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Triangle Cooperation of Iran, Russia and China and Eurasian Security

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ABSTRACT

At the onset of the 21st century, the international political arena has witnessed unprecedented chaos, marked by escalating competition among major powers and a challenging quest for consensus on the global order. Regionally, both state and non-state actors have increasingly challenged traditional security paradigms, while the emergence of failed states and quasi-governments has added a bitter layer of complexity. Across the Eurasian region, a complex interplay of global, regional, and internal rivalries has created a volatile security landscape for countries like Iran, Russia, and China, spanning from East Asia to Eurasia and West Asia. In light of these intricate dynamics, a central query emerges: how have these three nations responded to evolving international and regional trends, and is a strategic alliance against the United States a plausible outcome? The prevailing argument posits that these states are likely to enhance their cooperation progressively, aimed at bolstering regional stability, fostering economic development in the Eurasian domain, and mitigating American interference. Yet, divergent stances on global issues may curtail the prospects of a full-fledged strategic coalition. To delve into this hypothesis, this research employs a qualitative content analysis methodology, delving into a plethora of sources including articles, reports, books, and official websites from research centers within the three countries. The study first scrutinizes the spheres of collaboration existing among Iran, Russia, and China, before appraising the opportunities and constraints that may hinder their cooperation. Ultimately, the research aims to elucidate novel pathways and future prospects for the trilateral relationship in the Eurasian context.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, significant global transformations have bolstered Asia's prominence, marking a departure from the previous century. Notably, the collective ascension of China, Iran, and Russia—the venerable civilizations of Asia, Eurasia, and West Asia—holds pivotal implications for regional and global dynamics. With histories of collaboration spanning millennia, the synergy among these nations has intensified in the wake of evolving geopolitical landscapes. Since 1991, the advent of novel circumstances has catalyzed closer ties among the trio within the Eurasian realm. Against the backdrop of escalating economic imperatives, infrastructural expansion, counterterrorism efforts, and a quest for international equilibrium amid unilateral disruptions spearheaded by the United States, strategic entanglements have ensued. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) underscore the imperative of bolstering regional cohesion, particularly in Central Asia. However, amidst these cooperative endeavors, the specter of a unified front against American hegemony looms. While there exists a palpable drive to fortify regional stability and security and propel economic progress, divergent stances on global affairs temper the prospect of a consolidated strategic alliance. Thus, despite concerted efforts to navigate geopolitical exigencies, the feasibility of a cohesive trilateral pact remains circumscribed.

Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, this research endeavors to elucidate the underlying variables shaping the hypothesis. Drawing from a corpus comprising articles, reports, scholarly literature, and authoritative sources emanating from the three nations, the study delves into their respective blueprints for regional collaboration. Specifically, scrutiny is directed towards China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's Greater Eurasia Project, and the multifaceted engagements within the SCO, contextualized within the structural flux of the international order. Focused primarily on the realms of political, security, and economic cooperation, this discourse eschews delving into historical, geographical, or cultural intricacies characterizing the tripartite relations. A temporal focus spanning from 2014 to 2022 is adopted, albeit occasional allusions to antecedent epochs may be warranted. Geographically, attention is centered on Eurasia, with a particular emphasis on Central Asia—a pivotal nexus binding the three entities—eschewing digression into East Asia or West Asia. This inquiry unfolds through a sequential exploration of collaborative domains, followed by an analysis of attendant opportunities and constraints. Concluding reflections will illuminate emergent vistas and envisage future trajectories, thereby furnishing a comprehensive comprehension of the subject matter.

1. Research Background

The existing literature offers diverse perspectives on the trilateral dynamics between Iran, Russia, and China, shedding light on their intricate interplay within the geopolitical theater. Basiri and Ainevand (2016) underscore Russia and China's rationale for opposing Iran's nuclear program, grounded in legal justifications, juxtaposed against the United States' ideological confrontation. This dichotomy underscores the pragmatic and strategic underpinnings guiding Russia and China's engagements with Iran, aimed at safeguarding their respective interests.

Safari et al. (2020) in their study delineate the converging concerns of China and Russia, spanning security, economic, and institutional domains, and necessitating coordinated policy maneuvers. Within this framework, Iran's defensive participation could potentially foster regional equilibrium, aligning with its economic and security imperatives in Central Asia. Karami and Kaleji (2014) delve into the nuanced behavioral paradigms of Russia, China, and Iran, highlighting variances stemming from their distinct geographical, geopolitical, and bilateral dynamics vis-à-vis the United States within Central Asia's multifaceted landscape.

