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Iran's Policy towards Central Asia and its Implications for US-Iran Relations

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Introduction

Iran has a long history of relations with, and cultural influence over, Central Asia, which was essentially part of the sphere of Iranian civilization in its various manifestations. Iran's national and cultural renaissance after the Arab invasion occurred in Central Asia, especially in Samarkand, Bukhara and parts of present-day Afghanistan.¹ The demise of the USSR and the emergence of independent states in the region once again have created opportunities and security threats for Iran.² Tehran established official relations with the region's states in November 1991. Given the importance of the region, senior Iranian figures, including Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, visited the region.³

¹ Hunter, *Central Asia Since Independence*, p. 7. Khorasan is now a province in northeast Iran. Iran's location, ethno-demographic situation and cultural and civilizational impact have at all times made it an integrating factor in the geopolitical expanse that includes Central Asia. Most countries or territories of the present-day region were in the past parts of Iran or tied to it with all sorts of bonds –some of them are even conquered parts of Iranian territory. All have been exposed to Iranian cultural influence, including the culture of economic development. Iran was mainly responsible for disseminating Islam as a unifying religious constant. However, the specificity of state formation in the 19th and 20th centuries, and inclusion of Central Asia and Caucasus in the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union, decreased Iranian influence. H.A. Shirazi, *Melliyathaye Asiaie Miane*, Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1999, pp. 120-143, N. Mamedova, 'Political and economic situation in Iran: Its impact on the relationships with Central Asia and the Caucasus', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2003, pp. 98-114.

² See E. Herzig, 'Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia', *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, May 2004, pp. 503-517.

³ Former Iranian President Rafsanjani, visited Central Asia in October 1993, Spring 1994 and April 1997, and current president Khatami visited it in April 2002, September 2004.

Iran, relying on its location as a bridge between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, has sought an important role in the region's politics and economics. At the 11th International Seminar on Central Asia and the Caucasus on 8-9 December 2003, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi maintained that the new conditions following independence in 1991 created a good opportunity for pursuing Iran's and the republics' common interests.⁴ He said: 'To stabilise this region we needed first to establish political relations with the countries of the region, second to develop economic cooperation...third to play an instrumental role in the region's security, and finally, Iran wishes that foreign competition in the region be replaced by regional cooperation.'⁵

In a sense, Iran's policy towards the Central Asia has affected US relations with the region's republics. This paper will discuss the impact of Iran's relations with the region's countries on US policy towards them.

Iran's policy towards Central Asia

Tehran has pursued two sets of policies, the first political and security, the second economic and cultural. At the political and security levels, conflict in Tajikistan and developing instability in the region became of great concern for Iran's policymakers who, according to some analysts, feared it might invite foreign intervention and a new influx of refugees into Iran.⁶ In the cultural sphere, historical relations between Iran and Central Asia in linguistics, customs and religion could play a role. Iran has viewed the region as an opportunity to develop its

⁴ Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi's speech on the importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus in Iran's foreign policy, '11th International Seminar on Central Asia and the Caucasus', December 8-9 2003, Tehran, Iran, Iranian Students' New Agency (ISNA), 9 December 2003.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, pp. 3-68, M.J. Omidwarnia, 'Amniat dar Asiai Markazi va Qafqaz dar gharn 21', *Asiai Markazi va Qafqaz*, No. 34, Tehran, Summer 2001, pp. 45-62, S. K. Sajjadpour, 'Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia', in Banuazizi and Weiner, op. cit., pp. 197-215.

economic ties, and some of these landlocked states see Iran as a natural link and gateway to the high seas.⁷

In particular, Iran's relations with Kazakstan and Turkmenistan are based on mutual interests in the energy and transportation sectors.⁸ Iran could help these countries to develop their oil and gas industries and pipelines. In this connection, the Kazak President said, '...our investors who work on oil consider that the most beneficial route is through Iran to the Persian Gulf.'⁹ According to an *Interfax* report of 9 March 2004, the contract for building a reservoir park in Turkmenistan, with a capacity of 3,000 tonnes, to be completed in August 2005, has gone to an Iranian company, Pars Energy.¹⁰ Iran's relations with Turkmenistan have been the best of all with the post-Soviet republics (see Table 3.6). Niyazov and Khatami described Ashgabat-Tehran relations as a pattern for the rest of the region: 'An example of fraternal good-neighborly relations.'¹¹ This is partly because of the absence of any major security problems, the political stability in Turkmenistan, and the possibility for developing

⁷ Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, pp. 3-68.

