

THE SCO'S IRAN EXPANSION IN THE REGIONAL EQUATION

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Abstract: *Iran, which had held observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) since 2005, formally initiated its accession process by signing a memorandum of commitment for full membership during the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022. Subsequently, the Iranian Parliament ratified a bill endorsing the country's accession to the organisation. In doing so, Iran fulfilled all the legal and procedural requirements and officially became a permanent member of the SCO. This study provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges Iran faced throughout the accession process; the arguments put forth by domestic and international actors opposing its membership, and the implications of internal political developments on its foreign policy orientation. It also examines Iran's strategic pivot toward the Eastern axis and the broader geopolitical motivations behind Russia's support for Iran's membership. The core objective of this research is to evaluate how Iran can strategically capitalise on this foreign policy reorientation to enhance its regional and global standing.*

Keywords: Regional policy, integration, Iran, SCO, international relations.

Rezumat: *Extinderea Iranului în cadrul OCS în ecuația regională. Iranul, care a deținut statutul de observator în Organizația de Cooperare de la Shanghai (OCS) din 2005, și-a inițiat oficial procesul de aderare prin semnarea unui memorandum de angajament pentru obținerea statutului de membru cu drepturi depline, în timpul summit-ului OCS de la Samarkand, din septembrie 2022. Ulterior, Parlamentul iranian a ratificat un proiect de lege prin care aproba aderarea țării la organizație. În acest fel, Iranul a îndeplinit toate cerințele legale și procedurale, devenind oficial membru permanent al OCS. Acest studiu oferă o analiză detaliată a provocărilor cu care s-a confruntat Iranul pe parcursul procesului de aderare,*

a argumentelor formulate de actorii interni și internaționali care s-au opus acestui demers, precum și a implicațiilor pe care evoluțiile politice interne le-au avut asupra orientării sale de politică externă. Lucrarea examinează, de asemenea, pivotarea strategică a Iranului către axa estică și motivațiile geopolitice mai ample din spatele sprijinului acordat de Rusia pentru aderarea Iranului. Obiectivul principal al cercetării este evaluarea modului în care Iranul poate valorifica strategic această reorientare de politică externă pentru a-și consolida poziția la nivel regional și global.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the full accession of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to the Shanghai Cooperation. The research is motivated by the need to understand how Iran's membership may alter the geopolitical and economic architecture of Eurasia, particularly through its impact on regional security arrangements, economic integration, and the balance of power dynamics vis-à-vis Western actors. Furthermore, the SCO's growing relevance in shaping regional and global governance makes this issue timely and significant.

The central objective of the investigation is to identify the strategic, economic, and political advantages that Iran may derive from SCO membership and to assess how this development could contribute to deeper regional integration across Eurasia. Specifically, the research addresses the following question: *What are the consequences of Iran's SCO membership for the Eurasian region, and how can the IRI contribute to this integration process?*

Methodologically, the study employs content analysis of official documents, statistical data, and political reports, drawing on sources in English, Persian, Russian, and Turkish, to trace the evolving contours of Iran's foreign policy within the SCO framework. This multilingual and multi-source approach enables a multidimensional assessment that situates Iran's membership within broader debates on regionalism, great-power rivalry, and the restructuring of Eurasia's geopolitical and economic order.

While the research has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. First, access to primary sources remains restricted, as many aspects of Iran's foreign policy decision-making and its diplomatic negotiations within the SCO are conducted through closed channels. That is why the analysis relies primarily on official statements, secondary literature, and international reports, which may not fully capture behind-the-scenes dynamics. Second, the study is temporally bounded. Since Iran's accession to full SCO membership occurred only

in September 2022, the research primarily reflects short-term developments, while medium and long-term consequences remain beyond the reach of current evidence. Third, the analysis's geographical and thematic scope is predominantly focused on Iran's role within the SCO, limiting a more comprehensive assessment of the perspectives and responses of other key member states.

Simultaneously, this article contributes to the academic literature by systematically examining Iran–SCO relations – an area that has been relatively under-explored in both Russian and Iranian scholarship – from an external, objective perspective. By contextualising Iran's regionalism within the dynamics of Eurasian integration, this study advances scholarly understanding of how middle powers navigate sanctions, diversify economic partnerships, and position themselves within emerging regional security architectures. Furthermore, the geographical and thematic scope of the analysis is deliberately centred on Iran's role within the SCO, which not only provides a focused and in-depth account of Iran's strategic orientation but also introduces an innovative perspective into the literature. It simultaneously lays the groundwork for future comparative studies by establishing Iran's unique position as a reference point.

Although the study's theoretical framework is based on the realist paradigm, geopolitical theory and the axis shift approach are also directly relevant to the subject. This perspective stems from Iran's membership in the SCO, which is not merely a reflection of bilateral diplomatic relations. It is also the result of structural changes in regional and global power balances. In this context, as is commonly known, realism views states as the leading actors in international relations and considers foreign policy as a struggle for power, security, and survival.¹ From this perspective, Iran's orientation toward the SCO is interpreted as an alternative security search in response to pressure from the West. According to geopolitical theory, which analyses the relationship between a state's geographical location and its foreign policy,² Iran has critical geopolitical value in terms of energy routes and security, given its location at the intersection of Eurasia. This perspective explains Iran's centrality in regional energy corridors and its value as a "bridge state" linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Additionally, the "axis shift" approach highlights the more profound, structural transformation in Iran's alliance preferences and regional orientation.