Papageorgiou et al. (2023) expound upon the trilateral nexus's utilization of soft balancing mechanisms, accentuating economic bolstering and diplomatic entanglement within international fora. Concurrently, territorial defense emerges as a recurrent motif, underscoring the regional significance of this triangular entente. The prospect of eventual hard-balancing behaviors is also envisaged, adding a layer of complexity to the strategic calculus.

Contrarily, Grajewski (2022) tempers the discourse by cautioning against overstating the cohesion within the Russia-China-Iran axis. While acknowledging ideological alignments and sporadic coordination, the absence of formal institutionalization underscores the illusory nature of their entente. Grajewski's analysis pivots on defensive realism, offering a nuanced lens to discern the tripartite relations' inherent complexities and future trajectories. Drawing upon these scholarly interventions and informed by the tenets of defensive realism, this study endeavors to elucidate the evolving nature and prospective trajectories of the trilateral dynamics between Iran, Russia, and China. Through a critical appraisal of existing scholarship, supplemented by theoretical insights, it seeks to unravel the underlying dynamics shaping this multifaceted relationship within the context of West Asian geopolitics.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the realm of international relations, governments navigate a complex landscape characterized by cooperation, competition, and occasionally, the formation of alliances or conflicts to safeguard their national interests. Various theoretical paradigms offer divergent perspectives on these dynamics, with some prioritizing cooperative endeavors while others underscore competitive dimensions. Liberal, idealistic, and institutional theories tend to advocate for cooperation, emphasizing collective security and institutional frameworks as viable solutions. Conversely, realist theories, anchored in the tenets of defensive realism, emphasize the competitive and hostile aspects of international relations, prioritizing strength for defense, deterrence, and balance of power.

Defensive realism posits that the world is inherently chaotic, with states primarily concerned about their security. It asserts that self-help or unity are the only viable means to address security dilemmas. Central to defensive realism are the concepts of threat and alliance. Threat pertains to risks to a state's survival, security, and interests, necessitating strategies such as balancing alliances, deterrence, or joining existing alliances to ensure security. Unity, on the other hand, entails cooperation against a common threat. The formation and functioning of alliances hinge on shared perceptions of threat, the will to confront it, and mechanisms for cooperation, including organizational, informational, and operational communications. Diplomatic declarations and military warnings also play crucial roles in alliance dynamics.

In distinguishing between strategic alliances and partnerships, defensive realism underscores the long-term and vital nature of strategic issues addressed by alliances, characterized by detailed agreements and mechanisms. Strategic partnerships, while cooperative against a common threat in specific contexts, lack the enduring quality of strategic alliances.

Unlike traditional and strategic realism, defensive realism posits a benign view of anarchy in international relations. It prioritizes security and defense over power projection, emphasizing deterrence, balance, and coalition-building over hegemony. Additionally, defensive realism acknowledges the role of attitudes, leadership, and ideology in shaping security decisions, fostering a nuanced understanding of interstate relations. These theoretical propositions offer valuable insights into the dynamics of cooperation and competition among Iran, Russia, and China, particularly in the context of perceived threats from the United States. By elucidating the importance of security concerns, deterrence strategies, and the role of attitudes and leadership, defensive realism provides a framework for analyzing the evolving relations between these states within the West Asian geopolitical landscape.

3. The Increasing Cooperation

In recent decades, the tripartite relations between Iran, Russia, and China have witnessed a notable trajectory of convergence, underpinned by various factors that have culminated, particularly since the turn of the millennium. While delving into the historical backdrop of these relations is beyond the scope of this discussion, recent developments underscore the burgeoning cooperation among these nations. Crucially, the three states share significant similarities in their political systems and internal imperatives, engendering a fertile ground for collaboration. Economic exigencies, particularly the imperative for trade, interaction, and mutual complementarity, have emerged as pivotal drivers of their entente. In recent years, this impetus has manifested in the form of substantial agreements and contracts aimed at bolstering bilateral ties.

