

COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF IRAN'S POTENTIAL PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional intergovernmental organization, is crucial for regional security, economic cooperation, and geopolitical dynamics. Iran's accession to the SCO is seen as a step to strengthen regional ties and compete economically. After gaining permanent membership in the grouping due to its geographical proximity and importance as a regional player, the country now holds significant influence. Iran has seen the SCO as an alternative venue to address security challenges, economic integration, and nuclear protection. The study uses a qualitative research design, examining Iran's pursuit of permanent membership and its impact on political, economic, scientific, technological, energy, and environmental issues. Iran's elevation to permanent membership status in the SCO marks a significant development in regional geopolitics, reflecting its strategic imperative to diversify alliances and enhance regional cooperation. China and Russia have the leading status in the organization, and Iran's membership has become a triangular partnership in the grouping with a common adversary, the United States. Iran can maximize the benefits of its membership and positively contribute to regional stability and prosperity by actively engaging in SCO activities and initiatives.

Keywords: Iran, Membership, SCO, Regional, Geostrategic.

INTRODUCTION

After 18 years of persistent requests and as an observer member, Iran has finally secured permanent membership in the SCO. This achievement was strongly advocated by key members China and Russia. The primary rationale behind their support lies in their shared adversaries, the US and Israel (Khan et al., 2023). Tehran's accession to the SCO marks a significant step towards fulfilling its strategic, security, and economic objectives. In addition, Iran's membership signifies the substantial dismantling of the extensive Western network, particularly the US presence in the region post-9/11, and it reduces the persistent sanctions imposed by both the UN and the Western nations.

Before the recent amalgamation, Iran's inclination towards the Eurasian-led economic and security forum was discernibly nuanced and open. Iran's relations with SCO's leading members, China and

Russia, have been characterized by smooth operations, while its ties with India and Pakistan have been transparent to all observers. Given its landlocked geographical status and shared ideological and cultural ties, the Central Asian nations have already established dependencies on SCO member countries in trade and economic realms. Iran's previous aspirations for countering regional challenges, including the "three evils," and its efforts in controlling drug trafficking, illegal trade, fostering economic development, and enhancing regional connectivity, have been noteworthy and cannot be overlooked.

Iran's full membership in the SCO has been warmly embraced by all member countries. This accession holds the potential to bolster the organization's vital security and economic objectives, as outlined in Article 1 of its charter. These objectives include countering the "three evils," fostering economic

development, and enhancing regional connectivity. Moreover, Iran's inclusion stands to reinforce mutual confidence among member states, facilitate the establishment of good neighborly relations, and promote effective cooperation across various domains such as energy, trade, economy, transportation, science, technology, tourism, and environmental protection.

During the 22nd SCO Council of Heads of Government meeting in Kyrgyzstan, Mohammad Mokhber underscored Iran's full participation as a crucial factor for strengthening the organization. Kyrgyz President Gholam Hossein Yadegari commended Kyrgyzstan for supporting Iran's full engagement in the SCO and stressed the necessity for increased cooperation. Iran's interests lie in enhancing economic relations, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, transportation, new technologies, tourism, mining, and energy. Furthermore, Iran and Tajikistan have embarked on a new phase of collaboration, with a focus on heightened interaction across all spheres. Kazakh's Head of State, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, highlighted the significance of enhancing bilateral ties with Iran, a pivotal partner in the Caspian Sea region. Both nations deliberated on present and future prospects for Kazakh-Iranian cooperation, reaching agreements on enhancing collaboration in trade, transport, and infrastructure. President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran stressed the imperative of furthering these ties, particularly in the realm of trade. Additionally, a historic summit took place between Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei in Iran on June 19, 2023. The summit aimed to bolster Iran-Uzbekistan trade relations, signaling a commitment to deepening economic cooperation between the two nations.