¹ Jason Charrette, Jennifer Sterling-Folker, *Realism*, in "International Organization and Global Governance", 2018, p.95.

² Sören Scholvin, *Geopolitics an Overview of Concepts and Empirical Examples from International Relations*, in "FIIA Working Paper", No.91, 2016, p.4.

Following this, in the historiography of this theme, numerous books and articles evaluate both Iran's path to the SCO and relations among China, Russia, and Iran. Notably, Rashid Alimov, whose work detailing the history and current development stages of the SCO has been referred to as the "SCO Encyclopedia";³ Marc Lanteigne, who examined China's international institutional outreach and its rising position in the changing world order;⁴ and John W. Garver, who analysed China-Iran relations through the concepts of civilization and power, emphasizing the determination to build an Asia-centered order against Western dominance, are among the prominent books in this field.⁵

At the same time, Iran's adoption to this organisation has been a central theme for many articles from different perspectives. Iranian academic Pourya Nabipour argues that Russia and China's flexible, non-interventionist stance toward Western sanctions has made the SCO increasingly attractive to Iran. Tehran views the SCO as both an expression of its anti-hegemonic identity and a means to find alternative markets under sanctions⁶. Rana Pervaiz Iqbal and Syed Mussawer Bukhari claim Iran's main motivations for joining the SCO are economic, including boosting oil exports, developing the Chabahar Port, and avoiding isolation. SCO membership is expected to enhance Iran's energy market share, security cooperation, and support against US sanctions⁷. Mohsen Shariatinia sees SCO membership as a significant turning point in Iran's foreign policy, though opinions in Iran are divided on its risks and benefits. He stresses that membership entails binding commitments, especially in combating terrorism and security threats.⁸ Jahangir Karami believes global crises have strengthened Iran-Russia-China cooperation, and SCO membership could deepen Iran's regional integration. However, he warns

³ See: R. K. Alimov, *Shankhayskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva: stanovleniye, razvitiye, perspektivy* [Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Formation, Development, Prospects], Moscow: Ves mir, 2017.

⁴ See: Marc Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions: Alternate Paths to Global Power*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

⁵ See: Jhon W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World*, University of Washington Press, 2006.

⁶ Pourya Nabipour, *Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Economic, Trade and Political Affairs*, in "National Interest", No.6, 2022, pp. 13-14.

⁷ Rana Pervaiz Iqbal, Syed Mussawer Bukhari, *Iran as a Permanent Member of SCO: Scope and Challenges*, in "Journal of Development and Social Sciences", Vol. 3, No. 2, 2022, pp. 776-777.

⁸ Mohsen Shariatinia, *Iran's Full Membership in the SCO: Economic and Security Implications*, in "Scientific Quarterly of Political and International Approach", Vol.13, No.3, 2022, p. 36.

that internal economic weaknesses and US sanctions still limit Iran's effectiveness.⁹ Nicole B. Grajewski argues Iran uses SCO membership to safeguard regime security and resist external pressures. By embracing SCO principles, Iran gains a platform opposing Western liberal norms and supporting its sovereignty.¹⁰

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Iran's full membership in the SCO is not merely a symbolic counterbalance to Western institutions such as NATO but also represents a strategic alignment with the shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics of Eurasia. The analysis also highlights persistent structural challenges, economic stagnation, high unemployment, and the ongoing impact of US sanctions as key factors that are encouraging Tehran to shift its foreign policy toward the East and seek deeper engagement within multilateral frameworks such as the SCO.

THE PATH LEADING TO THE SCO

The SCO's founding history is based on two fundamental documents signed by the heads of state of its member states. The first was the "Agreement on Enhancing Security of Military Trust in the Frontier" (26 April 1996, Shanghai) and the second was the "Agreement on the Reciprocal Diminution of Armed Forces in the Frontier" (24 April 1997, Moscow). Basically, the 1996 Shanghai Summit and the Moscow Summit a year later were prototypes for what would become a full-fledged interdisciplinary cooperation organisation. Collaboration on implementing the agreements laid the groundwork for the "Shanghai spirit," including mutual trust and benefit, equality, and respect for each other's interests.¹¹

In July 1998, at the Fives' Summit held in Alma-Ata, a broad consensus was reached on continuing comprehensive negotiations on "land changes and security in Asia" and establishing extensive and lasting cooperation on issues such as trade, industry, energy resources, ethnic separatism, religious fanaticism, cross-border crime, and international terrorism.¹² Thereafter, the Shanghai Five Summit held in

⁹ J. Karami, *Strategicheskaya rol Irana dlya SHOS: ukrepleniye yevraziyskoy integratsii* [Iran's Strategic Role for the SCO: Strengthening Eurasian Integration], in "Vestnik Rossiyskogo universiteta druzhby narodov", Vol. 23, No.3, 2023, p. 553.