A noteworthy example is the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership inked between Iran and China on 27th March 2021 (Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Iran, China, 2020). This landmark agreement delineates a roadmap for robust cooperation encompassing economic and technical domains, with a projected value of \$400 billion. Notably, this level of collaboration stands as unprecedented, particularly against the backdrop of Iran's nuclear sanctions, underscoring the significance of this accord in providing a lifeline for bilateral relations amidst geopolitical constraints. This strategic pact not only signifies a quantum leap in Iran-China relations but also underscores the depth of economic interdependence and mutual benefit driving their engagement. Moreover, it underscores the pragmatic calculus guiding the foreign policy trajectories of both nations.

The prospect of a 20-year strategic cooperation agreement between Iran and Russia looms prominently on the agenda of both governments (Russia expects to sign strategic cooperation agreement with Iran soon — Kremlin, 2022). Over the past three decades, the two nations have forged numerous pacts spanning economic, technical, and political domains. Notably, their collaborative efforts have extended beyond bilateral spheres to address regional challenges, particularly in West Asia. A watershed moment in their cooperation unfolded during the late 1990s to early 2000s, marked by joint initiatives aimed at countering the Taliban and supporting the Northern Afghanistan coalition. This collaborative endeavor, bolstered by the active involvement of Tajikistan, played a pivotal role in enhancing regional stability and security in Central Asia.

Similarly, Iran and Russia have aligned their interests in supporting the Syrian government since 2015, significantly influencing the geopolitical landscape of West Asia. This concerted effort underscores their shared commitment to preserving stability and combating external threats in the region (Karami, 2019). The imperative of an eastern policy gained paramount importance for Iran following the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018. This matter has been the concern of Iran's high officials and Ayatollah Khamenei has said about this approach:

In foreign policy, preference of East over West, preference of neighbor over distance, preference of nations and countries that have common features with us over others, is one of our priorities today. We must look to the east. There are countries that can help us, we can face them with an equal face, we help them, and they help us (<https://www.leader.ir/fa/speech/20596/www.leader.ir/>).

President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi has been seeking to further strengthen ties with China, and has referred to this new approach as an 'Asia centric' policy which focuses on China. During his visit to Russia in January 2022, Raisi presented a draft of a 20-year agreement between Russia and Iran. In the agreement Iran seeks to strengthen economic and trade relations through this agreement (as of 2021, bilateral trade between Moscow and Tehran was estimated at \$3.5

billion). Iran has also been seeking to strengthen economic relations with Russia under the umbrella of the Eurasia Economic Union (Singh Maini, 2022).

The mentioned three states have important common interests in the Eurasia, Asia and West Asia. Under the influence of technological developments and especially the expansion of communication and transportation, the three regions of Eurasia, East Asia and the West Asia have come closer together. Particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013, and Russia's Greater Eurasia Project since 2016, and Iran's Eastern Policy since 2021, emphasize regional and trans-regional cooperation.

The Belt and Road Initiative, supposed to expand China's connections with the world by 2049, is China's most important plan and of course beyond Central Asia and Eurasia. According to this grand plan, the Chinese government will mainly seek access to Russia, the Caucasus, Iran and the Persian Gulf as well as the surrounding areas for road and rail transport through Central Asia. At first, Russia was worried about this plan and thought it was a tool of China to penetrate its backyard in Central Asia, but gradually its view changed (Maleki and Raoufi 2015: 54). Other Eurasian countries and Iran welcome this initiative from the very beginning and consider it to strengthen cooperation and convergence in the region. The BRI along with the SCO seems to be the last stage of China's return to the Eurasian landmass after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. China has in many ways reshaped Eurasia, which was previously perceived as a Russian entity. The new initiative also symbolizes efforts to create an alternative order in Eurasia and the wider world as part of its global role to challenge US hegemony, heightening Mackinder's warning of an emerging challenger from Eurasia (Harper, 2019).

On June 16, 2016, Vladimir Putin announced the "Greater Eurasia" project, which aims for greater cooperation between the EAEU, the SCO, China's BRI, and regional countries such as Iran and Turkey. Sergey Karaganov (2019) in his study believes that the origin of the concept of Greater Eurasia is caused by various trends in the world. From his point of view:

First, we should pay attention to the importance of trends such as the change in the centrality of the world economy from the West to the East, the rapid rise of China, India and other Asian countries, the beginning of the competition between the United States and its allies with the powerful China. He also refers to China's strategy, which seeks to meet the needs of its economic development, to ensure a friendly environment and expand access to global markets in the manner of the Belt and Road Initiative (Karaganov, 2019).

