

Developing an Optimal Model of Iran's Countermeasures against the Threats of Economic Plans of the Major Powers in Central Asia

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Abstract

In this article, the authors have sought to develop and present an optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia. This qualitative research uses mixed-methods (i.e., thematic matrix and thematic network) to collect and analyze data. Since the thematic matrix was used as a data analysis method, an indirect observation study (analysis of textual material) was performed, data were collected through a purposeful sampling of existing textual materials, and finally, a comparison and an analysis were made to specify commonalities and differences. In addition, since the thematic network, research data were collected using a semi-structured interview with 10 experts, who were selected using theoretical sampling; the collected data were analyzed using the thematic network analysis method. Eventually, a conceptual network model was constructed and interpreted. Findings of qualitative research while identifying opportunities and threats revealed that the optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia with three global themes, including the adoption of economic diplomacy by Iran, the adoption of soft diplomacy by Iran, and efforts to exit sanctions and remove sanction barriers, had reached theoretical saturation. The most appropriate strategy for Iran to confront the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia is to adopt convergent diplomacy in the form of various kinds of diplomacy and the removal of the sanction barriers.

Keywords

Major powers, economic plans, Central Asia, Iran, opportunity, threat, and countermeasures

Received 12 January 2022; Revised 18 November 2022; Accepted 23 November 2022

Introduction

The economy and its importance have been a cause of the rise and fall of many civilizations throughout human history. Those governments and civilizations that managed to have a strong economy and reduce poverty and unemployment flourished. On the contrary, those civilizations that could not reach a conceptualization of economic power diminished. Therefore, financial and economic activities have always been of immense importance. This is significant since human beings, whether individually or collectively and nationally, perceive it and find themselves engaged with it.

Its importance for society is also because growth, prosperity, affluence, fortune, power, independence, greatness, and achieving the desired perfection for society are all affected by economic issues. Of course, it does not imply that the

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economy must be considered as a substructure; rather, it merely indicates its great importance and suggests that if a country is economically, industrially, and technologically advanced and developed, it will be superior in other political and cultural aspects as well. According to this argument, we can declare that the economy is not defined only in terms of subsistence and home management; rather, it encompasses a wide range of collective living dimensions. This issue has caused different countries to employ various strategies and methods to achieve development, especially in the economic field, not confine themselves to domestic potentials and resources and seek their financial and national interests beyond their national borders (Wu, 2018, pp. 5–12).

Thus, it can be stated that along with the process of globalization and the increase in the significance of economic development, countries are trying to pursue their national interests in economic dimensions and different regions through adopting various plans and programs. One of these regions is Central Asia: the Central Asian region, due to various reasons, has an exceptional significance in global geopolitics. This importance manifested itself differently for regional and international powers, specifically after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the countries of the region, each having its unique ethnic, geographical, economic, and religious characteristics. Such an exclusive and unique location has led this important geopolitical area to undergo significant developments across its historical context and add to its economic importance in geoeconomical discussions. This happens because of two substantial issues. Firstly, the Central Asian region was a relatively closed region during the Soviet era in which regional and trans-regional powers could not enter and were relatively unknown. However, for more than two decades since the independence of these countries, the new economic situation has dominated the region. Secondly, given its geopolitical and economic importance, and human and natural resources, the Central Asian region has been a contact point for many cultural, civilization, political, and economic projects. We observe numerous economic projects such as Eurasian Economic Union, the New Silk Road, the Great Central Asia Initiative, “One Belt One Road,” TAPI Economic-Energy Plan, and North-South Corridor. Through the world’s great and middle powers, each of these plans could have opportunities and threat to Iran’s national interests.

The importance and necessity of this research are clear because the vast presence of these powers in the area may intensify the competition, and these great powers can become a serious competitor for Iran in terms of energy transit and transportation of goods and implementation of economic programs and they can affect Iran’s national interests seriously. Therefore, based on the arguments mentioned above, the present study aims to examine the opportunities and threats of the economic plans of the great powers in

Central Asia for Iran and to develop an optimal model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of significant powers in Central Asia based on a qualitative study.

Statement of the problem

Central Asia is a region that has always been the center of attention of regional and supra-regional powers. All these powers are pursuing their economic goals in Central Asia, so they have implemented special plans in this region in the form of “Eurasian Economic Union,” “New Silk Road,” “The Wider Central Asia Initiative,” “One Belt One Road,” “Organization of Turkic States,” “The Turkic Council’s Modern Silk Road,” “TAPI,” and “International North-South Transport Corridor.” The most important incentives that forced these powers to implement the above plans are geopolitical calculations, economic interests, or maybe both. Thus, the interaction between economics and geopolitics affects the goals and intentions of these powers and makes two rational assumptions. The first assumption is that the great powers and the Central Asian states are pursuing their national economic interests. The second assumption is that the economic plans that the great powers implement in Central Asia may lead to many opportunities and threats for Central Asian states such as Iran.

Concerning heeding the opportunities, Saddiq (2004), Tammana (2006), Karami and Kuzagar Kaleji (2014), Ordabayev (2015), Rezapour and Simbar (2018), and Mishra (2015) have acknowledged opportunities, including the following issues: (a) Increasing Iran’s security role in the developments of the region, (b) the presence of the United States in the region and Afghanistan to establish security and fight with Taliban and its opportunities for Iran, (c) business and transportation, (d) increasing the significance of Iran’s transit position and Iran’s transportation, (e) increasing the significance of Iran’s transit position and Iran’s transportation, (f) upgrading Iran’s position in a global economy and diversifying energy importation sources, and (g) upgrading the significance of the North-South Corridor, respectively.

Furthermore, Garlick and Halova (2020) believe that Iran’s participation in the SCO and the China Belt and Road Project improves Iran’s influence and regional role. Thus, Iran can facilitate the development of its infrastructure and internal transportation network by participating in these frameworks.

Regarding the threats, Yazdani and Fallahi (2016), Taheri and Bayat (2018), Shafiee (2017), Mousavi et al. (2014), and Rezapour and Simbar (2018) have enumerated threats such as (a) Russia’s preventing Iran from entering energy exchanges in the region, (b) India’s policy in the area and assisting in the progression of America’s goals and targets, (c) America’s contribution to TAPI project and threatening

Iran's interests, (d) failure to start the peace pipeline (Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline) and decline in the role and position of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region, and (e) China's supremacy over Iran's geo-economics structure, respectively.