¹⁰ Nicole B. Grajewski, *Iran and the SCO: The Quest for Legitimacy and Regime Preservation*, in "Middle East Policy", Vol.30, No.2, 2023, p. 38.

¹¹ V. Paramonov, *Formirovaniye geopoliticheskoy situatsii v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Formation of the Geopolitical Situation in Central Asia), in "Tsentralnaya Aziya i Kavkaz", Vol. 57, No. 3, 2002, p. 12.

¹² *Joint Statement Issued by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan at the Alma-Ata Meeting, 3 July 1998*, in "World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues",

Dushanbe on 5 July 2000 served as a turning point, marking the beginning of the Five's evolution into a forum for addressing important regional issues. It was followed by a six-country conference on June 14-15, 2001, where the establishment of a new regional alliance, the SCO, was officially announced.¹³

Charter of the SCO was concluded at the St. Petersburg Summit in June 2002 and enacted on 19 September 2003. The Charter is the statutory document that summarises the Organisation's objectives and policies, its composition, and its core operations. This organisation's mission, which is to reinforce mutual trust and friendship among the participating states and foster good neighbourly relations, is explained here.¹⁴ The essence of its mission is to promote practical cooperation and pursue the preservation of peace, safety, and balance in a broad spectrum of the region. The Agreement on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism was also ratified during that period, providing a legal basis for joint action to counter common threats and challenges faced by all countries in the region. Based on this document, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) for enhanced cooperation in this field was established and, in 2002, transformed into a permanent body of the SCO.¹⁵ In May 2006, a conference was summoned in Moscow to initiate the creation of the SCO Forum. The Forum consisted of SCO representatives from each country, affiliated with authorised scientific institutions designated as National Research Centres.

As for its structure, the highest legislative body is the Council of Heads of State. It sets the organisation's priorities; resolves key issues related to its internal structure and activities; establishes mutual relations with foreign states and other international bodies; and addresses the most pressing global problems. The Heads of Government Council meets once a year to endorse the Organisation's annual budget.¹⁶ The Foreign Ministers' Council is the body dealing with the core

Vol. 2, No. 4, 1998, pp.158-161.

¹³ Wang Jin, Kong Dehang, *Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Between China and Central Asian States in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, in "China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies", Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 66.

¹⁴ G. Logvinov, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A New Qualitative Step Forward on the Results of the SCO Summit in St. Petersburg*, in "Far Eastern Affairs", Vol. 3, No. 3, 2002, p. 21.

¹⁵ Erkinbek Turgunov, *Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü'nün Tarihçesi ve Bölge Güvenliğindeki Rolü* (History of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Role in Regional Security), in "ERI e-Bulletin", No. 336, 2022.

¹⁶ "Polozheniye o Sovete glav pravitelstv (premyer-ministrov) gosudarstv-chlenov Shankhayskoy Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva, utverzhdennoye resheniyem glav

activities. The extraordinary sessions of this Council are called upon the initiative of at least two Member states and with the concurrence of all the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The venue for the Council of Foreign Ministers' ordinary and extraordinary meetings is determined by mutual agreement, and decisions are taken by consensus. The Council of National Coordinators is the guiding and leading body for the Organisation's current activities. These coordinators are appointed in accordance with the internal rules and procedures of each member state, and regular meetings are held at least three times a year.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the SCO is seeking to expand avenues for cooperation in various fields in line with its defined objectives. For instance, to promote cooperation in the energy sector, Vladimir Putin proposed the establishment of an "energy club" at the International Conference on "Energy Market Trends and Prospects in Central Asia" held in 2005.¹⁸ As part of financial and budgetary cooperation, the launch of the Shanghai Interbank Association was officially announced on 26 October 2005.¹⁹ In this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Business Council was established on 14 June 2006 to expand cooperation and communication between Shanghai's business and financial sectors and promote the practical development of multilateral initiatives.²⁰ The SCO Heads of State Council also scheduled forums of education ministers of the member states to strengthen collaboration in the sphere of education and approved the creation of a permanent Expert Working Group in this field.²¹ In the field of developing sociocultural relations, a multilateral cultural interaction plan was approved at the 2007-2008 Ministerial Meetings of Culture, and the Declaration of the SCO was signed in 2009.

gosudarstv-chlenov Shankhayskoy Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva ot 29 maya 2003 g. [Regulations on the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Approved by the Decision of the Heads of State of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on May 29, 200], in "Moskovskiy zhurnal mezhdunarodnogo prava", No.3, 2003, p.270-273.

¹⁷ *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Article 4, 2002.

¹⁸ The Energy Club envisages cooperation among member states by encouraging national and private energy organizations to coordinate their investment and construction plans and explore joint ventures and technology shifts. See: Matthew Brummer, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran: A Power-Full Union*, in "Journal of International Affairs", Vol. 60, No. 2, 2007, p.188.

