

Neo-Regionalism and Culture-Based Security Policy between Iran and Eurasian Muslim Countries

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Abstract

Objective: Regional cooperation between Iran and the Muslim countries in the Eurasian region has been an important aim for different Iranian governments especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of these countries. Looking at some features of new regionalism theories, the present article aims at considering the role of such an approach in providing an appropriate framework in order to understand the regional cooperation in the Eurasian region. In fact, the main question of the present article is the way Iran and the Eurasian Muslim countries could achieve convergence in identities and norms and also cooperate with each other despite the disparity in defining common interests.

Method: The method used in this study is descriptive-analytical and uses the theoretical framework of neo-regionalism to analyze the areas of cooperation and difference between the two countries.

Result: The author argues that Iran and most of the Eurasian Muslim countries could have achieved a shared definition of identities and norms governing the patterns of their foreign relations with taking advantage of cultural convergent capabilities.

Conclusion: To conclude, the possibility of shaping such a kind of regional cooperation is examined and it seems that based on neo-regionalism framework, this policy will become possible when the level of analyzing the relations between these countries change from a micro-level of bilateral relation or a macro-level of global relations into a middle-level one within a regional relation and in a "Cultural Eurasia" context.

Keywords: Iran, Identity, Persian Language, Sufism, Neo-regionalism, Eurasia Muslim Countries, Security, Cultural Eurasia

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1. Introduction

Cultural convergence among the countries located in the same region has a long history. In fact, historical similarities, integrated traditions and common culture among the people who live in a broader geographical region are the basis of regional integration between the governments in today world. It is a fact that in the past decades political units while accepting globalization of some patterns and environmental methods in the international arena have tried to redefine their interests and identities in the regional framework next to their neighboring countries. Therefore, theories of regionalism that had a place among theories of international relations in the 1960s and 1970s, rushed up the steps in redefining their basic concepts from 1990s and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, new approaches emerged in the neo-regionalism framework.

In today world, new regionalism has provided an appropriate ground for forming various layers of regional cooperation based on two elements of "thematic openness" and "geographical flexibility" and sometimes claims to have provided the foundation of a new kind of co-operations at the international level.

It is also possible to define a new sphere of cooperation between countries that, according to classic definitions of the regions, we saw them in different regions of Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia, and according to the new definition of the concept of the region, we can do our part to build a new region called the Eurasian region.

The present study aims at considering the relationship between Iran and the Muslim countries in the Eurasian region, and the role of neo-regionalism in explaining or interpreting the cooperation between these countries with looking at main characteristics of neo-regionalism in modern times. In fact, the main question of the present study is how Iran has still been able to shape a new level of regional cooperation with most of the Eurasian Muslim countries despite heterogeneity in perceptions of national interests. The answer to this question and actually the hypothesis of the present paper is that "Iran can has come to a common definition of identities and norms with most of the Eurasian Muslim countries, governing the patterns of foreign relations through benefiting the cultural capacities of regional convergence despite heterogeneity of interests in some aspects."

This policy could be possible since the analysis level of Iran and the Eurasian Muslim countries' ties is going to change from a micro-level of bilateral relations or a macro-level of global relations to a more middle-level of regional relations and the cultural integration is more accessible by removing political barriers.

To analyze the possibility of regional cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Muslim countries, the author will try to explain a theoretical framework based on neo-regionalism theories and then will evaluate Iran's regional cooperation capacities with a focus on two important cultural elements: Persian language and common mystical teachings.

2. Neo-regionalism, Cultural Integration and Regional Cooperation

Based on the classical theories of regionalism, since the countries cannot hold different places in every time due to the fact that they are dependent on the geographical areas where they have come into existence, therefore, they do not have the option to join various regional arrangements (Miller, 2005, 241) (Buzan and Waever, 2003, 21).

From another perspective, the history bears witness to the fact that when peace and prosperity become important, the countries seek to identify and recognize the benefits of each other and competition happens in the framework of coexistence rather than looking for enmity, war and destruction.

However, the limited relations between neighbors, unpleasant historical memories, and desire for domination sometimes result to separated identities and neglecting of common cultural and civilizational norms and values between the countries belong to the same historical civilization. Their different perception from "self" and "other" causes extending political borders to other aspects of relations and the linguistic, religious, racial, ethnic and cultural diversities will be redefined in a disintegrated framework.