⁸ Dekmejian and Simonian, op. cit., pp. 74-95, and B. Khajehpour-Khouei, 'Survey of Iran's economic interests in the Caspian, in H. Amirahmadi, ed., *The Caspian Region at a Crossroad: Challenge of New Frontier of Energy and Development*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, pp. 75-86, A. Bigdeli, 'The transit position of Islamic Republic of Iran and the Central Asian states', *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 12, Tehran, Summer 2002, pp. 181-206.

⁹ Cited by E. Patricke, 'Tyler, Kazakstan leader urges Iran pipeline route', *The New York Times*, 10 December 2001, p. A12. See also N. Ghorban, 'By way of Iran: Caspian's oil and gas outlet', in Amirahmadi, op. cit., pp. 147-154.

¹⁰ 'Iran to build gas export terminal in Turkmenistan', *Interfax*, Ashgabat, 9 March 2004. For more see N. Entessar, 'Iran: Geopolitical challenges and the Caspian region', in M.P. Croissant and B. Aras, eds. *Oil and Geopolitics in the Caspian Sea Region*, Westport: Praeger, 1999, pp. 154-180 and N. Ghorban, 'Iran's potential role in the development and utilisation of oil and gas of the Caspian region', *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Tehran, Summer 2000, pp. 264-284.

¹¹ Quoted from *Neitral'niy Turkmenistan*, 9 February 2001, in V. Mesamed, 'Iran: Ten years in post-Soviet Central Asia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (online), Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002, at <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/eng-01-2002/04.mesprimen.shtml>

economic ties.¹² Completion of the 295 km Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan Railway has linked Turkmenistan's railways to those of Iran, and given Iran an opportunity to use Turkmenistan's rail networks to transport goods to other regional countries, particularly Uzbekistan.¹³ Nevertheless, obviously, some events have affected relations between these neighbours. In 2003 the Turkmen government awarded a contract for rebuilding its refinery at Seyidi to the Israeli company Merhav, and on 8 September 2003 President Niyazov expressed the hope that Merhav would continue to participate in Turkmenistan's economic development.¹⁴ The company is also developing software for a database that Turkmenistan intends to use for tracking the arrivals and departures of all foreign and Turkmen citizens.¹⁵

Iran has a common culture and language with Tajikistan, and was the first country to establish diplomatic relations with it. It played a significant role in ending the Tajik civil war, beginning with a ceasefire agreement signed in Tehran in 1994.¹⁶ In August 1995, Iran hosted a peace summit attended by Tajik president Imomali Rahmanov and Abdollah Nouri, leader of Tajikistan's Islamic Movement, at which both

¹² S.K. Sajjadpour, 'Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia', p. 208. Iran is fourth among 63 trading partners of Turkmenistan, it has already contributed to dozens of large projects, and there are about 150 treaties and agreements between them. See Mesamed, op. cit.

¹³ The project was inaugurated in 13 May 1996 by President Rafsanjani of Iran in the presence of leaders and dignitaries of about 50 countries and International organisations. *Ettelaat*, Iran's Daily Newspaper, 13 May 1996, p. 6. However, the opportunity is limited by difference in gauge; the Iranian gauge is 1435mm, the former Soviet system 1524 mm so goods have to be transshipped or wheelsets changed. This railway would connect all five Central Asian countries and Russia to the Iranian network and Persian Gulf, but the problem of gauge difference will remain. It is not, however, insuperable; similar gauge-changing facilities exist between standard-gauge (1435 mm) European systems and those of Spain and of the former USSR, and at standard-gauge China's borders with Kazakstan and Russia, and gauge-changing takes a matter of a few hours rather than days.

¹⁴ 'Israeli company to rebuild Turkmen oil refinery', *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 5/11 September 2003, p. 7. See also Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Profile, Turkmenistan, 2nd Quarter 1996, p.30.

¹⁵ 'Israeli company to rebuild Turkmen oil refinery', p. 7.

¹⁶ For a good account of relations between Iran and Tajikistan see M. Mesbahi, 'Tajikistan, Iran and the International Politics of the 'Islamic Factor'', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.16, No.2, 1997, pp.141-158.

sides agreed to extend the ceasefire and form a joint deliberative council to narrow their differences. Tehran maintained amicable relations with both sides, and never supported the Tajik Islamists' aim to create an Islamic government, even though Tajik opposition leaders were in Iran from 1993 to 1998.¹⁷ Coordinating policy with Moscow, in 1997 Tehran participated in preparing the General Agreement on Establishment of Peace and National Accord and Protocol on Mutual Understanding, signed by the Rahmanov and Nouri. Iran hosted the second, sixth and eighth rounds of peace negotiations, one consultative conference, and two meetings between the Tajik president and the opposition leader.¹⁸

