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ENERGY POLICY OF IRAN: CENTRAL ASIAN DIMENSION

Moldaliyeva Akdidar Ikilassovna

miakdidar@mail.ru

PhD student of the Department of Regional Studies,

Faculty of International relations, L.N.Gumilyov ENU, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan

Scientific supervisor - Kilybayeva P.K.

The independence of the Central Asian countries provided external players with the opportunity to expand their geopolitical spheres of influence in a region new to them and receive material dividends from the establishment of trade and economic ties. Iran did not become an exception, and in the first years after the collapse of the USSR, it seemed that even higher hopes were attached to gaining positions in Central Asia than other countries of the Near and Middle East (with the possible exception of only Turkey). Against the backdrop of tense relations with a number of Arab monarchies and friction with the West, a “breakthrough” in Central Asia meant for Iran compensation from the costs of isolation by acquiring new partners and establishing new economic ties. In the early 1990s, Iran focused on ethnic and linguistic affinity, starting an active policy in the region from Tajikistan, which is culturally close to it. However, then Tehran's Central Asian ties went beyond the narrow "Tajik framework" and now includes, to varying degrees, all the states of the region. The countries of Central Asia themselves are also interested in Iran, first of all, insofar as Iran is able to solve transport (access to the Gulf) and energy problems, provides technology and develops trade relations, has influence in the Economic Cooperation Organization formed in 1985 (ECO), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Strengthening of positions in Central Asia gives Iran the opportunity to solve a number of important interrelated tasks

The first is to get out of isolation. This direction of Iran's foreign policy works for the country's international image. Moreover, in contrast to the Middle East, where the Iranian policy of increasing influence was perceived as a claim to provide decisive military and political influence on the regional situation, in Central Asia Iran has traditionally acted and is acting more balanced. This allowed him to develop relations (albeit to varying degrees) with all the Central Asian states, which perceive him as an independent and significant player in the region. Cooperation with Iran

gives them additional opportunities to diversify their external relations, fits into the policy of multi-vector and balancing common to all Central Asian countries between world centers of power.

In Central Asia, Iran has established relations with new states whose international positions are of particular importance to it. According to a number of experts, the main tactical guidelines of Iranian diplomacy in the Central Asian countries are aimed at gradual installation in all areas that could help overcome Iran's foreign policy and economic isolation. Tehran positions itself as a reliable partner with parallel interests with the leading states of the world. Unlike the Middle East, in Central Asia we are not talking about religiously motivated actions (the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population of the region are Sunnis). Here, Iran does not claim leadership, and in the first place it declares and puts into practice pragmatic interests, and not values.

The Iranian course in Central Asia has always been rational and restrained. He was minimally affected by the change of Central Asian leaders, he was not full of sharp turns and avoided confrontation. For example, during the civil war in Tajikistan, Tehran, which sympathized with the Islamic opposition, opted for a political settlement based on the division of power proposed in the framework of the inter-Tajik dialogue. In contrast to the Middle East, where the Iranian policy of increasing influence was perceived as a claim to exert a decisive military and political influence on the situation, to dominate, in Central Asia, Iran has traditionally acted in a balanced and cautious manner. The second task is to provide economic dividends, to get real benefits from trade and economic cooperation with the region.

The Iranian government, headed by President Rouhani, formulated an updated regional concept a few years ago, within which Iran announced its intention to increase influence in neighboring regions, and in Central Asia in particular, by purposefully removing existing obstacles in order to expand the potential of both sides in the field of trade and investment and mutual influence [1]. At the same time, the key the point of this strategy is the implementation of major infrastructure projects, such as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is fully consistent with Tehran's desire to strengthen road and rail links with Central Asia with subsequent entry into the Chinese markets. The Chinese initiative was supplemented by the fact of the launch of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway line, as well as the start of the implementation of the Ashgabat agreement on the creation of a transport and the transit corridor Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran - Oman - Qatar (Memorandum... on the implementation of the agreement on the creation of an international transport and transit corridor). Echoing Tehran's previously stated priorities for the globalization of transport infrastructure, the OBOR opens up the opportunity for Iran to directly transform the country into a transport and logistics hub, where international transit routes would intersect. At the end of June 2020, Tehran and Beijing signed a 25-year economic and security agreement worth \$400 billion of Chinese investment in Iran. It is officially called the Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership [2].