Moreover, Graber (2020) outlined Russia's goal in implementing its economic plans to restore its influence and authority in the region and decrease the influence of the US, the European Union, Iran, and Turkey. Kazantsev et al. (2021) reported the threats such as the conflict between Russia and China and the intensification of multilateral foreign policy by countries in the region due to this conflict and the arrival of major powers into the region, which can pose security challenges for Iran.

According to the analysis of those abovementioned empirical records and the enumeration of the threats and opportunities of the economic plans of powers in Central Asia, it can be stated that the investigation of the financial goals of the major powers in Central Asia is significant in these respects. Moreover, these plans can have myriad threats and opportunities for Iran's national interests. Yet, what distinguishes this study from other previously conducted studies is that this research's attempt to present an optimal model and appropriate solutions for Iran's policy-making apparatus enables them to deal with threats arising from these plans and use the available opportunities within them properly.

Therefore, the general questions of the present study are the following: What are the threats and opportunities for the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia for Iran? What will be the optimal model of countermeasures by Iran against the hazards of the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia?

Iran's economic diplomacy in Central Asia

Based on the 20-Year Vision Document in the 2025s Horizon of Iran, which is considered as the most significant upstream document of the country after the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the interactions and foreign trade development strategies are particularly emphasized with the Southwest Asian countries including Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and neighboring countries. Accordingly, Iran pursues practical and constructive cooperation with its neighbors in North and Central Asia in the form of different organizations: The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and cooperation in the Caspian Basin and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Figure 1 displays a map of Iran's geographical location among its Central Asian countries.

In general, evaluating the bilateral economic relations and different strategic economic plans of Iran in the Central Asian region indicates that Iran's actions, especially in developing economic relations with Central Asian countries

more than two decades after the independence of countries in the region, are considerable and have followed an upward and forward trend. In this regard, the volume of Iran's trade relations with the countries of the Central Asian region during 27 years reached from about US\$300 million in 1995 to about US\$4 billion in 2005 (Kozhanov, 2012, p. 8 cited in Dehghani Firoozabadi & Daman Pak Jami, 2016, p. 49). Furthermore, this amount increased from about US\$3.7 billion in 2011 to US\$5.3 billion in 2015 (Kuzegar Kalchi, 2015, p. 126). Finally, the amount of Iran's trade relations in 2022 was estimated at US\$5.63 billion (IRNA—News Agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2022.04.9).

Literature review

In general, the importance of the subject of the economy has made its role and influence undeniable in the formation of the theories of international relations. One of these theories is Neorealism. Based on this theory, the economy plays a pivotal role in international relations and the relations among the world powers since major powers and governments seek access to natural resources such as raw materials, oil, and gas in the form of energy sources to maintain their hegemony. Therefore, energy and energy transmission pipelines are of utmost use to attract foreign investment, provide a reasonable ground for developing the regional cooperations, consolidate economic infrastructure, increase the influence and political roles of the countries as an important diplomatic tool to accomplish and promote the bilateral/multilateral economic, political, and cultural goals of the countries and enhance cooperations among neighboring countries, and establish regional peace and stability.

According to the developments since the 1980s, theoreticians such as Cohen and Gilpin, citing theories like "hegemonic stability," believed that one of the fundamental characteristics of the hegemonic power in any age is having control over resources, pipelines, and routes of energy transmission, and given that oil is a type of energy. Energy can be converted to money, and money generates control. Control is considered power. Accordingly, the ascendancy of hegemonic government relies upon having control over four types of resources, including control over the world's raw materials and energy, control over the world's capital resources, control over global markets, and control over the production of high value-added goods (Sadeghi, 2012, p. 22). This has led these powers to adopt economic plans in varying parts of the world and significantly impact geopolitical, economic, political, and security areas.

In this regard, the theory of Institutionalism also believes that individual interests should be neglected and collective economic interests must be pursued by forming unions and cooperative organizations in different countries. It is on this basis that financial plans in the form of the "Eurasian

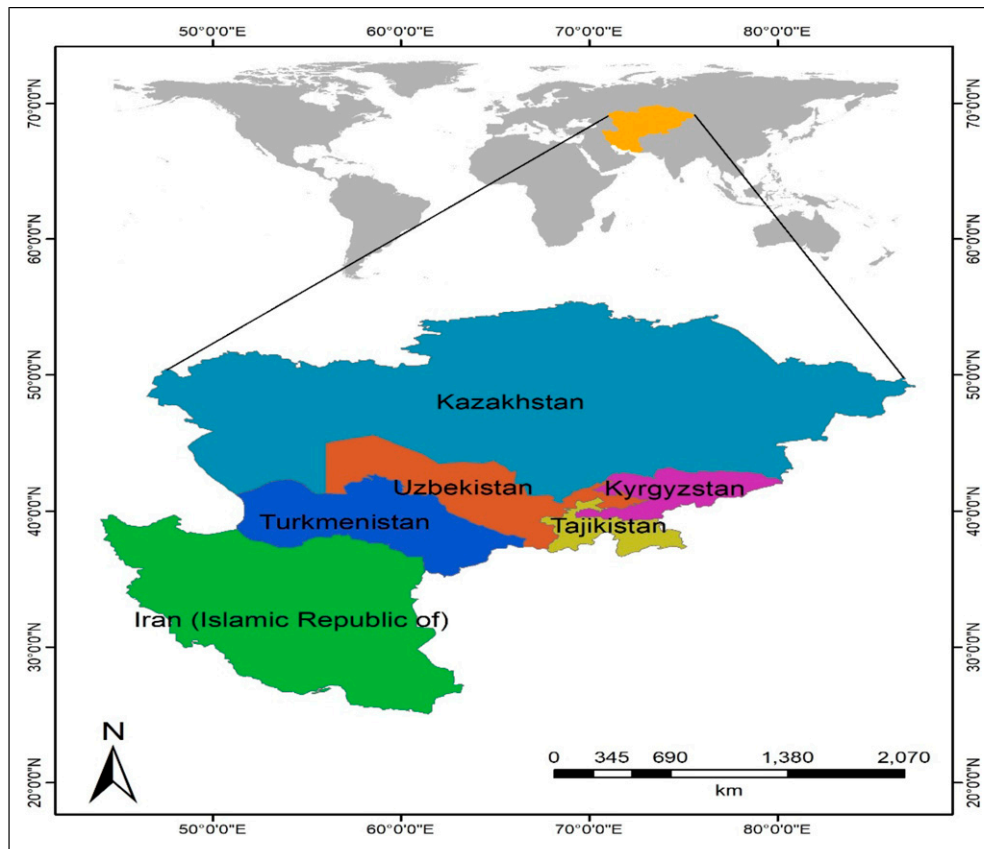


Figure 1. Map of Iran's geographical location among its Central Asian countries.

