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When Tehran looks at its regional environment. Iranian think tanks and their analysis of Central Asia

Clément Therme*

At a time when the American and European media are focused on the Iranian narrative regarding the "Arab Spring" in general and the Syrian crisis in particular, it is noteworthy to examine Tehran's attitude toward Central Asia. In this case, no official public stance has been taken by Iran concerning an "Islamic revival" (*Bidari-e eslam*) and, more broadly, the revolutionary discourse does not have the same weight in Iran's foreign policy in regard to Central Asia compared to the United States and the Middle East. In Central Asia, the Islamic Republic plays the role of a status quo power,¹ and it is in favor of keeping borders un-

changed and finding a juridical solution based on Soviet-era treaties to define a new legal regime for the Caspian Sea. Despite significant differences in Iran's regional policies, there are very few studies that deal with the role of Iranian think tanks in shaping Tehran's foreign policy. This dearth in literature regarding what is a potentially important factor explaining the Islamic Republic's behavior on the international scene deserves to be filled in. In this article, I limit the scope of my analysis to examine Iranian think tanks' production on Central Asia.

Producing expertise on international affairs in Iran

None of the main Iranian think tanks are fully independent from the state. As in any theocratic political system, the office of the supreme religious leader remains the main center of power regarding foreign policy decisions. The religious dimension of the Iranian state is strengthened by the defense of the main ideological tenet of the Islamic revolution, namely the cultural rejection of the West. This explains why Iranian scholars working for think tanks and universities have to take into account red lines imposed by the Islamic Republic. The centrality of Khomeini's writings—including his speeches and written works outlining his vision of the world—in designing present-day Iran diplomacy is still crucial. More than 33 years after the Islamic Republic's founding, the Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini is still a key institution in legitimizing ideologically the international behavior of the republic.² This was for instance the case with Khomeini's letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, which is often quoted by the Iranian political establishment as an example of a revolutionary anticipated vision of the fall of Communism and a sign of the dawn of a new Islamic world order.³

Even if the ideological hostility toward the West is part of the identity of the Islamic Republic, differences between the reformist (*eslahtalaban*) and conservative (*osulgarayan*) factions do have an impact on both the intellectual production of Iranian think tanks and their relationships with their Western counterparts. After the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005, relations between Western and Iranian think tanks were cut off. As a result, contacts between Iranian and Western think tanks, and even with independent scholars from the West or journalists and diplomats, became very risky: several Iranian research fellows were jailed for being in contact with Western think tanks or representatives of governments and universities. To counter what Iranian officials perceived as a Western view of the world, the Islamic Republic invested heavily in international broadcasting. It launched, for instance, Press TV, a channel which

allows Iranian officials to present their views regarding international affairs.⁴

Discussing Iran's foreign policy is often shaped by the issue of differentiating between Tehran's regional policy and international positioning. On the one hand, some analysts advance the idea that Iranian regional policy is based on the defence of pragmatic interests and not on revolutionary ideals. According to this view, Tehran's objectives in Central Asia are mainly to preserve stability, to strengthen economic cooperation with the post-Soviet independent states, and to emerge as a major regional power.⁵ Consequently, pragmatic diplomacy is designed according to a pattern of forging cooperative regional relations in order to reduce international isolation.⁶ On the other hand, several other analysts highlight Iran's revolutionary dimension and its anti-Western ideology as the main factor explaining its behavior.⁷ They point to what they call Tehran's "aggressive policies" that use the territories of the Central Asian states "to wage spy wars, and exacerbate regional tensions."⁸ Such a perspective insists on the confrontational dimension of Iran's foreign policy, which is seen as resulting in the same antagonizing behavior when dealing with neighbouring countries.⁹

One scholar who introduced himself as a "critic" of the Ahmadinejad administration, Seyyed Mohammad Marandi, stated that:

Western governments and politicians should be under no illusion: the vast majority of Iranians see the Islamic Republic of Iran as a legitimate form of government and they will support it as they did a few days ago [on the 31st anniversary of the Islamic revolution in 2010]. They should realize that many of the so-called Iran experts know little about Iran, some have an agenda, some have spent very little time in Iran, some don't even speak Farsi, but have the audacity to write articles and books about the country like the Orientalists of old. Also, their diplomats in Tehran are largely surrounded by a small group of like-minded Iranians who do not reflect or even understand the beliefs of the majority of Iranians.¹⁰

Iranian think tanks and their ideological orientations

Since Ahmadinejad's rise to power, the *Majles* Research Center has been quite influential in reinforcing the diplomatic doctrine as defined by the Office of the Supreme Leader. The Revolutionary Guards have organized their own desks to study the situation in neighboring countries, as well as relations with the United States, Europe, and the Middle East; no information leaks from them, however, making analysis difficult. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also has at its disposal several public offices, which can be classified as think tanks, working on foreign policy and the forecasting of world trends.

