic, economic, and cultural dimensions.

In recent decades, Iran has played an effective role within the broader set of Eurasian macro-policies, and this role has taken on a pivotal character. From a transit and corridor perspective, Iran is an important Eurasian actor and, due to geopolitical considerations and connectivity projects, cannot remain indifferent to regional power games (19). Iran's distinctive geography functions as a bridge between the growing economies of East and South Asia and the Middle East, Türkiye, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and Europe. The significance of Iran's geography is reflected in its emergence as a transit hub within the North–South corridor, which—through New Delhi's initiative and Moscow's support—connects western India via a northern land–sea route from Oman to Iran's Chabahar and Bandar Abbas ports and then, by crossing Iranian territory, to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and Europe. The

southern route of this corridor also links, through the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, to the Mediterranean, Western Europe, and ultimately connects in Russia to the northern corridor.

From a political and security standpoint, under the new conditions of the international system—where any power projection is accompanied by resistance—the Eurasian region has substantial capacity to form an anti-hegemonic axis against the United States, and a country such as Iran, alongside Russia and China, which are today recognized as first-tier regional powers, possesses the necessary potential to contribute to such an axis in Eurasia. It appears that, although U.S. power and influence in Eurasia are not as determinative as in the Middle East, opposition to U.S. global hegemony in Eurasia and cooperation among countries such as Russia, China, and Iran in this regard will affect global equations and, at the same time, steer a unipolar system toward multilateralism. One feature that contributes to sustaining U.S. global hegemony is its unique position in terms of worldwide access: the United States is the only country with military bases and extensive air and naval fleets across different regions of the world. Therefore, losing influence and dominance in Eurasia is dangerous for U.S. hegemony. Along this path, Iran has been able—by attracting Russian and Chinese support—to demonstrate its role as a key regional actor (10).

From a cultural perspective, Iran's historical and civilizational ties with Eurasian countries are long-standing, and older regional linkages can be revitalized to facilitate confidence-building measures. Cultural exchange programs—such as film festivals and world-heritage exhibitions that encourage people-to-people contacts and the exchange of ideas—are important in this regard. Iranian art, music, and cinema continue to have an audience in this region. Iran's proposal to host a cultural exhibition under the title of the "Shared Heritage of Nowruz" was a step in this direction. Some argue that, given the threat posed by extremism—which undermines the development of sustainable economic relations within this macro-region—Iran can fulfill a historical mission by introducing culturally tolerant discourses of Islam, as reflected in the rich Persian literary tradition (19).

From an economic perspective, a two-way relationship exists between Iran and Eurasia. Approximately 30 percent of the world's oil and gas energy is extracted and exported from Eurasian countries. Eurasia is also one of the world's major grain "silos," a fact whose importance became evident during the Ukraine war. This region is significant in agriculture, livestock production, and food security and can meet some of Iran's needs. Taken together, these considerations lead to an emphasis on expanding cooperation with Eurasia in Iran's economic policies. Iran's presence in regional markets, in addition to job creation, will also provide a platform for attracting investment in the southern and northern free zones (20). Overall, given Iran's political–security, economic, and cultural importance in the Eurasian macro-region, and considering the balance-of-power dynamics in this area, Iran can play a meaningful role in the relations of this macro-region.

Eurasianism in Iran's Foreign Policy

When Eurasianism in foreign policy is discussed, attention often turns to Russia's foreign policy after Vladimir Putin came to power. However, it should be noted that the articulation of Eurasianism in Iran's foreign policy expanded after the Islamic Revolution, when Iran sought to establish an independent foreign policy free from the influence of Western and Eastern powers. Over time, and as confrontation with the West intensified, the anti-Western pillar of Iran's foreign policy became more salient. Iran's "Look to the East" policy is generally understood as a strategy aimed at strengthening political, economic, and strategic ties with countries in the Eastern Hemisphere—especially Asia—in order to expand alliance networks and reduce Iran's vulnerability to Western influence (8).

