

ANKARA AND TEHRAN IN RUSSIA'S 'NEAR ABROAD': THE WAY TO CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to increase knowledge about a remote region of the world, but of utmost importance in the geopolitical context of today - Central Asia - as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, a space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers. Besides, the region has been, in recent years, attracting the attention of foreign investors due to the existence of large reserves of oil and gas. The central argument is that Iran and Turkey demonstrate a predominantly economic interest (the search for energy resources) towards the region, pursuing fundamentally realistic-driven policies with regard to it. Alternatively

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to the participant and non-participant observation, we resorted to the semi structured interview. The field research was done through interviews conducted predominantly in Central Asia. Convinced that the behaviour of the states is not likely to translate into tangible realities or mathematical formulas, we assume that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is the methodology supporting this investigation. We suggest that Iran inspires itself on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable vigour in recent years in order to project its power in the regional sphere and to mitigate the effects of Washington's (essentially) isolationist policy about it. Besides, we believe that an axis Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing can provide extraordinary opportunities to Turkey, of course, if it knows how to use a skillful diplomacy to maximize its interests without hurting the alliance with Washington.

KEYWORDS: Central Asia; Iran; Turkey; Geostategy; Realism

ANCARA E TEERÃO NO ENTORNO RUSSO: O CAMINHO DA ÁSIA CENTRAL

RESUMO

O presente artigo visa contribuir para aumentar o conhecimento acerca de uma região remota, mas de extraordinária importância no contexto geopolítico atual – a Ásia Central – fruto da sua posição estratégica enquanto elo de ligação entre Oriente e Ocidente, espaço de competição entre as grandes potências. O argumento central é o de que o Irã e a Turquia demonstram um interesse fundamentalmente económico (a busca de recursos energéticos) relativamente à região, perseguindo uma política predominantemente realista face a esta. Em alternativa à observação participante e não-participante, privilegiou-se a entrevista semiestruturada. O trabalho

de campo baseou-se em entrevistas conduzidas predominantemente na Ásia Central. O método qualitativo – através da análise hermenêutica – é a metodologia na qual se alicerça a presente investigação. Como recomendação estratégica, sugerimos que o Irão se inspire na política chinesa face à Ásia Central, que tem demonstrado um vigor notável nos últimos anos, de forma a projetar o seu poder na esfera regional e a mitigar os efeitos da estratégia (fundamentalmente) isolacionista de Washington relativamente à região. Além disso, acreditamos que um eixo Ancara-Teerão-Ásia Central-Pequim pode fornecer extraordinárias oportunidades económicas à Turquia, se esta souber, naturalmente, utilizar uma diplomacia hábil para maximizar os seus interesses sem ferir a aliança com Washington.

Palavras-chave: Ásia Central; Irão; Turquia, geoestratégia; realismo

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Several geopolitical doctrines highlight the prominence of Central Asia within the framework of the world economy and geostrategy. Some authors, like H. Mackinder (2004) or Z. Brzezinski (1998), stressed the importance of the *'Heartland'* (the Eurasian Balkans), as *'the world axis'* and geopolitical space that gives puissance and influence to the power that appropriates it.

In recent years, mainly due to the discovery of great energy reserves in the region and to the developments related to world and regional security, several lines of thought have reinforced the assumptions of Mackinder and Brzezinski. The debate about the security concept, which emerged in the post-Cold War, conveyed other dimensions – surpassing the State-centric and anarchic vision of the international system (advocated by authors like Morgenthau, 1978) – to the idea of security. Effectively, the realist theory, for which the security was inseparably linked to the possession and use of military capabilities, to the power and interests of the State actors, relents progressively. Studies on security, in the 90s, turned it into a global concept. Barry Buzan stood out in that theory which claimed a wider dimension to the concept of security. This would be composed,

henceforth, by a military, political, economic (including energy security) and environmental strand (Buzan, 1991). The way for the securitization of the energetic phenomenon was open. For experts like Daniel Yergin (2006), to speak on energy security implied to ensure a stable energy supply, at reasonable prices. Other definitions of the concept would be elaborated subsequently, reflecting both the evolution of the various theoretical concepts, and the interests of energy producers and consumers. Despite the multiple interpretations of the concept by the various theoretical currents, they all converge on the fundamental assumption that a country must have access to its energy resources on a permanent basis, running a minimal risk that they run out (Worley, 2006). Well, going through the existing literature, we realize that Central Asia is an important alternative in Russian or European energy diversification.

Several authors argue that Central Asia's energy wealth has transformed the region into an intersection of tension between States, of competition between companies and regional actors (Edwards, 2003). Consequently, the great powers and multinational companies want to be present in this race to energy. The access to oil reserves, the route of pipelines and the debate about who should build them are in the premises of what some experts call 'New Great Game', or rather, the 'return of the Great Game' (Freire, 2010). This also includes a logic of defense and military security, and not just of energy competition, reinforcing the importance of Central Asia for regional and extra-regional powers.