The main Iranian think tank dealing with foreign policy issues is the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), founded in 1983 under the authority of the Deputy Foreign Minister for Education and Research. IPIS objectives are to encourage research on Iran's foreign policy and studies of the main international issues affecting the country and the Islamic world globally. To pursue these goals, the Institute employs around one hundred research fellows, experts, and diplomats.¹¹

In 2006, Manouchehr Mohammadi, Deputy Foreign Minister for Education and Research in charge of monitoring IPIS activities, explained his view on how a think tank should be managed in light of its objective of enlightening the decision-makers conducting foreign policy:

A think tank should have the ability of defining a common position on the main international issues. This shared position is natural. Indeed, if one conducts the study in a truly scientific manner, the research outcome of the experts should be similar. We should arrive at a community of views. This is what states are looking for. If every research fellow draws its own conclusion, there will be no effect on the decision-making process.¹²

This point of view outlines the intellectual *dirigisme* at work inside IPIS. All critical opinions are refuted in advance as "non-scientific" or as points of view that weaken and obscure the intellectual identity of the think tank.

The quality of research is directly connected with the routine contention of power between the reformist, ideological conservative, and pragmatic conservative factions. During the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies (1997–2005), IPIS opened up progressively to intellectual exchanges with the West in general and European countries in particular. For instance, the Italian ambassador to Iran (2003–8), Roberto Toscano, participated in conferences jointly organized by IPIS and the Landau Network-Centro Volta, an Italian academic network.¹³ However, this opening to scholars and diplomats from European countries ended in 2006, not only because of a change in IPIS management after Ahmadinejad's rise to power, but also after the organization by IPIS of the 'Holocaust conference'.¹⁴ Consequently, most Western research institutions and think tanks decided to suspend their relations with IPIS. In a joint declaration following Tehran's conference on the Shoah, several European institutes and foundations stated that "through its complicity with the deniers of the absolute Evil that was the Holocaust [sic], IPIS has now forfeited its status as an 'interlocuteur valable', as an acceptable partner."¹⁵

This refusal to cooperate with the main Iranian think tank provoked in-fighting between political factions at the highest level of the Islamic state. Mahmud Ahmadinejad aimed to preserve IPIS's dominant role by stopping all attempts at cooperation between European research institutes and IPIS's competitors. Specifically targeted, the Ravand Institute for Economic and International Studies directed by Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Adeli¹⁶ had to cancel a conference project with the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), an agency of the European Union based in Paris. In December 2008, on the eve of the conference gathering, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs failed to issue visas for European scholars. In so doing, Iranian authorities excluded the possibility of a think tank affiliated with the reformist and Rafsanjani factions organizing a conference aimed at fostering dialogue between European and Iranian scholars.¹⁷

Founded in 2005, the Ravand Institute for Economic and International Studies is a research center which belongs to the reformist faction. Consequently, since Ahmadinejad's presidency, it has become an important place for Iranian inter-

nal opponents and Western diplomats and business representatives to debate international issues. The Ravand Institute promotes a positive and desideologized image of Iran through seemingly contradictory debates regarding international affairs and economic issues. Both the quality of intellectual production and the high level of experts have placed this Institute as the main center of encounters between foreigners based in Iran and the most pragmatic segment of the Iranian political establishment.

Another key institution is the Center for Strategic Research, which was founded in 1989 in order “to carry out strategic studies in various international, political, economic, legal, cultural, and social fields.”¹⁸ The Center is set up for the purpose of advising the political elite in general and the Office of the Supreme Leader in particular. Another of its missions is in line with the duties of the Expediency Council: “[it] is to study and research those issues which are among the duties of the Expediency Council according to law (including drawing up large-scale policies of the system, providing consultation services to the Leader, possible revision of the constitution, presenting solutions for large-scale problems, arbitration with regard to differences between legal entities, etc.). Since the Expediency Council formulates the general strategy of the Islamic system, the research activities of the Centre are mainly of a strategic nature.”¹⁹

The Center was placed under the supervision of the presidency until 1997, thereafter coming under the Expediency Council, which, since 1989, Rafsanjani has been the president of. This allows his political faction, the *kargozaran*, to use the Center to challenge Ahmadinejad’s policies and to disseminate Rafsanjani’s opinion in the domestic media, such as the need for dialogue with Western countries and adopting a critical position regarding Ahmadinejad’s intention to build a strategic partnership with Russia. Since 1992, Hassan Rouhani, a former general secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security (1989–2005), has been at the head of the Center. A close ally of Rafsanjani, he was in charge of nuclear negotiations during the period 2003–5²⁰ and has had numerous high-level political responsibilities, such as five terms as a deputy of the *majles*.²¹ The intellectual production of the Center follows

the main tenets of the ideology of developmentalism advocated by Rafsanjani: that is, the defense of pragmatism in implementing foreign policy and in economic affairs in order to avoid any political and institutional democratization agenda. In this regard, Rouhani also opposed the so-called militarization of political activities in Iran following guidelines provided by Ayatollah Khomeini.²²