Nevertheless, it is expected that cultural integration between the units in a region could expand economic cooperation and decrease the political tensions. The European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are two good examples of defining common identities and values, and even ideologies in a way to increase collective interests in different fields.

This pragmatic approach to cooperation for achieving collective security and providing interests for regional actors from convergence has been a first step towards regionalism as a bridge between two study levels of micro (including political units) and macro (including international structure). In fact, regionalism has helped to increase and boost the regional security (Kelly, 2007, 198).

Meanwhile, since the 1990s and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new approach came into existence in this field and new arrangements in the framework of the "neo-regionalism" concept have been made in this field of study.¹

This new approach to regionalism, more than anything else, emphasizes the characteristics of "openness of definition for the concept of region" and its different "layers." Therefore, the countries are less involved and bound in ideological arrangements for their joining or separation, and geography is regarded as a relative term or issue and it can be seen that there are countries that have joined some regions outside their regions. Definition of the concept of region has become more flexible and various forms of regionalism, regional organizations and institutes can be created on the basis of the interests of the countries that are brought together. In fact, in the modern world order, the world has been globally regional rather than moving toward uni-polar and/or multi-

1. For more information look at these sources: (Fawcett, 1995, 134), (Hurrell, 1995, 331), (Lake and Morgan, 1997, 3), (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 2000), (Mansfield and Milner, 1999, 589).

polarism and although powerful political units have their own roles and particular functions, regional actors have also found a stage to show themselves.

This new kind of regionalism, as informed, has constructed identities and norms within the framework of institution building have considered being a new political discourse in the international era. In this new discourse, sometimes multiple identities have been defined in a geographical area and have overlapped each other. Subsequently, several layers of regionalism could be formed simultaneously with different functions and each country defines its regional relations according to its needs and interests in one or more layers. Consequently, a "region" is what we perceive not necessarily what is defined on the map. Therefore, although the geography is still an important factor, this element has become more flexible and can be portrayed based on the needs, identity and interests of a country, each time.

One of the functions of neo-regional cooperation is providing security based on emphasising on common cultural models. Alexander Wendt, the author of *The Social Theory of International Politics* said: "Identities are the basis of Interests." (Wendt, 1999) From this perspective, we can say that cultural values are the basis of identities. And as the common interests can increase cooperation between the states, redefining common cultural values can decrease the animosities and security and stability will be expanded. As a result, culture-based security is the most important production of the neo-regionalism approach.

This study continues the discussion with a case study in the area of cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Muslim countries based on the neo-regionalism approach and emphasis on some common cultural elements in the region.

3. Iran's Regional Cooperation Capacities in the Eurasian Region

Iran and a number of Central Asian Muslim countries including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, along with South Asian countries including Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as Caucasian countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkey although today are geopolitically placed in separate regions, they historically share a common civilization and have mostly similar elements of identity and culture.

Although the political boundaries and the emphasis on nationalist elements (such as ethnicity) have caused that people in these countries belong themselves to areas rather than their neighbouring regions, their common culture as an important identity element in many fields ties these lands to each other as well as to their other neighbouring countries such as India, Iraq, West China, South Russia and so on.

Along with this, the need for economic growth and progress has stimulated these countries into boosting trade among their countries, neighbouring regions as well as the other parts of the world. And of course, security and stability is one of the most important prerequisites in order to achieve a superior economic position.

Since security in the modern world is cross-boundary and is not limited to a specific territory, to achieve economic dynamism and political and social stability the countries located in this region also have no choices but to work together. These collaborations in the current era are accomplished with two goals: first, reducing tensions among the states of this geographical area; second, establishing new conventions to confront ethnic and religious extremist militants. Achieving the two mentioned goals may help approaching other goals of political and economic cooperation among these countries.

This set of countries today has to work together at least in three spheres of culture, economy and security to promote their national interests and collective interests. Cultural similarities and the existence of common cultural elements among people of this broad geographical area have been contributing to shaping of common identities from a long time ago. Today, the revival of these common identities can not only help the cultural convergence of the people residing in these regions, but it can also form the fundamentals of stability or what can be called "culture-based security".

Not so long ago, many countries in these regions carried the legacies of the culture-based traditions in a common civilization, which for centuries had created kind of cultural convergence beyond national boundaries or even ethnical and religious divisions. To demonstrate potential capacities of Iran to develop cultural, economic, political and security partnerships with the Eurasian Muslim countries, among the various cultural components, such as ethnicity, language, religion, customs, art and architecture, common historical background and many more, the author has chosen two important cultural elements that have historically converged people from the Eurasian Muslim territories and today are still a significant part of the cultural identity of many Iranians.