The recent inclusion of Iran in the SCO marks a significant global development with far-reaching implications. Notably, as tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia diminish, China's influential role within the SCO has facilitated this rapprochement. Iran's path to SCO membership, coupled with its reconciliation with China, serves as a positive precedent for Saudi Arabia and underscores the potential for regional stability. In response to Western sanctions, a coalition comprising Russia, China, Iran, and other nations is forging deeper ties, reshaping the landscape of international

economic relations. The strategic geographical location of the Islamic Republic of Iran is instrumental in enhancing SCO's economic relations, serving as a vital link between the organization's key regions: Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the Caucasus.

Literature review

Established in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the SCO originally aimed to address security concerns in Central Asia. Since then, its scope has broadened to encompass regional stability, cultural exchange, and economic collaboration, marked by joint military exercises and projects (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, n.d.). Examining the evolution of SCO membership dynamics offers insights into its impact on regional and global politics, member states' objectives, and its role in regional security, economic integration, and diplomacy. This research, exemplified by Clarke (2010), provides valuable perspectives on the organization's growth and its contributions to both local and international affairs. Iran, as an active participant in regional conflicts such as those in Yemen and Syria, holds a prominent position in global politics, notably in nuclear non-proliferation negotiations. Additionally, Iran maintains diplomatic engagements to foster regional stability, address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and ensure energy supplies (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2020). The SCO emerges as a significant actor in regional politics, promoting security cooperation, stability, and diplomatic dialogue, particularly in Central Asia. Its efforts extend to counterterrorism, peace promotion, and facilitation of trade, infrastructure development, economic integration, and engagement with observer nations (Khan et al., 2022).

While the previous literature has extensively covered the SCO's evolution, objectives, regional political influence, membership dynamics, and Iran's regional and global politics role, there are crucial areas left unexplored. These include Iran's active pursuit of permanent SCO membership, the potential for the SCO to act as a mediator in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, and the anticipated benefits of Iran's inclusion for both SCO member nations and the broader geopolitical landscape. Additionally, there's a need to examine how Iran's integration into the SCO could serve as a

transformative force, impacting security, economics, and diplomacy within the region.

Theoretical Framework

Institutionalism views institutions as dynamic entities, both shaping and being shaped by their environments. Four key factors drive this dynamic interplay. Firstly, legitimacy and recognition are essential for their sustenance, earned through formal acknowledgment, social acceptance, and effective performance. Secondly, institutions thrive within the realm of regional cooperation and integration, facilitating collaboration through economic initiatives, political partnerships, and cultural exchange. Thirdly, they serve as cultural conduits, disseminating shared values through norms, socialization processes, and the convergence of practices. Lastly, institutional learning and capacity building drive their continuous evolution, enabling adaptation through evaluation, knowledge sharing, and innovation.

In the dynamic world of Institutionalism, institutions are not mere static structures but active participants, constantly engaging with their surroundings. Their vitality stems from legitimacy, garnered through formal acknowledgment, social approval, and demonstrated efficacy (Krasner, 1983; Scott and Meyer, 2003). Acting as adept weavers, they intertwine states in regional narratives, facilitating economic integration (Buzan and Waeber, 2003), political cooperation, and cultural interchange (Khan et al., 2023). Through their threads of shared values and norms, they propagate and embed these ideals, fostering a blend of practices and identities (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). However, institutions are adaptable creatures, perpetually learning and evolving through evaluation, knowledge dissemination, and innovation (Ostrom, 1990; Evans, 1995). Thus, when considering Iran's potential membership in the SCO, we witness not a static scene but a dynamic interplay, where the institution shapes Iran, Iran influences the SCO, and both contribute to the evolution of a regional narrative.

Institutionalism offers a theoretical framework within international relations that underscores the influence of international institutions on state conduct. This perspective encompasses various branches, such as liberal institutionalism and neo-institutionalism, each with distinct emphases (Bell,

2002). Leveraging the theory of Institutionalism can provide insightful perspectives for examining Iran's prospective permanent membership in the SCO. Here are several key linkages that could be explored in the context of this research paper:

➤ **Legitimacy and Recognition**

Iran, amidst international sanctions and political isolation, may perceive SCO membership as a pathway to garner recognition and legitimacy on the global platform, particularly from influential regional powers like China and Russia. Emphasizing non-interference and cooperative principles, the SCO offers Iran an opportunity to depict itself as a responsible and cooperative member of the international community, aligning with shared norms and values.