In 2007, Seyyed Mohammad Sadegh Kharazi launched the “Iran Diplomacy” website (www.irdiplomacy.ir) dedicated to publishing articles dealing with foreign policy issues. The nephew of Kamal Kharazi, the Minister for Foreign Affairs during President Khatami’s two terms, Sadegh Kharazi is also the brother-in-law of the son of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the former Iranian ambassador to France (2002–5). A member of the reformist faction, he is one of the main critics of Ahmadinejad’s strategy of rapprochement with Russia.²³ As a manager of the website, he introduces his media outlet as “an independent institution, which acts within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s regulations, its expenses being supplied through website advertisements and people’s aid.”²⁴ The website aims to defend “ideas of a group of realist, moderate, Iranian intellectuals and tries to portray an accurate and correct image of contemporary Iran to the world instead of selective, biased images.”²⁵

Even if most Iranian research centers linked to the reformist or the pragmatic conservative factions introduce themselves as “independent,” it is worth noting that their intellectual autonomy is relative given their inability to go beyond formal opposition (semi-opposition) to the government. Despite these limits, the aforementioned research institutes play a critical role in the internal debate on foreign policy issues. This is particularly true of the reformist institutions and media, which use their expertise to initiate debates on controversial issues, such as the Iranian position on the Caspian Sea’s legal status.

More specialized research institutions should also be mentioned here, especially those dealing with regional issues or energy questions such as the International Institute for Caspian Studies (IICS),²⁶ which promotes the official Iranian position regarding the Caspian Sea. The scope of re-

search remains largely focused on energy issues and on the potential role of Iran as a transit country for Caspian Sea oil and gas resources. The intellectual expertise is largely desideologized and designed to enhance Iranian regional interests. Finally, the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies,²⁷ directed by Kayhan Barzegar and before him Mehdi Zakerian,²⁸ offers networking opportunities for Iranian and Western researchers working on the Middle East. Informal diplomacy even comprises one of the main roles of this center, organizing, as it does, conferences where diplomats, representatives of the private sector, and scholars can discuss foreign policy and the nuclear issue.

All these institutions contribute at different levels to building international affairs as an academic field in Iran. Even if their analysis does not go beyond the Islamic Republic's red lines, it is worth reading their intellectual production to understand the decision-making process of Iranian diplomacy.

Central Asia: a research *terra incognita*

During the 1980s, Central Asia constituted a neighboring region where Iran could not actively conduct its foreign policy.²⁹ At that time, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was focused on the Iraq war (1980–88) and the Afghan civil war and Soviet intervention (1980–89). Relations with the Soviet Union were based on ideological opposition toward the superpowers, who were perceived as “quintessential oppressors, seeking to impose themselves on the rest of the world.”³⁰ Even if during the Cold War the opposition toward the Soviet regime was less rigid than the rejection of the United States, the Islamic Republic's diplomacy privileged a North/South rather than an East/West view of the world.³¹

Iran faced drastic domestic changes following Khomeini's death in 1989, which coincided with the end of the war with Iraq. These changes pushed the Iranian political elite to adopt a new agenda in foreign policy. President Rafsanjani decided to reassess the whole Iranian regional and international strategy and contributed to creating new think tanks and opened them to foreign cooperation. This drastic change translated into an ideological fracturing of the political

elite regarding Khomeini's political legacy. The proliferation of institutions dedicated to providing analysis on foreign policy was also due to the need for adapting Khomeini's revolutionary thinking to the new world order, with the emergence of a post-Cold War international system. Rafsanjani's strategy had the dual aim of promoting *Realpolitik* regionally and a policy of détente with the United States, as well as normalizing relations with foreign institutions in the academic field.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Iranian political elite were euphoric at what they perceived as an Islamist ideological victory over Communism and its atheist ideology. At the same time, Iranian authorities soon became worried about Turkey's and Pakistan's advances into Central Asia, their own difficulties in building ties with the new regimes, and the United States rising role in the region. Rafsanjani's diplomacy demonstrated its ability to adapt to a post-Khomeinist environment and to develop a policy of pragmatism in regard to the new geopolitical reality on Iran's north-eastern frontier. According to Fred Halliday, a representative of the Islamic Republic defined the strategy toward the newly independent states of Central Asia as the “flower bouquet” policy (*siasat-e dast-e gol*), meaning that every political leader arriving at Tehran's airport was welcomed with a bouquet of flowers.³²

The desideologization of Iranian foreign policy was indeed especially visible in the former Soviet space. This realism was the result of the Islamic Republic's diplomatic embarrassment in a post-Cold War international system that was suddenly dominated by the American superpower. As a result, Tehran reassessed numerous ideological tenets, more particularly, the political will to export the Islamic revolution. Its newly founded diplomatic pragmatism reassured Moscow, which was afraid of seeing Tehran reactivate its project of ideological propaganda toward the Muslim population of the former Soviet space. Therefore, Central Asia became an experimental field for Iranian diplomacy in terms of adopting a less ideologically-centered diplomacy.

