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# IRANIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD EURASIA: OBJECTIVES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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## **Abstract**

Iran-Eurasia relations have witnessed significant developments in recent years in light of Iran's eastwards orientation – or “look to the East.” The present paper discusses Iran's attitudes towards Eurasia with a particular eye on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed in May 2018 in Kazakhstan – which entered into force in October 2019. It also explores Iran's cooperative and competing relations with two giant global players like Russia and China. The paper argues that despite the potential gains which Iran can achieve from its partnership with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), there are evident obstacles and constraints hindering Iran in this regard. The paper discusses first the theoretical background of regionalism; second, the EAEU's establishment, its objectives and shortcomings; third, the free trade agreement with Iran; fourth, Iran's political and security imperatives; fifth Iran's engagement with Eurasia and China's overwhelming role; and finally findings and conclusions.

**Keywords:** *regionalism, Iran, EAEU, economy, security, free trade agreement, Russia, China,*

## Introduction

This paper discusses Iran's attitudes towards Eurasia with a particular eye on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed in May 2018 in Kazakhstan – which entered into force in October 2019. It also explores Iran's cooperative and competing relations with two giant global players like Russia and China.

The premise is that Iran's eastwards orientation – or “look to the East” – over the past years reflects its ambition to overcome its longstanding economic isolation, due to Western powers' relentless sanctions policy. Iran's slow return to international markets was characterized by a rapprochement with Western powers, which came simultaneously with what has been labelled as its “untiring push toward greater regionalism and Eurasian cooperation.”<sup>(1)</sup> Tehran's engagement with Moscow and Beijing can be seen as a result of a detailed risk assessment in case Western powers decide to raise their walls once more. However, Tehran's resolve to engage in a “preferential” trade agreement (PTA) is directly poised to bring positive economic results and political ones as well. But it has evident limits and constraints as well.

This paper attempts to answer two main interrelated research questions: first, how integrated is Iran with Eurasia? This question entails asking if it is a strategic partnership or merely a tactical one. Second, will Iran-Eurasia relations improve Iran's economic performance? This one is grounded on the hypothesis that to some extent the FTA will help Iran take a breather from the sanctions regime which has been crippling its economy for a long time. A hypothesis that must be verified. In fact, as many have observed, Moscow exploits the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a tool at its own disposal. Indeed, the main argument is that Iran will face evident limits in completely integrating into the EAEU, due to structural constraints – both systemic and also historic, referred to as deeply rooted national role conceptions.

All in all, these questions will help in understanding the problems, opportunities, challenges and limits of this intriguing issue of current international relations. A collateral aspect is to what extent this economic agreement will influence Iran's relations with Russia – which is by far the major player inside the EAEU. Symmetrically, the matter is to detect the ultimate significance for Iran to engage in a trading partnership with a regional organization made up of Russia's post-Soviet satellites. Finally, one important issue at stake is to understand how it will affect Iran's strategic orientations and its responses to external threats. Is such an economic agreement going to impact Iran's military and foreign policy doctrine?

This research has been conducted by first relying on a solid set of assumptions drawn from the Copenhagen School of IR, which tries to explain security dynamics by employing (neo)realist and ideational factors in an eclectic way. To better understand Iran's foreign policy, the systemic level must be given

as much importance as the domestic one. Geopolitics, external constraints, the distribution of power in the regional and global systems concur to explain Iran's international posture and attitudes as much as its national role conceptions, the establishment's perceptions of external threats, and domestic factionalism. The validity of the initial hypothesis has been tested by first reverting to academic monographs and journal articles, and also to reports and in-depth analysis issued by research and policy centers and even articles from newspapers – with the main goal of collecting more information to help inform the political, economic and regional context in which Iran is situated. Raw data has been drawn from international institutions by directly consulting online databases available on official websites.

## **1. Theoretical Background**

To better understand Iran's orientations towards the EAEU, it is significant to review its theoretical dimensions as follows:

### **1.1 Regionalism and the Significance of Operational Perspectives to Explain Iran's Position on Eurasia**

Regionalism is an increasingly dominant trait in international politics, flourishing especially as of between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. At that time, it became clear that regionalism was about to make a qualitative leap as reflected in the establishment of new regional agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and, above all, the European creation of a common market. Regionalism has been defined as one of the three constituents of the international commercial system along with multilateralism and unilateralism.<sup>(2)</sup> It is established on the idea that the more a region is economically integrated, the more it is politically integrated. A region's key attributes are connected to both geographical proximity and mutual interdependence.<sup>(3)</sup> Regionalism refers to a grouping of states within a specific region sharing common interests in cooperating with one another through common institutions and rules. Depending on the extent of integration, a regional agreement can be organized either through intergovernmental structures – which evolve around sovereign states – or supranational institutions – which are more independent from governments. The European Union (EU) is a case in point.