Iran's relations with Uzbekistan, however, have been more difficult. Uzbekistan was the last Central Asian country in which Iran established an embassy. Comparatively, even though Uzbekistan has a pivotal position in the region, it 'has not been as attractive to Iran as the other republics', partly due to the Uzbek government's suspicions of Iran's intentions.¹⁹ For example, in October 1993 an Iranian presidential visit to Tashkent did not go very well, partly because Karimov refused to let an Iranian cultural centre open in Samarkand.²⁰ Uzbekistan was also the only Central Asian republic to support the 1995 US-proposed trade embargo against Tehran, in part prompted by Iran's purchase of Russian nuclear reactors.²¹

In general, Iran's leaders are convinced that economic presence is the key to increased influence in the region, and Iran has had good trade relations with it, particularly Turkmenistan (see Table 1), though its

¹⁷ A. Tarock, 'Iran's Policy in Central Asia,' *Central Asia Survey*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1997, PP. 185-200, and K. Abdullaev and C. Barnes, *Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process*, London: Conciliation Resources, 2000.

¹⁸ K.L. Afrasiabi and A. Maleki, 'Iran's foreign policy after September 11', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. IX, No. 2, 2003, pp. 255-265.

¹⁹ Sajjadpour, op. cit., p. 210.

²⁰ O. Roy, 'The Iranian foreign policy toward Central Asia', at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>

²¹ K. Alimov, 'Uzbekistan's foreign policy: In search of strategy', The Eisenhower Institute, at <http://www.eisenhowerinstitute.org/programs/globalpartnerships/securityandterrorism/coalition/regionalrelations/ConflictBook/Alimov.htm>, and S.F. Starr, 'Making Eurasia Stable', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1, January/February 1996, pp. 80-92.

investments there are not comparable with Turkey's, as discussed below.²² Iran also facilitated the Central Asian states' admission to the ECO.²³ On this, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati articulated: 'The Islamic Republic of Iran is convinced that regional cooperation is the only guarantor of regional peace, security, and stability. It is in this light that bi- and multilateral relations are being forged with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.'²⁴ He also said: 'The ECO pursues objectives like trade among member-states, and the encouragement of sustained development and active participation in international trade.'²⁵

While Iran's role in economic and political developments should not be exaggerated, it is nevertheless fair to say that it has contributed to the economic development and political stability of the region, and is likely to continue to do so.²⁶ One of the important dimensions of Tehran's policy towards this area is security. Of course, this is not a new consideration for Iran, indeed, as Abbas Maleki, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, has written: 'For the past two centuries, the greatest threat to Iran's security and territorial integrity was posed by the Russian empire and its successor the Soviet Union.'²⁷ For Iranian foreign and

²² It seems total investments barely reached \$0.6 to 0.8 billion. In 1995/1996 the trade turnover with Central Asia and Transcaucasus (without Georgia) was \$803.3m; in 1996/1997, \$1,053.6m; in 1997/1998, \$876.5m; in 1998/1999, \$604.2m. For detailed information see 'Foreign Trade', *Salname-ye Amarie Keshwar* (Iran's Annual National Statistics), Tehran/Iran, 2000/2001, and *Hambastegi*, Tehran, 14 March 2001, p. 13.

²³ ECO was established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, to promote economic, technical and cultural cooperation among its members.

²⁴ A.A. Velayati, 'The Constructive Role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Maintaining Regional Security', *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Tehran, 1996, pp. 183-191.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ A. Maleki, 'Iran and Turan: Apropos of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasian republics', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (online), Vol. 11, No. 5, 2001, at <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/eng-05-2001/11.malprimen.shtml>

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Sajjadpour, op. cit., p. 213. For a comprehensive discussion see P.M. Goudarzi, 'Tahdidat aminiati dar Asiai Markazi: Moured Kyrgyzstan', *Asiai Markazi va Qafqaz*, No. 34, Tehran, Summer 2001, pp. 129-140 and N. Sonboli, 'Iran va Amniat Asiai markazi dar doran pas az 9/11', *Asiai Markazi va Qafqaz*, No. 37, Tehran, Spring 2002, pp. 103-119.

national security, maintenance of stability and peace in Central Asia has become a significant security objective since 1991. Velayati stated that 'the Islamic Republic could not have remained passive in the face of the deteriorating security conditions on its northern border after the collapse of the Soviet System.'²⁸ Therefore, one can argue that Tehran has given priority to maintaining stability in the region and securing its borders as much as possible. President Khatami said in Ashgabat in 1998: 'Stability here is our task – we should not create excuses for aliens to penetrate into our region.'²⁹ During his visit to Bishkek on 5 September 2001, Foreign Minister Kharrazi affirmed that Iran's relations with Central Asia were designed to overcome such threats to stability as drug trafficking, organised crime and the Afghan conflict.³⁰ Iran played an effective role in conflict resolution in Tajikistan. Iran feels threatened by NATO's eastward expansion, especially by the enthusiasm with which Central Asian leaders embraced PFP. During his visit to Moscow in March 2001, Khatami asserted that 'any foreign presence in the Central Asian region can upset the balance of peace and stability there.'³¹ More importantly, in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, a US military presence in the region poses a further potential threat.