In practice, realities such as confronting U.S. power in Iran's surrounding environments—areas that are all considered Eurasian subsystems—Iran's adjacency to the central Eurasian space, the "Look to the East" strategy in Iran's foreign policy, and an emphasis on opportunities to expand relations with China and Russia are all indicators of Eurasianism. Eurasianism has been pursued in different forms by Iran's successive governments, particularly after the Iran–Iraq War. Immediately after the war, during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, economic interactions—based on redefining Iran's economic relations with surrounding regions—became a priority in Iran's foreign policy. In this period, attention to economic investment and drawing states—including those within the Eurasian supercontinent—toward relations with Iran was pursued. A prominent example of Iran's Eurasianist approach in this period was active cooperation within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

This trajectory continued during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in the form of prioritizing culture in Iran's foreign policy. Although, in the Khatami period, due to an emphasis on improving relations with the West, the focus on Eurasia somewhat declined. At the same time, Khatami's culture-centered discourse provided a platform for strengthening cultural relations with Central Eurasia through cultural diplomacy and emphasizing shared cultural components, including the establishment and consolidation of the global Nowruz celebration (7). During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, Eurasianism was pursued more through Iran's perceived failure to achieve Western-oriented goals in the preceding period, the escalation of tensions with the West—especially the United States—and efforts to draw closer to China, Russia, and India as Eurasian powers. The central axis of Iran's foreign policy that resulted in Eurasianism was the "Look to the East" strategy. Unlike the implicit approach of the previous period, Iran's foreign policy in this era adopted Eurasianism more directly through "Look to the East." In essence, this strategy sought to advance national interests by expanding relations with Eastern powers that were expected to shape the future distribution of global power.

Iran's most important priority was full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). From the perspective of Iranian officials, forming an anti-American axis that included the nuclear powers China and Russia had the capacity to function as a deterrent pole in Asia against U.S. unilateralism, including in countering potential preemptive strikes against Iran. From the government's standpoint in this period, China, India, and Russia were major pieces at regional and international levels and possessed considerable capacity to help secure Iran's national interests and security. Overall, the core belief among proponents of the "Look to the East" policy over the past two decades was that Iran, by virtue of belonging to the civilizational sphere of the East and sharing cultural, historical, and identity affinities with the inhabitants of this sphere, could more easily establish coalitions and integration with these actors. Accordingly, Iran was expected to adopt a strategic and long-term approach toward the broader Eastern community and to take steps—through appropriate strategic design—to make optimal use of the maximum capacities of Eastern countries (5).

In this period, Russia and China—rather than European countries—became Iran's most important external partners. China gradually became Iran's largest economic partner and energy purchaser. A USD 20 billion agreement in May 2011 to strengthen bilateral cooperation in industrial and mining sectors was followed by an expansion of relations that, at one point, exceeded USD 30 billion per year. In parallel, given the prominence of Iran's nuclear پرونده, Iran's cooperation with Russia also expanded, and the two countries developed substantial cooperation in energy, nuclear, and military–security domains. Relations with India, within the "Look to the East"

framework—especially in the corridor sphere through the North–South corridor and China’s investment in this plan—also increased markedly.

During the Rouhani presidency, Eurasianism was pursued differently than under the previous government. Rouhani—especially in his first term—paid relatively limited attention to Eurasianism due to the expansion of engagement with the West on the nuclear issue. He viewed “Look to the East” not as a substitute but as a complement to relations with the West. His pragmatic outlook framed the West not as an enemy but as a partner in Iran’s development and global integration. This view was reinforced by Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who argued that low-tension relations with the West were a prerequisite for improving relations with the East because they strengthened Iran’s bargaining leverage. Rouhani effectively expanded the geographic scope of “Look to the East” to encompass a combination of Eurasian powers. The objective of his policy was to strengthen balanced relations with key Eurasian actors such as China, Russia, India, and the European Union, treating them as pivotal blocs in the defined Eurasian outlook (8).