Political science and international relations theories have tried to explain “how and why nation-states cease to be wholly sovereign”<sup>(4)</sup> by elaborating on a theory of regional integration known as neofunctionalism. This theory posits that through regionalism sovereign states “voluntarily mingle, merge, and mix with their neighbors so as to lose the factual attributes of sovereignty while acquiring new techniques for resolving conflicts between themselves.”<sup>(5)</sup> Sovereign states intentionally undergo a process whereby they transfer their

loyalties, expectations and some of their sovereignty on different issues (cultural, environmental, economic, health-related and so on) to a new entity which demands jurisdiction over them.

The neofunctional theory explains well Iranian attitudes towards Eurasia – and particularly Tehran’s signing of the FTA with the EAEU in 2018 – for at least two main theoretical reasons. First, neofunctionalism introduces “an unambiguously utilitarian concept of interest politics that stands in sharp contrast to the notions of unselfishness or common good that pervade functionalist writings. Assumptions of goodwill, harmony of interests, or dedication to the common good need not be postulated to account for integration.”<sup>(6)</sup> Neofunctionalism introduces an important component of utilitarianism to explain a state’s behavior. In a realist worldview, states pursue selfish goals reflecting national interests. However, they turn to supranational means when they deem it to be profitable. Therefore, neofunctionalism is not that different from political realism. Second, although oscillating between pan-Islamism and Iranian nationalism, and between ideology/radicalism and pragmatism, as well as between détente and post-détente, Iran’s foreign policy from the 1979 revolution can be almost wholly explained within a realist framework. This means that, “despite the influential role of religion in the country’s politics and policies, Iran has remained committed to defensive and realist imperatives for most of the last 40 years.”<sup>(7)</sup>

## **1.2 The Securitarian Dimension of Regionalism**

A primary dimension of regionalism is security. A number of regional studies have focused on the security dimension. From this dimension, regions are defined in accordance with their security relations which are developed within the context of geographically-connected states, “territorially coherent subsystems defined by interlocking patterns of securitisation.”<sup>(8)</sup> Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is one of the major theories developed to analyze relations between regional states and how and why security dynamics develop among them. According to Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver (2003), a regional security complex shows specific geographically clustered patterns of security. In this regard, regionalism primarily refers to the emergence of security dynamics within a specific regional context. Due to geographical proximity, security interactions are higher among countries belonging to the same region, while they are lower among states located in different areas, even though “non-territorial security constellations exist too.”<sup>(9)</sup>

During the Cold War, regionalism was thoroughly overlooked amid a power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, scholarly debate mainly focused on the bipolar order, global dynamics, deterrence, and nuclear proliferation. The regional level was either almost totally ignored or considered as a subsystem. Robert Kelly argues that IR theory has traditionally

neglected regional autonomy by emphasizing the importance of the global system over regional subsystems,<sup>(10)</sup> according to a long-standing viewpoint that the latter was not significant. The birth of the European Economic Community (EEC) in the late 1950s led to interest in the regional level, even though it “remained weakly conceptualized.”<sup>(11)</sup>

The “first wave of regionalism” failed between the 1970s and 1980s. This is because primal regional experiments such as OPEC and the New International Economic Order (NIEO) failed as well as the fading of Third Worldism, all of which “have prioritized the international system once more.”<sup>(12)</sup> However, towards the end of the Cold War, regions gained more relevance as power units, and heated scholarly debate arose.

A strong tendency to link regionalism with security dynamics emerged as global great power competition faded, leaving room for regional dynamics to play out. The “new wave of regionalism” did not neglect the hardcore essence of neorealist theory – territoriality, state-centrism, violence and war. Buzan and Weaver, for instance, recognize that “the regional level is compatible with, and we think complementary to, neorealism’s structural scheme, but it contradicts the tendency of most neorealist analysis to concentrate heavily on the global level structure.”<sup>(13)</sup>

The new wave of regionalists believe that states “cannot project power over long distances.” As such, “states are much more threatening to their near neighbors than to others”<sup>(14)</sup> and “the ability to project declines over distance for most states.”<sup>(15)</sup> One of the most heated debates that gripped the new regionalist wave was related to geography and territoriality. Lake and Morgan considered these factors to be rather irrelevant, with friendship or enmity between states determined more by technology than location.<sup>(16)</sup> However, Buzan strongly stressed on linking geography with history, a key premise in analyzing patterns of enmity and amity among neighboring states. Although most new regionalists accept geography as the basic criterion in defining a region, Buzan and the Copenhagen School argue that while territorial contiguity is important, the necessary condition for the existence of a “region” is a historically established pattern of rivalry or cooperation, depending on the intensity of that/those interaction/s.

Iran’s full integration into the EAEU is dependent on the following points: a) the EAEU’s goals and the incentives it can offer to Iran in regard to economic growth and security; b) the size of economic and trading integration between Iran and the EAEU, which is the key factor prior to any other kind of functional integration, even military; c) Iran’s status as a “middle power” and the dangers of attaching itself to a “great power” with ambitions of regional hegemony, whether a region is defined geographically or functionally; d) Iran’s security threats and how other external factors (the EAEU) may help in this regard.