Although Iran has sought to strengthen ties with Central Asia, it has been careful not to jeopardise its good relations with Moscow, which are important to its national and security interests.³² In 1996 Velayati claimed that Iranian-Russian relations were 'at their highest level in

²⁸ A.A. Velayati, 'The Islamic republic of Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus', Address at the Crans Montana Forum, Switzerland, 20/23 June 1996, *Keyhan*, Iran, 24 June 1996. For detailed discussion on security see H. Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*, London: Praeger, 1998.

²⁹ Resalat, Tehran's daily Newspaper, 19 June 1998, p. 11.

³⁰ Kabar (News), Kyrgyzstan, 5 September 2001, p. 3.

³¹ Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Tehran/Iran, 16 March 2001.

³² S. Blank, 'Russia and Iran in a new Middle East', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. III, No. 4, Fall 1992, pp. 108-128. Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian relations in the 1990s', pp. 65-80, B. Shaffer, 'Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran', *Policy Paper*, No. 57, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001, pp. 4-12, S.T. Hunter, 'Iran's pragmatic regional policy', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, New York, Spring 2003, pp. 133-147.

contemporary history.³³ Thus one can argue that, for Tehran close multi-dimensional relations with Moscow are more important than ties with the region's states.

2000	Balance	-311	-0.6	30.7	77	31.2
	Imports	344	20.9	2	10.2	50.2
	Exports	33.4	20.3	32.7	87.2	81.4
1999	Balance	107	7.2	19.9	108	29.1
	Imports	131	11	2.1	13.6	20.5
	Exports	24.1	18.1	22	122	49.6
1998	Balance	-78.8	-2	21.8	96.8	25.8
	Imports	87.2	14.2	4	5.5	27.9
	Exports	29.5	12.2	25.8	102	53.6
Country	Kaza kstan	Kyrgyzs tan	Tajik istan	Turkmen istan	Uzbeki stan	
Source: A. Bigdeli, 'The transit position of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Central Asian states', <i>Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies</i> , Vol. 6, No. 12, Tehran, Summer 2002, pp.183-184.						

In other words, for Iran, relations with Russia as a strategic balancer, regionally and globally, as a source of trade and arms, and as a partner in political and economic regional patterns are significant. In this connection, Iran's regional policy in regard to Tajikistan's civil war (and the conflict in Chechnya) had become increasingly 'Russiacentric'.³⁴ Iran's Defence Minister, Ali Shamkhani, has confirmed that closer defence relations between Teheran and Moscow are both necessary and inevitable, not least because both perceive a US-led NATO presence in Central Asia as a potential threat and feel that NATO's eastward

³³ IRNA, Teheran/Iran, 7 March 1996, p. 2.

³⁴ M. Mesbahi, 'Iran', *Conference Report (Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Reorientations, Internal Transitions, and Strategic Dynamics)*, the National Intelligence Council, Washington, April 2000, pp. 31-33.

enlargement will escalate regional tensions and crises.³⁵ The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 alarmed Iran to such extent that friendly relations with Moscow are now crucial for its national security.³⁶

Problems and Challenges

In attempting to develop its influence in Central Asia, Iran has faced some political, economic and religious limitations and challenges.³⁷ Economically, due to 8 years of war with Iraq (1980-1988), Iran has faced financial dilemmas, and has been unable to invest considerably in the region.³⁸ Furthermore, Iran represents Shiite Islam,

³⁵ E. Eefgil, and L.A. Stone, 'Iran and Turkey in Central Asia: Opportunities for rapprochement in the post-cold war era', *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 34-58.

³⁶ However, some observers think the US invasion of Iraq will have some positive results for Iran, such as possible future Shiite ascendancy in Iraq. But, apart from the end of Saddam's regime, Iranian officials view the invasion as a threat to Iran's security. More importantly, it is unlikely that Shia could gain a dominant role in a future Iraqi regime. For more on this see Iranian Newspapers News and Agencies *Ettelaat*, *Kyhan*, *Hamshahri*, IRNA, and ISNA, March/September 2003, A. Maleki, 'Iran and Russia: Neighbours without Common Borders', in G. Chufrin, ed., *Russia and Asia: The Emerging Security Agenda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 230-265, Shaffer, 'Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran', pp. 4-12 and D.L. Smith, op. cit., pp. 23-38.