Economic Union,” “One Belt One Road Initiative,” “the Great Central Asia Initiative,” and “the New Silk Plan” can be investigated and studied. That is, powers such as Russia, China, and the United States seek to design and adopt economic policies that can serve the interests of themselves and their partners.

One of the critical points in the framework of the neo-liberal institutional theory that Richard Haass points out is the gradual politicization of the actors' goals. That is, although actors may initially pursue technical and non-argumentative goals within the framework of cooperation, they gradually agree to use all possible and available instruments to achieve their technical-economic goals, which are called horizontal-vertical expansion or expanding logic and are claimed to broaden transnational cooperation from one sector to another to overcome new issues arising from the initial agreements (Daneshnia, 2012, pp. 148–149). Regarding the geoeconomic discussion, it can be stated that over the course of time and entering the 21st century, we are witnessing the replacement of the economic component with the military component, and countries determine their position in the world in this way. Geoeconomics is the geographical context of a country's economy that defines and determines the foundations of the

economy in power relations through implementing an out-looking approach. When part or all of a country's financial capabilities depend on geographical considerations, a geographical economy or geo-economy is formed. Geopolitics offers an economic recitation of the status quo and assumes a geoeconomic aspect, where the economy is the motive for power struggles. Thus, geoeconomics studies the impact of national, regional, or global factors or economic infrastructures on the political decision-making and power struggles and the influence on the formation of regional or global geopolitics (Gholizadeh and Zaki: 2008, p. 27). While in the past, superiority was based on military and strategic concepts or geopolitics, geoeconomics describes a different form of competition in which governments' power is measured by economic progress in the current era (Mahkoubi & Goudarzi, 2019, pp. 521–522). Therefore, countries that can achieve economic development and manage to dominate natural, raw, and energy resources can impact international relations.

On the other hand, according to the Copenhagen School, it can be declared that security today does not have only hardware and physical dimension; rather, what constitutes the current structure of security is the eradication of destitution, unemployment, economic development, high per

capita income, exceeding exports over imports, and so on. The definition of economic development demonstrates how the concepts of “economic development” and “security” are complementary and closely related. On that account, if a government fails to ensure economic security along with other security issues, it lacks any national security (Jalilova, 2014, pp 23–89). This affinity led to the re-definition of the concept of security based on economic components, since security, whether economically, socially, or politically, is one of the most important indicators and components of the development of countries that are related to the institutional characteristics of an economy, and can be defined as an institutional framework that encourages and builds confidence for savers and investors.

Anyhow, what is of utmost significance in summarizing the debate is that, firstly, economic interests and having access to raw and natural materials are the priorities for the major powers, which has led them to pursue their economic interests beyond their national borders. Secondly, given the sensitivity of the target countries to the political, economic, and security goals, the great powers are trying to follow their economic and political profits in the form of cultural goals under the banner of cultural diplomacy; since in cultural diplomacy, there is less opposition and resistance on the part of target countries, and civil society organizations mainly pursue it. Based on this critical and according to the definition by Milton Cummings, cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, information, art, lifestyle, value system, traditions, and beliefs to achieve common concepts and enhance mutual understanding among nations and countries, and due to the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of cultural diplomacy, recognizing its sensitivity, investment, and policy-making in this area seem to be essential for those in charge. In this respect, the most important requirement and obligation are the training of efficient human resources who are familiar with the fundamentals of cultural development, fluent in the language, and competent in principles of negotiation in the world system (Salehi-Amiri & Mohammadi, 2016, p. 14). In an article entitled “Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Holistic Strategy,” John Lankowski lists the tools of cultural diplomacy. In addition to the elements such as art, history, cultural exhibitions, educational programs and exchange, language teaching, and media, he introduces religious diplomacy as an instrument and a topic for cultural diplomacy (Shaykh Al-Islami, 2012, pp. 104–106).

Therefore, in addition to cultural diplomacy, the world’s major powers have recently employed two approaches, namely, soft power and scientific and technological diplomacy. Joseph Nye, in the book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, mentions that a country’s soft power is the opposite side of its hard power, and unlike hard power that relies upon coercion, soft power emphasizes persuasion and strives to attract others through appeal. Soft

power is the attractiveness of a country in the eyes of others (Nye, 2011). The premise of soft power is that actors need to attract others to their specific viewpoints that are considered legitimate and valid. If an actor attracts others to his point of view, more expensive sources of hard power will no longer be required. In the current situation, soft power results from the provision of information and the creation of attractiveness. Accordingly, it is a power source for countries on the international scene (Nye, 2011).

Furthermore, a country’s scientific and technological capabilities and interactions with other international actors in this field are called the diplomacy of science and technology. In other words, governments and other international actors (governmental and non-governmental international organizations) pay attention to both aspects of science and technology diplomacy (Riazi et al., 2019, p. 653). Since the progression of science and technology, which are developed in the world’s most influential scientific centers, has undeniably influenced international relations, the global economy, and the world community.

Concerning the Central Asian countries, this kind of diplomacy can be prominent for various reasons. Because, firstly, the countries of the region, due to scientific and technological flaws, are extremely required to expand their relations in this regard. Secondly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union provided the necessary ground for these types of relations with the great powers. Thirdly, this kind of diplomacy is largely non-sensitive and does not provoke opposition from other countries and governments. Eventually, it can be claimed that today, what distinguishes cultural diplomacy, soft power, and scientific diplomacy from different types of diplomacy is its direct relationship to national goals and interests. However, other sorts of diplomacy often are formed aiming at an economic or commercial benefit. Without the government’s direct involvement, cultural and scientific diplomacy is constructed upon the principle of mutual interests and common purposes. The relationship between the two parties can be the chief motive for cooperation. Consequently, it can be inspected that the world’s major powers have serious interests in pursuing and consolidating influence in their trans-regional territory which is exerted through the formation of a security coalition or the establishment of multilateral economic regimes. Both security alliances and economic initiatives can lead to integration and regional cooperation regardless of force or pressure on the external parties.