¹⁹ Stephen Aris, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, in "International Peace Institute Report", No.2, 2013, p.4.

²⁰ Stephen Aris, *op.cit.*, p.4.

²¹ *Byulleten mezhdunarodnykh dogovorov* [Bulletin of International Treaties], No. 10, 2008, pp. 4-7.

Between June 6-7, 2012, SCO Heads of State met in Beijing to engage in military-political cooperation and adopted a Declaration on the formation of a safe zone to promote lasting peace and shared prosperity²².

From this perspective, despite the presence of various interregional formations, the SCO is the only organisation that can guarantee security in the region. Especially when viewed from a geopolitical perspective, the fact that four of the seven nuclear powers (Russia, China, India, and Pakistan) and two of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China and Russia) have come together through the SCO reinforces this view. Countries in the region also share a similar view. For example, Imamali Rahman, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, said in an interview with Xinhua News Agency, "It is difficult to imagine today's world without the SCO." The President emphasised that the SCO is advocating a fundamentally new approach to security, adhering to the principles of common security, non-alignment, non-conflict and non-direction towards third countries.²³ However, the geopolitical turbulence of 2022 triggered substantial shifts in the broader landscape, amplifying the significance of the SCO while also spurring its advancement and evolution.

THE ROUTE THAT LED IRAN TO THE SCO

Following its official observer status in 2005,²⁴ Iran expressed its readiness to join the SCO as a permanent member at the Heads of State Council meeting in Dushanbe in 2008.²⁵ This issue was the catalyst for a range of differing opinions to be voiced at the conference. Most delegations and observer state representatives supported maintaining the moratorium on new admissions. The following factors

²² *Declaration of the Heads of State of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Building a Region of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity in* https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367264.html (Accessed on 12.01.2025).

²³ *Emomali Rakhmon. SHOS pokazala vsemu miru svoyu sostoyatel'nost* (Emomali Rahmon: SCO Has Shown the World Its Worth) in <https://khovar.tj/rus/2008/08/emomali-rahmon-shos-pokazala-vsemu-miru-svoyu-sostoyatel'nost/> (Accessed on 12.01.2025).

²⁴ Aylin Ünver Noi, *Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Is it Possible for Iran to Become a Full Member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization under Pressure of Nuclear Issue?*, in "Perceptions", Vol. 11, 2006, p. 96.

²⁵ *Ahmadinejad to Attend SCO Summit*, in <https://www.indiatoday.in/latest-headlines/story/ahmadinejad-to-attend-sco-summit-28095-2008-08-07> (Accessed on 12.01.2025).

were used to justify this position:

- The priority should be to ensure that the SCO mechanisms function as effectively as possible. Admitting new members should only be considered once this has been achieved.
- The increased workload and costs associated with onboarding new members are undesirable.

The actual reason for this is also obvious. According to most experts, granting observer countries full membership status is inappropriate due to their domestic and foreign policy issues. For instance, Iran has many problems both within and outside the international community.²⁶ This is why some experts believe that, by joining the SCO, this country will be able to transfer its problems to the organisation.²⁷ Therefore, for a long time, the prevailing view was that cooperation with observer states should be developed on a case-by-case basis, focusing on issues and programmes of mutual interest because it was thought that Iran wanted to join the SCO not to develop constructive cooperation, but to escape international isolation. Membership of a state like Iran, which has significant energy reserves and a geostrategic position, will not weaken the SCO; on the contrary, it will make the SCO more effective due to the increased number of participants.

In parallel with these developments, representatives of most member states' delegations have said it is time to develop precise membership criteria for the SCO. There was no common understanding of which countries could apply for membership in this organisation. Therefore, the criteria for granting or denying full membership status should be explicit. The Charter indicates that it welcomes the admission of any other state from the region that pledges to abide by its objectives and principles, as well as the provisions of other international covenants.²⁸ Furthermore, one of the Charter's criteria is geographical. In this context, the requirement for the candidate country is to be in the "SCO region". What's more, this region is not defined, and its borders are not specified.

According to I. A. Rogachev, the SCO emerged from the "Shanghai Five" mechanism, which was based on two unique agreements on reducing armed forces in Asia, as set out in the organisation's first documents.²⁹ Uzbekistan, which

²⁶ Aylin Ünver Noi, *op.cit.*, p. 100.

²⁷ Mohammad A. Mousavi, Esfandiar Khodaei, *Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, in "Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs", Vol. 4, No. 1, 2013, p.200.

²⁸ Alyson J. K. Bailes, Pál Dunay, Pan Guang, Mikhail Troitskiy, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, in "SIPRI Policy Paper", No.17, 2007, pp.6-7.

²⁹ A. V. Lukin, O. Y. Ilkayeva, A. M. Timorshina, *Dalneysheye razvitiye SHOS: problemy i rekomendatsii* (Further Development of the SCO: Problems and Recommendations) in

is not a party to these two documents, is a founding member of the SCO and has previously declared its recognition of the principles set out in them. Therefore, the settlement of border issues and the establishment of military trust are at the heart of the emergence of the SCO. In this context, I.A. Rogachev asserted that the primary benchmark for possible SCO membership is the existence of common borders with SCO member states.³⁰ This statement reflects the views of many Russian analysts on Iran's SCO membership.