³⁷ Mamedova, op. cit., Mesamed, op. cit. and M.E. Ahrari 'The Dynamics of the New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1994, pp. 525-539.

³⁸ M. Field, 'Tehran's overtures to Central Asia fall on deaf ears', *The Financial Times*, 15 April 1992, p. 5, Mamedova, op. cit., and Maleki, 'Iran and Turan: Apropos of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasian republics'. Several Iranian private-sector companies are involved in joint ventures in Central Asia, but the amounts invested are not significant. In addition, private companies and businessmen in Iran have had little experience of investing abroad. Interestingly, cultural and linguistic affinities have played only a minor role in determining the pattern of Iran's economic relations, as illustrated by its low level of economic engagement in Tajikistan. According to Iran Radio, the Tajik President said in Parliament 'Iranian-Tajik economic cooperation was at a very low level', 'Trade with Iran to improve after Tajik head's speech in parliament', *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Mashhad, 30 April 2000, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/tajikistan/hypermail/200005/0000.html>, and Tarock, op. cit., pp. 185-200.

while about 85 percent of Central Asians are Sunni Muslims.³⁹ Although Iran has not emphasised its Shiism in policy towards this area, its reputation as Shiite and as a would-be exporter of revolutionary Islam has caused the West and some of the region's states to challenge its influence, whereas the opportunities for influence provided to other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia by the majority Sunni population have gone largely unremarked.⁴⁰ B. Rumer, for example, argued that 'Tajikistan in particular has been a prime target of attempts [by Iran] to export the Islamic revolution.'⁴¹ R. Burnashev, a Kazak scholar, has also claimed that one element of Iran's regional policy has been 'the attempt to strengthen the role of Islam in Central Asia.'⁴²

Islam as such has not in fact been a major dimension of Tehran's policy towards this region; instead it has been motivated more by political, economic and strategic variables. Arguably, Iran has not attempted to disseminate political Islam in the region, nor to export its revolution there, but what some Central Asian states, particularly, Uzbekistan, view as an Islamic threat has engendered a very cautious attitude toward Tehran. Some of the region's analysts, such as K. Syroezhkin, of the journal *Kontinent* in Almaty, have argued that the Iranian government 'took a pragmatic position toward Central Asia. Aware that the rapid dissemination of Islamic idea in Central Asia was impossible, Iran concentrated on three tasks: economic cooperation, creation of joint transportation routes, and then resolution of issues involving the Caspian Sea.'⁴³

Externally, two issues have challenged Tehran's policy in Central Asia. First, the United States has been seeking to isolate Iran

³⁹ M.E. Ahrari, 'The Dynamics of the New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia', pp. 525-539, A. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 33-37.

⁴⁰ Ahrari, op. cit., pp. 525-539, see also D.L. Smith, op. cit., pp. 30-41, Entessar, op. cit., pp. 154-180, and Mamedova, op. cit.

⁴¹ Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, p. 36.

⁴² Burnashev, op. cit., pp. 114-165.

⁴³ K. Syroezhkin, 'Central Asia between the gravitational poles of Russia and China', in Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, pp. 169-207.

particularly in respect of energy resources and pipelines. Second, as mentioned earlier, some of the region's states, especially Uzbekistan, are reluctant to develop closer relations with Tehran.⁴⁴ Many in and outside the region, particularly in the United States, feared that Iran would try to export its Islamic revolution to the newly independent states, and suspicion of Iran's intentions has limited its influence at the state level.

Post-Cold War and US regional policy

The conclusion of the Cold War and the advent of the 1990s witnessed the unprecedented influence of the US and its Western partners in international affairs. The US led West had 'won' the Cold War and thus it sought to impose its economic, political and cultural values on 'Third World' without any significant countervailing ideological challenge in the wake of the failure of Soviet style socialism. Nevertheless, the US foreign policy agenda continued, to an extent, to view 'national security' interests in terms of a Cold War zero-sum game worldview, despite the absence of a visible enemy. The Clinton administration persisted in maintaining the United States' position as the world's 'dominant power' with a strong emphasis on a 'strategy of enlargement of the World's free community of market democracies.'⁴⁵ In relation to the post-Soviet Southwest and Central Asian region, the US policy revolved around three main goals:

1. Facilitating the transition of the former Soviet Central Asian republics towards capitalist democracy and market-oriented economic systems.