The important points of this discussion are as follows: (a) economic interests and access to raw materials and natural resources are the first priorities of the great powers; therefore, they pursue their economic interests outside their borders; (b) given the sensitivity of the target countries to the political, economic, and security goals, the great powers are trying to pursue their economic and political interests in the form of cultural goals and cultural diplomacy because

target countries usually do not disagree with cultural diplomacy (Hasan-Khani, 2007, pp. 138–139). Therefore, the great powers have recently used soft power and scientific and technological diplomacy besides cultural diplomacy because (a) the Central Asian states are weak in science and technology field and need help; (b) the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the ground for this change of approach; (c) states are less sensitive to this kind of diplomacy and do not oppose it; (d) what distinguishes cultural, soft power, and scientific diplomacy from other types of diplomacy is its direct relationship with national goals and interests because sometimes the aim of other forms of diplomacy is economic and commercial interests without any direct participation of the government while cultural and scientific diplomacies are based on the mutual interests and common goals and the relationship that exists between the two parties is the main motivation for cooperation (Quoted by Koolaei & Azizi, 2017, p. 1049).

Research method

The researchers used a qualitative research method to answer the research questions. The data were analyzed through network theme analysis. Theme can be defined as an indicator of important information regarding data and research questions. To some extent, it demonstrates the meaning of the existing pattern in a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, a theme is a repetitive and distinctive property in the text that manifests a thorough understanding and experience concerning research questions (King & Horrocks, 2010). From this point of view, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting existing patterns within qualitative data. This method analyzes narrative and textual data and transforms diverse and scattered data into technical and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is conducted in different ways. In this research, thematic matrix and thematic network were used. Thus, the thematic matrix was used to identify and compare the opportunities and threats of the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia for Iran. Also, this thematic study has been used to identify and formulate an optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia.

Thematic matrix is a method first proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Thematic matrix is used for comparing themes with each other in textual data. In this way, textual data from various sources or individuals are compared to identify similarities and differences.

Therefore, the research data were collected as a purposeful sampling method from existing documents (traditional and virtual including books, sites, articles, and research) using thematic analysis method and thematic

matrix type through indirect observation (text analysis). Then, the coding research data and basic concepts were organized through thematic coding. In addition, the opportunities and threats of economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia were identified and discovered and finally compared and analyzed in terms of similarities and differences.

The thematic network is a thematic analysis method and was developed by Attride-Stirling (2011). To obtain a thematic network, the following steps need to be performed: A. discovering basic themes (identifiers and key points within the text), B. discovering organizing themes (themes obtained from combining and summarizing basic themes), and C. discovering global themes (high themes containing the principles that govern the text as a whole). After performing these steps, the obtained themes are drawn as web maps.

Therefore, through thematic network analysis, the research data were gathered and theoretically saturated by conducting a semi-structured interview with 10 experts and scholars in the fields of regional studies and international relations, who were selected through theoretical sampling.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), theoretical sampling is the process of collecting data for theorizing through which the analyst simultaneously collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to include in the next step. Next is to collect them and where to find them in order to formulate his theory during its formation. The theory being developed controls the data collection process (quoted from Flick, 2006). Therefore, the samples here do not have the authority to be visible and representative of the statistical population; rather, they are important in the sense that they help to construct the investigated phenomenon and formulate the theory.

Furthermore, to analyze the data, research data were codified through the process of theoretical coding (consisting of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding), and basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes were described and analyzed so as to identify and develop an optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia. Moreover, to validate (credibility) the themes and qualitative findings, a communicative method of evaluation and focus group formation has been implemented (Flick, 2006, pp. 220 and 415). In the communicative validation method, data validation has been performed by the subjects of the study (i.e., interviewees). Additionally, through forming a focus group consisting of six experts and scholars (in the fields of regional studies and international relations), qualitative data of the research were controlled and evaluated. Also, to assure consistency (reliability) of the qualitative findings, the two methods of replicability and

transferability or generalizability were employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 283–284; Sarukhani, 2014, p. 289). Therefore, concerning the reproducibility of the qualitative study findings, the agreement coefficient method between the coders (researcher and co-researcher) was used, and the inconsistencies were eliminated through reviewing the data codification process. Besides, regarding the transferability or generalizability of the findings of the qualitative study, a regular and comprehensive theoretical sampling method (through interviewing various levels of academic and executive experts) was done as much as possible so that the results have the generalizability feature. Table 1 presents the list of sample members of the research in the semi-structured interview:

Research findings

The findings of the content matrix

Different studies have investigated the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia. Therefore, this section analyzes the threats and opportunities from domestic and international studies using the thematic matrix. When each of these threats and opportunities is highlighted, their commonalities and differences are also examined so that a model of coping strategies can be presented in the second section.

Thematic coding was conducted on the opportunities and threats that the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia have for Iran, then the basic, organized, and inclusive themes.¹ They were identified, and then the opportunities and threats of different economic plans were compared based on the identified inclusive themes,

and finally, their similarities and differences were specified.

The findings of the thematic network

In this section, qualitative findings are analyzed in three steps as follows:

Step one: Discovering basic themes. In the first step of thematic analysis, to achieve the optimal model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia, the data obtained from interviewing the experts have been compiled as declarative statements in the first place. Next, using the theoretical coding process and specifically, the open coding, basic themes or the identifiers and key points within the text were identified. Therefore, through the theoretical coding procedure (open coding type), 156 basic themes of the optimal model of the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia were identified and enumerated*. (To avoid prolonging the article, the open coding table extracted from declarative statements, which were obtained from a semi-structured interview with experts, was not mentioned*.)

Step two: Discovering organizing and global themes. Following the theoretical coding, mainly axial and selective coding, first, organizing themes were identified and enumerated by combining and summarizing basic themes. Then global themes of the optimal model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia were identified and recounted by combining and summarizing organizing themes. The process of this analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. List of sample members in the semi-structured interview.