As early as 1992, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to create a Center for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus at IPIS, further launching

two specialized quarterlies dealing with Central Asia and the Caucasus region, jointly published by the Center and the Office of the Deputy Foreign Minister for Research and Education. The first journal, *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye va qafqaz* (The Central Asia and Caucasus Review), offers a wide range of views on Central Asia and the Caucasus from the West, Russia, and Iran. The second review, *Amu Darya*, published in English, aims to disseminate views of Iranian and non-Iranian scholars on the two regions.³³

This new research interest in the post-Soviet regions was justified by two main factors: "In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a systemic inquiry and study of Central Asia and the Caucasus became increasingly important. The significance of the region, chronic dearth of accurate information, and lack of general familiarity with this region, all added to the urgency of the undertaking ... It is an uncontested fact that the cultural, historical, artistic, literary, and religious commonalities linking the Iranian and Central Asians go far beyond many would tend to believe."³⁴

Iran's Central Asian policy in expertise publications

If many articles and reports published by Iranian think tanks on Central Asia insist on economic cooperation, shared cultural heritage, and the Persian-language community, they tend mostly to discuss the current, geopolitical situation—that is, the importance of the Caspian Sea in the national Iranian imaginary, as well as the relationship with the powerful northern neighbor, namely Russia, are key issues that shape the considerations of Iranian experts.

Iranian experts regularly advance arguments about Iran's cultural proximity to Central Asia, and therefore tend to promote the region as a cultural, economic, and geopolitical entity. They define Iran's policy toward it as favoring "self-reliance among regional states and the exclusion of extra-regional powers (meaning the United States)."³⁵ They portray Tehran as a responsible, "peaceful," and "stabilizing"³⁶ regional power which builds good-neighbourly relations through cooperation in the energy sector, fight against

terrorism, preservation of territorial integrity, and respect of state sovereignty. They also develop the conventional Iranian narrative on the country as a victim of Western "Iranophobia" and point to the "Zionist" influence on Western states' Central Asian policy.

Tajikistan obviously benefits from a specific focus by Iranian experts. The constructive role played by Tehran in the Tajik peace negotiations in 1995–97 is often presented as a potential model that could be applied in the South Caucasus. Assadollah Athari, a Turkish affairs expert and member of the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies, explains that "Iran enjoys both civilizational weight as well as political weight. It also has the non-interventionist and non-ideological experience in settling regional issues, one example of which was witnessed in Tajikistan."³⁷ Beyond the exemplarity of the Iranian diplomatic mediation vis-à-vis the Tajik civil war, the Iranian narrative focuses on the encounter between the two nations (*mellat*) and the need for economic development in the poorest country of the former Soviet space.³⁸ In 2008, the launch of a Persian TV channel in collaboration with Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and the establishment of an Economic Council of the Persian-Speaking Union, reinforced the trend of promoting Iranian soft power in the "Iranian world" (*Iran zamin*). Finally, Iranian priorities in Tajikistan remain also closely linked to the Afghan situation, especially rising instability, and the need to address drug trafficking.

The legal status of the Caspian Sea is understood as the main judicial and territorial issue to be discussed in relation to Central Asia. Seen from the Iranian point of view, any deviation from the official objective of an equal share of the Sea is considered to go against Iran's state interests.³⁹ Different schools can nonetheless be discerned. A first, "maximalist" group believes that Iran has a right to 50 percent of the Caspian, on the basis of the Soviet–Iranian treaties of 1921 and 1940 and the Almaty Declaration of 1991, in which the newly independent states agreed to respect the Soviet Union's legal obligations. The second, "minimalist" group states that the Iranian share is limited to the part of the Caspian below the Astarahoseinqoli line, which was the "imaginary" line of demarcation during Soviet times.⁴⁰ A third, "median" group judges that the best solu-

tion is the condominium regime together with a shared agreement concerning the seabed.⁴¹ Given the sensitivity of Iranian public opinion regarding this issue, the authorities need to find a compromise with neighbouring states without undermining, even if symbolically, state sovereignty.⁴²

Linked to the Iranian perception of the Caspian Basin as a site of potential conflict is the issue of energy. Articles in Iranian journals denounce the U.S. unilateral sanctions against Iran and the West's strategy of blocking every project concerning oil or gas pipelines linking Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Turkey via Iranian territory. Most Iranian experts point to Washington's ideological policy regarding what they consider to be the natural advantages of the Iranian route to export Caspian resources to the international market.

Central Asia as a site of competition with NATO

Even under Rafsanjani's policy of détente with the West, Iranian think tanks and their publications related to Central Asia remained staunchly opposed to the American policy in the Caspian region. They reacted vehemently to Washington's strategy of preventing Iran's access to Caspian oil and gas resources and, thus, of it becoming an alternative export route for the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan.⁴³ In the 2000s, the think tanks continued to use harsh diplomatic rhetoric condemning American military presence in the "Greater Middle East," and denounced the military encirclement of its territory by the U.S. Army, especially after the intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and in Iraq (2003).