⁴⁴ Turkmenistan is an exception; Turkmen-Iranian relations are developing well. See Hunter, 'Iran's pragmatic regional policy', pp. 133-147, Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, pp. 3-68, Robins, op. cit., pp. 36-54 and D.L. Smith, op. cit., pp. 41-49.

⁴⁵ Remarks of Anthony Lake, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 'From Containment to Enlargement – 21 September 1993.' *U.S. Department of State Despatch*, Vol.4, No.39, 1993, p.660. See also Anthony Lake, "American Power and American diplomacy-21 October 1994." *U.S. Department of State Despatch*, Vol.5, No.46, 1994, p.767.

2. Encouraging the Middle Eastern states (like Yemen, Libya and Syria) and the newly independent, Central Asian states in the direction of the West to steer them away from the Russian orbit.
3. Exploring avenues for the commercial involvement of its petroleum companies in the oil and gas sectors of the Middle Eastern and Central Asian economies. In this connection, the existence of large oil and gas reserves in Central Asia could provide the United States an opportunity to reduce its dependence on Persian Gulf oil.⁴⁶

In addition to these goals, Washington strived to reduce the influence of those states in the region that it perceived as hostile to its strategic and economic aims. Amongst these states, Iran and, to a lesser degree, the Russian Federation took prominence. In fact, in the Middle East and Southwest Asia the US no longer needed to balance major regional power through the creation of balance of power architecture as it had done by strengthening Iraq against Iran in the 1980s. In an increasingly 'unipolar' global system of the early 1990s, the US sought to 'contain' its opponent through military and economic means by evolving the so-called 'Rogue-state' Doctrine.

A major goal of the 'Rogue-state Doctrine was to weaken and eventually eliminate the rising 'Third World' powers that were asserting their independence and sovereignty by pursuing autonomous external and internal policies. Most importantly, these states were aspiring to develop an indigenous military and industrial capability, which had the potential in the long- run to challenge the West's intrusive policies. Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (North Korea) were identified as the leading 'rogue-states' due to these countries defiance of US hegemony. Washington conducted a sophisticated propaganda against these states' alleged involvement in the development of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In fact, such claims were contrary to the facts; in the case of

⁴⁶ See Rosemary Forsythe, "The Politics of Oil in the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Adelphi Paper*, 300, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996, pp.17-18.

Iran, the government had cut down military spending after the Iran-Iraq war because of economic difficulties. Iran slashed its military budget from US \$ 5 billion in 1991 to US \$ 2 billion in 1997.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Iranian armed forces remained equipped with ageing military equipment bought by the Shah. Western arms embargoes and the war with Iraq had limited the serviceability of this largely US supplied weaponry. In spite of these developments, Washington had since the early 1990s remained adamant in blocking Iranian access to vital technology and finances. The US policy was clearly identified by President Clinton's advisor for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, Martin Indyk, in June 1993. Indyk stressed the necessity for the 'dual containment' of regimes in power in Iran and Iraq until they modified their behaviour. He elaborated that:

Dual containment derives from an assessment that the current Iraqi and Iranian regimes are both hostile to American interests in the region. Accordingly, we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game...we reject it because we do not need it...as long as we are able to maintain our military presence in the region, as long as we succeed in restricting the ambitions of both Iraq and Iran, and as long as we can rely on our regional allies-Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and GCC and Turkey-to preserve the balance of power in our favour in the wider Middle East region, we will have the means to counter the Iraqi and Iranian regimes.⁴⁸

In 1995 and 1996, the Clinton administration and the US congress added even more sanctions on Iran in response to allegations about Iran's development of weapons of mass destruction and its support for 'terrorist' groups. The hypocrisy of US policy was evident as Washington

⁴⁷ See Michael T. Klare, 'The New "Rogue-State Doctrine" Doctrine', *The Nation*, 8 May 1995.

⁴⁸ Martin Indyk's address at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 18, 1993, parts of which are quoted in the *Middle East International*, No.452, June 11, 1993, pp.3-4.

continued to back Israel's oppressive policies against the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and refused to condemn Israeli development of advanced nuclear weapons. Moreover, Washington itself was giving tacit consent to the emergence various armed anti-Shiite 'Islamic' militia's in Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to assist in the 'containment' of Iran.