Subject	Gender	Education	Age	Field of study	Job
1	Male	PhD	57	International relations	Research Deputy of the Iran and Eurasia Studies Institute
2	Male	PhD	67	Political geography	Professor of Tarbiat Modares University
3	Male	PhD	40	Economical science	Assistant Professor, Department of Russian Studies, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran
4	Male	Ma	63	Political science—regional studies	Radio and Television Research Center
5	Male	PhD	40	International relations	Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Allameh Tabatabai University
6	Male	PhD	55	Political science—regional studies	President of Payame Noor University, West Tehran branch
7	Male	PhD	40	Regional studies—Central Asia and Russia	Faculty member, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman
8	Male	PhD	62	Political geography	Professor of world studies at university of Tehran
9	Male	PhD	33	Political geography	Researcher and lecturer at Tarbiat Modares University
10	Male	PhD	39	Regional studies—Central Asia and Russia	Researcher and lecturer at Payame Noor University, West Tehran branch

Step three: Developing the thematic network. Before developing the thematic network, firstly, the number of global, organizing, and basic themes of the optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia were extracted from the qualitative data obtained from a semi-structured interview with 10 experts in the field of regional studies and international relations and are shown in Table 3.

As Table 3 demonstrates, the optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia has reached theoretical saturation with three global themes, ten organizing themes, and 156 basic themes based on a semi-structured interview with 10 experts in the field of regional studies and international relations.

After enumerating and extracting global, organizing, and basic themes of the optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia, in this section, an attempt is made to draw a conceptual model or the formation of a thematic network of the optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia (Figure 2).

Discussion

Central Asia is one of the regions which has always been and will always be the primary focus of regional and trans-regional powers. This has led to the formation of unique policies in this region. Once, there was a discussion of "The Big Game" between Britain and Russia in the 19th century, and now the rivalry between regional and trans-regional powers has led to the formation of a "New Big Game" in the region in which each actor pursues their political, military, cultural, and economic goals. What regional and trans-regional powers share in common in Central Asia is the issue of economic goals. Therefore, each of the powers has devised special plans for this region in this regard, some of which have been addressed in this study. What is of utmost significance in respect to heeding to these plans is the type of their designs and the purposes behind them, which can be accompanied by a manifold of threats and opportunities for Iran (Table 4).

Thus, regarding the opportunities and threats of the economic plans of the powers in Central Asia, and to achieve an optimal model of Iran's countermeasures against the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia, a semi-structured interview with 10 experts and academic pundits in the field of regional studies and international relations was conducted. Therefore, the following results are obtained:

A. Adoption of economic diplomacy by Iran: Iran must heed the following points in this type of

diplomacy: (1) Efforts to strengthen internal infrastructures for economic activities with the region, (2) involvement in the economic plans of the major powers in the region, (3) Iran's investment and economic cooperation with the countries in the region bilaterally and multilaterally, (4) having an active and pragmatic strategy for Iran's economic relations in the region, (5) paying attention to energy diplomacy and playing an active role in the energy market, and (6) paying attention to road diplomacy by Iran.

The above result, the adoption of economic diplomacy by Iran, is in line with the theoretical approach of Neorealism in the sense that economic factor plays a vital role in international relations and relations among the powers. In this regard, the theory of Institutionalism also believes that individual interests must be overlooked. The collective economic interests should be pursued in the form of unions and cooperative organizations in different countries. Moreover, geoeconomic theory, which studies economy and the relationship between geography and the power of countries, also emphasizes the importance of economy in the global arena on the formation of regional groupings based on the economy.

Therefore, according to the abovementioned theoretical records (the theory of Neorealism, theory of Institutionalism, and geoeconomic theory), Iran can pursue economic diplomacy in the form of heeding to and strengthening internal infrastructure, playing an active role in the energy market and the transit of goods, investment and economic partnership with the countries of the region, and collaboration in the economic plans of the powers in the region provided that it is based upon a wise policy and includes the greatest national interests of Iran.

B. Adoption of soft diplomacy by Iran: Iran must pay attention to these points in this kind of diplomacy: (1) Adopting cultural diplomacy by Iran and (2) adopting scientific and technological diplomacy by Iran. The results above suggest that Iran's adoption of soft diplomacy is consistent with the theoretical approach of cultural diplomacy that underscores reinforcing mutual understanding among nations and countries based on shared cultural and civilizational components in educational, cultural, and information programs. On the other hand, the adoption of soft power, which emphasizes persuading and attracting others through cultural, ideology, ideals, or moral values, can indirectly influence mutual interests among countries and societies. Eventually, scientific and technological diplomacy, which accentuates joint scientific and technical collaborations and common interests among nations, can improve and facilitate

Table 2. Process of axial and selective coding to discover organizing and global themes of the optimal model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia.

Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
Adoption of economic diplomacy by Iran	Efforts to strengthen internal infrastructures for economic activities with the region	<p>Removing the obstacles and activating the internal capacities for economic cooperation with countries in the region</p> <p>Creating capacity for geopolitical use</p> <p>Playing the role of a geopolitical and socioeconomic complement for the countries of the region by Iran due to its appropriate geographical capacity</p> <p>Strengthening Iran’s infrastructure capacity for regional and trans-regional economic cooperation</p> <p>Trying to create capacity, not a competitive advantage, in the current situation</p> <p>Eliminating the costs of economic cooperation with Iran by activating internal capacities</p> <p>Capacity building and Iran’s use of its geographical location advantage to improve the economic position at the regional and global levels</p> <p>Completing hardware infrastructures through software components</p>
	Involvement in the economic plans of the major powers in the region	<p>Iran’s role in two initiatives, namely, China Road Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union</p> <p>Capacity building to activate the Iran Peace Pipeline alongside the TAPI project</p> <p>Changing attitudes toward participation in the economic plans of the powers in the region</p> <p>Building trust and cooperation with Russia for an active presence in Central Asia</p> <p>Iran’s maximum use of the pivotal relationship with Russia and China</p> <p>Iran’s well-informed and intelligent involvement in China and Russia’s economic plans</p> <p>Heeding to economic activity and cooperation with all major world powers</p> <p>Approving India and America’s economic plans along with China and Russia to create balance in the region</p> <p>Iran’s economic immunity from sanctions through cooperation with and engagement in the economic plans of the major powers in the region</p> <p>Creating an equilibrium in the attitude and interaction with the West and the East by Iran</p> <p>Creating a consensus in foreign policy about involvement in the economic plans of the major powers in the region</p> <p>Iran’s competition with major regional and trans-regional powers along with building trust</p> <p>Transforming opportunities into threats through the establishment of economic unions and cooperations</p> <p>Facilitation of a comprehensive commercial relationship between Iran and Russia through Iran’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union</p> <p>A major blow to the US sanctions against Iran through Iran’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union</p> <p>More opportunity and freedom of action for Russia and Iran through reducing the Eurasian Union’s dependence on the dollar</p> <p>Enhancing Iran’s economic strength and political influence in the region through membership in the Eurasian Union</p> <p>Making a logical and sensible use of membership in the Eurasian Economic Union by Iran</p> <p>Facilitation of Iran’s membership in the Eurasian Union through accession to the Palermo Convention and the CFT</p>
	Iran’s investment and economic cooperation with the countries in the region bilaterally and multilaterally	<p>Developing Iran’s economic exchange with Tajikistan regarding oil and gas swaps for freshwater</p> <p>Cooperation with fossil energy-producing countries in the region</p> <p>Cooperation and partnership with the Central Asian countries in various fields of oil and gas derivatives</p> <p>Revival of Iran’s textile industry based on cotton and textile products of Central Asian countries</p> <p>Cooperation with oil- and gas-producing countries in Central Asia in the form of a joint coalition</p> <p>Expanding commercial relations and long-term ties with the developed countries of Central Asia</p> <p>Carrying out joint economic projects with the Central Asian countries in the field of banking</p> <p>Having joint activities in the field of insurance</p> <p>Having joint activities in the field of shipping</p> <p>Iran’s cooperation in the hardware sections of various Central Asian countries’ industry</p> <p>Iran’s cooperation in the Chinese Silk Road project in Central Asian countries</p> <p>Regional joint projects in the field of trading</p> <p>Having regional collaborations in the energy sector in Central Asia</p> <p>Workforce exchange</p> <p>Having effective multilateral collaborations</p> <p>Having diverse and multilateral collaborations with different Central Asian countries</p> <p>Defining economic projects with the participation of Afghanistan and Tajikistan</p> <p>Iran’s full membership in the Eurasian Economic Union</p> <p>Establishing an aluminum container producing factory in Tajikistan</p> <p>Iran’s joint economic cooperation with Central Asian countries in the field of alterant and food packaging industries</p> <p>Establishing meat packaging, Salambor processing, and leather industries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan</p> <p>Cooperation with Central Asian countries in the field of metals and minerals</p> <p>Joint cooperation in the field of civil industries</p> <p>Emphasizing and accentuating the export of manufactured and technology goods by Iran</p> <p>The economic advantage of the factor led to Iran’s presence in Eurasia</p> <p>Efforts to establish multilateral cooperation between Iran and Central Asian countries</p> <p>Deepening economic relations with the Central Asian countries</p> <p>Establishing a cooperation organization between Iran and Central Asian countries</p> <p>Having joint investment in the region</p> <p>Iran’s investment in the industrial, mining, and construction sectors of the Central Asian region</p> <p>Developing local trading by Iran</p>

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
	Having an active and pragmatic strategy for economic relations in the region by Iran	<p>Focusing and updating the business information of Iran's political representatives</p> <p>Thorough and timely notifications to the Iranian traders and producers about the markets of Central Asian countries</p> <p>Employing active diplomacy to reduce possible ambiguities and misunderstandings with the neighbors</p> <p>Highlighting the development of Iran's stable relations with its neighboring countries in Central Asia</p> <p>Expanding regional ties by Iran pragmatically</p> <p>Having a foreign policy orientation based on utilizing geographical capacities and interaction with neighbors</p> <p>Heeding regionalism in Iran's foreign policy</p> <p>Iran's attention to being integrated into the global economic system</p> <p>Adopting an open geopolitical strategy by Iran</p> <p>Having a plan and a roadmap for economic and commercial relations with Central Asian countries</p> <p>Developing a practical strategy for a greater presence in the region by Iran</p> <p>Establishing strategic relations along with sustainable economic cooperation</p> <p>Having solidarity in internal management and policy to implement appropriate policy</p>
	Paying attention to energy diplomacy and playing an active role in the energy market	<p>Attracting foreign technology and investment in the field of energy</p> <p>Emphasis on attracting foreign investment in the field of energy</p> <p>Heeding to energy diplomacy and increasing energy exports</p> <p>Assigning economic projects to the private sector to implement successful and exemplary economic projects</p> <p>Removing obstacles and heeding to the issue of energy transit to Central Asia</p> <p>Creating competitive advantages through diversifying energy business areas</p> <p>Ensuring energy security by Iran through the sale of gas to consumer markets</p> <p>Diverse partnership and cooperation in the field of energy with Central Asian countries</p> <p>Iran's gas exportation through the Turkmenistan-Xinjiang gas pipeline</p>
	Paying attention to road diplomacy by Iran	<p>The desirability of Iran's transit route for Central Asian countries</p> <p>Connection with Kazakhstan via Turkmenistan and the Caspian sea</p> <p>Optimizing and streamlining of transportation routes by Iran</p> <p>Developing railway and port infrastructure for the North-South corridor in interaction with the countries benefiting from it</p> <p>Negotiating and clarifying the dimensions of energy transit via the North-South corridor to avoid possible challenges</p> <p>Iran's geostrategic situation as a port of entry and a regional transportation bridge prepares the ground for economic interactions</p> <p>Upgrading infrastructures for the construction of roads, railways, pipelines, and electricity networks</p> <p>Launching Chabahar-Sarakhs and Jask-Mashhad railways to provide Central Asian countries with access to the open waters</p> <p>India and other South Asian countries' access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea through the construction of a North-South corridor in Iran</p> <p>Chabahar-Sarakhs railway, Zabol-Zarang-Delaram, and Khaf-Herat, Afghanistan route for India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia</p> <p>Devising severe plans to expand railway transportation in Iran</p> <p>Cost-effectiveness of Iran's route for Central Asian countries to access open waters</p> <p>North-South corridor: a unique and profitable plan for Iran</p> <p>The necessity of construction and completion of Chabahar-Sarakhs railway to reinforce and transport transit goods</p> <p>Enhancing Iran's role and contributing to its economic growth by establishing the international North-South transport corridor</p> <p>Activation of the transit line and the North-South corridor through the completion of the Chabahar-Sarakhs railway project</p> <p>Launching an express railway network from Iran to Tajikistan via Afghanistan and Turkmenistan</p> <p>Easy and safe access of Central Asian countries to open waters and other countries through Iran</p> <p>Completing economic and transit corridors</p> <p>The attractiveness of Iran's geopolitical location for neighbors and other countries to access open waters</p>
Adoption of soft diplomacy by Iran	Adopting cultural diplomacy by Iran	<p>Cultural factor as a catalyst</p> <p>Forming the union of Persian-speaking countries</p> <p>Attention to the Persian language as a communicative media in other fields</p> <p>Heeding to the cultural contexts for the private sector's economic activities in the Central Asian region</p> <p>The influence of the role of culture in the framework of pragmatic plans by Iran</p> <p>Removing barriers and challenges to Iran's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia</p> <p>The merely facilitating role of cultural factors in the economic and political cooperation</p> <p>Avoiding controversial and sensitive topics in the field of cultural diplomacy</p> <p>Emphasis on tourism diplomacy</p> <p>Emphasis on sports diplomacy</p> <p>Using capacities such as Nowruz in the field of cultural diplomacy</p> <p>Cultural factor as Iran's first advantage in converging to the Central Asian countries for economic interaction</p> <p>Proper use of cultural factors in Central Asian countries</p> <p>Emphasis on familiar cultural figures and elements instead of Islamizing Central Asian countries</p> <p>Desisting the idea of superiority and following the concept of equality and emphasizing joint cultural and economic collaborations</p>