## **2. The EAEU: Establishment, Objectives and Shortcomings**

The EAEU was formed under Russia's influence in May 2014 involving some former members of the Soviet Union, with Belarus and Kazakhstan constituting the core countries and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining immediately afterwards. It represented the revival of a former organization whose origin dates back to January 1995, when Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed their first treaty to form a Customs Union (CU). Later, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined the CU.

According to its treaty, the EAEU aims to create a geographic area for the free movement of goods, services, capital and workers, and to provide for common policies in macroeconomic spheres: transport, industry, agriculture, energy, foreign trade, investment, customs, technical regulations, competition and antitrust regulation, with plans to create a single currency and deeper integration in the future. The EAEU's main goal is to counterbalance the EU's economic and political influence and establish an alternative successful model of regional economic integration.

According to the EAEU's website, "the Union is being created to comprehensively upgrade, raise the competitiveness of and cooperation between the national economies, and to promote stable development in order to raise the living standards of the nations of the Member-States." The EAEU embraces an integrated single market of 183.8 million people and a gross domestic product of \$1.9 trillion, which represents 32 percent of global gross domestic product.

When discussing the EAEU, it is imperative to focus on Russia, as it is by far the most powerful state in the union. It univocally exerts a major influence on the other states in the union, and has the potential to impact global politics as well as to exploit the union for its own geopolitical ends. Indeed, some critics of the EAEU have highlighted Russia's intent to create a trade bloc composed of former Soviet satellite states to counterbalance the EU, the United States and China [Henley, February 18, 2014]. Though Russian President Vladimir Putin denied his intention to bring the Soviet Union back to life through the EAEU, the former US presidential candidate and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the EAEU as "a move to re-Sovietize the region [...] We know what the goal is."<sup>(17)</sup>

For his part, Putin expressed his view on the EAEU in an article published by the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* on October 3, 2011. He stated that "it is crucial that the Common Economic Space is rooted in coordinated action in key institutional areas such as: macroeconomics, ensuring competition, technical regulations, agricultural subsidies, transport, and natural monopolies tariffs. Later, this framework will also include common visa and migration policies, allowing border controls between our states to be lifted. In

fact, we are adapting the experience of the Schengen Agreement that benefits Europeans as well as everyone who comes to work, study, or holiday in the EU.”<sup>(18)</sup> According to Putin, the EU is taken as a model “it took Europe 40 years to move from the European Coal and Steel Community to the full European Union. The establishment of the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space is proceeding at a much faster pace because we could draw on the experience of the EU and other regional associations. We see their strengths and weaknesses. And this is our obvious advantage since it means we are in a position to avoid mistakes and unnecessary bureaucratic superstructures.” For Putin, the EAEU will serve as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region and an opportunity to expand cooperation with China, the EU and the United States. Putin has expressed his support to form a partnership between the EAEU and the EU, rejecting the notion of confrontation between the two blocs.<sup>(19)</sup>

Putin has refuted speculation about Russia’s allegedly aggressive foreign policy agenda by listing the virtues and strengths of the EAEU. However, the EAEU exists alongside the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a political-military experiment which hosts the EAEU member states plus Tajikistan and pre-exists the union. The eventual creation of a single currency and a centralized bureaucracy would indicate Russian plans to dominate.<sup>(20)</sup>

As suggested by Ksenia Kirkham, most academic studies view the EAEU as a rival to the EU and depict it as a Russian tool to restore Moscow’s power/influence, a threatening scenario for Western states.<sup>(21)</sup>

Despite speculation about Russia’s intent to use the EAEU for its own geopolitical purposes, it must be pointed out that within its institutional architecture, the membership of its Commission, which is the organization’s governing body, reflects a push towards multilateralism. In fact, it is composed of two governing bodies: the Collegium, made up of five members, one for each state, and the Board, comprising 10 members, two for each member state, with equal voting power.

Academic scholars have highlighted the EAEU’s low legitimacy among its own member states and this is a major weakness.<sup>(22)</sup> The threat of Russian economic, political and military dominance over the EAEU member states that gained independence from the former Soviet Union approximately 30 years ago means that they do not completely trust the Russian-sponsored regional integration initiative, especially after Moscow’s intervention in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. As a result, the EAEU focuses on trading relations or similar arrangements such as customs unions, and stays away from pushing integration on the political front.

The Russian leadership treats “the post-Soviet nations as having only “limited sovereignty,” being part of the region controlled by Russia as a “great power



[...]” Finally, a number of the largest Russian firms profit from open access to the markets of the less economically advanced post-Soviet countries. “[...] a number of the largest Russian corporations are relatively more competitive in the region. They are interested in sustaining the asymmetrical economic dependence of ex-Soviet republics.”<sup>(23)</sup> The first and foremost indication of its will to emerge and be recognized as a great power is to impose its dominance over the former Soviet-sphere, which Moscow considers as its own backyard. A major reason behind Moscow’s intent to achieve global power status is to consolidate domestic support and legitimacy.