NATO involvement in the region through the Partnership for Peace is probably one of the most widely discussed topics in specialized journals published by Iranian think tanks. Many articles are published not only on NATO's expansion strategy but also on the issue of conflicting relationships between Washington and Moscow in a post-Cold War international system. When analyzing what they perceive as a threat from NATO, Iranian scholars point out the converging interests of Moscow and Tehran in opposition to the rise of NATO's influence in the post-Soviet space. The Iranian perception of the current situation is

heavily shaped by NATO's intervention in the Balkan crisis in the 1990s, presented as the harbinger to a broader project aimed at extending influence over the Middle East, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia.⁴⁴

From the Iranian perspective, there is a direct link between NATO's military presence and the location of oil and gas resources. That is why think tanks' publications often highlight the arrival of NATO military experts in Central Asia; the activities undertaken with the Central Asian armies in the framework of the Partnership for Peace;⁴⁵ and the rumor started by the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Rahim Safavi, evoking Iraq's future membership of NATO. Think tanks consider NATO as a self-proclaimed gendarme with an illegitimate right of intervention in Middle Eastern affairs. This is a common view among the political elite of the Islamic Republic, whether they be reformists or ideological conservatives.

Nevertheless, despite this theoretical consensus, in practice the Islamic Republic shows some flexibility in its openness to dialogue on security issues with some NATO members. In March 2009, the first informal contacts between NATO and the Islamic Republic took place after more than 30 years of no relations. This first contact consisted of an informal meeting between the Iranian ambassador to the EU, Ali Asghar Khaji, and a NATO negotiator, Martin Erdmann, in Brussels. According to Italian officials, the main topics of discussion were security in Afghanistan and NATO supply, especially the potential of the use of Iranian territory as a supply route.⁴⁶

The partnership with Russia as Iran's prism on Central Asia

It is probably in the relationship to Russia that Iranian think tanks express their largest divergences of point of view. Here again, the differences in producing knowledge are directly related to the conservative and reformist factions. Under the Khatami presidency, Tehran supported Russian policy toward Central Asia; but the reformist diplomatic line also included the need for dialogue with Washington on this issue.⁴⁷ On the contrary, the conservative faction, in particular during the Ahmadinejad presidency, has favored

the implementation of a strategic partnership with Moscow in order to confront the West. Schematically, Iranian scholars can be divided into two groups. Most members of the conservative faction advocate pursuing the strategic objective of building an alliance with Russia to preserve the anti-Western identity of the Islamic Republic.⁴⁸ The second group, namely the reformist faction, tries to show that Russia's behavior in Central Asia is worse than Western policies toward Iran.⁴⁹

However, there is predominantly a conciliatory tone vis-à-vis Russia. Many articles present Russian perspectives,⁵⁰ address the regional issue affecting Iranian-Russian relations in general, and deal with the question of the remaining hurdles facing the two neighbours in building a strategic partnership. Sharing the same viewpoint as Moscow is even more developed in relation to the issue of "color revolutions" and the West's democratization agenda. Iranian diplomatic discourse has opposed support for democratization measures implemented by the U.S. government and NGOs such as the Soros Foundation. Similar to Moscow, Tehran rejects what it perceives as a Western policy tool to enhance its influence. After the Iranian "Spring" of June 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran even labelled Western efforts to promote democracy in Central Asia and the Middle East as *jang-e narm*, meaning soft war.

Hoping for Russia to again become a key actor to counter American influence in the region, Iranian think tanks have actively discussed, mostly positively, Putin's presidency and Russia's reassertion on the international stage. Russia's political evolution after the pro-Western Yeltsin decade was interpreted in Tehran as a diplomatic opportunity to enhance its own regional power. In an article entitled "Russia, the West, and Iran," Elaheh Koulaei⁵¹ points out the Russian disappointment vis-à-vis Western countries after the fall of the Soviet Union, especially after 1994.⁵² Iranian publications have thus tried to carefully analyze what they define as the "Eurasianist" and "Atlanticist" political factions and their balance in the Kremlin, as Moscow's attitude toward the West is perceived from Tehran as the main factor affecting bilateral cooperation. After Putin's successful comeback to the Russian presidency in March 2012, the view from Tehran sees the probability

of persistent Russian-American tensions given the predominance of what they interpret as a "moderate Eurasianism":

The moderate Eurasianists came to this understanding that confidence building measures are not fruitful, because the West has its own policy and agenda. So, some Russians think that the time for confidence building measures is over. Generally speaking, Putin came to power at the time when the mistrust between the U.S. and Russia was at its peak, unsuccessful confidence-building had been experienced and "resetting" the ties between the two countries wasn't working and he was being given an unfavourable treatment by the West and especially the U.S. It's clear that with this background, Putin is not after cooperating with the U.S. I think he wants to correct the West's wrong policies towards Russia and himself.⁵³