A brief reflection about realism. Realism can be conceived as the political theory of economic nationalism: the central idea is that governmental economic activities must remain subordinate to the State building goal (Siitonen, 1990). Based on such principles, the realist paradigm dominated, considerably, the debates and the research on International Relations, during the post-War, in the USA and in Europe. In the realist perspective, the international society is, fundamentally, in a "state of anarchy" hobbesian, encouraged by the "search for power" (Siitonen 1990, 20). In fact, as Victor Marques dos Santos recalls, "political realism characterizes an international society essentially anarchic, in which the actors exist through the possible management of an inevitable 'state of nature'" (2007, 243). According to Stephen Blank, "the actors operate according to the old principles of realism and of *realpolitik*" (1999, 150). On the other hand, many of the measures they take, and which aim to increase their political influence, are inscribed in the logic of the market economy.

The realist and neorealist schools admit, therefore, that “the survival of the national State is the ultimate purpose of governance developed by the unit of power”. [...] “All policies are defined as a ‘struggle for power’” (Santos 2007, 242). In this sense, the power “is conceptualized as a means and an end in itself, and its general meaning is that of the ability to influence or change the behavior of others in a desired direction, or alternatively, the ability to resist such influences on their own behaviors” (Santos, 2007, 242).

After the introduction of the realist postulates, as well as the geopolitical importance of Central Asia, we will develop our central argument, i.e. that powers (Turkey and Iran) demonstrate a fundamentally economic interest (the pursuit of energy resources) in the region, following policies that are predominantly realist compared to this one. Instead of participant and non-participant observation techniques, difficult to apply to this object of study, we resorted to semi-structured interviews. The field research was done through interviews conducted not only in Portugal, but also, and predominantly, in Central Asia to key individuals related to the issues studied. Within the framework of the research underlying the present article, two journeys were carried out to Central Asia, one from 3rd to 11th September, 2011, to Kazakhstan, at the invitation of the Director of the Suleimenov Institute, in Almaty; and the second journey from 28th September to 18th October, 2012, to two other countries, besides Kazakhstan: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (among the main cities visited, let us highlight Almaty, Bishkek, Naryn, Osh, Dushanbe). We opted for using experts from non-governmental organizations working on the field, as well as the staff of embassies in Central Asian republics, among others. In other cases, the interviewees were from the Central Asian republic in question. Some interviewees in Central Asia have requested anonymity or, in some cases, asked to be referred to as local experts (who are connected to American diplomacy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

Convinced that the behaviour of the states, the power or influence are not likely to translate into tangible realities, mathematical formulas, or mere statistics, we assume, from this point, that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is, certainly, the methodology supporting the present investigation. In this sense, it is imperative to penetrate the sphere of subjectivity, i.e. the understanding of causality inherent in the action of the various actors, that reaches us through the analysis of a whole panoply of scientific articles, monographs, among other sources regarding the subject of this study, in order to try to

understand what drives certain actor (either Iran or Turkey) to act in this or that way. By questioning the understanding of the sense of the facts and of causality that moves Tehran and Ankara in the Central Asian sphere, qualitative analysis approaches, particularly, the scope of hermeneutics, of understanding, of which Dilthey tell us about on the famous maxim: "We explain nature, and we understand spirit" (1894, 149).

As a final recommendation, we suggest in the specific case of Iran that the country inspires itself on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable vigour in recent years in order to project its power in the regional sphere and to mitigate the effects of Washington's (essentially) isolationist policy about it. Besides, we believe that an axis Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing can provide extraordinary opportunities from an economic point of view to Turkey, of course, if it knows how to use a sufficiently skillful diplomacy to maximize its interests without hurting the alliance with Washington and the exemplary image that this secular state, a crossroads between Asia and Europe, has, yet, by the West.

The planning of the two journeys to Central Asia involved a thorough and time-consuming research on universities, experts, diplomats, professors, Non-Governmental Organizations, having the Aga Khan Network, among many other actors, provided considerable support, not only in terms of the selection of local experts, but also in enabling interviews at a distance, by telephone, as well as in the visit to various poles of the University of Central Asia (in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). To the difficulties inherent in the selection and previous contact with entities and local experts, we have to add the language barrier, the obtaining of visas and the absence of the Embassy of Portugal in each of the Central Asian Republics, always having to resort to embassies in third countries), to deal with all the bureaucracy characteristic of countries such as Kazakhstan, which requires letters of invitation, among other procedures. Another difficulty concerns the authoritarian nature of the Central Asian Republics, which makes that the displacement of an investigator to these countries raises possible suspicions by the local authorities, which often refuse to issue visas for stays. Although we have not experienced problems in this respect in the countries we have visited (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Uzbekistan's case is flagrant.

Another difficulty relates to the collecting of photographic material in some of these countries, as we could verify in Dushanbe (the

same didn't happen in the case of Almaty, Bishkek, Osh or Naryn, where the police did not put any restriction on the action of photographing).