3-1. Persian Language

In this area of civilization, Persian language was used for centuries as the official language of many territories of the region and people from different cities and towns spoke in this language. Back to the history, the cities of Herat and Delhi had been the capital of Persian language and culture in various periods. In Central Asia also cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand have been the guardians of the Persian-speakers' cultural traditions during the Turks' rule over these lands.

Turks, who have for more than a thousand years ruled over a vast expanse from Central Asia to the west and south of the continent of Asia, considered themselves as part of this culture and language rather than being alien to it and mostly people spoke in both ethnic and official (Persian) languages in various periods. In fact, Persian language was prevalent in the crown of monarchs of different Muslim dynasties including Mogul, Timurid, Turk as well as other kingdoms. Literates and poets used Persian language and it has also been an administrative language of secretaries. Hence, millions of historical writings of various monarchies' documents and letters in Persian language are kept in museums and administrative archives of different countries of the region. In

fact, the phenomenon of dissevering languages and the emphasis on language divergence-based identities is new in the region and has been aggravated in recent centuries by increasing nationalist approaches and ideological views.

Today, there are numerous common vocabularies in languages of Turkish, Urdu, Turkmen, Kazakh, Uzbek, Azeri, Kyrgyz and Pashtu as well as other common dialects in the Eurasian region, indicating long-standing historical ties between these languages.

In fact, Persian language has had a profound influence on forming many of the modern languages of Central and South Asia. Today, the Urdu language is written in Persian script, and the national anthem of Pakistan and many other literary works in this country are fully understood by Persian speakers. (For more details, see: Ajam, 1390/7/3)

On the other hand, vocabularies, sentences and pronunciations through the historical origins in Uzbek language are very much influenced by the Persian language. To many Uzbeks, particularly in Samarkand and Bukhara as well as in the provinces of Surxondaryo and Qashqadaryo, Persian language has a special cultural and scientific place. There are many books in Uzbek written in Persian script, what makes the Uzbek scholars and instructors learn Persian. Over the portals of the historical and ancient buildings of the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva are written inscriptions of Persian. Shirali Avazmetov, the author of “Persian Vocabularies in Uzbek Language” has collected more than four thousand Persian vocabularies in Uzbek language. (Avazmetov, Retrieved on: 1397/1/6) According to Safar Abdullah, a Tajik researcher in the field of Iranian studies and instructor at the Al-Farabi University in Almaty, there are 43,000 manuscripts in the “Abū Rayhān Al-Bīrūnī Library” in Uzbekistan, of which 39000 manuscripts are written in Persian language. (Abdullah, 1394/9/15)

The Azerbaijani Turkish language is the second language among the Turkish languages, which has been affected by Persian; the first one is the Uzbek language. This has been more in the contexts of phonology, vocabulary and structure. Persian language also has long been the official language of the crown of the Ottoman Sultans. Visiting the Turkish museums, walking around the old neighbourhoods as well as visiting the historical monuments of the different cities of this country, illustrates the presence of Persian writing and language on the monuments and inscriptions. (Yalchin, 1394/2/2)

Throughout history, Iranians used to regularly travel to Kazakhstan as well and their trade with Kazakhs has led to a cultural mixing and promotion of Persian language, as far as it is said that Iranians introduced Islam to this region. Many historical books of this territory are written in Persian. Gaining knowledge about history of this country is difficult without knowing Persian. Most Kazakh poets, writers and scholars are familiar with Persian language. Major literates such as Hafez, Saadi, Ferdowsi and Khayyam Nayshaburi are well-known figures in this area and many of them, if not all, are translated in Kazakh. According to Komis Bayov, the chairman of the Persian language seat of the Al-Farabi University in Almaty, many Persian proverbs are also used in

the Kazakh language. According to the Kazakh researchers, there are approximately three thousand Persian words in the Kazakh language. (Etemad, Retrieved on: 1397/1/8)

Pashto is an Eastern Iranian language spoken in some parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and India. Although Arabic has influenced this language during centuries, Pashto has retained many original features of Iranian languages and possesses different dialects. (IRANICA, Pashto, Afghanistan)