Most analysts state that among other EAEU weaknesses, economic asymmetry is one of the most troublesome. Indeed, Russia’s economy is by far the largest among the EAEU member states, not to mention Moscow’s share of trade with other EAEU member states, a figure which is almost negligible, while the EAEU represents more than 50 percent of Belarus’ trade.<sup>(24)</sup>

Another EAEU weakness has been the faltering construction of a Eurasian identity, along with widespread corruption in the EAEU member states, and “low efficiency of the democratic power structures through which the formation of cultural leadership can take place.”<sup>(25)</sup>

## **2. The Free Trade Agreement With Iran: Economic Opportunities and Limits**

The early phases in establishing a free trade agreement between the EAEU and Iran blossomed in December 2015, when Tehran signed a temporary agreement to lower tariffs. Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh, Iran’s Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade at the time, expressed optimism about Iran joining this union, stating that expanding trading relations was a strategic priority for Tehran.<sup>(26)</sup> The implementation of the agreement would no doubt speed up the establishment of the infrastructure needed for the International “North-South” Transport Corridor via Iran, Russia and the Caspian Sea, according to Veronika Nikishina, the Eurasian Commission’s Minister for Trade. This corridor will also benefit other countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, revealing the strategic importance of Iran’s geography.<sup>(27)</sup> The agreement was expected to last for three years and become permanent if things worked out during the talks. According to Iranian officials, this was the goal they intended to reach.

Geopolitically speaking, the strategic importance of Iran for the EAEU was underlined by Tigran Sargsyan, who served as the Chairman of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) between 2016-2020, during a summit held at the EEC’s headquarters in Moscow in early September 2019. Sargsyan said “the Heads of State of our Union attach special importance to deepening cooperation with Iran.” He noted the importance of Iran’s business community attending the summit, indicating Tehran’s willingness to integrate and Iran’s

significant role in linking “North-South” and “West-East” transport hubs.<sup>(28)</sup> Such optimism was echoed by Veronica Nikishina. She stressed that the union’s business community was interested in trading with Iran even before the agreement was signed, with Iran’s exports to the union’s countries rising by 28 percent in 2018.<sup>(29)</sup>

From Iran’s perspective, this agreement represents a major breakthrough for its trade. Iran’s Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian at the EAEU summit in Yerevan on October 1, 2019, pointed out that “about 840 commodity items will be subject to preferential tariffs, which means tariffs on some goods will be reduced and some will become zero tariffs.”<sup>(30)</sup> To be exact, the agreement involves 862 agricultural and industrial items, of which 502 are Iranian and 360 are from the EAEU. Under this agreement, Iran’s main exports include fruits, vegetables, metal products, construction materials, and items such as tableware and carpets. Similarly, Iran is to reduce tariffs on imports from the EAEU such as meat, selected agri-food products, metals, and electronics as well as other items.<sup>(31)</sup> Among agri-food products that Iran imports, barley, sunflower products and corn constitute the major part and they mainly come from Russia and Kazakhstan.<sup>(32)</sup>

For Tehran, this agreement facilitates its entry into new markets amid renewed sanctions. Other Iranian officials hailed the agreement too. Iran’s Minister of Industry Reza Rahmani emphasized its potential benefits in the face of US sanctions, while Mohammadreza Jahanbiglari, a member of Iran’s Chamber of Commerce, welcomed the agreement with even more optimism by predicting a four-fold growth in Iran’s trade turnover with the EAEU to reach \$10 billion within one year.<sup>(33)</sup> This optimism proved to be too unrealistic, let alone not considering the impact of negative externalities arising from the COVID-19 health pandemic.

From the Russian perspective, this preferential agreement would contribute to developing bilateral trade and expanding investment cooperation, according to the Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak.<sup>(34)</sup> This is important for Russia as it recovers economically from the sanctions regime imposed by the West post-Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Just five months before this agreement, Iran had signed another strategic and historic agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the P5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the UK, China, France, Russia and the United States – plus Germany).

According to a report quoted by Tehran Times, the signing of this “preferential agreement” has been beneficial to Iran. In terms of Iran’s trade growth rate, Iran’s exports to the EAEU member states increased by 216 percent in value and 522 percent in weight between January and September 2019 compared to the same period in 2018.<sup>(35)</sup> The report highlights that the major increase

was registered with Armenia, setting the stage for a competitive advantage for Iranian products compared to those coming from Turkey, a country which used to dominate the Armenian market before the implementation of this agreement. Actually, the EAEU-Iran trade agreement covers about 55 percent of the total mutual trade between the partner states. According to the agreement, Iran's products receive much higher tariff reductions compared to EAEU products. According to Adarov and Ghodsi, future growth in import-export relations will benefit the EAEU member states more than Iran, with a confirmation of an upward trend in Iran-Russia trading relations, compared to other EAEU member states, with mutual trading gains, especially in relation to vegetables and fruits.<sup>(36)</sup> Certainly there is some room for optimism, but the agreement must be contextualized within the framework of Iran's current affairs and its overall trading relationships.