An investigator comes across, therefore, several risks in this kind of countries (since the regime is virtually omnipresent in the lives of citizens and institutions), being that he has to invest, consequently, a considerable time in the preparation of his journeys to avoid, or at least, to reduce the possibility that something goes less well (but, to mention another example, we couldn't avoid being retained, at about 5,000 meters above sea level, by the border guards in Tajikistan who, by preventing us from entering their country, made us think, even if indirectly, of a 'plan B', which consisted of traveling to the opposite end of the Kyrgyzstan to try to cross the border into Tajikistan (this time, successfully). Another difficulty inherent in collecting information, not so much linked to the restrictions or authoritarianism, has to do with a different ordering of the territory (different from the European case, for example), which explains why for us, westerners, it had been very complex, in many cases, to find the addresses previously provided by the respondents.

In addition to all these aspects, we believe being also pertinent to mention the various withdrawals of some respondents - practically confirmed - few weeks before the departure to Central Asia, which led to a rethinking of strategies and a new search for experts to interview. In most cases (particularly with regard to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), the websites linked to local universities and institutes either offered no version of their contents in the English language, or were purely and simply, in maintenance, or no longer available. All these aspects can, eventually, be revealing of another vision of the world and of the territory, where the disappearance of the Soviet State, often causing a certain nostalgia for the older generations, eventually gave way to a list of authoritarian leaders, who have neglected the territory planning and the welfare of the population, to the detriment of their own personal interests, in which the oil and/or natural gas issues brought, many times, a 'false development', which benefits elites and certain economic groups.

1. CENTRAL ASIA

1.1. Characterizing the region

Under the new energy atlas, Central Asia is located in a strategic region, with strong ties to neighboring regions. Its development depends,

firstly, from the access to the rest of the world. Central Asia is an important part of world's political and economic system, being "surrounded by some of the most dynamic economies in the world, among three of the so-called BRICS countries (Russia, India and China)" (Central Asia Competitiveness Outlook, 2011, 10). As Armando Marques Guedes³ stresses (2011), "Central Asia is, somehow, a strategic zone", which has been "regaining undoubtedly a structural cyclical extraordinary importance". According to this expert, "if there were three major brands of the century, conflicts that had positive impact on the reconstruction and creation of a new international order, these were Afghanistan, Iraq and the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation" (Guedes 2011). Interestingly, according to the author, "these three conflicts occurred in Central Asia" (Guedes 2011). And it is true that, if there is "a conflict that humanity currently fears", this involves Iran, which is no more than "a southern extension of Central Asia" (Guedes 2011). For centuries, Central Asia has been the crossroads of Eurasia, or, as Jack Caravelli⁴ (2011) notes, "the intersection between East and West", which makes it, according to this author, an "interesting" region. Effectively, it is the point of confluence of four civilizations that have both controlled and been controlled by Central Asian people (Asimov and Bosworth 1998). Moreover, as Xiaojie Xu notes, "the civilizations that dominate the region have been able to exert their influence in other parts of the world" (1999, 33).

Central Asia is one of the pivot regions of the world. It is located in the nucleus of the Eurasian continental space and is a crucial link between several robust and dynamic economies, such as China, European Union, India, Japan and Russia (Competitiveness Outlook, 2011). According to Khwaja, "Central Asia owes its importance to the vast economic potential and geostrategic location of which it is endowed, becoming progressively in a world economic center" (2003, 7). The Central Asian Republics, with their considerable energy and human potential are, as Johannes Linn notes, confronted simultaneously with "a challenge and an opportunity", insofar as "the Eurasian economic space is an active part of a new phase of global integration" (2007, 5). In fact, Central Asia is, according to Guo Xuetang, "the region where the effects of geopolitics and competition between the great powers has been more felt compared to any other part of the

3 Armando Marques Guedes, (2011). Personal Interview. Lisbon. Armando M. Guedes is Professor of Law at Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

4 Jack Caravelli (2011). Interview via Skype - USA. Jack Caravelli was director for Non-proliferation with responsibility for US non-proliferation policy in Russia and the Middle East.

world" (2006, 117). Indeed, according to this author, "ethnic and religious conflicts, energy competition, the strategic positioning of the various actors and the political unrest in the region, have proved a recurring feature in Central Asian regional context" (Xuetang 2006, 117-118). As such, it is hardly conceivable that any energy study about the region be limited to the discussion of the relationship between supply and demand of energy resources in Central Asia. It is also necessary to consider the geopolitical and geo-economic aspects.