Persian language has also been used for decades in Kyrgyzstan and has been taught in schools. Vocabularies about religion and commerce in Kyrgyzstan are mostly derived from Persian vocabulary. Some linguists have calculated that the number of Persian vocabularies in Kyrgyz language is up to 1200 vocabularies. According to "Kyrgyz-Naame", people made their prayers in Persian before the invasion of Russians. Persian language and literature are more widespread in Kyrgyz local culture and traditions, particularly the dialect to which in south-western regions of the country and the Fergana Valley is spoken. Many of historical sites of Kyrgyzstan have Persian names and hundreds of Persian vocabularies and terms are used in the daily routines of its people. Before the domination of the Soviet Union over Kyrgyzstan, most of the decrees and letters, land ownership documents and letters of devotion were all written in Persian. The first Bolshevik statements of the time issued to the people of these areas were translated into Persian. There is also a trace of Persian masterpiece literature (Shahnameh) in compiling of the Epic of Manas, Kyrgyzstan's most significant ethnic capital and symbol of its national identity. (Saadi Foundation, 1396/9/28)

Therefore, Persian language, the creator of history, literature and common knowledge in Eurasia, can help shaping a common historical identity among the Muslim communities. Iran's attempts to expand Persian language aimed at achieving a better understanding of the common background of the populations of these countries can undoubtedly help identity and cultural integration in the region.

3-2. Common Mystical Teachings

Mystical teachings have also played a significant role in connecting the people of the Eurasian Muslim region. In fact, these principles were unique moral and social schools whose functions were not limited to religiosity and led in special cultural and civilizational achievements. Khorasan School, one of the largest cultural-mystical approaches of this geographic area that includes major intellectuals and thinkers such as Ibrahim Adham, Bayazid Bastami, Abolhassan Kharghani, Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair, Khaje Abdollah Ansari, Khajeh Ahmad Yasawi, Shaghigh Balkhi, Abu Saeed Abu Nasr, Abolfazl Sarakhsi, Imam Mohammad Ghazali, Sanai Ghaznavi, Attar Neyshabouri and Mawlana, not only accepts the principles of the Islamic theology but have also been influenced pre-Islamic religions.

Zarrinkoob believes that "Khorasani's Sufism, rather than being related to spiritual traits and its contents, is more of a geographical aspect." (Zarrinkoob, 1379, 31) Khorasan where encompasses Marv, Balkh, Nisa, Neyshabur, Toos, Herat, Termez, Samarkand and Bukhara, Esfarayen, Bastam, Kharghan, Damghan and other areas has been far beyond the current political boundaries.

Since the 8th century, when the Khorasan School was established, until the 15th century, most of the founders of Sufism were from Khorasan territory, and Khorasan was more than anywhere else such as Aleppo, Baghdad, and Hamedan prepared to accept different ideas and opinions. (Sadri, Winter 1387)

One of the advantages of the Khorasan School is its proximity with chivalry (Ayyari). (Lavizen, 1384, 236) The result was the presence of Sufism and mysticism in the social, political and economic spheres and the association of people with the Sufi elders was taking place in their meetings. The school of Khorasan may be mostly recognized with futuwwa (generosity) reflecting their social behaviour through which "Serving others and being kind to the people" (Mohammad-ebn-Monnavar, 1366, 231) was institutionalized and spread into other areas and formed a culture. "Being responsible and kindly welcoming newcomers" were considered as duties. (Bakhezri, 1345, 177)

Indeed, this school itself originated from the cultural traditions of these societies, including generosity and chivalry and was based on the perspectives of the individuals who were fighting against oppressions and tyrannies of the sovereigns. The existing tolerance and sacrament in the Khorasan School is of considerable importance, which is also because other schools of thought such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Manichaeism have influenced mystical strand of Khorasan. (Saki, 1384)

Thus, considering its deep thoughts, Sufism in Khorasan School has characteristics such as combining with chivalry and futuwwa, trying to establish a world peace, contrasting oppression, and scientific efforts and a tendency towards the elites. The above characteristics have led to the creation of important works and achievements such as the formation of mystical literature and poetry, as well as the proximity of Sufism to other religious and social movements. (Sadri and others, Autumn 1387)

Unlike the Iraqi School emphasizing on isolationism, asceticism, seclusion, and monasticism and urging its followers to stay away from people and to go to the monasteries (Chitik, 1386), the elites of the Khorasan School believed that they should experience and live with people. Therefore, this school broadly affected the social life of the people. Hence, scholars, writers, poets and mystics played a special role in shaping life style the citizens of these areas chose and in building a good pattern of governance in these areas. (Sajadi, 1372) Publishing literary books with the content of moral teachings for the kings, formulating letters of policy (Siasat-Nameh) and appointing prominent scholars as ministers and secretaries of the crowns of various kingdoms, underlie formation of a political culture based on tolerance, peace and ethics in different societies of this part of the world during the past centuries. Therefore, culture has had social

and political functions rather than a literary and artistic usage and has helped establishing stability and creating moral traditions in this region.