To pursue its diplomatic agenda of rejecting Western, and especially NATO influence, in Central Asia, Tehran has had to rely on Moscow as its main ally. In July 2012, the Iranian ambassador in Moscow, Mahmoud Reza Sajjadi, pointed out the main incentives for Russia and Iran to increase their bilateral cooperation:

I think that one of the West's concerns is that it thinks Iran and Russia have common interests and threats in the region. It is somehow interesting that there are no other two countries in the world which have the same interests and threats. The areas in which we have common threats and interests are: Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus regions, energy, the issue of Russian disintegration, containing Israel's strong presence in the region and the weakening of Muslims' status in Russia, the Caspian Sea region, battling the Salafi and Wahhabi activities in the Caucasus region, Iraq, Palestine, and the Syrian crisis. In Afghanistan, in the three areas of drug smuggling, battling the extremists, and the U.S. long-term presence, the two countries have mutual interests. The second common issue is Central Asia and the Caucasus regions. Setting up NATO or U.S. bases in these regions is a concern for both countries. The third is related to the field of energy. Of great concern to us, is the fact that if Turkmenistan's gas and Kazakhstan's oil reaches

the European markets via the Caspian Sea, bypassing our and the Russians' market, it can have adverse effects on our energy markets. Therefore, we are strongly against laying pipelines under the Caspian Sea, on the pretext that it has environmental consequences.⁵⁴

Iranian support of Russian policy in the former Soviet space is therefore one of the main assets of Iranian diplomats when negotiating with Russia, especially the nuclear issue. According to Iranian publications, Tehran's goal of developing economic relations with Central Asia should not be interpreted as an anti-Russian policy.⁵⁵ Similarly, Iran's strategy to increase the role of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO, with Turkey, Pakistan, and four Central Asian states), and of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), has no anti-Russian objective, but rather an anti-Western one.⁵⁶ However, Iranian think tanks are also disappointed by what they interpret as the growing lack of support by Moscow of the Iranian stance on the nuclear issue. An expert on Iran and Russian ambassador in Tehran, Konstatin Shevlev detailed the Russian diplomatic rejection of the term "strategic partnership" when talking about Russian-Iranian relations:

I have to be direct on that because I don't like the term 'strategic partner,' since usually it is not viewed as a zero sum relationship, since should the interests of one side be infringed upon the other must enter the picture no matter what. This kind of relationship never existed between Iran and

Russia and never will, since Russia can only embark on this type of ties with the CIS.⁵⁷

Concluding remarks

As a result of the openness of Iranian diplomacy between 1989 and 2005, Iranian think tanks and research centers multiplied. After 2005 and the rise of the Iranian neoconservative faction to the presidency, it has become more difficult for Western and Iranian experts to engage in dialogue regarding shared objectives, namely preserving regional stability. The output of Iranian think tanks outlines both the innovative aspect of Iranian foreign policy after the first revolutionary decade and the limited changes implemented by Khomeini's successors.

On the innovative side lies the pragmatism of Iranian regional policy, determined by two main objectives in Central Asia: the search for stability on its north-eastern frontier and the need for its Central Asian diplomacy to accommodate Russian objectives. This is a new trend in Tehran's foreign policy which was previously, first and foremost, determined by revolutionary objectives. The moderate position toward Russia and the need for Tehran to follow Russian diplomatic guidelines demonstrates the limit of Iran's ambition to occupy the role of an independent regional power in the former Soviet space.

* Clément Therme is an Associate Fellow at the Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques (CADIS) at EHESS (Paris), and a Research Fellow for the Programme for the Study of Global Migration at the Graduate Institute (Geneva). He taught at the Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies at the University of Bath. He is the author of *Les Relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979* (Iranian-Russian Relations since 1979), published in French in 2012.

¹ Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), p. 174.

² See for instance, *Imam Khomeini on Exportation of Revolution* (Tehran: International Affairs Department, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, 2001), and *Imam Khomeini and the International System. A Collection of Articles*,

(Tehran: International Affairs Department, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, 2006).

³ See also the conferences organized by IPIS, "Third International Conference of Imam Khomeini and Foreign Policy: Ethics in International Relations" in March 2009, and "Fourth International Conference on Imam Khomeini and Foreign Policy" in June 2010.

⁴ Regarding the media strategy of the Islamic Republic and its will to promote an image of a moderate Islamic country, see Pierre Pahlavi, "Understanding Iran's Media Diplomacy," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2012): 21–33.

⁵ In the conception of Iranian foreign policy, Iran's willingness to become the main regional power is to be achieved through regional multilateralism. Indeed, "multilateralism also reflects Iran's beliefs in its own geographical centrality for extra-regional actors inter-

ested in access to Central Asia and the Caucasus." Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (2004): 127.

⁶ See Edmund Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), p. 13.