The economic structure of Central Asia, as well as its political characteristics are strongly marked by its geographic location, more precisely, by "the difficult access to other parts of the world" (Duarte, 2012, 3). On the other hand, as Xiaojie Xu mentions, "the survival of the Central Asian Republics essentially depends on the maintenance of several corridors and links" (1999, 36). In fact, these corridors are as, or more, important than the energy potential of the region, in that they expand in all directions, connecting China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region, and the Indian Ocean (Duarte, 2012). According to Armando M. Guedes (2011), "Central Asia is a corridor between the West and China, which runs the Greater Middle East and the soft belly of the former Soviet Union - an area to which the Russian Federation designates horizontal near abroad, (as opposed to the vertical near abroad, which begins in the Baltic countries and ends in Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan)". Therefore, according to this expert, "Central Asia has an umbilical connection to China at one extreme, and in the other extreme, to the West; in the north, a connection to Russia (first to the Russian empire, then, the Soviet Union, and currently, to the Russian Federation); and in the south, multiple connections to turbulent and unequal areas like India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey (first to Turkey at Ottoman Empire, and later to the Turkish state" (Guedes, 2011).

From a political point of view, as Doris Bradbury⁵ (2011) notes, "Central Asia is a more stable region than Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, in general". As Zhao Huasheng indicates, it "forms a buffer zone between the great powers, although Russia has special relations with the countries of the region" (2009, 335). Since the beginning of the 21st century that the competition between the great powers around energy resources has intensified, contributing to a rapid rise in energy prices, and also to new outlines in terms of energy security. In this context, and as a result of

5 Doris Bradbury (2011). Personal Interview. Almaty. Doris Bradbury is Executive President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Kazakhstan.

its energy reserves, “Central Asia has proved to be an area of competition and rivalry between the great powers” (regional and extra-regional), which affects the relationship between these, as well as the balance power, influencing thus the “international framework” that emerged in the “post-Cold War” (Duarte, 2012, 5). Geopolitics naturally provides an explanation for that fact, considering that it is “in large part determined by the dimensions of a region” (Huasheng, 2009, 335). In fact, “the great powers need to acquire a large land mass to exert influence in the international arena” (Huasheng 2009, 332).

1.2. The geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the region

Several authors do not hesitate to assign to Central Asia a ‘prominent position in the context of a new world order’ (Xu, 1999, 33). If we look at the history of oil, “the general ambition, since the 70s, since the big oil shocks [by the various consumer countries], has been to rely less on the Persian Gulf, as it is a highly volatile area” (Fonseca⁶, 2011). In fact, as stated by Richard L. Ottinger, “much of the remaining oil reserves in the world, are located in unstable countries in the Middle East, and far from areas of consumption, “which raises “concerns about the security of oil supplies” (2007, 3). Nevertheless, one should note that “the ambition to discover ‘other Persian Gulf’ never happened and it will probably will never“, since “hardly, other regions of the world will have the same capacity of reserves as the Middle East” (Fonseca, 2011). However, “in the current highly competitive world, at the energy resources level, Central Asia and, particularly, the Caspian region, are of crucial strategic importance in the world market“, if one wants to “attempt to diversify energy sources” (Fonseca, 2011).

When we recall our recent history, it is clear that the “North Sea or West Africa“, regions that ultimately serve as a “counterweight to the dominance of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East in world’s oil production“, had been they, too, object of interest on the part of the consuming powers (Fonseca 2011). However, according to Fonseca, if “the energy resources of the North Sea” proved “an attractive option in the period that followed the oil shocks“, nowadays it is essential to find other alternatives capable of replacing a production that has been falling, “particularly in the UK and Norway” (Fonseca 2011). For example, a

6 Pedro Fonseca, (2011). Personal Interview. Lisbon. Pedro Fonseca is Professor of International Relations at ISCSP-ULisboa.

report from the International Energy Agency, in 2008, about the 800 major world oil reserves, indicates an average annual depletion rate of 5.1 per cent, with a tendency to increase to 8.6 per cent by the year 2030, and the largest declines in oil production between 2000 and 2008, were registered in Mexico, China, Norway, Australia and the UK (World Energy Outlook 2008). With regard to the North Sea, for example, “production declined from 6.4 mbd⁷ in 2000 to less than 2.1 mbd in 2005” (Luft and Korin 2009, 2). Given this scenario, Central Asia has, therefore, a “very important role in the diversification of energy sources” (Fonseca, 2011).

According to Guedes (2011), “it is not obvious that Central Asia is an area (within the meaning assigned by the International Relations to the concept of *region*)”, provided with “an internal cohesion and distinguished from the other areas” which allows us to call it a “region”. According to the author, this is due to the fact that “a large part of the regionality of Central Asia has fluid borders and often negatively defined” (Guedes 2011). Central Asia is, to this author, “a region of variable geometry, situated between Russia, India, China, the Islamic world and the West”, which corresponds, in a way, to the “old Silk Road” (Guedes, 2011). I.e. Central Asia is not, from the analytical point of view, more than a “label”, it “is not a concept” (Guedes, 2011).