In 2018, Iran signed a preferential trade agreement with the EAEU. This union is one of the institutional tools of cooperation between Eurasian countries and the peripheral countries of the region. Iran attaches great importance to this cooperation and hopes to increase the level and extent of its economic and commercial cooperation with the member countries of this organization. In the last three years the reduction of tariffs along the lines of the agreement will bring benefits to both trading partners (Adarov and Ghodsi 2020).

On May 8, 2015, Russia and China issued a joint statement on cooperation to connect the Eurasian Union and the Belt and Road Initiative, where Russia expressed its support for the initiative and China agreed to Russia's efforts to advance the economic integration of the EAEU. In October 2016, China started one-year talks on trade and economic cooperation, including five rounds of talks, three meetings of joint working groups and two ministerial consultations. On May 17, 2018, China and the Eurasian Union signed an agreement on trade and economic cooperation, which included customs cooperation, trade facilitation and intellectual property protection along with new issues such as electronic commerce, which is the first important systematic agreement between the two sides (Safari, et al, 2023). According to the estimate of the Asian Development Bank, by the end of 2022, trade turnover between EAEU and China will reach 230-250 billion dollars (Increasing the volume of exchanges between Eurasian

countries and China to 151.1 billion dollars, 2022). In recent years, the leaders of Russia and China are trying to further economic integration of the Eurasian region and the leader of Iran also has a positive view of this process.

Iran became an official member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2022. The SCO was formed in 2001 based on the Shanghai-5 summit and became a new organization that included China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Then, in 2017, India and Pakistan, and on September 16, 2022, Iran was accepted as its member. The organization started from solving border issues, grew from cooperation in fighting terrorism, developed and deepened cooperation in political, economic, cultural, educational and other fields of cooperation and gradually turned into a new model of multilateral cooperation (Yamei and Mwadi Makengo, 2021).

Iran's SCO membership strengthens security and military cooperation with China and Russia (Kuo, 2022). Although this organization is not an anti-Western alliance according to its constitution, it seems that the strengthening of this organization can slowly advance the efforts of China, Iran and Russia to change and shape the world order. Central Asia is geographically, economically and politically the point of connection of the three countries. After the fall of the Afghan government in 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become more important and the cooperation between Iran and Russia, and China has become more necessary than before.

One of the important areas of regional cooperation is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), whose agreement has been signed since 2000, and since 2021, transportation between Russia, Iran and India has gradually started in it. The International North-South transport Corridor is a 7200 km long route, including sea routes, railways, and road network that can connect Mumbai in India to Helsinki in Finland. This route compared to the route of the Suez Canal is approximately 40% shorter in terms of distance and time, and costs 30% less (Hossein Babaei Mamaghani and Asadikhomami, 2021). In the summer of 2022, this corridor has started its activity for the first time. Russia's serious will to exploit this corridor is now very important for its activation.

The most important factor in the three states' cooperation can be considered the opposition to the unipolar international system and the unilateralism desired by America and the interventionism of the West. This issue has become more important after the Syrian crisis since 2012 and the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. In recent years the US government and its allies have challenged Russia in Ukraine, China in Taiwan and Iran in the Persian Gulf.

The Iranian perspective on international order has reflected the themes articulated by the Russian and Chinese discourse about an anti-hegemonic multipolar world order, sustained by respect for sovereignty and civilizational diversity. Like Moscow and Beijing, Tehran's narrative on multi polarity has highlighted the essential role of non-Western organizations and countries like Iran, India, Brazil, China, and Russia in shifting the centralization of power away from the West. Russia, China, and Iran have aimed to challenge "Western" standards both discursively and procedurally through various international organizations (Grajewski, 2022).

From this short review about the needs of relations, it can be concluded that a set of needs at the national, regional and international levels has made the three countries we are talking about have to enter into important cooperation that their common interests and also it seriously supply the countries of Eurasia, Asia and the West Asia.

The cooperation between Russia, China and Iran in recent years has been observed by the Western powers, especially the United States, and it has been mentioned as a threat (Chivvis, and Keating, 2024). This issue has intensified especially after the recent crisis in Ukraine, and East-phobia has become a Western propaganda and narrative line against constructive cooperation between the three countries.