Despite Iranian enthusiasm surrounding the agreement as displayed in Iranian newspapers, other sources report different figures, pushing scholarly analysis to be more realistic. Based on alternative raw data as mentioned, Iran's trading relations with the EAEU member states are highly downsized when compared to Iran's trade with China and the EU. China is by far Iran's largest trading partner and a major market for Iranian exports.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iran's exports to China in 2019 were worth approximately \$12.6 Billion, nearly four times the amount of Iranian exports to Turkey, Iran's second ranked market. At the same time, Iran imported approximately \$6.5 Billion of Chinese products in 2019, much more than the \$4 million of Iranian imports from the UAE, which is the second largest exporter to Iran, not considering the EU as a whole.<sup>(37)</sup> While the value of European imports of Iranian products is much lower when compared to other countries such as China, Turkey, India, Korea, Afghanistan, the UAE and Japan, the value of European products exported to Iran in 2019 was nearly \$4 Billion.<sup>(38)</sup>

The total share of Iran's imports from and exports to EAEU member states is considerably negligible, as the two following tables indicate.

By briefly analyzing the dates in the above tables, some observations can be made. First of all, Russia is by far Iran's major trading partner among the EAEU member states. Russian imports remained relatively stable, moving from 85.38 percent of total EAEU imports in 2016 to 81.68 percent in 2019 (Table 2). Exports to Russia accounted for around half of the total, moving from 57.81 percent in 2016 to 47.14 percent in 2019 (Table 1). Among the EAEU's exporters, Kazakhstan is the second largest exporter to Iran after Russia, accounting for 13 percent of total EAEU exports in 2019. The other EAEU member states accounted for only 5.3 percent of total EAEU exports to Iran.

A second interesting observation is that Iranian exports to Armenia

**Table 1: Iran: Exports of Goods to Its Partners**

Millions, US Dollars

	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>Russia</b>	285	371	496	364
<b>Armenia</b>	155	165	254	306
<b>Belarus</b>	5	77	12	9
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	43	64	84	76
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	6	8	12	16
<b>TOTAL</b>	494	685	858	771

Source:IMF,Directin of Trade Statistics (DOT)

**Table 2 : Iran: Imports of Goods from Its Partners**

Millions, US Dollars

	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>Russia</b>	1544	704	671	750
<b>Armenia</b>	21	26	29	25
<b>Belarus</b>	29	16	10	10
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	211	67	70	119
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	3	6	13	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	1808	819	793	918

Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics (DOT), <https://bit.ly/35vh2Pq>.

doubled from 2016 to 2019 (Table 1) and almost reached the value of exports to Russia, with 39.71 percent of the total – a figure indicating Iran’s increasing importance to Armenia over the past four years. Exports to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan similarly show an upward trend, despite these markers not being

extremely significant for Iranian products. As underlined by the Washington Institute, “much of this volume comprises fruits, vegetables, nuts, cement, ferrous metal products, petroleum products, and natural/liquefied gas.”<sup>(39)</sup>

Last but not least, while Iranian exports have progressively grown over the past four years – rising by 56 percent (Table 1) – Iranian total imports almost halved in the same period (Table 2), largely due to a dramatic decline in Russian products imported to the Iranian market, but also due to a visible decline in imports coming from Belarus and Kazakhstan. Armenia remained almost stable, with only Kyrgyzstan registering an increase. Such a downhill trend in imports should not be interpreted as a bad sign for Iran. On the contrary, it means that Iran has considerably reduced its trade deficit with the EAEU, as its exports have increased at the same time.

Notwithstanding this positive trend, the Washington Institute further highlights that “the FTA covers only about 50% of goods traded between Iran and the EAEU, with limited liberalization. To protect domestic production and promote self-sufficiency, Iran maintains a 4% across-the-board minimum import tariff. [...] Apart from Armenia, Iran’s energy exports to union member states count for little given Russia’s dominance in that sector.”<sup>(40)</sup> Arguably Russia covers the lion’s share. Russia’s quest for power represents one of the major limitations not only to the agreement’s implementation but also to any future developments in Iran-EAEU relations.

Beyond the above-reported tables, a few words must also be said about Iran’s importance for Armenia –the latter is probably more significant to the former. While Russia represents Yerevan’s top trade partner – as one might expect – Iranian goods have been ranking fourth overall in the past four years and accounted for almost \$325 million in 2019. A special trading relationship, the potential of which has been highlighted by Rouhani in a bilateral meeting with President Armen Sarkissian during the already-mentioned summit in Yerevan, “the Islamic Republic of Iran and Armenia have many capacities in various areas such as energy, transit, tourism and industry to use in line with benefiting the two nations.”<sup>(41)</sup> His words were echoed by Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan: “Iran is a sustainable source of energy and natural gas for Armenia, and his country wants to extend the gas-to-electricity barter agreement with Iran until 2040.”<sup>(42)</sup>

With Russia dominating the EAEU, what real chance does Iran have to establish major trading relations with its members in the future? To what extent can Russia tolerate any possible rapprochement between Iran and its former satellite states, with Moscow still considering them to be part of its backyard? How likely are Iran-EAEU relations to be cooperative in the future? Will cooperation lead to competition? The following sections attempt to address these important questions.