At the same time, structural pressures—particularly those associated with the United States, especially after the U.S. withdrawal from Iran’s nuclear agreement, the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization, the assassination of General Soleimani, Iran’s attack on the Ayn al-Asad base, and other developments—prompted a change in Iran’s policies and a turn toward Eurasia (7). Following these actions, a noticeable shift occurred in the government elite’s approach to relations with the West. For example, Mohammad Javad Zarif stated in a televised interview on August 17, 2020, that the era of U.S. superpower status had ended and that the United States was suffering from miscalculation; he also noted that developing relations with neighboring countries and certain friendly states such as Russia—and especially China—had become a priority, to the extent that, with the visit of China’s president to Iran, relations moved from a basic strategic level to a comprehensive strategic partnership (21).

During the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi, the “Look to the East” policy also emerged as a strategic response to the global power shift from West to East. In this period, the government regarded Iran as aligned with the emerging East and elevated “Look to the East”—which in the previous period had been more of a tactical maneuver—into a strategic choice. Deep distrust and pessimism toward the West, intensified by the failure of the nuclear agreement, reinforced this shift eastward. At the same time, “Look to the East” in this period, given the neighborhood policy, became focused across Asia. The “Look to the East” policy in this era also incorporated an element of multilateralism. Accordingly, the government and President Raisi emphasized Iran’s active participation in Eastern initiatives and organizations. In this period, Iran attained full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after 14 years. The government also expressed Iran’s serious intention to strengthen cooperation with Eurasia and to implement the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with China. In addition, Iran also joined the BRICS Plus mechanism (8).

Iran and the Central Asia Subsystem in Eurasia

Central Asia is one of the most important subsystems of the Eurasian macro-region. The fact that the countries of this region were situated under the umbrella of the Soviet Union meant that, while preserving their own specific differences, they nevertheless followed similar trajectories in many social, political, and even economic domains. This is reflected in the persistence of closed and authoritarian political structures, patron–client social systems

aligned with the dominant domestic political order, and a non-complementary and non-integrative economic structure inherited from the former Soviet socialist system (13).

Each of the countries in this region has distinct characteristics and capacities. Kazakhstan's economy is oriented toward exporting natural resources to China and the European Union. Uzbekistan occupies a central position in the region and uses its large population and strong military as instruments of regional influence. Kyrgyzstan is characterized by weak state institutions, an economy dependent on labor exports, and Russia's significant role in its national security. Tajikistan likewise faces economic dependence on labor exports to Russia, security vulnerabilities along the border with Afghanistan, and the expanding influence of Russia and China. Turkmenistan, for its part, is positioned in a posture of neutrality, dependence on gas sales, and an "open-door" policy toward energy customers (18).

Central Asia is important to Iran in multiple respects. Historically, all five Central Asian republics have maintained close links with the Iranian core lands, and parts of them were, for long periods, incorporated within the Iranian empire. This long historical connection has produced deep ties that potentially provide a strong foundation for developing reciprocal relations. Centuries of domination by the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union were never able to erase the imprint of Iran's historical presence in the region (4). Economically, Central Asia's growth potential depends on access to the ports of neighboring states; Iran's ports are among the closest ports to Central Asia and naturally function as gateways for maritime trade for the region.

At the regional level, Central Asia also matters for Iran in relation to addressing Afghanistan-related issues, countering Western sanctions against Iran, and expanding Iran–China interactions. Since 2021, by signing a strategic cooperation agreement with China, Iran has signaled its intention to deepen engagement with China, and Central Asia—sharing more than two thousand miles of border with China—constitutes a primary gateway for this cooperation. Some countries in this region, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have long been natural economic partners for Iran. Iran–Uzbekistan economic relations have expanded since 2018, and under an agreement the two countries signed in 2021, Tashkent obtained access to Iran's Chabahar port (22).

The transit significance of this region is also important for Iran. Effective and maximum utilization of this advantage and latent capacity requires serious attention to multimodal transport. Multimodal transport refers to the transit or carriage of goods using two or more modes of transport, such as ships, trains, and trucks. In practice, this is a combination of rail, road, and maritime networks. Its advantages include reduced time and fewer cargo transfer points, as well as a lower risk of damage to consignments. Iran's effective use of its multiple Caspian Sea ports, the movement of Central Asian cargo through Iran's land route to Türkiye and Europe, and the movement of cargo through the eastern Caspian rail route (Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran) can form a chain of multimodal transport between Iran and Central Asia. At present, this network has taken shape to some extent, but it requires further infrastructure development and greater coordination among different segments of the national transport network (17).