According to the Consul Fernando Melo Antunes (2012), there are three fundamental reasons that explain “the importance of Central Asia to the great powers”.⁸ Firstly, “[the area] has energy resources in relevant amounts in both oil and gas” (Antunes, 2012). In this respect, Zehra Akbar states that “regional and transregional states are well aware of the importance of the energy potential of Central Asia” (2012, 14). The region is, in fact, about to become “a major global supplier of energy” in particular in the sectors of oil and gas” (Akbar, 2012, 14). Returning to Fernando M. Antunes (2012), the second reason for the importance of the region to the major powers, is due to the fact that their neighbors, “namely China, Russia, the Caucasus and Europe” encounter “transportation problems” (meaning logistic terms), likely to be resolved and/or mitigated by “the countries of Central Asia”. Finally, the region is significant, since it is composed of countries which have gained independence about 20 years ago, “have a very significant potential of economic growth” (Antunes, 2012). With a

7 Mbd: Million barrels per day.

8 Fernando M. Antunes (2012) Personal Interview. Lisbon. The author is, since May 2011, Honorary Consul of Kazakhstan in Portugal.

population of 92 million people and abundant energy resources, Central Asia is an attractive destination for investment and trade (Competitiveness Outlook 2011). As an example, from 2000 to 2009, “the flows of direct investment in the region increased nine times”, while its gross domestic product grew on average “8.2 per cent per year” (Akbar 2012, 13). In fact, “as a result of the growth of [Central Asian] markets, the strengthening of the potential for trade in agricultural products, and [the existence of] a service sector favorable to exploration, the Central Asian Republics can be vital trade links between Europe and Asia” (Akbar 2012, 14).

2. IRAN'S GOALS IN CENTRAL ASIA

To Almaz Saifutdinov⁹ (2012), “The New Great Game is mainly played by the USA, Russia, China and Iran”. According to Farrukh Suvankulov and Yunus Guc, “for historical reasons, Iran has considered itself for a very long time, as the door to Central Asia” (2012, 27). Due to the Russian occupation and then the Soviet expansion in the twentieth century, the ties between Iran and the region decreased considerably in intensity (Suvankulov and Guc 2012, 27). However, in the past 15 years, “the country has sought to stimulate economic and political relations with the Central Asian Republics” (Suvankulov and Guc 2012, 27). The focus of efforts has been in areas where Iran shares a historical, cultural and linguistic heritage (Tajikistan and certain oblasts of Uzbekistan). Tehran has supported officially, cultural, educational and religious exchanges with Tajikistan.

According to Zehra Akbar, “with the fall of the Soviet Union, the paradigm of Iranian foreign policy has undergone significant changes” under which “policymakers would then have to deal with a set of different independent states whose goals may or may not be aligned with Iranian interests in the region” (2012, 7). Since most of the region was formerly integrated in the Persian Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Union gave Iran an extraordinary opportunity to explore not only the cultural connection with what sometimes is called ‘Middle Asia’, but also to use its geostrategic position to maneuver the dynamics of this region, and counterbalance the influence of competing nations such as Russia and China, and countries and organizations perceived as direct threats to the security and sovereignty

9 Almaz Saifutdinov, (2012). Personal Interview. Dushanbe. Almaz Saifutdinov is a researcher at the US Embassy in Dushanbe.

of Iran, such as the USA and NATO (Akbar 2012, 7). Moreover, Tehran considers it advantageous to neutralize the influence exerted by Turkey (considered a 'lackey' of the West) and Pakistan (a traditional opponent of Iran) in Central Asia.

Exception in the Central Asian Republics, is that Tajikistan and Iran share common cultural, historical and linguistic roots. As Monica Witt notes, "the Tajiks have a good relationship with the Iranians, largely due to about 2500 years marked by a common history" (2012, para. 4). Both speak the same language, although the alphabets differ (Witt 2012). The culture, cinema and Iranian media are quite popular in Tajikistan (Witt 2012). The "*Norooz*, or celebration of the Iranian New Year", is another cultural characteristic shared by both countries (Witt 2012). The problem in the relationship between Iran and Tajikistan is that "although both have the same language, culture and traditions, they are quite different with regard to religion: the Tajiks are mostly Sunni, while Iranians, mainly, Shia" (Saifutdinov 2012). Almaz Saifutdinov (2012) explains that there is no openness for the flourishing of Shiite Islam in Tajikistan. In the opinion of a local expert (who requested anonymity¹⁰), "Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Uzbeks do not perceive the ancient Persia as a source of cultural civilization; Tajik and Turkmen also do not". Therefore, according to this expert, "as much as the Iranians strive, they cannot be a (very) influential player in the region". Zehra Akbar shares this view, presenting the following arguments: "the rejection by the Central Asian Republics of Iran's economic model, and the preference, instead, to Western developmental models; the aversion of the Central Asian Republics to the emergence of 'guides' and 'mentors' in the region, in the period that followed its independence from Russia, and the repeated attempts in preventing a return to a situation of Russian domination, and the financial inability of Iran to seize its strategic potential in the region" (2012, 8).

