

Failure of Geopolitical and Geo-Cultural Commonalities to Integrate Iran and Central Asian Countries

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Abstract

There is a widespread belief that geopolitical factors, common cultural, historical and political elements can foster integration or convergence between countries in a specified region. In this study we argue that despite these commonalities, Iran and countries of the Central Asia have not been able to establish meaningful interactions and consequently, integrate around them. So the main issue that we will deal with is that why Iran and Central Asian Countries, despite Geopolitical factors, Geo-cultural commonalities and Geo-strategic elements, haven't been able to foster a regional meaningful convergence. Based on the question that has been raised, the research methodology of the paper is qualitative data analysis. Based on inductive reasoning, we have collected qualitative data to provide sound and verifiable answer to the question. The data has gathered from library sources, statements and documents. Findings of this research contend that in order to create integration and convergence, these commonalities should be translated into mutual values, a shared way of thinking and finally, into mental connectivity. Mental Connectivity can translate all other common factors to a pathway of regional integration. Without such a connectivity, it is somehow impossible to foster a regional integration. There are factors at three levels of trans-regional, regional, and domestic spheres that are on the way of establishing such a mental connectivity.

Keywords: Iran, Central Asia, Geopolitics, Geo-culture, Regionalism.

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1. Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the geopolitical situation of Iran changed drastically, because of the emergence of the two regions of South Caucasus and Central Asia in its northern borders. This geopolitical upheaval entailed geo-economic, geo-cultural, and geostrategic importance for Iran's policy toward the region. This article will focus on the geopolitical and Geo-cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

Iran and countries of the region share cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious commonalities such as the experience of living under Persian Empire, existence of Persian-speaking nations and groups, the role of Islam and the existence of historical figures like Rudaki and Avicenna. There is a widespread belief that existence of common cultural, political, linguistic and historical commonalities could pave the way for regional integration or close collaboration. Despite these commonalities, Iran and countries of the region have not been able to establish meaningful interactions and converge around these commonalities. The purpose of this article is to investigate the reasons for the failure. The authors believe that the main reason is the fact that despite these material and non-material commonalities between the parties, mental connectivity and intersubjective norms have not been formed. These ideational norms and mental connectivity could assign meaning to the commonalities. But lack of the norms and mental connectivity has made the shared assets ineffective, on the way of regional convergence.

To inquire the issue, we use neo-regionalism theory to explain that how intersubjective norms and values are shaped and that how mental connectivity is formed. Then, we look at the concept of geo-culture and its importance on the way of regional integration. In the next part, we introduce the concept of soft power as a channel that can provide a proper ground upon which Iran and countries of the region can capture their cultural commonalities and move toward integration of a cultural essence. In the end, we come up with some policy recommendations for Iran and countries of the region to best capitalize on the cultural commonalities and to find a way around problems and converge around their mutual assets.

1.1. Literature Review

There is a bulk of scholarly articles and books that have been written about Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia and Caucasus, and specifically its geopolitical and cultural relations with them. Few of them worth noting:

Some of these works are theoretical and analytical, such as Hajiyousefi (2015), Dehghani Firoozabadi (2006), Karami (2008), which have explored Foreign policy of Iran towards the region from theoretical and analytical point of view. Others, namely Hafeznia, et.al (2007), Azami and Dabiri (2011), Wastnidge (2017), Enayatollah Yazdani, et.al (2007), Dadandish (2007) and Karami and Kuzegar (2014) have tried to analyze the relations between the two parties from Geopolitical perspective. All of them argue that there is a great geopolitical opportunity for Iran in the relations with Central Asian Countries to boost its status and national interest. Khodayar (2012), Mirfakhrayi and Firoozmandi (2017), Haghpanah. et.al. (2014), Toiserkani (2009) and Dehshiri and Taheri (2016) have put their emphasis on cultural bounds and potentials which could provide a good context for their integration. Sadeghi (2015), Zahrani, et.al. (2016) and Dehghani Firoozabadi and Daamanpak (2017) have argued that there is a good economic opportunity that could yield in regional cooperation between the neighboring countries.