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
		The effectiveness of the cultural factor in Iran's relations with Central Asian countries Iran's affinity with Central Asian countries due to a common historical and cultural background The significance of the role of the Persian language in the affinity of Iran with Central Asian countries Using the tradition of Nowruz in Iran's general diplomacy with Central Asian countries Encouraging the establishment of a cultural attaché in the embassies of Central Asian countries in Iran Performing joint artistic activities between Iran and Central Asian countries Establishing an understanding to set up Persian and Uzbek language chairs in the universities of both countries Using common cultural capacities and historical backgrounds in Central Asia Facilitation of Iran's economic and political relations with Central Asian countries due to the existence of cultural and civilizational commonalities Establishing Persian language chairs in the universities of the region Establishing the Museum of the Common History of Iran and countries of the region Strengthening common rituals and legends in the form of media platforms Developing tourism industry for people from Central Asian countries to visit Iran Emphasis on the Persian language as a shared cultural heritage of Iran and countries of the region Emphasis on the tradition of Nowruz as a shared cultural heritage of Iran and the countries of the region Heeding to cultural components and adopting soft diplomacy in Central Asian countries Holding joint, periodic Nowruz festivals between Iran and these countries Holding joint meetings in honor of renowned and eminent figures Assisting the reconstruction, renovation, and redecoration of Iranian architectural works in the region Assisting the restoration and reconstruction of common historical documents The precedence of science and technology diplomacy over cultural diplomacy The precedence of economic activities over cultural diplomacy Using civilization capacities through promoting structural capacity of diplomatic apparatus in the region Identifying common non-sensitive bilateral cultural components Reinforcing active institutions and non-governmental organizations in the cultural fields Presenting a realistic image of Iran in the form of media programs Adopting scientific and technological diplomacy by Iran Using the capacities of science and technology diplomacy in line with economic activities and collaborations Developing joint economic projects created in the context of scientific cooperation Scientific interchange in various fields between Iran and Central Asian countries Building trust in Central Asian countries via scientific and technological collaborations by Iran Scientific and technological diplomacy: The most effective strategy for cooperation and interaction among countries Having joint scientific and educational cooperation in various fields The effectiveness of scientific and technological diplomacy through capacity building and investment in various scientific fields Attempts to create joint science and technology parks Having educational, scientific, and cultural collaborations Interaction and knowledge sharing with the Central Asian countries by Iran Loss of Iran's geopolitical advantage due to the existence of sanctions Sanctions as an obstacle to Iran's full accession to the Eurasian union Exiting geopolitical isolation designed by world economic powers Lifting sanctions in order to do activities and economic investment in Central Asia The dependence on defining and implementing joint economic plans with Central Asian countries on the removal of sanctions
Efforts to exit sanctions and remove sanction barriers	Existence of sanction barriers for economic activities Exiting sanctions and geopolitical isolation	Loss of Iran's geopolitical advantage due to the existence of sanctions Sanctions as an obstacle to Iran's full accession to the Eurasian union Exiting geopolitical isolation designed by world economic powers Lifting sanctions in order to do activities and economic investment in Central Asia The dependence on defining and implementing joint economic plans with Central Asian countries on the removal of sanctions

Source: Research Findings.

economic interactions among countries at various regional and trans-regional levels.

Thus, according to the theoretical records mentioned above (cultural diplomacy, soft power, and diplomacy of science and technology), Iran can operationalize soft diplomacy in the form of cultural diplomacy and scientific and technological diplomacy against the economic plans of the great powers in the region. Because on the one hand, cultural diplomacy, due to its multifaceted impact and civilizational affinity of Iran with Central Asian countries, enjoys more effectiveness and legitimacy. On the other hand, conducting joint scientific and technological activities can prepare the ground for joint economic plans and programs. Therefore, cultural and scientific fields are one of the

most important contexts that Iran can improve its level and amount of cooperation with Central Asian countries to revive its geo-culture and enhance its scientific influence in Central Asia and pave the way for more convergence in foreign policy, particularly in the economic field.

C. Efforts to exit sanctions and remove sanction barriers: Iran must adopt and pursue appropriate mechanisms to bring maximum benefits for the country and eliminate (1) sanction barriers for economic activities and (2) geopolitical isolation.

The results mentioned above, efforts to exit sanctions and remove sanction barriers by Iran, are consistent and in line with the theory of Copenhagen School in the sense that security is a

Table 3. Number of global, organizing, and basic themes of the optimal model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia.

Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
Adoption of economic diplomacy by Iran	Efforts to strengthen internal infrastructures for economic activities within the region Involvement in the economic plans of the major powers in the region Iran’s investment and economic cooperation with the countries in the region bilaterally and multilaterally Having an effective and pragmatic strategy for economic relations in the region by Iran Paying attention to energy diplomacy and playing an active role in the energy market Paying attention to road diplomacy	100
Adoption of soft diplomacy by Iran	Adopting cultural diplomacy by Iran Adopting scientific and technological diplomacy by Iran	51
Efforts to exit sanctions and remove sanction barriers	Existence of sanction barriers for economic activities Exiting sanctions and geopolitical isolation	5
3	10	156



Figure 2. Optimal network conceptual model of Iran’s countermeasures against the threats of the economic plans of the major powers in Central Asia.