Regional stability and security constitute another domain of significance for Iran in this area. Over the past decade, rising instability in Afghanistan has driven the migration of millions to Iran and Central Asian countries and has created a shared basis for cooperation between Iran and Central Asian states. Instability in Afghanistan has also facilitated the expansion of terrorist groups such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). To address this threat, Iran and Tajikistan established a joint military committee in April 2021. In October of the same year, Iran hosted a conference attended by the foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbors, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan,

and Turkmenistan (22). In practical terms, it can be argued that Central Asia, until 2021, was not a major priority within Iran's foreign policy. The axis of Iran's foreign policy was a neighborhood policy and a strategic outlook aimed at creating new opportunities in the region.

At the same time, over the past decade, Iran–Central Asia relations have faced challenges, the most important of which have been U.S. sanctions. Sanctions have pushed Central Asian countries toward Trans-Caspian transport routes that connect Kazakhstan—via the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus—to Türkiye. Sanctions have also contributed to repeated delays by Indian companies in developing the Chabahar port. Another challenge in Iran–Central Asia relations concerns the impacts of Islamism in Iran's foreign policy. The Central Asian republics are all secular in nature and, since independence, have combated various manifestations of political Islam. Moreover, events such as the Tajik civil war, which was influenced by Islamist actors, and the existence of radical groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have led Central Asian countries to be cautious about cooperation with Iran, given that Islamism and support for religious movements are often viewed as integral components of Iran's foreign policy.

Eurasianism and the Expansion of Iran–Tajikistan Relations

As noted in the previous section, Eurasianism in Iran's foreign policy has taken different forms across different periods. In this sense, Eurasianism under successive post–Iran–Iraq War governments—since 1989—has advanced Iran–Tajikistan relations in varying ways. During the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, due to the country's emergence from a prolonged war and its need for broader interaction and investment across different sectors, relations with Tajikistan received attention. On the other hand, during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the discourse advanced under the rubric of the "Dialogue among Civilizations" played a prominent role in Iran's Eurasian policy. In a speech delivered to Tajik elites on September 12, 2004, Khatami stated that the Persian language is not merely a means of communication among Persian-speakers, but rather a repository of art, knowledge, ethics, and spirituality that must be preserved; he further emphasized that this language reflects the creative spirit of Persian-speakers and signifies a historical continuity, adding that when the "Dialogue among Civilizations" was proclaimed from the "roof of the world," it was this very Persian history and culture that was being proclaimed, and that Iran's spirit, culture, and civilization constitute a composite civilization (7).

During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, as a broader definition of Iran's foreign policy and its objectives was advanced, the center of gravity of Iran's foreign policy shifted from West to East, and greater attention was directed toward the East—particularly Iran's neighbors in Central Asia. He traveled to Tajikistan several times, and on each occasion reiterated the importance of integration between the two countries on the basis of shared cultural and historical foundations. In the same period, the North–South corridor plan and its significance for Central Asian countries in overcoming geopolitical landlock were also emphasized. Iran's oil revenues during this period enabled Ahmadinejad to adopt a more expansive approach in providing assistance to less-developed countries such as Tajikistan. During a visit to Tajikistan, he described the construction of the Independence Tunnel as a gift from the people of Iran to Tajikistan.

The cumulative effect of this approach by Iran gradually led, at the initial stage, to the emergence of specific instruments in Iran's foreign policy toward Tajikistan and Central Asia. Iran first projected an image of itself as a regional power in Central Asia and subsequently pursued this output through defining strategic interests in Tajikistan. In operational terms, Iran also demonstrated its economic and technical capacity by implementing major

projects such as dams and tunnels (13). During the years 2013–2021, Rouhani’s presidency affected Iran–Tajikistan relations in a different manner. In this period, the government’s foreign policy objectives initially prioritized resolving Iran’s nuclear issue, particularly through engagement with the Western world. Regional cooperation—centered on West Asian crises, especially during the second term—was placed on the agenda, and Central Asia was not assigned a substantial role in foreign policy.