Though most of the aforementioned works are valuable sources on Iran's relations with Central Asian Countries, but, none has tried to investigate the failure of cultural commonalities, economic opportunities and geopolitical factors to forge convergence and integration between Iran and Caucasus republics. The current paper seeks to provide a sound answer to the question. In other words, it would be the main contribution of the current paper.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

In this research, the theoretical framework of regionalism and its constructivist offshoot would be used. This research makes use of the concept of soft power coined by Joseph Nye with a constructivist outlook to elaborate on the regional integration between Iran and Central Asian countries.

1.2.1. Regionalism

In today's complicated world, regions have become more and more important, and independent as well. A region's problem would be solved more easily because of the close historical, cultural, geopolitical, and economic ties and the consequent understanding between the countries.

In order to understand and define regionalism, we should define and define and clarify the concept of "region" and specify its constituent elements. There have been many attempts in explaining the region and these attempts have resulted in different definitions about the term.

Regions have been defined and analyzed within at least three separate research traditions. Classical theories of geopolitics stress the material basis of regions. Ideational theories of geography insist that regions are not given but politically and culturally constituted. Regions have also been analyzed from the perspective of behavioral theories of geography, with the variable of spatial distance treated as having a direct and statistically robust effect on actors' behaviors (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008: 124).

Different regionalist perspectives still concur that two distinct ways of post-world war 2 regionalism have occurred, the first between the 1950s and 1970s, and then the second starting in the mid-1980s, the latter process now being labelled by many in IR and IPE as the new regionalism (Fawn, 2009). While old regionalism was more concerned with economics and material aspects, new regionalism has move beyond and toward analytical and normative dimensions of regionalism. These newer approaches emphasize the social construction of regions (Acharya, 2007).

While mostly associated with Wendt's "Anarchy is What States Make of It" (1992), social constructivism introduced to the field of IR by Onuf's "The World of Our Making" (1989). It is an approach to international politics that concerns itself with the centrality of the ideas and human consciousness; stresses a holistic and idealist view of structures; and how the structure constructs the actors' identities and interests, how their interaction is organized and constrained by that structure, and how their very interaction serves to either reproduce or transform that structure (Barnett, 2014: 166, in Baylis & et al, 2014).

There are several factors distinguishing constructivism from other branches of international relations theories. Normative or ideational structures are just as important as material structures, identities inform

interests and in turn actions, and agents and structures are mutually constitutive (Reus-Smit, 2005: 188, in Burchill & et al, 2005).

Constructivists have several themes. The idea of social construction suggests difference across context rather than a single objective reality, constructivists have emphasized the social dimensions of international relations, and have demonstrated the importance of norms, rules, and language at this level, and they have argued that, far from an objective reality, international politics is a world of our making (Fierkel, 2013: 189, in Dunne & et al, 2013).

According to Wendt, a fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. The second principle of constructivism is that the meanings in terms of which action is organized arise out of interaction (Wendt, 1992). Besides these two principles, one can refer to three features unique to the constructivism. It contends that actors are social, interests are endogenous, and society is the constitutive realm (Reus-Smit, 2005: 199, in Burchill & et al, 2005) meaning that identities and interests of the states are forms within the society and through the interaction.

The aim of social constructivism is to study and explain the neglected aspects of the process of regional integration such as establishment of regional political orders through collective norms and principles, the transformation of identities and interests, and the constitutive role of transnational institutions (Firoozabadi, 2014: 115). With culture being the basis that informs the meanings that people give to their actions (Barnett, 2014: 161, in Baylis & et al, 2014) and with the society being the constitutive realm and culture one of its key elements, one can see the importance of culture in international politics and off course, in regional trade-offs.

1.2.2. Geo-culture

The term geoculture comprises of two words, geo and culture, implying the mutual effects of the two on each other. In order to understand geoculture, one must first understand culture and how it plays out in the relations between states and in fact how it might affect a country's foreign policy making.

According to Wallerstein 'each person maybe described in three ways: the universal characteristics of the species, the sets of characteristics that define that person as a member of a series of groups, that person's idiosyncratic characteristics. When we talk of traits which are neither universal nor idiosyncratic we often use the term culture to describe the collection of such traits, or of such behaviors, or of such values, or of such beliefs'(Wallerstein, 1991: 158).

By some other definitions culture is 'the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social groups; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time' (Merriam-Webster, 2018). It is 'the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society' (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). It is 'the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time'(Cambridge Dictionary, 2018).