Another important aspect is that "Iran is currently under intense pressure from the USA, [and broadly] by the International Community because of its nuclear program", and the author estimates that "[the Iranians] do not have many [economic] tools to operate in Tajikistan as other players involved in the country" (Saifutdinov 2012). Apart from the involvement in the "construction of tunnels and hydroelectric power plants in Tajikistan", it should be mentioned that "Tehran provides humanitarian aid to Tajikistan, through, for example, the Khomeini

10 This expert is connected to the American diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan.

Foundation" (Saifutdinov, 2012). According to Iran Daily Brief, "since it is present in Tajikistan, Khomeini Foundation has helped tens of thousands of poor families by regularly providing services and products" (2013, para. 1). Moreover, "the Foundation provided initial assistance to 5,000 young couples, and instituted training activities in various technical areas, provided medicines to thousands of needy families, as well as assistance to more than 170 000 students with special needs" (Iran Daily Brief 2013, para. 1).

Regarding economic cooperation, "Iran has sought to expand the transportation infrastructure in the region, with the aim of controlling the transit of goods to and from the region" (Suvankulov and Guc, 2012, 27). On the other hand, "Iran sponsored the hallway Sarakhs - Bandar Abbas, linking Turkmenistan and other Central Asian Republics to the nearest international sea lanes" (Suvankulov and Guc, 2012, 27). Iranians built the tunnel of Anzab in Tajikistan (Suvankulov and Guc 2012). Moreover, in 2009, the Presidents Ahmadinejad, Karzai and Rakhmon agreed to build a new road between Iran and Tajikistan, through northern Afghanistan (Suvankulov and Guc 2012). It should be added that Iran intends to participate in a number of exploration projects for oil and gas in the Caspian (Suvankulov and Guc 2012). Tehran established "several free trade zones near the borders with Central Asia, including most importantly Sarakhs and Bandar Anzali, for being the greatest" (Suvankulov and Guc, 2012, 27).

According to Zehra Akbar, "over the past 15 years, the traditional focus of Iran in the Persian Gulf has been gradually relocated to the Central Asian Republics" (2012, 7). As a result of the inner nature of the region, Iran has an extraordinary economic potential to offer the Central Asian Republics through routes that lead not only to the Indian subcontinent, but also to port infrastructure in Iran. Iran has executed incursions into the Central Asian Republics, emphasizing trade and investment in infrastructure, with special attention to the case of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Armenia. The goal of Tehran is to create an extensive network of regional ties and institutions that can serve as a counterweight to the U.S. geopolitical pressure. In 2005, "Iran completed a road section of 125km, worth 43 million dollars, which connects the Iranian region of Dougharoun to Herat" and announced that it will build "a railway of 176 km from Iran to Herat" (Akbar, 2012, 7). In 2004, Iran concluded 1000 km of the rail Bafq - Mashhad, which shortens in two days the rail link from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf (Akbar, 2012, 7). Tehran has been focusing

in recent years, in trade with its regional neighbors, particularly with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Akbar, 2012, 7).

According to Clément Therme, “Iranian experts often highlight the cultural proximity of Iran towards Central Asia”, and therefore tend to perceive the region as “an economic, cultural, and geopolitical entity” (2012, 6). Moreover, they characterize the politics of Iran towards Central Asia as “promoting self-reliance among the regional states and the exclusion of extra-regional powers (referring to the U.S.)” (Herzig, 2004, 505-6). Iran needs a regional market. In this sense, Tehran seeks to “further develop its relations with the Central Asian Republics and the Caucasus countries” (Islamic Invitation Turkey 2013, para. 1). Indeed, “the administration of former President Ahmadinejad devoted, in recent years, special attention to the cultural, political and economic cooperation with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan” (Islamic Invitation Turkey 2013, para. 4).

3. TURKEY'S GOALS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey had no ‘strategy’ towards Central Asia, due to its security policies which had formerly been limited by the imperatives of the Cold War era. In turn, as Hakan Fidan notes, “Turkish public opinion seemed to be much more sensitive to the Turkish communities in Central Asia, which are often perceived as the ‘Turkish nation’” (2010, 81). However, post-1991, “the public opinion and the Turkish policy makers saw the development of a greater interest in the region” (Fidan, 2010, 82).

Henderson and Weaver report that “Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the Republics of Central Asia, immediately after their independence in the early 90s” (2010, 111). The emergence of ‘brother states’, sometimes referred to as ‘Turkic Republics’, generated a burst of enthusiasm in almost all political wards in Turkey. William Hale observes, in turn, that “the idea of a Turkic world, from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China”, became a “new subject of discussion in the Turkish political circles and in the media” (2000, 188).