In 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former national security adviser of the United States, made an insightful and exclusive analysis of geopolitical patterns in his famous book "The Grand Chessboard", mentioned the possibility of creating an "anti-hegemonic alliance" with the participation of China, Russia and Iran. He writes that:

The biggest danger is that China, Russia and Iran form a big alliance against America. But this alliance can only be realized if the US adopts a hostile and very short-sighted policy against China and Iran at the same time (Bairamlu ,2021: 38).

Brzezinski continued that Eurasia is the "chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played," where there are many "geostrategic players" and "geopolitical pivots." In the view of Brzezinski, China and Russia are classified into geostrategic players, while Iran is one of the geopolitical pivots. This can illustrate the importance of the three countries. Many of his predictions are still vital today. While US relations with China, Russia, and Iran have been strained to varying degrees, the latter three countries have made new progress in developing their mutual relations (Tengjun ,2021). This pattern has led some media and analysts to believe that Brzezinski's prediction is now becoming a reality.

Also, recently the United States has mentioned the three countries China, Russia and Iran as a main challenge of the United States and its allies in the National Security Strategy document. In the new document of National Security Strategy in October 12, 2022 address:

The United States derives security and economic benefits from the region's democratic stability and institutions, as our shared values provide a basis for collaboration and peaceful dispute resolution. To help preserve and enhance these traditions, we will support partners striving to build transparent, inclusive, and accountable institutions. Together, we will support effective democratic governance responsive to citizen needs, defend human rights and combat gender-based violence, tackle corruption, and protect against external interference or coercion, including from the PRC, Russia, or Iran (National Security Strategy, 2022).

In the Annual Threat Assessment report of the Intelligence Community of United States in February 7, 2022, threats of China, Russia and Iran were mentioned (Annual Threat Assessment report of the Intelligence Community of United States, 2022). As a result, the three countries are bound to share efforts at the international level. Brand Hall wrote in a report titled "China, Russia and Iran Are Slowly Ganging Up on the US":

Russia and China proclaimed a strategic partnership "without limits". Iran is reportedly giving Moscow drones and lessons in sanctions evasion, which are quite useful amid a continuing war in Ukraine. Russia-Iran convergence, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has remarked, is "something that the whole world should look at and see as a profound threat." It's easy to understand the logic of this cooperation. All three powers seek to preserve and protect illiberal political systems, push the US out of their geographic neighborhoods, and roll back a post-Cold War order dominated by Washington (Brands ,2022).

Chinese analyst Zhang Tengjun (2021) wrote that faced with the development of friendly, non-aligned interstate relations between China, Russia and Iran, the US is once again suffering from its delusions of persecution. It went back to its old ways of looking for enemies and trying to tie the entire West to its chariot against non-Western countries. Regardless of the development of the trilateral relations, Washington should realize that the time when the US could confront several countries at the same time has long passed (Tengjun, 2021).

Based on the existing realities and content of American strategic documents, the study found that cooperation of Asian powers has been one of the concerns of U.S. statesmen in recent years, and they are trying to create a narrative of security and otherness in front of them. Another US

policy towards these three countries is trying to convince their allies in other regions to participate in a series of activities against them.

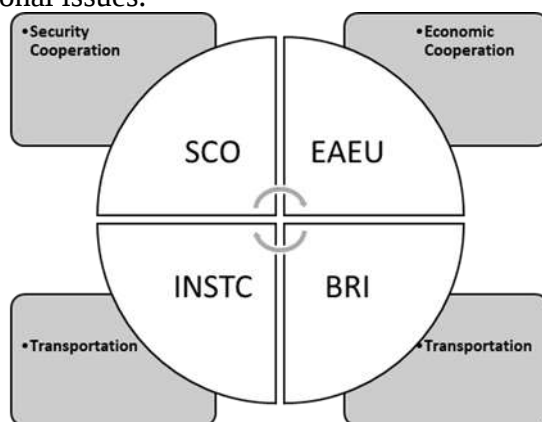
4. Institutionalization of Interactions

The cooperation between Iran, Russia, and China in these new conditions has had new possibilities and opportunities. In this regard, the process of pluralization of the international system and the plurality of sources of power and international actors, the independence of states, the necessity of cooperation against extremism, terrorism and separatism, and the existence of common regional structures and institutions should be referred to.

Since the end of the first decade of the new century, the international system has gradually moved away from the unipolar situation claimed by U.S., and as a result, it has become more pluralistic. Based on this trend, the international multilateralism has increased and the sources and centers of power have become more multiple. Undoubtedly, 2008 can be considered a turning point in the international system, which slowly moved towards a multi-polar and multi-center model. The formation of organizations such as BRICS¹ and G20² and the increasing weight of regional powers are among the most important realities of this new world.