Nevertheless, in the final years of the Rouhani administration—especially during 2019–2021—positions emerged underscoring the importance of Tajikistan and Central Asia in Iran’s foreign policy (7). Ultimately, during the years 2021–2024, Iran’s president Ebrahim Raisi sought to draw Tajikistan back into Iran’s strategic محور. This was carried out primarily within the framework of the neighborhood policy. In line with the presidential role of restoring balance in Iran’s relations with its surrounding environment, Raisi attempted to incorporate Tajikistan within this policy. The importance and priority of the neighborhood policy in Iran’s external relations during this period was reflected in the strengthening of cooperation with Tajikistan.

Areas of Tajikistan’s Cooperation in Iran’s Eurasianist Policy

Cooperation in Counterterrorism

Terrorism is among the most important issues threatening the security of Iran and Tajikistan. This threat has intensified particularly due to Afghanistan’s proximity to both countries. Tajikistan shares a 1,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan, much of which—because of difficult terrain—has become a haven for certain terrorist groups and drug traffickers. Tajikistan’s security threats have increased, especially after NATO forces withdrew in 2021 and the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. This has confronted Tajikistan with challenges on several levels. The first level is instability along its border with Afghanistan and, consequently, exposure to various security threats stemming from the Afghanistan crisis, such as the production and transit of narcotics, transnational organized crime, and arms smuggling. The second level is the threat posed by the group known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (داعش). This group has carried out various terrorist attacks along the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border, and many of its members are reported to be Tajiks.

The third level concerns Tajikistan’s hostile relations with the Taliban. Tajikistan has long been a supporter of Afghan Tajiks and other Taliban opponents. The Taliban, in turn, has deployed not only its own militants but also fighters from Jamaat Ansarullah—a Tajik Islamist militant group opposed to the Tajik government—along the Afghanistan–Tajikistan border. These threats have pushed Tajikistan toward strengthening security ties with its neighbors. In January 2022, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon called on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to establish a security belt around Afghanistan. To justify this request, Dushanbe claimed that more than 40 terrorist camps with around six thousand militants existed in northeastern Afghanistan. However, the organization did not take new steps to help secure Tajikistan against Taliban-related threats (22).

This situation, more than anything, has directed Tajikistan toward security cooperation with a powerful neighbor such as Iran. Tehran and Dushanbe consider the Taliban’s lack of effective control over Afghan territory—and the resulting presence of extremist groups in Afghanistan’s border areas—a security threat. Beyond this, both countries have a record of supporting Afghan Tajiks against the Taliban. Since 2021, various meetings have been held between the two countries’ security officials, focusing on Afghanistan and counterterrorism. During a visit by Iran’s Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces to Tajikistan and a meeting with Tajikistan’s Minister of Defense in

May 2022, the parties held a specialized session in which, while reviewing ways to develop and expand bilateral cooperation and combat terrorism in Central Asia, they also discussed regional cooperation centered on Afghanistan. In general, developing and consolidating regional and bilateral cooperation, exchanging training, and expanding military cooperation around counterterrorism have been placed among the priorities of the armed forces of both countries (22).

Cooperation in the Energy Sector

Iran's substantial energy capacities provide a basis for cooperation. Despite the existence of strong competitive drivers between Iran and some Eurasian energy exporters, including Russia and Caspian littoral states, this domain can still serve as a platform for technical cooperation—such as in exploration, extraction, refining, downstream products including petrochemicals, swaps, and participation in joint energy projects. Iran has signed numerous agreements in this field with Russia, China, India, and others; however, due to sanctions, the implementation of some has faced difficulties, and they could become operational if these constraints are removed (7).

Cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan in various energy projects also has room for progress. In recent years, the two countries' energy cooperation in electricity and water has been expanding. In October 2024, during a meeting in Tehran between Iran's Minister of Petroleum and Tajikistan's Minister of Energy and Water Resources, strategies for expanding bilateral cooperation in this field were emphasized. Over the past several decades, Tajikistan has benefited from the capabilities of competent Iranian companies in projects such as the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant for both upstream and downstream activities. At present, additional areas of cooperation exist between Iran and Tajikistan's water and electricity sectors. Tajikistan relies heavily on imports to meet its daily demand for petroleum products and has two refineries with a combined processing capacity of 500,000 tons per year. In this context, the two countries are also reviewing plans related to the exchange of crude oil and petroleum products within their commercial transactions. Iran has also been active over the past two decades in training specialists in Tajikistan's oil and gas industry (23).

Advancing Iran's Transformation into a Regional Power

Another role Tajikistan plays in Iran's Eurasian policy relates to Iran's role in regional security, which is closely connected to Iran's regional-power agenda. Iranian officials and foreign policy documents emphasize this strategy. Although the geography of this objective is defined primarily as West Asia, Eurasia—given its connectivity to Iran's territory and interests—also constitutes part of this strategy and part of the region in which Iran seeks to be “first.” Accordingly, Iran cannot remain indifferent to rapid Eurasian developments, relevant actors, and influential processes in pursuing this strategy (7). By advancing a Eurasian policy, Iran—while preventing its own marginalization from trends and equations in this macro-region—will gain new opportunities to advance its strategic objective of becoming the leading regional power.

In this context, certain regional developments—such as the Russia–Ukraine war—have provided Iran with greater room for maneuver in this region, particularly in relation to Tajikistan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan has been heavily dependent on Russia in the security domain. Russia has three bases and approximately 7,000 personnel in Tajikistan. After threats from Afghanistan expanded, Tajikistan's president asked Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, to mediate to reduce tensions between Kabul and Dushanbe. Tajikistan is concerned that Moscow may redeploy some of its forces stationed in Tajikistan to the Ukraine battlefield, especially given that over

the past two years Russia has deployed some of its forces—including the Wagner group—from Syria and Libya to the Ukraine theater (22). In this regard, Tajikistan is inclined to diversify its security alliances in light of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the resulting possibility of weakening the CSTO, and to expand relations with its Persian-speaking neighbor, Iran, to fill a regional security gap.

Military Cooperation

Over the past several decades, Iran has faced sanction policies imposed by the United States and its allies at multiple levels. Especially after the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, the U.S. sanctions regime expanded under the "maximum pressure" policy. These sanctions are particularly encompassing in the military domain, in the sense that, due to compliance obligations, many countries refrain from selling military equipment to Iran or purchasing it from Iran. In this context, a major development occurred in Iran–Tajikistan military relations in 2022. In May 2022, Iran inaugurated its first drone production facility in Tajikistan, where the Ababil-2 UAV (a multi-purpose drone with reconnaissance, combat, and loitering-munition capabilities) is produced and exported (24).

This development also entails an indirect effect of Tajikistan—as a pivotal country in Eurasia—on Iran–Russia cooperation. In general, from the perspective of Iran's "Look to the East" policy, Russia is one of the principal poles of power in Eurasia alongside China. Over the past two decades, Russia has closely monitored any U.S. and European moves to fill post-Soviet vacuums in Central Asia's security, diplomatic, and economic structures. In this framework, some argue that it is logical for Russia to open Eurasia to non-Western powers as substitutes for the West. An example is the 2015 China–Russia agreement to coordinate China's Belt and Road Initiative with the Russia-centered Eurasian Economic Union. Russia's acceptance of Iran's drone facility in Tajikistan can also be explained in the context of tensions with the West and after the start of Russia's war against Ukraine (24). Nevertheless, it appears that Iran's entry into Central Asia—compared with China—aligns less closely with Russia's Eurasia-centered deterrence strategy against the West.

Cooperation in the Post-American Transition Period

One of the key assumptions shaping Iran's evolving policy and strategic position in Eurasia concerns Iran's perceptions of the international order. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has consistently criticized U.S. unilateralism in the region. This has been the principal factor driving Iran toward cooperation with Russia and China in the Eurasian power game. Vladimir Putin has likewise regarded Iran as an important actor in forming a more just multipolar world order. In this context, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated during his meeting with Putin in Tehran in 2018 that one of the areas in which the two sides could cooperate is the containment of the United States, emphasizing that the United States constitutes a threat to humanity and that its containment is possible (21).