Of course, the emergence of China as the initiator of a global economic project does not guarantee the implementation of the Iranian infrastructure strategy in its original form. The resumption and tightening of US sanctions pressure is complemented by the fact that the Iranian economy is in a difficult position. Tehran is in dire need of an influx of foreign investment that would stimulate the development of key sectors of the economy. In such circumstances, the implementation of large infrastructure projects can be significantly hampered, both due to the lack of necessary funding, and due to various geopolitical circumstances. The states of the region consider the construction of communications as a necessary element of the diversification of transport routes. But the pressure of the United States on the countries of the region and the emphasis on the fact that everything should be "without Iran" makes the leaders of the countries of the region behave extremely cautiously in any area of interaction with Iran, be it cultural, political or economic cooperation. For example, Kazakhstan has become Iran's largest trading partner in the region over the years of independence, delivering oil on a swap basis. How Kazakh analyst L.

Parkhomchik points out that up to 2010, up to 5 million tons of Kazakh oil annually went through the port of Aktau in the Caspian Sea to Iran as part of swap operations. However, under the pressure of Western sanctions, this practice was stopped, which to a large extent influenced the volume of bilateral trade. If in 2008 its figure exceeded 2 billion dollars, then by the end of 2015 the trade turnover amounted to 650 million dollars, of which 570 million was the export of Kazakhstan [3].

Until 2016–2017 Tehran's economic ties with Ashgabat developed in ascending order. Back in 1997, a pipeline was built in Iran and Turkmen gas was supplied to the northern regions of Iran, at that time poorly connected with the southern fields. It is worth noting that back in 2014, Iranian Oil Minister B.N. Zanganeh stated that his country now produces enough of its own gas and purchases from Turkmenistan are made only to maintain political relations [4]. As reported by the Iranian media, after lengthy negotiations, the parties came to a mutual agreement. Despite this, on January 1, 2017, Turkmenistan cut off gas supplies to Iran. In mid-August 2018, Turkmenistan filed a lawsuit against NIGC with International Arbitration. In October 2018, the Iranian side filed a counterclaim. The dispute is about the price, accumulated debts and methods of calculating them by the parties. The specific expression of this conflict was the cessation of Iran's purchases of Turkmen gas from 2017. Pipelines in the Iranian direction are idle, although they were designed for 20 billion cubic meters. m of gas [5].

The economy of Turkmenistan continues to depend heavily on the export of natural gas, which in the best years of its supply to Iran, Russia (and through the Russian Federation) and China provided up to 90% of export earnings. However, in recent years, Ashgabat has managed only to some extent to return to partnership with Russian business. At the same time, China remains the main buyer of natural gas, on which Turkmenistan has become highly economically dependent, especially considering that the proceeds from gas trade are mainly used to repay Chinese loans. Over the past 20 years, according to BP Statistical Review, Turkmenistan has repeatedly increased its proven gas reserves - from 2.5 trillion cubic meters. m in 1998 to 19.5 trillion cubic meters. m at the end of 2017. This is the fourth figure in the world after Qatar, Iran and Russia. However, Turkmen success in gas production leaves much to be desired. Since 2008, production has fluctuated between 63-66 billion cubic meters. m. Thus, in 2016, 66.8 billion cubic meters were produced in Turkmenistan. m, which was 4% less than in 2015 (69.6 bcm, according to the BP World Energy Statistical Review) [6]. The current economic and political events in the world continue to have a negative impact on the prospect of diversifying the export of Turkmen natural gas, and hence on the economy of Turkmenistan as a whole. The protracted dispute with Ashgabat is forcing Iran to completely abandon Turkmen gas and replace it with its own (the problem is the need to build infrastructure) or Russian (it can be supplied in transit through Azerbaijan). Under the current conditions, the Turkmen leadership with admirable tenacity continues to build a section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI/TAPI) gas pipeline on its territory and periodically over the past two years declares that it has already been completed. As the Turkmen expert S. Aytakov points out, Turkmenistan, starting to actively promote the construction of TAPI, has entered into a zone of serious conflicts of interest. “The gas markets of Pakistan and India are a zone of interest for Qatar and Iran. While Qatar is already supplying liquefied natural gas to these markets, Iran is waiting for the continuation of the construction of the Mir gas pipeline, which it has already brought to the border with Pakistan *, but construction has stalled due to US sanctions. The appearance of the TAPI project directly contradicts the interests of both Qatar and Iran. It is worth noting that two years ago, President G. Berdimuhamedov tried to negotiate with the leadership of Qatar on a joint presence in the market of India and Pakistan and even applied for investments for the construction of TAPI during a personal visit to Qatar, but the visit ended in nothing” [7]. At the same time, Tehran periodically points to the prospects for the development of other gas routes that potentially compete with Turkmen projects. In particular, the National Iranian Gas Company stated that it is considering the possibility of gas supplies to China, as well as through