US and Iran's policy towards Central Asia

As discussed earlier, Iran has shown great interest in expanding relations with the Central Asian countries. In this context, the possible strengthening of Iran's Islamic-based influence in the region made Washington nervous, because it had the potential to create a fundamentalist anti-Western/American bloc in the heart of Eurasia. As M.J. Malik noted: 'Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fear of the 'evil Empire' has given way to the fear of the 'Islamic Empire' stretching from North Africa in the West to Central Asia in the East.'⁴⁹ From the US viewpoint, Iran's strategy was to export its revolutionary brand of Islam and exploit Central Asia's potential as a market, so that the region would become a hotbed for political Islam. Furthermore, Washington saw Tehran projecting itself as a redeemer of Islamic values against all non-Shiite challengers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and acting as a key player in the game of petrol politics.⁵⁰ This was evident in the words of ex-Secretary of State Baker: '[The Iranians] are active in some of the former Central Asian republics. It's one of the reasons we think it's important that we ourselves, have contact and dialogue with these former republics.'⁵¹ A. Cohen claimed

⁴⁹ President Ronald Reagan called the USSR an 'evil empire', Speech on 8 June 1982, J.M. Malik, 'The 'great game' begins', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, June/July 1992, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁰ J.E. Yang, 'US, Turkey Pledge Aid to New States', *The Washington Post*, 12 February 1992, p. A30, A. Lieven, 'The (Not So) Great Game', *The National Interest*, No. 58, Winter 1999/2000, pp. 63-92, Smith, op. cit., p. 7, and Menon and Barkey, op. cit., pp. 68-89.

⁵¹ T.L. Friedman, 'US to Counter Iran in Central Asia', *The New York Times*, 6 February 1992, p. A3.

that Tehran, with its militant Islamic Shiite ideology, had been contributing money to rebuilding mosques and religious schools neglected during the Soviet era.⁵²

Accordingly, from the beginning, Washington was anxious about Iran's search for increased politico-economic and religious influence in the region, and used various policies to isolate Iran and prevent it from establishing any significant presence in the region. James Baker made this clear during a visit to Central Asia, when he said that the USA would move quickly to open embassies in the republics to counter expanding Iranian influence there.⁵³ In February 1992 T. Friedman wrote in *The New York Times* that '[t]he Bush administration has already begun consulting with Turkey and Egypt on how they can all cooperate in order to help prevent Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakstan from falling under the political sway of Iran.'⁵⁴ Later in 1993 this became part of the Clinton administration's broader strategy for containing Iran in the framework of 'Dual Containment'.⁵⁵ This policy was outlined by Clinton's Advisor for Near East and South Asian Affairs, Martin Indyk, in June 1993. He emphasised the need for

⁵² A Cohen, 'US interests in Central Asia', Testimony before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific / House International Relations Committee - US House of Representatives, 17 March 1999. Forecasts of the early 1990s of possible dissemination of Iranian fundamentalism in Central Asia have proved wrong. The fundamentalist threat can be described as hypothetical rather than real. However, Turkey, Israel and the United States are still brandishing the forecasts.

⁵³ Friedman, 'US to Counter Iran in Central Asia', p. A3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hunter, op. cit., pp. 133-147, for detailed discussion on Dual Containment see C.F. Gregory III, 'The illogic of dual containment', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, March/April 1994, pp. 56-65, R.H. Curtiss, 'Dual containment and crackdown on Iran: Wrong policy, wrong reason, wrong administration', *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, June 1995, p. 33-34, P. Clawson, 'The continuing logic of dual containment', *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 33-48, R.O. Freedman, 'American Policy Toward the Middle East in Clinton's Second Term,' in S. Blank, ed., *Mediterranean Security in Coming Millennium*, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, 1999, pp. 371-416, and K. Katzman, 'The end of dual containment: Iraq, Iran and smart sanctions', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 71-89.

‘dual containment’ of the regimes in power in Iran and Iraq until they modified their behaviour:

Dual containment derives from an assessment that the current Iraqi and Iranian regimes are both hostile to American interests in the region. Accordingly, we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game...we reject it because we do not need it...the coalition that fought Saddam remains together. As long as we are able to maintain our military presence in the region; as long as we succeed in restricting the ambitions of both Iraq and Iran; and as long as we can rely on our regional allies – Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – to preserve the balance of power in our favour in the wider Middle East region, we will have the means to counter the Iraqi and Iranian regimes.⁵⁶

The US decision-makers saw increased Iranian influence in the area as a threat to US national interests, and so tried to prevent Tehran from achieving its strategic goals, while Iran attempted to expand ties and maximise the benefits from its relationships. R. Menon and H. Barkey described Iran’s diplomacy in, and radio broadcasts to, Central Asia as a threat to the West, particularly the United States.⁵⁷ In the meantime, the Civil War in Tajikistan prompted concern that Iran could feed unrest.⁵⁸ In addition, the US government saw Iran as wanting to use the region’s markets to reconstruct its own war-ravaged economy.