Following Russia's endorsement, the issue of Iran's membership in the organisation accelerated, and it signed a memorandum of commitment to obtain member-state status at the SCO summit held in Samarkand on 16 September 2022. Iran was admitted as a full member of the SCO at the organisation's 23rd summit, chaired by India, in July 2023.³¹ This state's long-awaited entry into the SCO has received extensive, mostly positive coverage in the local media. Those who assessed this event positively emphasised that Iran was unable to join the SCO for eight years during the 11th and 12th governments (2013-2021) led by former President Hassan Rouhani, and that Ibrahim Raisi, who was elected President of the IRI in June 2021, succeeded in resolving the issue. The Iranian Foreign Ministry's intensive efforts and one-to-one discussions with leaders of SCO member states contributed significantly to achieving this goal. However, it would be inaccurate to blame the previous Iranian government for the delay in the country's acceptance as a full member of the SCO.

Despite having some truth in such criticism, as some Iranian and foreign analysts have rightly pointed out, the Rouhani government has focused more on rebuilding relations with other countries and improving cooperation with the West.³² For objectivity, it is necessary to recognise that the Islamic Republic's pro-Western stance at the time was completely understandable. Because Iranians expected to receive significant investments, advanced technologies, and modern equipment from prosperous and developed European countries. In return, they planned to pay for this with freed-up financial resources and oil shipments to Europe. Due to the international political situation, however, Iran has not received

"Shankhayskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva: ot stanovleniya k vsestoronnemu razvitiyu", 2008, pp. 10 - 12.

³⁰ A. V. Lukin, O. Y. Ilkayeva, A. M. Timorshina, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-12.

³¹ Emrah Yıldırımçakar, *The Dynamics of Iran-China's New Strategic Cooperation*, in "Alternatif Politika", Vol. 15, No. 2, 2023, p. 357.

³² Przemysław Osiewicz, *The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Region under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani: Continuity or Change*, in "Przegląd Strategiczny", No.7, 2014, p. 255.

support from the EU.³³ The absence of assistance from European countries, the US pressure on the Islamic Republic, and the implementation of the “everything without Iran”³⁴ policy have narrowed Tehran’s political and economic space for development. This necessitated Iran’s resorting to the eastern vector³⁵ of its foreign policy to reduce American pressure. Even as early as 2018, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, expressed his own stance on the issue as follows: “One of our priorities in foreign policy today is to prefer the East over the West, the neighbour over distance, and the peoples and countries that have common characteristics with us over others”³⁶.

Subsequently, unlike his predecessor, Iran’s new President Raisi declared at the very commencement of his term that Iran’s foreign policy priorities are “relations with neighbouring states” and “multilateral economic integration”.³⁷ He also made a statement that “the world should know that our government’s foreign policy does not stem from the JCPOA and is not limited to the JCPOA”. With this, the possibility of developing relations among Iran, Russia, and China emerged. One of the first steps taken by the new government, in the context of renewed foreign policy priorities, was to intensify its efforts to join the SCO. In 2023, this yielded a positive outcome.³⁸ Therefore, those evaluating Iran’s SCO membership consider the strategy Raisi has implemented to be correct.

IRAN’S EXPECTATIONS FROM THE SCO

Since its inception, Iran has sought to foster closer relations with the SCO as part of its foreign policy. Tehran believes that, in terms of political and economic cooperation, the SCO can fulfil an indispensable function in broader political spheres and strengthen multilateralism.³⁹ So, it is crucial to explain why Iran is so

³³ U. B. Potapov, *Vostochnyy almanakh* [Eastern Almanac], “Kvant Media”, No. 4, 2020, p. 42.

³⁴ M. Mesbahi, *Iran and Central Asia. Paradigm and Policy*, in “Central Asian Survey”, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2004, pp. 119-120.

³⁵ J. Karami, *Strategicheskaya rol Irana dlya SHOS....*, p. 553.

³⁶ *Baianat dar didare Mardome Azarbaijane Sharghi* [Public Statements in East Azerbaijan], in <https://www.leader.ir/fa/speech/20596/> (Accessed on 11.01.2025).

³⁷ *Ayatollah Raisi dar ejlas-e saran Shanghai (Ayatollah Raisi at the Shanghai Summit)* in URL: <https://president.ir/fa/131302> (Accessed on 11.01.2025).

³⁸ Nicholas Olczak, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): An Evolving Platform that should not be Overlooked*, in “The Swedish Institute of International Affairs Report”, 2025, p.3.

³⁹ S. Asl. Seyyedi, Z. A. Dzhan, *Znachenije SHOS v politike «Vzglyad na vostok» Islamskoy*

keen to join the SCO.