Turkey to the EU. What to do next with the TAPI project is unclear. The course announced by the United States for the withdrawal of its military units from Afghan territory creates a “new uncertainty” regarding the implementation of this gas pipeline.

The Trans-Caspian Pipeline Project (TCGP), despite its political lobbying from the European Union, is still a mythical project due to the disagreement of Tehran and Moscow, as well as its little attraction for Baku. The long-term delay in the implementation of the TAPI project, which competes with the projects of Iran and Qatar, does not allow the Turkmen authorities to improve the situation in the country. In addition, on November 1, 2017, the Russian Ministry of Energy and the Iranian Ministry of Oil signed a memorandum on supporting the project of gas supplies from Iran to India. This large-scale project with a length of 1,200 km along the seabed is designed to become an alternative to the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, which has long been "slipping" for political reasons, both between Tehran and Islamabad, and between Islamabad and Delhi. Traditionally, all Iranian projects are strongly opposed by the United States. For Iran, cooperation with Turkmenistan is a chance to strengthen its role and influence, primarily in the field of energy exports. Moreover, Tehran believes that this is no less important for Ashgabat. Iran can serve as the main corridor through which Turkmenistan will get access to the World Ocean. For the Turkmen energy sector, Iran can be important not only as a consumer and sales market, but also as a partner that can play an important role in providing the Turkmen fuel and energy sector with the necessary technical knowledge and competencies [8]. In Iranian-Uzbek relations, restrictions were initially associated with the influence of the American vector in Tashkent's foreign policy. However, with the gradual lifting of sanctions and attempts by the Iranian side to ensure the country's reintegration into the world economy, this factor weakened, as did Tashkent's ideological alertness towards Iran. After the death of I. Karimov and the coming to power of Sh. Mirziyoyev, hopes arose for a serious intensification of economic relations between the two countries. This hope is fueled by the serious intention of the Uzbek leadership to rebuild its economic system. Tashkent intends to increase its own line of products produced by the manufacturing industry high-tech goods.

To sum up, expanding the capacities of the petrochemical industry is one of the main tasks to reduce the country's dependence on raw materials. This will allow, by processing raw materials, to increase the output of chemical products with high added value, to export not raw materials, but finished products, and, by reducing imports, to provide them to national consumers. Thus, to ensure an effective diversification policy, Uzbekistan needs a technologically advanced oil and gas sector. The Shurtan Gas Chemical Complex (GCC) has already been put into operation in the republic, the construction of the largest Ustyurt GCC in Central Asia has been completed. In this regard, it seems that the experience of Tehran, which managed, despite severe Western economic pressure, in 2000-2015, may be in demand for Tashkent. increase the capacity of petrochemical production by 7 times. Iran's relations with Kyrgyzstan, where other players, primarily Russia and China, are actively and successfully operating, have not yet received significant development. In the economic relations between Iran and the Central Asian states, along with objective ones, there are also subjective difficulties in export-import operations, which are largely related to the international isolation of Iran and excessive bureaucratization. Among them is the lack of established Iranian banking in Central Asia (with the exception of Kazakhstan), which seriously complicates the servicing of trade operations.

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