It has been suggested that cultural diplomacy, as an instrument of cultural relations, while it may seem to be far removed from the high politics of alliances, international law, rising powers and new security challenges, in fact provides the glue that hold alliances together (Billows & et al, 2011: 24, in Maltzahn, 2013: 1). Cultural relations between two or more countries are usually conducted through governmental and non-governmental channels. While the former is merely about negotiating agreements and making them operational, the latter is more comprehensive.

In this research, the concept of geoculture refers to a set of characteristics between a group of people such as the customs, beliefs, language and behaviors that are affected by the geography or rather affect the geography during time.

Despite shared historical and cultural linkages, Iran and states of the region have not been able to establish meaningful interactions on the way of regional integration and because identities and interests are formed through the interactions, they have not been successful in creating intersubjective norms.

1.2.3. Mental Connectivity and Regionalism

In the literature of regionalism and integration, border or physical connectivity is assumed as the cornerstone. Physical connectivity includes

“hard infrastructure’ such as transportation roads, exchange medium ..., and “soft infrastructure’, such as regulatory policy, decision-making and institutional frameworks. In order to deepen the interconnectivity, countries strive to expand and improve the hard infrastructure, while at the same time, strengthening their soft infrastructures. Without soft ones, the hard facilities won’t be able to connect the adjacent states.

In this paper, we want to go a step further and argue that without “Mental Connectivity” both of the “soft” and “Hard” infrastructures won’t be helpful in regional cooperation. By mental connectivity, we mean to see the issues and problems like each other (to some extent), and value similar behavior and assets and to think like-mindedly. Mental connectivity in the formation of European Union, for example, played a crucial role in defining and executing regulations and establishing institutions. Although these states were adjacent to each other for decades and they had huge assets of cultural, historical and political commonalities, but they failed to establish a regional organization like EU till they come to a close and similar mentality. Shared beliefs in free trade, collective security, democracy, interdependence, collective monetary policies and peaceful coexistence enabled them to integrate and capitalize on their common features. Based on this argument, we can put forward this conceptual model:

Theoretical Model for regional integration in Central Asia



Based on this model, mental connectivity creates some sort of shared mentality and way of thinking, which in its turn, yields to understandable behaviors. Those behaviors will boost mutual understanding. It could help

politicians to look differently to regional issues and can persuade them to develop relations in different areas. Meaningful, durable and complex relations between regional countries can pave the way of regional integration.

2. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to argue the reasons of failure of Iran and Central Asian countries to utilize common and joint elements in order to foster regional integration. So, those kind of data would be gathered to demonstrate the huge potentials in the region to integrate, and, failure of the countries to utilize them. In this regard, the qualitative data analysis would be used and data would be gathered from library sources, official statements and online platforms.

3. Iran's Approach to the Region

Central Asia is one of the most important regions in Iran's approach towards its neighboring environment. There are several factors regarding the importance of the region for Iran including geographical proximity, historical, cultural, and religious linkages, transportation, as well as the presence of great regional and trans-regional powers. Therefore, from geopolitical, geo-cultural, geo-economic, and geo-strategic viewpoints, the region is important for Iran. But this studies would analyze the issue from cultural standpoint. Due to significant historical and cultural linkages, it can be an appropriate ground for Tehran to capitalize on cultural relations and commonalities in its relations with the regional countries. Among the many factors in cultural relations one can name the historical experience of living under the Persian Empire, role of Islam, Persian language, cultural commonalities, way of living and the existence of the cities like Bukhara as the cradle of Iran's sciences and outstanding figures such as Avicenna and Rudaki.

In the framework of cultural-civilizational discourse, the collapse of the Soviet Union had geo-cultural importance. Independence of the republics of the region has yielded in the revival of an important part of the Iranian world in the late 20th century. And, the birth of the independent countries in Central Asia and South Caucasus, that were, once, comprising parts of the Persian empire, put an end to the policy of Iranophobia by the Soviet Union. Today, the linkages between Iran and Central Asia are in some shared

customs, presence of Persian language in the region, religious commonalities, and historical experience. Celebrating the ancient Eid of Nowruz –which dates back to the pre-Islamic period- by the Sunni people of the region is a sign of the shared history between Iran and the region, influencing on people tradition (Farajirad, et.al., 2017). Also, Persian language is popular in the region and is spoken in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and parts of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (IRAS & ECO Cultural Institute, 2014: 1). The existence of figures such as Rudaki, Nasir Khusraw, Khwarizmi, Farabi, Avicenna and cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara that were cultural centers of the Persian Empire note the importance of the region for Iran.