According to many national and Russian experts, about 44% of the world's population resides in the countries of this organisation, and the member states produce a third of global GDP.⁴⁰ Additionally, as highlighted earlier, four of the nine de facto nuclear powers in the world are members of this organisation. Moreover, the Iranian side also considers that the primary purpose of the SCO is to pursue three major missions, namely the fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism.⁴¹ Dealing with these challenges is very critical and meaningful for Iran, too. Iran's engagement with Russia in Iraq and Syria within the framework of the Astana process has demonstrated it. Furthermore, Iran knows that the SCO has grown significantly in recent years. The following reasons underpin Iran's need for the SCO from this perspective:

- *Regional security context.* Given that Iran is not a participant in any regional security arrangement, it has recently concentrated on alternative security institutions, including the SCO. Recent events in the neighbouring country of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, such as the issue of Afghanistan's status and the change in state name, associated with the Taliban movement coming to power (which is banned in Russia), as well as anti-Americanism and hostility towards Israel, have led to this state's presence under the umbrella of an organisation from a security motive. President Raisi's remarks during the summit of the SCO in Dushanbe in September 2021 are particularly noteworthy in this context. According to Raisi, interaction with the SCO on regional security issues is essential. This can only be achieved through cooperation among regional powers, without external interference.⁴² Hence, Iran's admission to the SCO symbolised the strengthening of Tehran's foreign policy orientation towards the East.⁴³ For the

Respubliki Iran s geopoliticheskoy tochki zreniya (Importance of SCO in Iran's "Look East" Policy from Geopolitical Perspective), in "Blizhniy i Postsovetkiy Vostok", Vol. 2, No. 6, 2024, p. 59.

⁴⁰ U. G. Litvinova, *Shankhayskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva: dvadtsat let raboty* [Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Twenty Years of Work], in "Vostochnyy almanakh", Kvant Media, No. 5, 2021, p. 54.

⁴¹ A. K. Galimzyanova, *15 let Shankhayskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva. Stanovleniye. Razvitiye. Perspektivy* [15 Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Formation. Development. Prospects], "V sbornike: Aktualnyye problemy mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy v XXI veke, Materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii", 2017, p. 154.

⁴² *Ayatollah Raisi dar ejlas-e saran Shanghai* [Ayatollah Raisi at the Shanghai Summit] in <https://president.ir/fa/131302> (Accessed on 12.001.2025).

⁴³ M. Ansarinassab, N. Bidmal, *Tahlile Chand Janab-e Garaeie Tejarate Iran Baraye Estefadeye*

Islamic Republic, accession to this organisation marks its first experience of involvement in a multilateral organisation that addresses issues of mutual protection.

- *Economic context.* The SCO is an organisation in which Iran is involved, suggesting that Iran is re-emerging economically in the region. Iran is aware that the SCO is interested in expanding collaboration in its main areas of activity: foreign policy, trade, and economy.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, this country should also make efforts to broaden cooperation across trade, the economy, finance, energy, and transport under the SCO umbrella, and to pay attention to agricultural development.⁴⁵ In the announced course towards multilateralism, Iran intends to benefit from the routes proposed and supported within the scope of two megaprojects of transportation through its territory by SCO member states. These include the Chinese BRI project and the Integrated Transport Corridor North-South (INSTC), which is being actively promoted by Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁴⁶ Beyond the above-mentioned projects, Tehran is also willing to use the major, rapidly developing port of Chabahar (Sistan and Baluchistan Province), situated in the south of the country on the shores of the Gulf of Oman, for transit transportation. Simultaneously, it should be noted that the Chabahar Free Economic Zone, which Iran had previously offered to the EEU member states to operate, is also located here.⁴⁷

- *Political context.* The antagonistic and intransigent image of Iran, which has been subject to political sanctions imposed by the US and other Western countries, will be eliminated, and the country's political visibility will increase. The Islamic Republic will also be able to capitalise on its capabilities through coordinated collaboration with Russia and China, turning the tensions and challenges posed by the US into opportunities. This will strengthen the state's position, which, in turn, will secure Iran's place in regional trends and even in macro-international politics.

Overall, Iran's accession to the SCO can be described as an extremely

Behine az Mougheyaite Geopolitike Sazmane Hamkarye Shanghai [Analysis of Iran's Trade Multilateralism for Optimal Utilization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Geopolitical Position], in "Journal of Central Eurasian Studies", Vol. 15, No. 2, 2023, pp. 103-127.

⁴⁴ U. G. Litvinova, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ A. K. Galimzyanova, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁴⁶ *Ayatollah Raisi dar ejlas-e saran Shanghai* [Ayatollah Raisi at the Shanghai Summit] in <https://president.ir/fa/131302> (Accessed on 12.001.2025).

⁴⁷ U. B. Potapov, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

momentous event for the country, representing an outstanding achievement in its diplomatic history. The Iranian government believes that becoming a full member of the SCO would enhance its prestige and credibility on the international stage, enabling it to take a stronger position with the West regarding the lifting of sanctions and the revival of the JCPOA.