### **3. Political and Security Imperatives for Iran**

Since a region can be defined either from a geographical, functional, political, and even economic point of view, the real “boundaries” (or breadth) of a region can vary depending on these different definitions. The Middle East is the natural region Iran historically belongs to. However, the Middle East is paradoxically “a region without regionalism.”<sup>(43)</sup> Actually, at the dawn of the Cold War, Iran was co-opted into regional security agreements such as the Baghdad Pact (1955) including Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom and the Alliance of Periphery (1958), along with Turkey, Israel and Ethiopia. These regional security agreements reflected global alliances in the bipolar world. Despite the absence of any structured regional framework, some regional organizations began to appear on the scene, like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It goes without saying that Iran was totally excluded from all of them. Moreover, political strength, technological superiority and the military successes of Israel against Arab countries over the decades caused a decline in Arab nationalism in favor of the emergence of a new identity based on political Islam during the 1970s and 1980s. A new securitization pattern strongly emerged and has been dominating regional politics to the present day.

The 1979 revolution in Iran reshuffled the cards in the Middle East and had global repercussions. From that moment on, Iran’s foreign policy revolved around a set of pillars grounded on the search for “independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic.”<sup>(44)</sup> Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy resulted from the rediscovery of the country’s inner identity and the awareness that the only way to survive in international politics would be to only depend on itself.

Iran’s special cultural identity, Persian, is situated in an Arab-dominated region and this situation is also appreciated by countries like Turkey and Israel as they are indeed encompassed by a dominant Arab culture as well. In addition, Iran’s encirclement syndrome has created a sense of constant frustration as it is threatened by external forces and fears invasion. Rather than being totally driven by religion and ideology, Iran’s foreign policy has often been inspired by pragmatism and rationality.<sup>(45)</sup> Regional strategic alliances have resulted in many US-led initiatives against Iran. At the same time, Tehran has been prioritizing its struggle against the United States’ encroachment in the region, and Saudi Arabia’s leadership in the region, and Israel’s existential threat.

Iran’s pivot to the East necessarily followed.<sup>(46)</sup> The search for economic partnership with Russia and the free trade agreement signed with the EAEU was a specific aspect of its pivot strategy, despite the limits and constraints.

By speaking at the EAEU summit in Yerevan on October 1, 2019, Iran’s

President Hassan Rouhani said, “The international community must take a firm decision and also take effective actions to counter the United States’ unilateralism and hostile approach. [...] The international system is based on multilateralism and cooperation among the members of the international community. All countries are duty bound to counter unilateralism based on their international commitment and responsibility and in line with protecting global security and stability. [...] Peace and security in the Gulf, Sea of Oman and Strait of Hormuz should be provided by the regional countries. As I said at the United Nations General Assembly summit<sup>(47)</sup> I invited all the countries influenced by developments in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz to join the Hormuz Peace Endeavor.”<sup>(48)\*</sup>

Rouhani also emphasized Iran’s efforts to support cooperation within the framework of regional economic and political organizations such as the EAEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Just before leaving for the Armenian meeting in question, he mentioned, “I think this is the first time in our country that we are entering a regional economic union. [...] In conditions when the Americans are putting pressure and sanctions on the Iranian nation and global trade, this is a very important move.”<sup>(49)</sup>

Rouhani’s remarks can be interpreted in two ways. First, Iran’s official position is to attach great importance to regional agreements, whether economic or political-military. However, it seems that adhering to such regional frameworks is nothing but a function of its bitter confrontation with the United States. Second, from a political-security perspective, Iran’s reference point in the regional context remains the Middle East. Opposition to Israeli policies in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, fierce political rivalry with Turkey in Iraq and Syria<sup>(50)</sup> – despite an engaging trading partnership with Ankara – harsh ideological and political struggles, as well as energy competition with Saudi Arabia and its clash with the United States at all levels remain Tehran’s top foreign policy issues which drive its regional and international behavior.

So, the question at stake is: to what extent can the EAEU, or other Eurasian security organizations such as the CSTO and the SCO or even just Russia or China, help Iran in overcoming the economic, political and military difficulties it faces in the Middle East? Compared to 20-30 years ago, Russia and even more China are real global competitors to the United States in many regional theaters including Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This has pushed Moscow and Beijing to be more aggressive in countering US-led efforts to impose sanctions on Iran because they indirectly harm Russian and Chinese economic interests. In 2020, Russia and China in the UN Security Council vetoed to extend US-sponsored Resolution 1747,<sup>(51)</sup> which imposed an arms embargo on Iran in 2007.