Since the independence of these countries, officials inside Iran have tried to develop the diplomatic relations with countries of the region and it was one of the first countries that recognized their independence. Consequently, Iran established its diplomatic relations with them first, and then cultural liaisons with four countries of the region (Kaleji & Alavian, 2009). During these years Tehran has undertaken some measures in order to capitalize on its cultural advantages in the region. Among Iran's efforts for the revival of its cultural and civilizational assets in the region, one can refer to the publication and distribution of books, in Persian language, mostly in the fields of poem and literature in parallel with holding book exhibitions, cooperation between academies, universities (exchange of students and professors), establishing different centers for Iranian studies (joint meetings and the exchange of researchers), various art cooperation in different areas of theater, music, and cinema, holding cultural exhibitions, running television and radio channels and websites, and finally the establishment of various cultural and religious centers (Karami & Kaleji, 2014).

Another effort of Iran for utilizing its soft power in the region is educational diplomacy. Educational diplomacy is using educational capacities to create positive images which itself is a part of the cultural diplomacy. To this matter, Iran's universities and universities of the region have signed agreements on the exchange of students and university professors, and have also established cultural centers and attachés in Iran and these republics. Among them, one can refer to the ECO Cultural Institute, Association of Governmental Universities and Research Institutes

of Countries surrounding Caspian Sea, Sa'adi Foundation, Al-Mustafa International University and Tajik Research Institute for Persian Culture.

Al-Mustafa University is a scientific and international university with a religious identity with the aim of spreading Islamic, humanities, and social sciences. It has offices in more than 65 countries and has relations with many Islamic centers including the Islamic faculty of Tajikistan national university. By signing agreement with this university, Tajikistan national university has held short-term courses for professors. Another program of Al-Mustafa University is providing opportunities for Tajik professors and students to teach and study in Iran (Dehshiri & Taheri, 2016).

Sa'adi foundation established in 2012 with the aim of strengthening and spreading Persian language abroad. Its responsibility is conducting educational, research, cultural, and media activities in the area of Persian language in the international arena. Its aim is to strengthen Persian language centers in foreign countries. Its activities, among others, are publishing and sending materials on Persian language learning and holding courses for Persian language teachers in the region. It also offers some short and long-term opportunities for foreign students to stay in Tehran and learn Persian language. Tajik research institute for Persian culture is established by Iran's foreign ministry in cooperation with Sa'adi foundation in Tajikistan. Its main activity is publishing and distributing books in Persian language.

Association of governmental universities and research institutes of countries surrounding Caspian Sea was established in 1995 with four members namely universities of Guilan, Mazandaran, Gorgan, and Technical University of Astrakhan, and has 51 members now. Its main goals are as below:

- Joint cooperation in the areas of culture and education;
- Information exchange about sciences relating to the Caspian Sea;
- Creating data bank of Caspian Sea;
- Holding seminars and workshops;
- Publishing scientific newsletter in English;
- Exchange of students and professors;
- Creating new university majors relating to the Caspian Sea;
- Providing necessary support for spreading of the language of member countries (Dehshiri & Taheri, 2016).

In spite of all outside pressures (especially from U.S.), Iran has thrived to revive its cultural and historical ties with Central Asia; shared ties dating back to the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. In fact, culture and civilization are the most important factors and in a sense are the relative advantages of Iran in Central Asia (Karami & Kaleji, 2014). Despite this fact and all the efforts, Iran has not been able to make use of its advantages regarding the countries of the region and thus establishing meaningful interactions. In fact, Iran's policy in other regions and other issues such as its hostility with the U.S. has overshadowed its policy towards Central Asia (Karami & Karimian, 2017).