Table 4. A comparison of the similarities and differences of threats and opportunities that the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia have for Iran.

Economic plans of the great powers	Criterion	Opportunity	Threat	Similarity	Difference
Russian plans	Energy Transit Plan	Iran can use the capacity of Russia to resist regional and trans-regional energy threats	There may be tensions between Iran and Russia over energy transit in Central Asia	Iran may play a more important geopolitical role in the region, and its relations with the states involved in these economic plans may expand	Implementation of the Russian economic plans may have negative political and economic consequences for Iran
Indian plans	Eurasian Economic Union	Iran can develop comprehensive economic relations with the members of the Eurasian Economic Union	Joining the Eurasian Economic Union may have negative political and economic consequences for Iran		
	International North-South Transport Corridor	*A multipolar world may emerge in the region against a unipolar approach	The presence and influence of regional and supra-regional powers in Central Asia may increase and be strengthened		Perhaps when the Indian plans are implemented, the influence of regional and supra-regional powers will increase in Central Asia, and the impact of Iran will decrease in the region
	The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline	*The geopolitical and commercial role of Iran may be highlighted and increased	Iran's economic transit and cultural influence may decrease in the region		
Turkic plans	Turkic Council	Construction of the TAPI Gas Pipeline may lead to economic balance and security stability in the region			
		*It may develop cultural–historical convergences and common security strategies in Central Asia	*Turkey is directed by the USA and cooperates with this state to implement pro-Western policies in Central Asia		The developmental policies of Iran and Turkey in Central Asia are not compatible, and Iran's influence will decrease in the region because Turkey is pursuing pro-Western policies
		*Turkey is not fully recognized as a Central Asian country by Russia	*The developmental and cultural models of Iran and Turkey in Central Asia are not compatible		
	The Turkic Council's Modern Silk Road	Iran can ensure the region's security, and a balance can be observed in the area	Turkey's economic power may increase, Iran's geopolitical role may weaken, and its economic-transit influence may decrease		
American plans	The Wider Central Asia Initiative	*Iran may expand its relations with other countries, especially with Russia and Afghanistan	Insecurity may increase in the region, and the political influence of Iran and Russia in the region may decrease		Insecurity may increase in the region, and Iran and Russia's political and economic interests in the area may decrease when the American plans are implemented
	The New Silk Road	*Iran's cultural influence in the region may expand, and Iran may emphasize Afghanistan			
		Iran may expand its relations with China and the Central Asian states	Iran may be deprived of the economic benefits of energy transit in Central Asia		
Chinese plans	One Belt, One Road	*Iran may strengthen and expand its cooperation with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) member states	Tensions may develop, and the interests of the states involved in the plan may be imbalanced		Tensions may develop, and the states' interests involved in the plan may be imbalanced
		*The geopolitical role of Iran may be highlighted in various economic fields (i.e., energy, transportation, and trade)			

Source: Research Findings.

multifaceted concept and includes various developmental levels (social, political, and economic). As a result, the removal of development and growth obstacles can provide the citizens of a country with security in many aspects, specifically the economic dimension. The existence of sanctions and sanction barriers preclude regional and trans-regional economic collaborations and impede economic advancement that needs to be dealt with and addressed immediately.

Conclusion

The present study results indicated that the implementation of the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia for Iran in terms of opportunities and threats have some similarities and differences. In this regard, the similarity of the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia for Iran in terms of opportunity was an increase in Iran's geopolitical importance and the expansion of Iran's relations with the countries involved in such economic plans. In addition, the difference between the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia for Iran in terms of threat were negative political and economic consequences for Iran through the implementation of Russian economic plans, increasing the influence of regional and supra-regional powers in Central Asia, and reducing Iran's influence in the region through the implementation of India's economic plans, the discrepancy between the development policies of Iran and Turkey in Central Asia and the weakening of Iran's position because of pursuing the pro-Western policies in the region by Turkey, insecurity and reduced influence and political and economic interests of Iran and Russia in the region due to the implementation of the US economic plans and the emergence of tensions and imbalances of interests between the countries involved in China's economic plan. Despite the opportunities and threats of the economic plans of the powers in Central Asia for Iran, the most appropriate strategy for Iran is to engage in convergence diplomacy in the form of cultural and economic diplomacy and remove sanction barriers to the implementation of Iran's joint economic plans with its Central Asian neighbors to achieve the desired model of Iran's confrontation strategies against the threats of the economic plans of the great powers in Central Asia. Undoubtedly, the realization of this issue for both sides will lead to a win-win game that increases Iran's regional and international position, eliminate the threats of economic plans of regional and supra-regional powers, and provide the context for mutual economic development.

Limitations

With respect to the limitations of the present study, two cases can be mentioned in general. To begin with, the lack of sufficient empirical literature, nationally or internationally,

concerning the subject of the present study was one of the scientific obstacles in order to compare the constructed conceptual model with their findings and results so that the commonalities and differences of the constructed model of the present study can be evaluated and compared to them in this perspective. Next, this study was based on a qualitative research strategy. Therefore, despite the efforts to assess the validity (credibility) and consistency (reliability) of the qualitative findings of the research, the external validity decreased to some extent due to the lack of evaluation and suitability of the measured conceptual model of the qualitative study in the quantitative study (specifically survey study). However, this is one of the weaknesses of all qualitative research and not just the present research.

In addition, this qualitative study failed to mention some internal factors (weakness and strength), such as the role of domestic politicians in foreign policy, the desire to expand cooperation with countries in the region and the world, capacity-building for the effective management of foreign relations, and the dominance of the hardware approach over the software approach in foreign policy and foreign factors (opportunities and threats) such as using the capacities of international and regional organizations, developments in Iran's geopolitical environment, the transition of the international system, the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, and the fragility of the Central Asian economy and their dependence on Russia. Thus, these factors can be further investigated following the SWOT study and the design of an optimal model for Iran's strategic economic management in Central Asia.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The basic and organized themes of the opportunities and threats of each economic plan are not mentioned to avoid a length limit.

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