Despite its economic, diplomatic and military rapprochement with Russia and China over the past two decades, it seems that sharing a broad counter-hegemonic narrative with them is not enough. For instance, it must be pointed out that Russia and China are not completely satisfied with Iran's aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East, because it impedes their efforts to secure energy and trade routes. China in particular expressed concern about Iran's foreign policy in the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic bottleneck where a large volume of world trade passes on a daily basis.

Iran is concerned about its economic dependence on China and is a bit reluctant to move towards greater economic integration with Russia. Although economic and energy relations with them have been improving throughout the past 30 years, the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 paved the way for a win-win situation as well as an opportunity for rapprochement with Western powers. However, Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal in May 2018 pushed Iran towards Russia and China.

#### **4. Iran's Engagement With Eurasia and China's Overwhelming Role**

The EAEU predominantly reflects Russia's position towards the international order. On the one side, the EAEU reflects an interesting experiment of regional integration. On the other, it signifies the latest Russian initiative to restore its former status as a global power through its domination over former satellite states. Such an objective is not only driven by domestic imperatives but also by an ambition to resist Washington's encroachment into the region. Iran's attitudes towards Eurasia are primarily molded in accordance with its relations with Russia.

Iran and Russia undoubtedly share similar positions, particularly to counter Washington's power in the world. Iran and Russia are held together by what has been singled out as an "ideational synergy,"<sup>(52)</sup> encompassing "common feelings of 'international misrecognition' and 'common threat perceptions.'"<sup>(53)</sup> Russia's push towards economic integration in Eurasia was the outcome of Moscow's will to counterbalance Western efforts to isolate it internationally in the wake of the end of the Cold War. According to Kirkham, Russia's isolation was threefold: "a) political-economic (the IMF and the World Bank), b) military (NATO's operations), c) spatial (the EU and NATO's physical border expansion)."<sup>(54)</sup>

Even though Russia and Iran share similar concerns regarding security and have common interests in facilitating the signing of agreements, this is not sufficient to lead to a strategic alliance. While, the two countries have preferred to describe their relationship as a "strategic partnership,"<sup>(55)</sup> it would be more accurate to describe it as a bilateral relationship based on structural geopolitical rivalry, which has allowed them to arrange some mutual tactical understandings in regard to specific issues.



The Astana peace process, involving Turkey too, is just a marriage of convenience between Russia and Iran which is based on a political trade-off between their competing interests, its durability may continue or expire, depending on sudden changing geopolitical conditions. Furthermore, the signing of the FTA between Iran and the EAEU indicates not only converging trade interests but also Russia's exclusive authority to permit a foreign state to access its post-Soviet space economically.

Iran's integration into the EAEU has not met its expectations to date. The lack of financing and crippling economic sanctions towards both Iran and Russia have slowed down economic integration. Therefore, the EAEU for Iran is one among a number of regional initiatives which remain stagnant, along with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for instance. The latter's delivery of equipment has been delayed by repeated setbacks.<sup>(56)</sup> The INSTC is a major project for the land transportation of freight from India to Europe passing through strategic countries such as Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, by overriding more expensive routes through the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. From Iran's perspective, it is not only a matter of reducing the transit time and costs by geographically avoiding strategic rivals such as Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea and Israel in the Mediterranean, it is also viewed as an opportunity to rise as a hub for geo-energy and geo-economic dynamics in Eurasia. A way to re-emerge from isolation after decades. A matter of survival.

Vladimir Putin's proposal in 2016 to create a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" encompassing China, India, Iran and Russia along with its CIS partners and the EAEU, is another enticing initiative for Iran's reinstatement into the international economy. It came just a few months after the March 2015 proposal to economically integrate the EAEU with the New Silk Road Economic Belt. Negotiations regarding a Greater Eurasian Partnership have failed due to major strategic divisions among its prospective member states. After all, economic cooperation is one thing, a strategic alliance is something else. Actually, Russia's geopolitical ambitions clash with China's rise as a global power. Although some room for integration between the EAEU and the Silk Road exists, no real mechanism has come of age so far to try to integrate elements of both initiatives, hence creating a convergence and competition paradox<sup>(57)</sup> which has resulted in a Sino-Russian condominium over Eurasia.<sup>(58)</sup>

Another significant factor limiting Iran's prospects to benefit from deeper integration with Eurasia is China's growing partnership with the Eurasian countries, being the EAEU's second biggest trade partner at present.<sup>(59)</sup> China's growing economy requires hydrocarbons, thus generating a potential struggle between competitors in the energy sector.