➤ **Regional Cooperation and Integration**

Iran's accession to the SCO presents avenues for enhanced economic and infrastructural collaboration, offering access to new markets, trade prospects, and potential joint ventures and projects with fellow member nations. Through initiatives like the Silk Road Economic Belt, the SCO promotes regional integration, and Iran's participation in such endeavors stands to bolster its connectivity, transportation infrastructure, and resource accessibility.

➤ **Normative Convergence and Shared Values**

Iran's inclusion in the SCO could wield influence over the organization's agenda, infusing it with Iran's viewpoints on matters of regional security, cultural exchange, and economic collaboration. Through active engagement in SCO forums and dialogues, Iran can contribute to shaping common understandings regarding regional challenges, fostering collective problem-solving efforts and ultimately promoting greater stability in the region.

➤ **Institutional Learning and Capacity Building**

Within the SCO, institutions serve as platforms for peer learning and knowledge exchange, offering Iran opportunities to glean best practices from fellow members in critical areas such as cyber security, counter-terrorism, and disaster management. By actively engaging in SCO training programs and capacity-building initiatives,

Iran stands to enhance its governance structures and internal processes, thus improving efficiency and bolstering regional stability.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the implications of Iran's SCO membership on both political and economic domains. Data has been gathered from official documents and academic sources, subsequently subjected to thematic analysis and triangulated to ensure validity. The theoretical framework of Institutionalism has been chosen to underpin this study, providing guidance for analyzing motivations, implications, dynamics, and conclusions, which will be structured into dedicated chapters. Ethical considerations pertaining to anonymity, consent, and bias will be rigorously adhered to throughout the research process.

Iran and SCO

Located in western Asia and officially known as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iran, historically referred to as Persia, is situated opposite the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Hormuz critical sea routes for oil transportation. It shares borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, Iraq and Turkey to the west, and Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Caspian Sea, and Turkmenistan to the north. Encompassing an expansive land area of 1,630,848 square kilometers, Iran boasts significant natural resources, comprising approximately 11% of the world's proven oil reserves and 16% of its natural gas resources, valued at around \$4 trillion. With a population estimated at approximately 89,269,831 ("Iran population", 2023), Iran operates as a democratic and constitutional nation, ensuring its citizens' fundamental rights. In terms of foreign policy, Iran under President Ebrahim Raisi has prioritized strengthening ties with Russia while deepening relations with China, signaling a shift towards the East. Concurrently, efforts have been directed towards fostering stronger connections with neighboring countries in South and Central Asia, as well as the Arab world (Garrett, 2021).

The SCO traces its origins back to 1996 when the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan established the Shanghai Five, aimed at fostering mutual trust, resolving border disputes,

and enhancing regional cooperation. In 2001, with the addition of Uzbekistan, the organization evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Comprising six member states, including India and Pakistan as new acceding members, the SCO represents a significant portion of Eurasia, with a combined population of 1.5 billion, or one-fifth of the world's population. The organization also includes four observer countries and six dialogue partners. Key agreements, such as the "Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions" and the "Agreement on Improving Military Forces in Border Regions," were signed between 1996 and 1997 in Shanghai and Moscow by the heads of state of the founding members. Annual meetings held between 1998 and 2000 facilitated dialogues on enhancing security in border regions and addressing political, economic, and security issues (General information of SCO, n.d.).

At the Heads of State Meeting held in Shanghai on June 14–15, 2001, it was decided that the Shanghai Five would transform into a regional organization to enhance cooperation in combating the threats of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. This decision was prompted by recent developments in the global environment and within member states. Consequently, the Agreement on the Establishment of the SCO was signed by the six member countries, alongside an agreement admitting Uzbekistan as a member of the Shanghai Five mechanism. Additionally, the "Shanghai Agreement on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism" was signed during the meeting (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, n.d.).