IRAN'S RELEVANCE FOR RUSSIA IN THE SCO CONTEXT

Russia's narrative, though largely shaped by geographical determinism, aligns with its perception of Iran's historical significance and resurgence as a dominant regional power. It also demonstrates Russia's involvement in regional initiatives, showcasing its pivotal role in fostering regional interconnectedness and moulding the evolving world order. Strengthening Iran is of great regional importance on this axis. According to Moscow, Tehran could play a crucial role in confronting NATO by becoming involved in the region's geopolitical rivalries.⁴⁸ Iran can undercut US ambitions in Western Asia while boosting Russia's goals in the region through its effectiveness. Russia prefers to foster its relations with Iran as part of a multi-vector strategy. Iran is a key factor in Russia's Greater Eurasia strategy.

At the heart of the Greater Eurasian concept is the aim to transition to an international order that promotes multipolarity and the development of non-Western regional security through economic institutions.⁴⁹ Given Russia's perception of Iran as a pivotal state with the potential to serve as a nexus between Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East and South Asia, the matter of its geopolitical alliance formation with the major power centres of the Eurasian landmass has become the primary subject of negotiation for Russian foreign policy.⁵⁰ This enhances the accessibility of the larger Eurasian project. It is centred on the notion of a "Eurasian quadrilateral" consisting of China, Russia, India, and Iran. This alliance amounts to an expansion of the Moscow-Beijing-Delhi strategic triangle proposed by Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1998. So why was the Tehran

⁴⁸ *The Ukraine War Has Made Iran and Russia Allies in Economic Isolation* in <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-ukraine-war-has-made-iran-and-russia-allies-in-economic-isolation-heres-how/> (Accessed on 15.01.2025).

⁴⁹ Nicole Grajewski, *Russia and Iran in Greater Eurasia*, in "Middle East Insights", No. 239, 2020, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Karim Sadjadpour, Nicole Grajewski, *Autocrats United: How Russia and Iran Defy the U.S.-Led Global Order* in <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/russia-iran-oil-gas-ukraine-syria?lang=en> (Accessed on 17.07.2025).

factor added to this triangle later?

Iran is not only a Middle Eastern country, as Moscow envisions it, but also a country on the southern periphery of Russia, with geographical, political, and economic significance. This is what Moscow has historically called a sphere of privileged benefits. The Eurasian aspect of Russia-Iran relations highlights continuities in Moscow's external relations with Iran. Focused on maintaining relations with its neighbours to the south and establishing a dialogue on regional challenges ranging from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan. Despite the shifting territorial configuration and the emergence of new players seeking greater influence in Eurasian political and economic developments, the above-mentioned elements of Moscow's stance have helped shape Russia's foreign policy towards Iran. Russia's Greater Eurasia discourse emphasises Iran's strong position as a major regional power centre and as a geographic bridge linking Eurasia across the Middle East and South Asia. And this leads to opportunities for intercontinental interaction. This is the main reason for Russia's full support in accelerating Iran's joining the SCO. Coexistence within the same organisation also means converging security, economic, and strategic interests across Eurasia.

Generally, Iran and Russia share similar security concerns: preserving regional stability and constraining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) presence, especially in the region and its periphery.⁵¹ Therefore, both countries seek to unify their efforts under the SCO umbrella. In pursuit of this security objective, Russia perceives that Iran is a counterbalancing force against common difficulties and threats, including drug smuggling, terrorism, and transnational crimes. The perception is conveyed through its rhetoric, which emphasises Tehran's significant experience in addressing regional challenges stemming from Afghanistan.⁵² Russia's war with Ukraine was another factor in the development of relations between these two states. The number of visits of high-level political and business delegations between Moscow and Tehran increased significantly during this period, and Iran equipped Russia with drones that it used in its military confrontation with Ukraine.⁵³

Ultimately, the war in Ukraine strengthened Putin and Khamenei's

⁵¹ Michelle Gris , Alexandra T. Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russian Iranian Cooperation*, in "Perspective: Expert Insights on a Timely Policy Issue", 2023, p.7.

⁵² J. Karami, *Iran va Rusiyah Muttahid-i Sharqi Ya Tahdid-i Janub* (Iran and Russia: Eastern Allies or a Southern Threat?), in "Fa namah-i Ravabi -i Khariji", Vol. 7, No. 2, 2010, pp. 171-199.

⁵³ *Made in Iran Russian Drones Have American, Canadian Parts* in <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211091085> (Accessed on 17.01.2025).

determination to realise their goal of a multipolar world order that challenges Western supremacy. In response to Iranian assistance, Moscow has bolstered Iran's military capacity across various fields, and the country has made significant progress in acquiring sophisticated conventional weapons from Russia, enabling the defence authorities to pursue some of their long-standing ambitions. Agreements on military equipment were signed with Russia in November 2023, shortly after Iran acceded to the SCO as a fully-fledged member in July 2023. In this regard, agreements have been concluded for Su-35 fighter jets,⁵⁴ Yak-130 training aircraft and Mi-28 attack helicopters, but only Yak-130s have been delivered so far.⁵⁵

Iran has been pushed to forge deeper commercial and strategic connections with Moscow due to persistent economic sanctions and growing concerns that the US-backed Gulf Arab Israeli bloc could further shift the Israeli balance of power in West Asia away from Tehran. Indeed, the Iranian official media reported that Tehran is eager to deepen its engagement with Russia in almost every field, from economics to aviation to politics.⁵⁶ Given Iran's key position in the Greater Eurasia strategy and regional security, Russia is also seeking to ensure its prominence in regional institutionalisation by supporting Iranian interests within the SCO framework.