4. Research Findings: Mental Connectivity: The Main Missing Factor

U.S. enmity with Iran is an important factor halting Tehran from using its unique geographical position and ancient historical-cultural ties with the region, and has led to specific perception or misperception regarding Iran and its goals in the region on the part of the leaders of the region to reject Iran as part of the Central Asia and Caucasus sub-system (Hajiyousefi, 2015: 87-88). Another reason is countries' agenda of nation-building and thus nation-branding. Therefore, it is necessary for them to (re)define their culture, traditions, and history. Due to this fact, they are unwilling to accept themselves as part of the Iranian cultural universe. Additionally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia as the cultural intersection between East and West has strengthened its cultural ties with Turkish and Western cultures. In fact, in the post-communist era, despite the belief of many scholars regarding Iran's overwhelming cultural influence in the region, it seems that Turkish and Russian cultures have been dominant in the region (Sanaei, 2011: 298).

Furthermore, Iran's policy in other regions especially in the Middle East has a great effect on the perception of the leaders of Central Asia, and consequently they have perceived Iran's policies as such. This is a function of domino beliefs (Jervis, 2017: 236). The so-called Iran's agenda to be the dominant actor in the region creates a perception in the countries of the region to perceive Iran as a threat, since they are not up for a big brother. So, they try to balance against Iran which in turn, acts as a pretext for the presence of any third-party actor. Lastly, there are problems arising from Iran's policy-making process and its domestic issues. Iran has not defined a

specified and clear role for itself in the region, and in the result, has faced with important impediments, both in the inside (lack of prioritization) and in the outside (passive cooperation and the precaution of the political regimes of the region). Consequently, Iran has remained in the periphery of major issues (Karami, 2008).

Other important factors, namely Shi'ism in Iran, lack of meaningful economic relations, lack of required infrastructures for boosting regional trade and transportation, having non-complementary economies, historical biases and memories and Iran's misperception about the region should be added to the aforementioned factors to have a holistic picture on the issue.

To put it in a nutshell, domestics, regional and trans-regional factors (Ghaderi Hajat and Nosrati, 2014) have prevented Iran from utilizing its cultural assets in the region to establish a meaningful, steady and fruitful relations with neighboring countries. Existence of non-material soft-power sources can't, by itself, yield in hard and tangible outcomes. Therefore, some new approaches should be adopted.

Coming to Iran's relations with the countries of Central Asia and Caucasus, we can argue that due to lack of mental connectivity they have failed to define and establish a fruitful and viable relations, making use of their huge common assets. Different factors, mostly political, have hindered the politicians and elites at the both sides to form and forge joint values, and similar fashion of thinking about their bilateral and multilateral potentials. One of the key impediments, in this regard, is the misperception and misunderstanding that is prevalent among regional leaders. Due to lack of constant communications between the leaders, lack of meaningful economic and cultural relations, unintended ignorance of regional assets and the role of third parties, they have failed to define a regional agenda on which they rely to boost regional cooperation. So, the main argument of the current study is that without fostering any meaningful mental connectivity between Iran and Central Asia and Caucasus Countries, they won't be able to benefit their common cultural, political, linguistic and historical heritage. To do so, they should boost communications and regional dialogue. The leaders of the countries should adopt a new approach. In the next part, some policy recommendations would be offered.

5. Policy Recommendations

By promoting people-to-people connectivity, governments could help their people access the region's vast knowledge resources, as well as foster better understanding about the region's diverse cultures and value systems (United Nations ESCAP, 2014).

If Iran wants to best capitalize on its cultural assets and to establish meaningful interactions, it needs to first engage in trust-building measures by participating in bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral regional initiatives and building hard infrastructures. Then, based on these hard infrastructures it can embark on initiatives for enhancing its cultural relations with the countries of the region. After all, normative power elements need material basis for realization.

Another solution for Iran should be moving beyond groupthink bias toward bureaucratic-organizational politics. Groupthink means that the group making the decision seeks consensus at the expense of exploring a variety of alternatives (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010:44). Bureaucratic-organizational politics provides venue for bargaining and bandwagoning between different entities with different mindsets which would result in a more cohesive policy.

Universities can help to build bridges between Iran and these countries. On one hand, due to the lack of meaningful mutual understanding between them, their past activities have resulted to nothing. On the other hand, the ordinary people are not capable of having dialogue due to lack of venue, role of ideologies, and most importantly, its trivial impact on high politics. Therefore, universities can act as a variable that connects elites and ordinary people. In this sector, there can be some initiations such as forming regional universities network cooperating on student and lecturer exchange, conducting joint scientific cooperation, annual meetings, joint or double degree programs and cultural initiatives.

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