At the same time, Iran–Russia relations have expanded across multiple dimensions. In particular, since the intensification of sanctions against Russia following the war in Ukraine, Moscow has drawn on Iran's approaches to sanctions evasion in areas such as oil trade, including disabling vessel tracking systems, conducting ship-to-ship transfers in international waters, and using networks of shell companies to conceal the origin of oil (25). China, as the most significant structural rival to the United States, has also played a central role in this context, with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative constituting the most important regional project affecting Central Asia and Iran. In 2021,

Iran and China signed a 25-year cooperation agreement that emphasized corridor development and energy cooperation (8).

Within this process, given that Iran views Eurasia as possessing strategic importance in the post-American transition period, it has actively pursued new and sustainable relations with regional countries. One of the most decisive mechanisms shaping cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan in this regard is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), through which Eurasian powers seek to establish balance against Western dominance in the global arena. In September 2022, at the SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Iran attained full membership in the organization (17). Another important area of cooperation is the North–South Corridor, which Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries—due to their landlocked geography—are keen to utilize.

Economic Cooperation

Economic interests constitute one of the most important objectives of Iran–Eurasia relations. In practice, following Iran's failure to fully realize the economic benefits of the nuclear agreement, Tehran has increasingly turned its attention to the opportunities offered by Central Asia as a Eurasian subsystem. Russia remains Tajikistan's most important economic partner; however, after 2022 and the onset of the war with Ukraine, Russia has been subjected to severe U.S. and European sanctions. The weakening of Russia's economy—by reducing opportunities for labor migrants and leading to the accumulation of surplus labor in Tajikistan—has become a source of socio-economic tension (26). This situation has prompted Tajikistan to seek greater balance in both border security and its external economic relations.

In the short term, Iran cannot replace Russia as Tajikistan's primary economic partner. The volume of Tajikistan–Russia trade amounted to approximately USD 1 billion in 2020, whereas Iran–Tajikistan bilateral trade reached USD 240 million in 2021. Iran's foreign direct investment in Tajikistan reached USD 33 million in 2021. Available data indicate that trade between Iran and Tajikistan increased during 2023 compared to the previous year, reflecting a gradual upward trend (26). In the long term, however, Russia's sanctions—if combined with careful planning—could position Iran as one of Tajikistan's principal partners. Strengthening relations with Iran can assist Tajikistan in achieving greater balance in its foreign relations, particularly with regard to its major external partners.

Conclusion

Eurasia is a decisive and consequential macro-region in global politics and power, and the world's major powers seek to play an active role within this geographic arena. Eurasia comprises several major subsystems, four of which—the Persian Gulf, the Caspian region, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus—are located along Iran's surrounding borders. This reality necessitates Iran's active role and engagement across all these areas. Among these subsystems, Central Asia holds particular importance due to its cultural affinities and political and economic relations with Iran, especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Attention to Eurasia in Iran's foreign policy has been ongoing since the post–Iran–Iraq War period, and varying interpretations have emerged depending on governmental approaches and priorities. Nevertheless, the core objectives of Iran's Eurasian policy have centered on diversifying Iran's foreign relations and establishing economic interactions with actors within this macro-region. Accordingly, within Central Asia, Tajikistan stands out as the most significant country playing a role in Iran's Eurasian policy due to its shared historical and cultural background with Iran. Tajikistan's role in Iran's Eurasian policy has been assessed in accordance with Iran's overarching goals and has progressed in line with broader

economic, cultural, and political objectives. At the same time, Tajikistan's engagement in Iran's Eurasian policy has been aligned with the core aims of this policy, including countering terrorism-related threats, joint efforts by Iran and Tajikistan in the energy sector, advancing the regional power agenda that constitutes a priority of Iran's foreign policy, joint military and security cooperation within Tajikistan, cooperation with Russia and China in pursuit of a post-American global order, and the expansion of economic cooperation.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

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