On September 19, 2003, the SCO charter was officially approved, outlining key objectives including the maintenance and enhancement of relationships with other nations and international organizations, collaborative efforts to prevent international conflicts and seek peaceful resolutions, and joint exploration of solutions to 21st-century challenges (Khan et al., 2022). The expansion of the SCO was a pivotal agenda item during the 17th SCO Meeting of Heads of State, held in Astana on June 8–9, 2017. At present, the Council of Heads of States has endorsed the full membership of India and Pakistan in the SCO ("General information of SCO", n.d.).

Iran became an observer in the SCO in 2005, with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad unofficially

expressing Iran's desire for full membership during the SCO conference in Shanghai on June 15, 2006. However, Iran formally applied for full membership within the SCO's established requirements up until 2008 (Mousavi and Khodaei, 2013). Iran's aspirations for full SCO membership are driven by various challenges, particularly in security, the economy, and strategic interests. Iran perceives SCO membership as a means to safeguard its nuclear development efforts under the organization's protection, potentially deterring attacks from nations like Israel or the US on its nuclear facilities. Additionally, Iran sees SCO membership as a leverage point to pressure Russia into providing advanced weaponry. Economically, Iran views China and Russia as crucial sources of investment, particularly in the face of Western sanctions (Khan et al., 2023). Following the conclusion of the 23rd meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States, Iran was granted full membership, becoming the ninth permanent member of the organization. The New Delhi Declaration, released at the end of the meeting, underscored the historical significance of Iran's accession to the SCO as a full Member State (Riyaz, 2023). Currently, the SCO consists of nine permanent members: the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Iran.

Iran's in the SCO, Pre and Post Permanent Membership Dynamics

Pre-Permanent Membership Dynamics

Pakistan-Iran relations are undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a resurgence of optimism and collaboration. Prime Minister Imran Khan's inaugural visit to Iran in April 2019 catalyzed deeper engagements on political, economic, and security fronts. Iran's steadfast advocacy for Kashmir underscores its commitment to supporting the rights of Kashmiris and condemning perceived injustices by India. Both nations are actively collaborating at expert levels to enhance road and rail connectivity, modernize the Quetta-Taftan highway spanning 700 kilometers, streamline border crossings, and improve facilities for pilgrims traveling to Iran, Iraq, and beyond ("Pakistan-Iran Relations," n.d.). Diplomatic ties between Iran and Pakistan have seen significant

improvement, thanks to the initiatives spearheaded by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, aimed at fortifying bilateral relations and fostering stability in Afghanistan following the Taliban's assumption of leadership in 2021 (Jamal, 2021). Rooted in historical, spiritual, linguistic, cultural, and religious bonds, the relationship between Pakistan and Iran is deeply intertwined, with Pakistan notably being the first nation to recognize Iran's independence following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Over the years, the two nations have stood by each other during critical moments, culminating in the declaration of their shared border as the "Border of Peace, Friendship, and Love" by their respective leaders.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in 2016 marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations, despite historical reservations stemming from the 1979 Revolution. A robust trade partnership has been established, with Iran notably backing India on resolutions at international forums, counter to Pakistan's stance (Soltaninejad, 2017). Iran and India boast a centuries-old relationship characterized by extensive exchanges in trade, energy, culture, and interpersonal interactions. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ushered in a new era of engagement, marked by frequent high-level visits and ongoing dialogue. India has thrown its support behind Iran's bid for observer status in the SAARC regional alliance, recognizing Iran's strategic location between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. However, the imposition of US sanctions, particularly under CAATSA, led to the cessation of oil shipments from Iran in 2019, impacting India's energy security. Additionally, Iran's growing ties with China and India's close relationship with Israel introduce tensions into the bilateral relations ("India-Iran Relations," 2022).

The Pre-Permanent Membership Dynamics between Iran and **China** have cultivated a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship. In March 2021, Iran and China agreed to a comprehensive 25-year cooperation pact encompassing political, strategic, and economic dimensions, signaling a deepening of ties between the two nations ("Iran-China to sign 25-year cooperation pact", 2021). Positioned alongside Armenia, Iran and Russia serve as key players in the Caspian region, wielding considerable influence. Furthermore, Iran and Russia share partnerships in various domains,

including Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia, and have collaborated as military allies in conflicts in Syria and Iraq (Neil, 2015).