Also, the main focus of international politics and economics has moved away from the West and towards Eurasia and Asia. According to a 2018 study by Richard Sakwa, "the old vast West is now being balanced by a Greater Eurasia led by Russia and China and the selective alliance of other countries with them (Sakwa ,2018: 4-6). In this new international system, regional powers play a wider role. Other states also have more independence compared to the past. In these changing international conditions, China, Russia and Iran can have extensive regional cooperation from Central Asia to Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. The preparations for this cooperation are available within the framework of regional organizations. Therefore, at the same time, the pressures of the United States against them in the crisis of Ukraine, Taiwan, and the Persian Gulf force them to take a more serious position against Western interventions.

Moscow, Beijing and Tehran have important interests in the regional stability of Central Asia and Extremism, separatism and terrorism threaten the interests and security of all three states (Joint combating terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking and other types of transnational criminal activity, and also illegal migration, 2002). America's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has fueled more security concerns in the region. The existence of joint regional organizations such as SCO, EAEU, and regional initiatives such as BRI and INSTC provide important possibilities for the cooperation of the in regional issues.



1. BRICS is an intergovernmental organization comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, Founded in June 16, 2009.

2. The G20 or Group of 20 is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 sovereign countries, the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU).

Figure 1. Organizations and Initiatives in Greater Eurasia
Source: Author

By nature of its geographic position and economic potential, Iran has assumed a prominent place in both Russian and Chinese effort for fostering regional connectivity. Russia has stressed Iran's potential to assume a pivotal role as a geographic bridge connecting Europe and Eurasia to West and South Asia and thus broaden opportunities for transcontinental trade. The INSTC and BRI rely on Iranian port infrastructure in the Caspian and overland trade routes to expand exports into the Persian Gulf and South Asian markets (Grajewski, 2022). These Interactions can help the economic development of the countries in the region. Without economic development and the ineffectiveness of governments in supply the economic needs of the people, national and regional security will be unstable and the weakness of economic development and the poverty of the people creates the ground for the spread of extremism and terrorism.

5. Different Horizons

Although there are suitable fields and possibilities for the cooperation of Iran, China and Russia, the limitations and challenges of the relations between the three countries should not be ignored. Public opinion in the three countries has a different situation. Especially in Iran and Russia, the opinions of a part of the people do not agree with confronting the West and paying attention to the East. The two governments of Iran and Russia see this situation as affected by the western media and virtual environment. This issue is much more serious in Iran, and the policy of looking to the east and agreements with eastern countries are opposed by sections of the people and especially the political faction of the reformists of Iran, who emphasize balanced relations with the East and the West.

Another limitation of cooperation is the differences between the three countries in some regional issues. In Russia, there are concerns about the demographic situation in the Far East region, as well as China's growing influence in Central Asia. The policy of Iran and Russia towards the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus is not very clear and the two countries' attitudes towards some important issues in the region are different. It is also possible to point out the difference in attitude towards the foreign enemies of each country. Regarding Israel, Russia follows a very different policy than Iran. Both China and Iran have a cautious policy towards the war in Ukraine.

Also, one of the limitations of regional cooperation is the tendency of some countries in the region towards Western countries and other regional institutions. NATO and the European Union are important for some Eurasian countries, and these institutions also offer concessions to these countries to limit their relations with Eurasian powers. It is natural that in a more pluralistic international system, all countries try to have wider connections.

It should be noted that in the second article of the SCO charter, it is emphasized that "SCO being not directed against other States and international organizations" (Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002). Some member states such as India and Pakistan have good relations with Western countries, and even Central Asian countries are reluctant to cooperate with an anti-Western institution and as a result, it cannot be considered an anti-America and anti-NATO security entity.

