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Iran and Turkmenistan: An Overview

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Abstract

To understand the relations between Iran and Turkmenistan very comprehensively and bring out a thorough analysis of the subject, it is very important to study the social, economic and political relations between these two countries. Research works have been conducted by various scholars about the Iran-Turkmenistan relations but the emerging socio-economic and political relations between these countries have not been taken into consideration. Thus, this research paper will help to understand the socio-economic and political spheres in analyzing the bilateral relations between Iran and Turkmenistan as an overview.

Keywords: Disintegration, Geo-strategic, Cosmology, Mythology, Isolation, Islamic fundamentalism, Bilateral relations.

Introduction

Central Asian Republics emerged as independent sovereign countries in December 1991 as a result of Soviet disintegration. Central Asia lies at the heart of Eurasian continent and completely land-locked and geographically encircled by Russia (In the North), the Eastern Europe (In the West), Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan (In the South) and China (In the East). Any power which has a foothold or deep influence in Central Asia can have close watch to the important neighboring areas. Therefore, the region bears great geo-strategic importance. Its geo-economic importance is mainly because of the presence of vast oil and natural gas resources.

Iran sees the Central Asian region as an arena for reducing its own isolation. Hoping to make itself an attractive economical and political partner to these states. Iran has been cautious in supporting radical Islamic opposition movements in the region. Several Central Asian States (CAS) are proceeding with or contemplating energy projects that transit Iran. Prior to the disintegration of Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea was under the joint ownership of Soviet Union and Iran but the emergence of three new states, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan bordering the Caspian Sea laying claim to resources make the situation complex. The exclusive rights of Russia and

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Iran have come to be a challenge. The largest oil and gas reserves are located within the territory of these three former Soviet Republics.

Turkmenistan and Iran enjoy a common cosmology and mythology through the concept of "Turan-o-Iran" a traditional mode of spatial sub division. Actually, Turan is a Persian term to designate north eastern Iran. The Turkmenistan and Iranian peoples share a great deal of traditions, like the Navruz. Availability of ethnic minorities on both of the border is one of the factors facilitating close contacts between Turkmenistan and Iran. After the disintegration of USSR, these independent governments set out to outline a new framework of relationship with the outside nations. Turkmenistan has gained invaluable geopolitical advantages that may lead it to increase of power as important player in the Iranian region in the near future. If the Caspian Sea was to be given the status of sea it would be divided into five territorial zones with each country bordering each other as per their 1982 laws of the sea convention. This would allow these three Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, major share of the Caspian Sea's hydrocarbons and the right to develop their own portion of the sea bed for their respective country. If the Caspian Sea is accepted as a lake then all the five states bordering the Caspian Sea will have equal rights of navigation and exploitation of its natural resources. The tension increases due to rise of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism too.

Turkmenistan shares a common border with Iran. The Caspian dimension is also an important factor of the relations between Turkmenistan and Iran. They have a lengthy border; they share historic, religious, and civilization commonalty stretching back for centuries. Advancing relations with Turkmenistan, Iran is being quite pragmatic. It is after strengthening of its positions in the region and benefiting from availability of hydrocarbons in the neighboring country and from its convenient geopolitical location at the crossroads of transit ways. Turkmen population of the northern provinces of Iran is a factor that facilitates neighbourly relations. Geographically Iran and Turkmenistan play a vital role in linking Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. It is the only country which has access to Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea ports although since the mid 1990s. Turkmenistan is also aware of Iran which has a very sensitive political relationship with the West, more particularly with the United States, which has alleged that Iran provides extensive support to terrorist groups. There is also a dispute about its nuclear program, which allegedly violates the terms of Non-Proliferation Treaty. Despite several difficulties and hurdles, Turkmenistan also sees the Iranian policy in relation to this region which has proved durable. In the first place, Iranian policy has vastly improved its relations with Russia, despite the potential contradictions in the Iranian and Russian policy towards Central Asia and the Caspian region. Both countries have evolved a strategic partnership with significant military and nuclear components. Secondly, they share increasing desire to influence the development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan has signed agreements with Iran, Russia, Ukraine, and China and tries to develop relations with Iran in this respect. However, due to the limited capacity of gas pipelines and the lack of any alternative export routes for natural gas, Turkmenistan needs to develop socio-economic and political