⁷ Ray Takeyh explains that the revolutionary continuity in Iranian foreign policy found its roots in the politicized interpretation of Shia Islam: "Revolutionary regimes usually change when their ardent supporters grow disillusioned and abandon the faith. It is, after all, much easier to be an ex-Marxist than an ex-Shiite. In one instance, renouncing one's faith is political defection; in the other, apostasy." Ray Takeyh, "All the Ayatollah's Men," *The National Interest*, August 22, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/all-the-ayatollahs-men-7344>.

⁸ Richard Weitz, "Iran's Self-Defeating Regional Strategy," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 21, 2012, <http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5738>.

⁹ This analysis points out Tehran's dependency on Russia and China. According to this view, Iran is almost a "vassal state" of Beijing and Moscow. Assad Homayoun and Gregory Copley, "Iran and its neighbors: Caught in a strategic trap of their own making," *WorldTribune.com*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.worldnewstribune.com/2012/07/19/iran-and-its-neighbors-caught-in-a-strategic-trap-of-their-own-making/>.

¹⁰ "Q&A: Seyed Mohammad Marandi: Green Movement Defeated," *insideIRAN.org*, February 15, 2010, <http://www.insideiran.org/news/qa-seyed-mohammad-marandi-green-movement-defeated/>.

¹¹ According to the presentation of the Institute in *Siasat-e khareji XVI* (2002). The Institute's main objectives are also listed on the English version of the website, <http://www.ipis.ir/Pageltem-359.aspx>.

¹² Personal interview with Manoutchehr Mohammadi, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris, September 2006.

¹³ See "Round Table on *Iran's Foreign Policy: Regional Issues and Relation with Europe*," Tehran: IPIS, January 13, 2004.

¹⁴ See the letter written by M. Mousavi to the Istituto Affari Internazionali of Roma. Available at: <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/Documenti/Comments%20on%20the%20IPIS,%20191.01.07.pdf>.

¹⁵ See the text of the declaration on the website of the French think tank IRIS, <http://www.iris-france.org/docs/pdf/communiqués/2006-12-19-ipis.pdf>.

¹⁶ Economist, former governor of the Central Bank of Iran (1989–1994), former Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs (1999–2004), and former ambassador to Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

¹⁷ The letter announcing the cancellation of this conference was available on Ravand Institute's website until November 2010, <http://www.ravandinstitute.com/events/conference/detail.php?ID=1391>.

¹⁸ See the Center's website <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=en&abtid=00>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ In an interview, Ruhani stated that "We had to choose between a bicycle, Peykan [an Iranian car, though no longer in production, which is notoriously unreliable], and a Mercedes Benz. The decision was made not to ride in the Mercedes, so we stayed with the Peykan and the bicycle." According to his view, the Mercedes means concluding an agreement with the U.S. in the 2000s; the Peykan means pursuing the negotiating process with the EU. See "Ravayat hosein ruhani az payam-e jorj bush be iran va pasokh ke arane shod/baiad bein-e 'benz, peykan va dotcharkhe yeki-ra baraye mozakere entekhab mikonim" (Hossein Ruhani's version of George Bush's message to Iran and how Irani decided to answer: choosing between Mercedes Benz, Peykan and bicycle"), *Khabaronline.ir*, May 9, 2012, (Ordibehesht 20, 1391), <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/212390/politics/nuclear>. See also "Goftegu-ye majale mehrname ba doktor hosein ruhani" (Mehr News Interview with doctor Hosein Ruhani), *Center for Strategic Studies*, May 7, 2012 (Ordibehesht 13, 1391), <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=fa&subid=-1&cntid=2497>.

²¹ For more details, see his biography on the website of the Center for Strategic Research, <http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtid=09&&depid=123&&semid=283>.

²² Rouhani stated that "The Imam further noted that the armed forces should not be involved in the activities of political parties." See "We Must Care for the World Public Opinion," *Center for Strategic Studies*, October 6, 2009, <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=en&subid=-1&cntid=2006>.

²³ Sadeq Kharazi, "Hozour-e rusie dar mozakerat eshtebah bud" (Russians' attitude during the negotiations was a mistake), *Khabaronline.ir*, July 21, 2012, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/228411/weblog/kharazi>.

²⁴ See the website <http://irdiplomacy.ir/?Lang=en&Page=36>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See the website <http://www.caspianstudies.com/about.htm>.

²⁷ *Markaze Pajhooheshhaay-e Elmi va Motaale'at-e Esteraategic-e Khavar-e mianeh*.

²⁸ He has been teaching human rights at Azad University and he became, in 2008, president of the Iranian association for international studies.

²⁹ On this topic, see Martha Brill Olcott, "Soviet Central Asia: Does Moscow Fear Iranian Influence?" in John L.

Esposito, ed., *The Iranian Revolution. Its Global Impact* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), pp. 205–6. During the Soviet period, Tehran was engaged in broadcasting radical Islamic propaganda to the Soviet South. See Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South*, p. 47.