On the other hand, along with the expansion of the spiritual and religious influence of the sheiks in Khorasan, we witness the expansion of Sufism schools in Azerbaijan and the emergence of genuine Sufi figures in this region. The first Sufis during the 9th – 11th centuries paid more attention to Khorasan School when it came to principles and basis. Ibrahim Joynani and Abu Nasr Sharwani were the agents for transferring the persuasions existing in Khorasan to Sharwan located the current territory of Azerbaijan. (Taheri Kosrowshahi, summer 1395)

Sufism in Azerbaijan burgeoned in Shams school during the 7th century through which it was reflected in Masnavi and the Rumi poetry, considering that Rumi's correspondences with the scholars from Termez and accustoming to the works of Sanai and Attar represents the Khorasani's origins of his mysticism. Such perspectives later expanded throughout the Caucasus and Anatolia creating various Sufism schools.

The combination of the Muslims' mystical views and the Sufi approaches of other religions such as Hindus and Buddhists created tendency toward tolerance and coexistence among the people living in these geographic areas. Therefore, today, recreating prevailing cultural teachings among the people of these territories helps discovering approaches for new cultural convergences and gives a new identity to the old functions of these cultural elements.

Today, considering the political and social situation of these societies which are divided into separate states through political borders and each of them is striving to define an independent and separate identity, it can be truly understood that insecurity at the national and regional levels originates from the efforts to foment nationalist policies of states and to refrain from creating a joint collective identity in the region. Avoiding peaceful and tolerant attitudes and perceptions of religion has also caused religious extremism and fanatical definitions about religion to flare up the flames of anger in this region and to fuel ethnic, religious, and national hostilities. This is despite the fact that the common history of this region was mostly based on peaceful and humanistic interpretations regarding religion, and religious extremism was a marginal and not so popular trend in this area of civilization.

4. Conclusion

Security is the ability of a country to parrying internal and external threats against its political existence or its national interests. Based on a constructivist perspective and neo-regionalism approaches toward relations between nations a new definition of elements of security may be presented.

As mentioned in the introduction, to analyze the possibility of regional cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Muslim countries, the author has tried to explain a theoretical framework based on neo-regionalism theories and then evaluated Iran's regional cooperation capacities with a focus on two important cultural elements: Persian language and common mystical teachings.

Now at the end of the paper, we can say that through the neo-regionalism approach, the attempts for cultural convergence and the emphasis on common cultural components such as language, historical background, religious similarities and common traditions can be more than ever converge these countries and develop cooperation at regional level. In fact, although the diverging aspect of the above cultural elements is highlighted in the classical definitions focusing on nationalism as one of the main obstacles to regional cooperation, the author believes that these elements are capable of promoting integration in the region and establishing cultural ties between these societies rather merely being evidences of divergence among the inhabitants of the Eurasian Muslim countries.

In the current world where people can easily cross political boundaries to connect to each other, making plans to establish a cultural approach with goal of regional convergence can be more possible than ever. Similar identities, shared interests and cooperation among nations in the Eurasian region based on an emphasis on the convergent cultural-civilization elements in this complex will provide a good basis for the establishment of stability and security in the region.

Meanwhile, addressing the neo-regionalism from a constructivist perspective we may state that in the case of assuming that identities are formed based on the cultures, traditions and customs of societies, interests are appeared based on identities, and finally cooperation, reconciliation and stability in the societies are established based on common interests among; then it can be said that revising the ancient cultural traditions of these regions plays a key role in creating closely related identities, common interests and a stable and secure partnership.

Under these circumstances, a focus on applying "cultural diplomacy" and formation of a new trend called "Cultural Eurasia" is very useful and necessary for promoting economic and political cooperation and establishing a culture-based security. In fact, utilizing common cultural and social elements in these societies may help a better understanding of the inhabitants in the region, and along with the diplomatic efforts of the states builds confidence and cooperation among nations.

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