Prior to their integration into the SCO, Iran's relations with Kyrgyzstan spanned various sectors including education, culture, tourism, customs, finance, and efforts against human trafficking and crime. Bilateral trade encompassed agricultural and capital goods exchange between the two nations ("Domestic Economy", 2009). Iran shares a close and enduring bond with Tajikistan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, often described by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as "one spirit in two bodies" due to their shared Persian language and cultural heritage (Mesbahi, 2016). Economic ties between Iran and Kazakhstan have flourished, with both nations witnessing parallel growth in their economic systems. Kazakhstan has been a key ally for Iran, particularly in circumventing international sanctions through oil exchange agreements (Lucente, 2022). Despite ideological differences—Iran being an Islamic theocracy and Uzbekistan a secular presidential democracy—both countries have endeavored to enhance relations across various sectors. Bilateral agreements have been signed to collaborate on financial services, energy production, construction, agriculture, transportation, medicine, and border infrastructure ("Domestic Economy", 2009).

Post-Permanent Membership Dynamics

The SCO conference, hosted by India, commenced on Tuesday morning, aiming to explore membership opportunities for Iran. Participating nations deliberated on critical issues including trade, economic connectivity, and regional security. Notable leaders such as Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raeisi participated in the virtual summit. Prime Minister Modi expressed his delight at Iran's forthcoming entry into the SCO, emphasizing the potential benefits for regional infrastructure projects like the Chabahar transport corridor. Pakistan's Prime Minister also extended congratulations to Iran for joining the organization, advocating for leveraging the capabilities of SCO member nations. President Xi Jinping of China congratulated Tehran and assured that SCO members would officially embrace Iran

during the meeting. President Putin of Russia expressed support for Belarus's prompt accession to the SCO, highlighting its strategic significance as Russia's closest ally.

Putin lauded Iran's acceptance into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, emphasizing that the Islamic Republic will now actively participate in all activities within the organization. He extended sincere greetings and congratulations to President Ebrahim Raeisi of Iran for this achievement. Highlighting Iran's swift completion of necessary procedures, Putin expressed commitment to assisting Iran in effectively engaging in the diverse activities within the SCO framework. The New Delhi proclamation by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council, released on Tuesday, officially recognized Iran as a fully-fledged member of the organization. The statement underscored the historical significance of Iran's admission to the SCO, emphasizing its importance as a full member state. Later on Tuesday, the flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran was ceremoniously raised at the SCO headquarters ("Iran Officially Becomes Full-Fledged Member", 2023).

During the SCO Council of Heads of State Meeting in Virtual Format on July 4, 2023, Pakistan's Prime Minister, H.E. Mr. Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif, conveyed his pleasure in addressing the SCO leaders once more. He extended heartfelt congratulations to President Ebrahim Raisi on Iran's full membership in the SCO, expressing warm welcome to Iran and emphasizing the organization's anticipated benefits from Iran's inclusion across various areas of focus ("Statement by H.E. Mr. Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif", 2023). Following this, on Wednesday, August 2, 2023, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the foreign minister of Iran, embarked on an official visit to Pakistan. During his visit, he met with Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the foreign minister of Pakistan, in Islamabad. The discussions centered on bilateral relations between the two nations and the global challenges they face, marking a significant phase in their post-permanent membership dynamics.

On Thursday, Pakistan and Iran unveiled a five-year plan aimed at enhancing trade cooperation with the ambitious target of reaching a \$5 billion trade volume. During a joint press briefing, Zardari highlighted the key objectives of the trade plan, which include the removal of trade barriers, the finalization of a free trade agreement, and the

establishment of institutional ties between the private sectors of both countries. Zardari expressed confidence that the initiatives outlined in the plan would pave the way for a robust and enduring economic partnership between Pakistan and Iran in the years to come, emphasizing that the plan aligns with the national interests of both nations. Abdollahian, during his visit, emphasized that discussions would encompass various aspects, including bilateral relations, economic cooperation, challenges facing the Muslim world, and shared security concerns such as the situation in Afghanistan. This visit marks Abdollahian's first trip to Pakistan since assuming office. Notably, the establishment of the first border market between Pakistan and Iran has been realized, with plans for additional border markets in the pipeline (Aktas and Tekin, 2023).