To counter Iranian influence in the region, Washington tried on the one hand to discourage the republics’ ties with Tehran, and on the

⁵⁶ M.S. Indyk, ‘The Clinton Administration’s Approach to the Middle East’, Keynote Address at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Soref Symposium*, Washington, 18 May 1993.

⁵⁷ For details see Menon and Barkey, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-89 and Nichol, ‘Central Asia’s New States: Political Developments and Implications for US Interests’, 1996, pp. 1-9.

⁵⁸ D. Pipes and P. Clawson, ‘Ambitious Iran, Troubled Neighbors’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 1993, pp. 124-142.

other hand attempted, as discussed below, to increase Turkey's influence, as an alternative to Iran.

To evaluate US policy towards the involvement of Iran in Central Asia, one could argue that initially American policymakers did not realise that Tehran was doing little to foster Islamic resurgence in the region. In contrast to Washington's assumption, Iran was following politico-economic interests, not trying to export its revolutionary brand of religion.⁵⁹ Former Deputy Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Maleki, made this clear: 'Despite western accusation of Iran for exporting religious extremism to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Iran expanded economic and social relations with its neighbours', and that 'Iran's position in the republics has been given a great boost by the fact that its policy is not based on ideology, but on trade and cultural links between it and the republics.'⁶⁰ Moreover, Russia was, and still is, more important to Iran's economy and particularly security than Central Asia, so its relations with Russia rank above those with the region's states.⁶¹ In his visit to Uzbekistan in late 1991, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati reiterated the principle by which Tehran was to conduct its policy in the region: 'Whilst respecting the aspirations of the Soviet republics for self-determinations, Iran's relations with them would be formulated within the framework of [its] relations with Moscow.'⁶² In

⁵⁹ I. Bal, *Turkey's Relations with the West and Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2000, pp. 116-119, and A. Hyman, *Power and Politics in Central Asia's New Republics*, London: Research Institute of the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, pp. 12-16.

⁶⁰ A. Maleki, 'Iran and Turan: Apropos of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasian republics', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (online), Vol. 11, No. 5, 2001 at <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/eng-05-2001/11.malprimen.shtml>. See also A. Maleki, 'Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Review of the Iranian Connections', *Marco Polo Magazine*, No. 2, 1998, pp. 21-26. For Western accusations of Iran for exporting religious extremism to Central Asia, see, for example, Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm*, pp. 34-37, G.E. Fuller, *Turkey Faces East: New Orientations Toward the Middle East and the Old Soviet Union*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1992.

⁶¹ For more details see E. Herzog, 'Iran and Central Asia', in R. Allison and L. Jonson, eds., *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2001, pp. 171-198.

⁶² BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Middle East, No. 1242, 29 November 1991, p. A5.

fact, Tehran has seen Russia as the most important country in the region, and feels that it must have the best relations with it, believing that 'Russia is a vast market for Iranian goods, on the one hand, and that Russia is a land of opportunities, on the other. These opportunities involve high-tech equipment, military industries, and nuclear technology and weapons, such as submarines.'⁶³ In relation to the Tajikistan conflict, first of all this problem resulted from local ethnic, regional, and inter-elite conflict, not from outside interference nor the influence of fundamentalist Islam.⁶⁴ Second, Tehran played an important mediating role to end the conflict.

Therefore, one can argue that Washington's primary understanding of Iran's attitude towards the region was more myth than fact. Nevertheless, US policymakers did come to realise that Iran's limited resources and other problems deprived it of any capacity to monopolise Central Asia, and raised questions about the need to promote Turkey or any other country, such as Pakistan, as alternative models for the region.

Conclusion

The emergence of the independent Central Asian republics onto the international stage presented a new frontier for regional and global power such as Iran and US. Under the new circumstances, the countries found themselves in the interest zone of both powers, attracting widespread attention because they have emerged at a point where the political, economic and security interests of various powers converge.

Although Iran has tried to influence the region, US cold relations with Tehran has led the later to do whatever it can to stop the former's ties with the region's states. This has led Washington on the one hand to expand its own politico-economic and military influence in the region and on the other hand to help countries such as Turkey to play a role in Central Asia. However, one can argue that Washington's primary

⁶³ A. Maleki, 'Iran and Turan: Apropos of Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasian republics'.

⁶⁴ Pipes and Clawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-142.

understanding of Iran's attitude towards the region was more myth than fact. Nevertheless, US policymakers did come to realise that Iran's limited resources and other problems deprived it of any capacity to monopolise Central Asia, and raised questions about the need to promote Turkey or any other country, such as Pakistan, as alternative models for the region.