Turkey aspires to become “the new energy center in the region”, a key state in the transit of oil and gas, “connecting Europe, the Caspian region, the Middle East and the Mediterranean” (Eissler, 2012, para.1). In fact, Turkey plays an increasingly important role regarding oil transit,

being strategically located at the crossroads between Central Asian Republics, rich in energy resources, the Middle East and the European consumption centers (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2013). As Mehmet Öğütçü explains, “being a regional energy hub does not mean, of course, only the possession of pipelines crossing its territory” (2013, para. 39). For Turkey to operate as a core of natural gas, it needs to “be able to import a sufficient quantity of gas to meet both its own domestic demand, and any obligation to re-export, as well as to provide capacity to transport gas from the Caspian and the Middle East to Europe” (Öğütçü, 2013, para. 39). At the heart of Ankara’s energy policy there is a rapidly growing economy, with extremely high levels of dependence on energy imports, and an intention of the Government to strengthen Turkey’s position as a regional power.

Both Turkey and the countries of the Caspian region are today faced with threats of various kinds, to the security of transportation routes and infrastructure, likely to disturb or even interrupt the flow of energy in the region. The international oil companies depend significantly on tankers passing through the Bosphorus, a navigation route that measures only “700 meters wide” at its narrowest point, being “one of the busiest maritime choke points in the world, through which transit 2.9 million barrels of oil daily in 2010” (New World Encyclopedia 2013, para. 2). The Turkish authorities are aware that an accident with a tanker, or a terrorist attack, could lead to the closure of the Bosphorus, which would, of course, have serious economic, political and environmental consequences, first for Turkey. Moreover, it should be noted that the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan has, on several occasions, carried out attacks against domestic pipelines, “which nonetheless has an impact abroad” to the extent that the International Community questions whether Turkey is effectively able to protect the energy infrastructure found in its territory” (Weiss *et al*, 2012, xii).

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new perspectives and opportunities – that were previously outside the scope of Turkish foreign policy – particularly in the Middle East, in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Economically vibrant and politically “more nationalistic and assertive”, today Ankara does not intend to continue to play the role of ‘subordinate partner’, and has also demonstrated, repeatedly, that U.S. concerns weigh less in its regional decisions (Cornell, 2012, 17-18). Currently, a majority of Turkey’s security challenges are concentrated in the Caucasus and the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Iran. Thus, by necessity, Ankara has been increasing its attention on these areas.

Energy is an important issue in Turkish politics, both at the domestic and international levels, reflecting the needs of a rapidly growing economy. Data from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013) indicate that the Gross Domestic Product of Turkey increased 171% between 1990 and 2008. The growth rate of the country was 9% in 2010 and 8.5% in 2011. Turkey recovered “relatively quickly” from the economic crisis that began in 2008 (Rodrik, 2012, 47). This growth, however, took place at the expense of an extremely high dependence on energy imports, since with very limited domestic reserves, Turkey imports almost all the oil it consumes (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2013). To illustrate this, in 2010, “Turkey’s energy production met only 29% of its energy demand”, which is “one of the major weaknesses of the country’s energy security, which affects its foreign policy” (Tulin 2013, para. 3). According to Mehmet Ögütçü, “the shortage of energy supply in Turkey” is compensated by the extraordinary geographic position of the country, located “between the second largest gas market - Europe, and the substantial gas reserves of Russia, the Caspian Basin and the Middle East” (2013, para. 31). This location provides Turkey with “the opportunity to be the main hub of European gas and a key actor towards the gas policy throughout the region” (Ögütçü, 2013, para. 31).

The main energy priority of the Turkish government is to ensure security of supply at affordable prices. The economic vitality of the country, its strong transatlantic ties, and the existing energy infrastructure, make Turkey an attractive partner for European countries importers of energy resources. According to former National Security Advisor of the USA, Stephan J. Hadley, “Turkey has become one of the five or six most important countries of the world”; [...] “It’s ironic... if we look at its economic performance, we will be in doubt whether Turkey should join the European Union or, instead, the European Union should join Turkey” (in Ayhan Simsek, 2012, para. 1).

Turkey’s location provides it with an easy access to supplies from the Caspian Sea, the Middle East, Russia and North Africa. Turkish representatives are euphoric that “70% of the [worlds’] proven reserves of oil and gas are to be found in its immediate vicinities” (Tulin 2013, para. 1). The country plays an important role in the transit of oil and gas from these regions. Several pipelines bring significant quantities of oil and gas from Russia and Azerbaijan to Turkey, where large amounts of Russian and Kazakh oil are shipped through the Bosphorus. Turkey also provides an

important outlet for Iraqi crude oil, through the Kirkuk - Ceyhan pipeline, built in the late 70s.

FINAL REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We sought to describe Iran and Turkey's interests in Central Asia as being impregnated with a certain realism and pragmatism. In fact, we wanted to explain that the desire of strengthening relations with the five Central Asian Republics primarily gravitates around a pursuit for power and influence, valued by realism. However, power is here understood as an 'energetic', but also cultural, power, since both Tehran and Ankara have strong historical bonds to the region.