"I am pleased that Iran will become a new member of the SCO family today. I send my warmest gratitude to the Iranian people and President Ebrahim Raisi for this," stated Indian Prime Minister Modi during the summit. Additionally, Modi applauded the signing of the memorandum of obligation for Belarus's membership in the SCO ("Iran formally becomes a full member ", 2023). On August 21, 2023, Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi engaged in a phone conversation with the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, H.E. Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi. The discussion revolved around bilateral relations and international issues. Currently, agricultural goods and fruits constitute the majority of trade between India and Iran. However, there exists potential for enhancing economic relationships through mutual investment assistance, increased cooperation in medical and pharmaceutical sectors, and the improvement of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. Both Iran and India share concerns regarding the rise of Wahhabi power in Asia and the Middle East, as well as the emergence of dangerous Sunni Islamist groups in South Asia. While they share some strategic objectives, India and Iran hold differing foreign policy views from a geopolitical perspective. Despite acknowledging the significant promise of their economic cooperation, challenges such as bans on Iranian oil and restrictions on Indian involvement in projects like the Chabahar port, energy, and infrastructure persist. Over the years, their economic collaboration has primarily centered on Iran's

abundant hydrocarbon reserves meeting India's energy requirements.

Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed the 23rd meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO via video conference in Beijing on Tuesday, stating, "We will sign the memorandum of commitment on Belarus's membership at this conference and welcome Iran as a full member. This will demonstrate the SCO family's strength. I extend my congratulations to the two nations" (Xinhua, 2023). The relationship between Iran and China has evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership, encompassing cooperation across various sectors including the economy, politics, security, military, culture, society, education, and science. According to President Ebrahim Raisi, Iran and China are "friends in difficult situations." From this perspective, Iran stands to benefit from China's influence in lifting sanctions, countering American isolationism, promoting trade denominated in currencies other than the dollar, and unlocking financial resources and investment opportunities, particularly following Iran's full membership in the SCO. Positive understandings and business agreements were fostered during the visit of China's Vice Premier to Iran and President Raisi's visit to China last year, contributing to the strengthening of bilateral relations. During President Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023, the two nations sealed a long-term, 25-year pact encompassing several agreements in commerce, transportation, information technology, and tourism. Iran holds the world's largest known reserves of crude oil and natural gas, presenting a significant opportunity for contributing to China's energy security through its energy development plans. Despite increased scrutiny, China has remained Iran's top consumer of oil for the past decade, persisting in its oil exchanges with Iran despite US sanctions.

Beijing has expressed readiness to collaborate with Iran in the agricultural sector, aiming to import high-quality Iranian agricultural goods and enhance Iran's food security and agricultural production capabilities. Iran welcomed China's establishment of a "green channel" for the export of Iranian agricultural and food products to China. Last year, numerous agreements were reached on plant health regulations, food exports, dairy exports, apple exports, and orange exports. However, certain Chinese businesses have faced

sanctions due to regulatory restrictions, impacting ties between Tehran and Beijing and causing challenges in oil trading and sales. Moreover, Iran's compliance with FATF regulations and secondary sanctions has led to concerns among Chinese businesses about potential limitations and risks associated with investing in Iran. Tehran's embargo on the import of 2,000 products has also negatively affected trade with China. The revival of the JCPOA is seen as essential for overcoming significant obstacles in economic relations between Iran and China (Bonesh, 2023).