CONCLUSIONS

Opinions on the nature of the SCO diverge. Some refer to it as a paper tiger, while others see it as a counterweight to NATO or a means of ensuring stability, peace, security and prosperity in Eurasia. Nevertheless, the scope of the SCO's activities suggests that it intends to transcend these definitions and address the challenges posed by a shifting global order, both globally and regionally. The admission of Russia, China, India, and Iran to this association has made considerable progress toward creating a competent inter-state coalition, although it has not yet become a fully influential institution of regional interaction. In this context, it is understandable why Iran, as a regional actor, should be part of the SCO, and why Russia should likewise approve this.

The country has suffered severe economic difficulties, exacerbated by a

⁵⁴ *Iran Finalises Deal to Buy Russian Fighter Jets* in <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-finalises-deal-buy-russian-fighter-jets-tasnim-2023-11-28/> (Accessed on 17.01.2025).

⁵⁵ Karolina Hird, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, *The Russia-Iran Coalition Deepens* (Washington: Critical Threats Project), 2025, p.19.

⁵⁶ *Iran Set to Become Permanent Member of SCO*, in <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2376820/iran-set-to-become-permanent-member-of-sco> (Accessed on 17.01.2025).

weak economy, unemployment, and the adverse effects of US sanctions on the Iranian market. Thus, the Islamic Republic needed to find new allies and opportunities in the East. As a member of the rising regional powers, the SCO has arguably provided a platform for the rebuilding of Iran, which has been seriously affected by sanctions. The crisis in Ukraine, Russia's new eastern strategy, and the escalating tensions in US relations with Russia and China can be said to have triggered it. In such an environment, Iran's membership of the SCO and its focus on developing its foreign policy in the east create crucial preconditions for a new situation conducive to the practical realisation of these opportunities. In the context of pessimistic and optimistic scenarios, it is appropriate to consider the current views on this issue. The pessimistic scenario is that, as a permanent member of the SCO, Iran would have to become a protectorate of the two superpowers, China and Russia. This would be contrary to Iran's independence. Although the military and security commitments of the SCO's permanent members are substantial, it is not in Iran's best interests to make such pledges. This is because, for the last four decades, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy has not been based on Easternism or Westernism, but on a strategy of independence.⁵⁷ In fact, for a long time, the state in question refused to associate with any bloc. In this context, Tehran's refusal to negotiate and its diplomacy with the West, especially on the nuclear issue, by building relations with the East, or by thinking that the SCO member states, especially Russia and China, will fully support Tehran's policies, is incorrect. It is also misguided for Iran not to develop active multilateral diplomacy to reduce tensions with the West. Tehran can exploit the SCO's economic potential despite sanctions. However, joining this organisation should not be seen as a miracle solution that will instantly resolve all of Iran's economic issues and normalise its relations with the UN, EU and US.

On the other hand, the optimistic scenario suggests that Tehran should pursue a realistic approach to international relations, based on achieving a positive balance. A favourable equilibrium could strengthen Iran's position if Tehran were to shift towards the East. Simultaneously, Iran is required to continue negotiations, mainly with the US and the West. However, it is worth noting that Iran's election as a permanent member of the SCO has elicited adverse reactions from Western officials. Based on the analysis of this reaction, if Iran follows a realistic strategy, it

⁵⁷ A. Vakhshitekh, *Vopros vstupleniya Irana v Shankhayskuyu organizatsiyu sotrudnichestva v politicheskoy diskurse i ekspertnykh otsenkakh* (The Issue of Iran's Accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Political Discourse and Expert Assessments), in *"Postsovetkiye issledovaniya"*, Vol. 4, No.7, 2021, p. 576.

can strengthen its position in negotiations with the West and play a non-zero-sum game by adopting a pragmatic foreign policy. Moreover, Iran can both overcome its problems and maximise the benefits of competition between the East and the West if it continues to take steps toward constructive interaction and cooperation with the East. Therefore, if Iran demonstrates a constructive approach to de-escalation with the West and can comply with a multilateral agreement, Iran's permanent membership in the SCO could become an additional opportunity and leverage in the negotiations.

Furthermore, it can influence the West's position. Moreover, the orientation to the East and the future expansion of cooperation between Iran, Russia, and China could open additional prospects not only for the effectiveness of this state within the SCO, but also for the development of further relations with the EEU. This is vital for Iran's economic growth. As mentioned earlier, Iran's Eastern policy is closely aligned with Russia's Greater Eurasia plan, which is important for the economic development of all Central Asian countries. From this perspective, the continuation of cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian countries within the SCO will have positive consequences.

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