We suggest here, in the particular case of Iran and Turkey, that both countries deepen the diplomatic efforts that they have been, quite well, developing regarding the Central Asian states. It's not unreasonable to propose, at a time when Iran is under sanctions of various kinds from the international community – being, in particular, marginalized by the USA, whose priority in Eurasia is to prevent the emergence of any regional hegemon or pivot, be it Chinese, Russian (after all Central Asia is Russia's 'near abroad') or Iranian – that Tehran turns Central Asia into a kind of 'soft power laboratory'. Through investments, trade, regional cooperation on several matters, Iran can present itself as a responsible and mature neighbour towards the countries of the region which, in turn, want to maximize their interests, without becoming too dependent on any great power. In this Central Asian New Great Game - in which Turkey and Iran, two regional powers that are often forgotten or underestimated by experts - Ankara and Tehran can propose themselves as viable alternatives, as the logic of geography teaches us, by helping the Central Asian countries to easily gain access to international markets, favouring, for example, the access to the Indian Ocean or to the European continent to those '*landlocked*' states.

But if Tehran and Ankara can be important partners for the Central Asians, Central Asia is also crucial for the projection of Iran and Turkey into the regional sphere, as well as while regional market for Iranian and Turkish products. Developing the terrestrial and aerial bridges that link Iran to its Central Asian neighbours should be a concern that Tehran must not neglect. In this regard, we suggest that Iran (as well as Turkey) inspire on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable

vigour in recent years. Although Washington has its own version of the *New Silk Road* – which excludes Iran from any initiative, putting, instead, Afghanistan in the centre of the economic revitalization of the ancient Silk Road – we advocate here that Tehran can and should engage Beijing's attention to 'escape' from Washington's marginalization. The *Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis* makes perfect sense, if we take into account that the timing could not be more propitious, especially since China is promoting its own version of what it considers to be the *New Silk Road*, different from the one that is conceived by the USA.

In the Chinese conception of the *New Silk Road* there is no room for excluding countries, Iran above all, which Beijing considers to play a fundamental role within the terrestrial corridors (road and rail) that Chinese have been building and financing in the region to facilitate the flow of the Chinese products and, above all, to try to mitigate the consequences of a possible blockade of the Strait of Malacca, extremely harmful to Chinese energy security, in the event of military hostility between Beijing and Washington. In this context, Iran, but also Pakistan (where China is investing in modernization and expansion of the port of Gwadar) are two vital parts in the Chinese *New Silk Route*.

It is, therefore, Tehran's role to know how to deal with the Chinese, approaching them, to take better advantage of the benefits of this Chinese *New Silk Road* which, unlike Washington's, does not exclude ideologies, regimes or creeds... the Chinese just want to do *business*. After all, that's what Beijing's consensus is about. Tehran must propose itself as a useful and long-lasting partner, capable of helping China, and above all, as realism advocates, helping itself to live (survive) on the realistic struggle for power, in a context in which the International Community tries to exclude it from several initiatives.

We argue here that Turkey can and should cooperate with Tehran rather than exacerbate the marginalization and isolation to which the International Community (and the USA in particular) has condemned the country. It should be noted that after the signs of rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, a new Turkish-Iranian partnership has been developing. From a pragmatic and realistic point of view, it makes perfect sense, at least because Iran is Turkey's third largest export market, being both economies highly interdependent, therefore.

It is pertinent to add here the fact that Turkey's role, once seen by the West as a model for Islamic democracy in the region, has been relegated

to the background as regards its ability to mediate the issues assigned to the Middle East. Indeed, Washington has been consulting Ankara's recommendations less and less in what concerns issues of security and geostrategic nature related to the Middle East. Faced with this fact, won't the economic imperatives of a Turkey that thirsts for energy and markets justify, from a realistic and pragmatic point of view, that Ankara dares to 'lightly' sacrifice its loyalty to Washington to get closer to Tehran? It's a complex question, but that is nonetheless interesting to ask, since an axis Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing can provide extraordinary opportunities from an economic point of view to Turkey, of course, if it knows how to use a sufficiently skillful diplomacy to maximize its interests without hurting the alliance with Washington and the exemplary image that this secular state, a crossroads between Asia and Europe, has, yet, by the West.

We believe that Ankara can fully strengthen its terrestrial connections (road and rail) to Iran, as well as betting on the creation of new gas and oil pipelines that cross Iran and are destined for Central Asia. This would aim to open, on the one hand, new export routes for Central Asian oil and gas (since Russia controls mainly the infrastructure through which circulate the gas and oil from these *landlocked* countries), as well as to create alternative land bridges (road and rail) to the flow of Iranian, Central Asian and even Turkish products. Everyone would benefit.

We don't want to finish without throwing a challenge to future work. We encourage here other researchers to better explore what is the exact contribution that the *Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis* can provide in the context of the Chinese *New Silk Route* and how Turkey and Iran can profit from such an initiative, in order to sell their products and to project power in the regional sphere.

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