relations with Iran. Iran sees Turkmenistan as transit route to rest of the Central Asian region. "The head of the Iranian delegation to the second session of the regional planning council of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) held in Tehran on 27 January 1992, welcomed the request from the republic of Turkmenistan to join the ECO, and expressed the hope that the ECO activities would contribute towards the formation of a commonwealth of the Islamic countries."[1] At present, the gas infrastructure and the signed contracts connect Turkmenistan to Iran and Russia (since 1 January 2006, Iran and Russia are the sole importers of Turkmen gas). The construction of a 200 kilometer pipeline between the Turkmenistan town of Korpedzhe and Kord-Kuy in Iran assured the export of 8 billion cubic meters of gas each year into Iran's network. With Iranian financing, this pipeline is expected to become a part of a larger system for exporting Turkmen gas to Turkey. The steady improvement of Turkmenistan's relations with Iran in the sphere of gas transport was symbolized by the joint decision in the summer of 2006 to increase Turkmenistan's annual export to the Iranian grid to 14 billion cubic meters.

In this way, many scholars emphasize that by virtue of its geographical location, history, and economic circumstances within the region of Greater Central Asia, Turkmenistan should be a major crossing point for both regional and continental transport. Since independence Turkmenistan has done much to seize this opportunity and establish itself as an entrepot along major rail road and highway arteries. Notwithstanding impressive achievements that have been largely underestimated abroad, Turkmenistan at the start of the twenty-first century lags behind many of its neighbours in transport and trade and shows few signs of breaking out of the isolation that results from this situation. Despite possessing significant oil resources and the world's fifth largest natural gas supply, Turkmenistan remains one of the poorest countries in Central Asia. A lack of export routes for gas and oil, and misuse of export revenues by the government have meant that Turkmenistan is not profiting as much as it might be from its natural resources. Katarzyna Czerewacz and Zofia Tomczonek (2008) argues that Central Asian countries are the object of interest of several countries (the USA, China, Russia, Turkey, Muslim countries, partly European Union), because of their geo-strategic location but mainly due to their enormous resources of crude oil, natural gas, gold and uranium. The region is important for the fast developing Chinese economy. Moreover, the shortest land route from Europe to China runs through Central Asia. However, that the region of Central Asia is characterized with big ethnic and cultural diversity resulting in many tensions and conflicts. One of serious dangers is the Islamic fundamentalism; among the others one can indicate questions of boundaries protection and security[2]. Kenneth Katzman and James Nichol (1998) said that Iran sees the Central Asian region as an arena for reducing its own isolation hoping to make an attractive economic and political partner to these states. Particularly Turkmenistan and Iran have been cautious in supporting radical Islamic opposition movements in the region. Several Central Asian states are proceeding with or contemplating energy projects that transit Iran[3]. Simbal A. Khan (2004) analyses that the twentieth century political landscape of the world is strewn with conflicts whose sources lie as much in

the engagement of extra regional powers, as they lay in the fault lines of their regional security environments. This attempts to expose the underlying tensions within Iran's immediate security environment which are exacerbated by the involvement of the hyperactive super powers like the U.S. These changes have largely undermined Iran's geo-political significance and increased its vulnerability to pressures from various international and regional sources. Growing U.S. unilateralism and the post 9/11 war on terrorism have enhanced Iran's security predicament as it grapples with the manifold increase and concentration of U.S. military forces along its borders[4].

Conclusion

Iran and Turkmenistan shares a number of highly significant factors in terms of religion, history, customs, and traditions-these factors will help in promoting and strengthening the political relations between two countries. Turkmen population of the northern provinces of Iran is an important factor for that facilitates neighbourly socio-economic and political relations between Turkmenistan and Iran. The attraction, both countries experience toward each other, stems from the lack of choice, which is a distinct feature of the Iranian and Turkmen relations. Both countries cannot help having active bilateral contacts because they have a lengthy border; they share historic, religious, and civilizational commonalty stretching back to centuries. Turkmenistan and Iran have interest to develop their relations for three reasons- firstly, to build ties with the neighbouring states for social, economic, and political reasons in order not to leave the area free for their rivals. Secondly, to break its isolation from the gulf and the Near Eastern areas, and thirdly, to become active in their region by re-launching their foreign policy and by re-invigorating their regional diplomacy. To achieve these objectives Turkmenistan and Iran have been intensely active at the bilateral level relations. Though Turkmenistan will definitely look for other countries to have an access to International markets. So, in this context Iran's long border with Turkmenistan contributes to its status of a potentially powerful external actor in Central Asia.

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