China is also Iran's largest economic partner. Upon visiting Tehran in

January 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with Iran, which “marked the official recognition of Iran as a crucial partner for China”<sup>(60)</sup> three years after Beijing launched the Silk Road initiative. Bilateral relations between the two countries have been good for the past decades, however, as the imposition of international sanctions against Tehran increased, Iran became more and more dependent on Beijing, resulting in a “substantial reduction of Iran’s agency.”<sup>(61)</sup>

However, first the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in July 2015 – in which China’s role was decisive – and secondly the establishment of the CSP – most of its 17 memorandums were related to the BRI – represent evident signs that Iran has grown as a strategic partner in China’s world vision, setting the conditions for overcoming “the dynamics of the Great Power-Middle Power relationship.”<sup>(62)</sup> By emerging as a crucial pivot in the middle of Eurasia, Iran may in fact turn into China’s gateway to the West. Iran and China are naturally complementary economic and trade partners, as Iran heavily depends on China’s imports of machinery, industrial products and technology while, conversely, China needs Iran’s oil supplies to feed its industry. This may in turn benefit Iran’s stagnant oil sector. “China is making efforts to secure energy resources from the Caspian region as an alternative to Middle Eastern oil. Therefore, Iran is a vital link for the transit of oil pipelines to transfer energy from the Caspian region to China, indicating that China has a strong interest in maintaining a strong strategic partnership with Iran.”<sup>(63)</sup>

However, many limits to advance Iran-China relations remain. Iran not being upgraded to a full member in the SCO is significant. While Russia fully supports Iran’s full membership to the SCO, reflecting its vision for the organization to act as a counterweight to US policies and NATO operations, China is more prudent since it views the SCO more as a pragmatic organization to aid intra-regional cooperation and integration.<sup>(64)</sup> Moreover, China likes to mitigate risk in international relations, and it has expressed concern about Iran’s aggressive behavior in the Middle East. Last but not least, even if Iran’s leadership views the SCO as an opportunity to create a counterweight to the United States and NATO in the East, Iran’s aversion towards over-dependence on foreign states still remains, thus hindering its integration into the EAEU and advancing relations with China on different fronts.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to evaluate Iran’s engagement with Eurasia through analyzing its benefits, opportunities, and challenges as well as its limits. From an economic perspective, the FTA agreement with the EAEU has been somewhat beneficial to Iran’s economy, but with noticeable limits as reflected in the trade data. The sharp fall in trade volume between 2016-2019, because

of a decline in Russian exports to Iran, was partially recovered in a matter of seven months, between the end of 2019 and early 2020 – namely, since the implementation of the FTA agreement itself – exceeding \$2 billion.<sup>(65)</sup> However, it seems too early to evaluate this positive turnaround amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic which will upset trade relations around the world. Therefore caution is needed. It would be advisable to wait for more complete datasets to draw a more balanced conclusion concerning trading relations with the EAEU. Against the backdrop of Iran's economic entente with the EAEU, and despite successful tactical dealings with Russia on energy and security matters, Tehran's economic relationship with Moscow is the weakest leg of the partnership. Conversely, it has been largely pointed out that Iran's main trading partner is unquestionably China. In spite of a significant fall in trade worth approximately \$26 billion in 2018 to \$19 billion in 2019,<sup>(66)</sup> Beijing has strengthened not only its trading relations with Tehran, but also its diplomatic and military relations. Iran has become "profoundly, disproportionately, and perhaps irretrievably dependent on Beijing, despite its own revolutionary opposition to reliance on foreign powers."<sup>(67)</sup> Upon launching the BRI in 2013, Beijing started to increasingly perceive Tehran as its door towards European markets without passing through Russia, highlighting Iran's strategic geographic position in China's worldview. However, China is in fact interested in securing energy supplies from Iran as much as from Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners.

Tehran has viewed economic integration with Eurasia via the FTA with the EAEU as an important opportunity to thwart US-led sanctions. The early talks regarding the FTA began just a few months after signing the Iranian nuclear deal in July 2015 between Iran and the P5 + 1. Iran's external environment was ostensibly becoming much more cooperative after decades of harsh political-ideological confrontation and crippling economic isolation. Iran's slow return to international markets was characterized by a rapprochement with Western powers, and what was simultaneously labelled as its "untiring push toward greater regionalism and Eurasian cooperation." However, President Donald Trump's announcement to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal on May 8, 2018 occurred just days before Iran signed the FTA on May 17. Thus, the signing of the FTA can be considered as a sign of Iran's pragmatic desire to diversify its economic partners in case the United States imposed harsh sanctions on its economy.

In conclusion, despite pushing towards Eurasia and the East, Iran still relies almost totally on its main long-standing foreign policy pillars such as independence, nationalism and self-sufficiency. The signing of the FTA has proven to be more of a symbolic agreement to create a unified front with Russia against Washington's encroachment in the post-Soviet space and

the Middle East rather than a substantial turning point in Iran's economic integration into Eurasia. Similar thinking can be applied to Iran's attempts to join the SCO and its diplomatic and political rapprochement with China. Even though Iran has not been upgraded to a full member in the SCO so far, the country's path towards Eurasianism has been critical in its drive to balance anti-Western pressures.

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