Iran's nuclear program has also caused differences with Russia and China in the last two decades (Hadian and Zargari, 2018). Although Western countries have generally claimed against Iran in this case, Russia and China also played an important role in referring the case from the International Atomic Energy Agency to the United Nations Security Council and also in passing six sanctions resolutions against Iran (Hadian and Zargari, 2024). At the same time, unlike the West, the two Asian countries have tried to prevent this issue from becoming a major

crisis. Also, Russia and China have played a positive role in the nuclear agreement between Iran and the member states of the Security Council

Despite the gradual process of forming institutional cooperation in the form of Shanghai Cooperation Organizations, Eurasian Economic Union and BRI, their interactions are still mostly bilateral and we still cannot speak of a strategic triangle and the existing organizations and initiatives are still not very efficient and effective. The economic relations between Iran and Russia have also remained limited and have not been able to create effective integration and convergence. In this regards Grajewski he wrote:

Despite ideational convergences and coordination on salient issues, it would be erroneous to suggest the existence of a formidable Russia-China-Iran axis. Rather, the tripartite relationship between Russia, China, and Iran remains an illusory entente – bereft of regularized, institutionalized relations outside of their respective bilateral ties which tend to allow only modest trilateral coordination (Grajewski ,2022).

Therefore, based on the above discussions, the existing limitations on the way of expanding the cooperation of the three countries is a fact that cannot be denied, and based on this, we cannot talk about the existing strategic cooperation, but what exists is the process of important cooperation between the three countries and its gradual expansion. Based on the definition of strategic alliance presented in the theoretical part of this article, despite the common threat of America to the three countries in question, each of them has different paths to deal with or interact with that country. Whether these relations can create a triangle of strategic cooperation depends more on the conditions of internal, regional and international dynamics.

Conclusion

As it was said in this article, the trend of global developments is towards the role of the Asian region and its great civilizations. In a multi-polar and multi-level international system, where actors and sources of power will be more numerous, regional big powers will play a greater role in Asia. The three states of Russia, China and Iran have found important opportunities for cooperation due to their common region from Eurasia to East Asia and West Asia. Economic and technical needs and necessities within the three countries, relatively similar political systems, common security concerns in the Eurasian space, the possibility of crisis spreading from one region to other regions due to globalization and trans nationalization of threats, especially separatism, extremism and terrorism, and most importantly, the simultaneous international pressure from the West and Western organizations against national and regional security and stability, have made the cooperation of the three countries inevitable. Therefore, they are under the pressure of economic sanctions, political competition and indirect security conflict of America and its allies in different ways, and this issue creates a good opportunity for their cooperation.

This issue is especially important regarding America's withdrawal from the nuclear deal, military and economic support for Ukraine, and provoking the issue of Taiwan. Regarding the Ukraine crisis, there is still no clear outlook, and even if a solution is found to end the crisis, it will not be easy to return the relations between Russia and the West to the conditions before February 2022. The Taiwan crisis also has the same ambiguous situation and there is even a possibility of its escalation. Therefore, the direction of international developments and the relations of the three countries with the Western world will remain dark.

Therefore, each of the three countries have different political agendas, but the process of their developments and interactions is towards a wider cooperation, which may even lead to wider strategic cooperation. But a basic point is that Tehran, Beijing and Moscow must take effective steps for the stability and expansion of bilateral, regional and international relations,

which can be strengthening and efficiency of common organizations and initiatives such as SCO, EAEU, BRI and INSTC. In this framework, it is also very important to strengthen economic cooperation with Eurasian countries to help economic development with the aim of substantially reducing the areas of extremism and terrorism. In the context of an evolving global landscape emphasizing the pivotal role of Asia and its civilizations, the cooperation among Russia, China, and Iran emerges as an imperative driven by a convergence of factors. Their shared regional proximity spanning from Eurasia to East Asia and West Asia, coupled with economic, political, and security commonalities, underscores the inevitability of collaboration.

Against the backdrop of mounting international pressures, including economic sanctions and geopolitical tensions orchestrated by Western entities, the imperative for cooperation among these nations becomes even more pronounced. As evidenced by recent developments such as America's withdrawal from the nuclear deal, the Ukraine crisis, and the Taiwan issue, the trajectory of international relations remains uncertain, further necessitating concerted efforts towards regional stability and resilience. While not constituting a formal alliance, the trajectory of interactions among Iran, Russia, and China points towards broader cooperation, potentially culminating in strategic partnerships. Key initiatives aimed at fostering this collaboration include bolstering common organizations such as the SCO, EAEU, BRI, and INSTC, along with enhancing economic ties with Eurasian nations to mitigate extremism and terrorism. Moreover, constructive engagement with Afghanistan, activation in extra-regional platforms like BRICS, and the establishment of common currency exchanges are pivotal steps towards fostering regional cohesion and countering external narratives seeking to undermine Eastern cooperation.

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