³⁰ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 238.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Fred Halliday, "The empires strike back? Russia, Iran and the new republics?" *The World Today*, November 1995, 221.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "Introduction. Center for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Amu Darya. The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 6 (2000).

³⁵ Edmund Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia," *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 505–6.

³⁶ Mehrdad Mohsenim, "Ofog ha-ye hamkari iran-orusie dar asia-ye markazi va qafqaz" (Horizon for cooperation between Russia and Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz*, no. 12 (1376/1997): 99–110.

³⁷ "Interview with Assadollah Athari: Caucasus Alliance Minus Iran Doomed," *Irdiplomacy.ir*, September 10, 2008, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/2663/%60Caucasus+Alliance%E2%80%99+Minus+Iran+%60Doomed%E2%80%99.html>.

³⁸ Hassan Ali Ahmadi Fesharaki, "Jomhuri-ye eslami-ye Iran va Tajikistan: tshalesh-ha va manafe-ye melli Iran" (The Islamic Republic of Iran and Tajikistan: Challenges and the Iranian National Interest), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye va qafqaz*, no. 22 (1377/1998): 97.

³⁹ Clément Therme, "Iran and Russia: a Tactical Entente," in Stephanie Cronin, ed., *Empires and Revolutions: Iranian-Russian Encounters since 1800* (London/New York: Routledge, Iranian Studies Book Series, 2012).

⁴⁰ Mojtaba Damirchielou, "Negah-e irani be tahavolat-e regim hoqouqi-ye daria-ye khazar" (Iranian look Towards the Evolution of the Caspian Sea Legal Regime), *Faslname-ye motale'at-e asia-ye va qafqaz*, no. 53, (1385/2006): 159–186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Interview with Guive Mirfendereski, Boston, March 2009.

⁴³ Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani, "The Challenge of US Caspian Sea Oil Policy," *Amu Darya. The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 4 (2000): 516–521.

⁴⁴ Abdal Sadr Hidraf, "Negaresh-e Iran be gostareh NATO" (Iranian look toward NATO extension), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye va qafqaz*, no. 59 (1386/2007).

⁴⁵ See Mansur Rahmani, "Tozie' naqshe-ye amniati-e nato va sazman-e amniati va hamkari-e orupa dar asia-

ye markazi va qafqaz" (Expansion of the Security Role of NATO and OSCE in Central Asia and the Caucasus), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye va qafqaz* no. 22 (1377/1998): 1–10.

⁴⁶ NATO supply could potentially transit through the Iranian port of Chabahar. See "Iran and NATO end 30-year impasse," *BBC News*, March 27, 2009; and "NATO Members Free to Seek Iranian Supply Route," *Strategic Forecasting*, February 3, 2009.

⁴⁷ This dialogue comprised informal negotiations between Tehran and Washington on the Afghan situation in the framework of the Geneva Initiative. This multilateral forum allowed the two parties not to be engaged in direct talks. The Islamic Republic was also satisfied to be involved in the diplomatic process regarding Afghanistan while Pakistan and Russia were not participating in the Geneva Initiative. See John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams. Moscow and Tehran since the Fall of the Shah* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2009), p. 181.

⁴⁸ See the Interview with the Islamic Republic of Iran's ambassador in Russia, "The Iran-Russia Relations. A seminar with Ambassador Mahmoud Reza Sajjadi," *Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS)*, July 24, 2012, <http://en.merc.ir/default.aspx?-tabid=98&ArticleId=456>.

⁴⁹ See Sadeq Kharazi, "Hozur-e rusie dar mozakerat eshtebah bud" (Russian participation in negotiation was wrong), *Kharonline.ir*, July 21, 2012, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/228411/weblog/kharazi>.

⁵⁰ See for instance Vitaly Naumkin, "Iran va rusie: taqate' manafe" (Iran and Russia: Collision of Interests), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz*, no. 30 (1379/2000): 9–16.

⁵¹ Professor of Political Science at the University of Tehran and a member of the parliamentary friendship group between Iran and Russia.

⁵² Elaheh Koulaei, "Rusie, gharb va iran" (Russia, the West and Iran), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz*, no. 12 (1376/1997): 78–93.

⁵³ Sajjadi, "The Iran-Russia Relations."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Mojtaba Faraji, "Asia-ye markazi bedonbal-e hoviati-e mostaqel" (Central Asia: Looking for an Independent Identity Power), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz*, no. 62 (1387/2008): 173–203.

⁵⁶ Fathollah Mehradi, "Sazman-e hamkari shanghai: qodrat-e tavazon bakhsh" (The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Balancing Power), *Faslname -ye motale'at-e asia-ye markazi va qafqaz*, no. 62 (1387/2008): 127–155.

⁵⁷ Konstatine Shevlev, "Russia Will Expand Ties With Iran Regardless of Third Party Opinion," *Amu Darya. The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 272.

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