In his remarks, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support for Belarus's prompt membership in the SCO, emphasizing its strategic importance as Russia's closest ally. He also commended Iran's full membership in the SCO, noting that Iran would now actively participate in all SCO activities. President Putin extended his sincere condolences and congratulations to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on this significant occasion ("Iran officially becomes full-fledged member", 2023). Despite geopolitical pressures following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iran and Russia have forged a new strategic relationship. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov affirmed that Russia's military cooperation with Iran would continue persistent, rejecting demands from the United States and its allies. Reports surfaced that the US urged Iran to halt the supply of weaponized drones to Russia, which are reportedly being used in the conflict in Ukraine. However, Ryabkov dismissed these demands, asserting the sovereignty of both Russia and Iran. While Iran has acknowledged providing drones to Russia, it maintains that the deliveries occurred before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Iranian drones, known as the Shaheed, have been utilized by Russia in the conflict, capable of taking off and detonating instantly without the need for a runway ("Russia's Military Ties with Iran", 2023).

Following his participation in the 22nd SCO Council of Heads of Government meeting in Kyrgyzstan, Mohammad Mokhber shared insights upon his return to Tehran. Mokhber highlighted the significance of Iran's full participation in the SCO, noting that member states viewed it as a substantial strengthening factor for the organization. He emphasized Iran's stance on global issues such as Gaza's plight, which he addressed both in public

speeches and bilateral meetings during the summit ("SCO member states", 2023). Mokhber elaborated on Iran's proposals for economic cooperation presented in six primary areas, which received broad support from participants. Meanwhile, Kyrgyz President Japarov underscored his country's readiness to collaborate with Iran, particularly in business, economics, and investment. He extended congratulations on Iran's SCO membership, expressing confidence in Iran's contribution to fostering friendship and cooperation among member states. Gholamhossien Yadegari, in turn, lauded Kyrgyzstan's support for Iran's full participation in the SCO and emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation between the two nations. He highlighted untapped business and financial resources and expressed Iran's keen interest in bolstering economic relations with Kyrgyzstan. Collaboration priorities between Iran and Kyrgyzstan encompass agricultural trade, transportation, technology, tourism, mining, and energy ("Kyrgyz and Iran relations", 2023).

Iran's Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, welcomed the growing era of collaboration between Iran and Tajikistan, emphasizing increased interaction across all spheres. In a phone conversation with his Tajik counterpart, Sirojiddin Muhridin, on Tuesday, Amirabdollahian lauded the strong and amicable relations between Tehran and Dushanbe. He heralded the onset of a new phase in their partnership, stressing the importance of sustaining this positive momentum. Amirabdollahian underscored the significance of bilateral trips by the presidents of both nations, noting them as pivotal moments in their relationship. Highlighting the numerous bilateral cooperation agreements signed since President Ebrahim Raisi's assumption of office in 2021, Amirabdollahian emphasized the need for their diligent implementation by both administrations. In response, the Tajik Foreign Minister echoed sentiments of goodwill, emphasizing the importance of fostering robust, high-level bilateral ties between the two fraternal nations. President Raisi received warm greetings from Tajik President Muhridin, who extended another invitation for the Iranian President to visit Central Asia, signaling a commitment to further enhancing bilateral relations ("New Chapter Starts in Iran", 2023).

During the meeting, the Head of State reiterated

Kazakhstan's view of Iran as a vital partner in the Caspian Sea region and underscored the significant importance placed on developing bilateral ties between the two nations. The presidents engaged in discussions regarding the current state and the potential for future growth of Kazakh-Iranian cooperation. They mutually agreed on the critical need to implement a series of steps aimed at enhancing collaboration in trade, transport, and infrastructure. Beneficial agreements were reached on various issues, including the visa application process and other matters concerning business and citizen relations. Kassym-Jomart Tokay expressed Kazakhstan's unwavering commitment to improving its relationship with Iran and called for both governments to take the necessary steps to implement previously agreed-upon agreements effectively. He also expressed a desire to meet again in Kazakhstan to further advance bilateral ties ("Head of State met with Ebrahim Raisi", 2023). During the meeting, the Head of State emphasized the successful partnership between the two nations within the SCO and other international organizations. Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, reciprocated by affirming the strong ties between Kazakhstan and Iran, built upon close friendship and mutual support. Raisi acknowledged the healthy bilateral relations and expressed a commitment to further strengthening ties, particularly in the realm of trade. He underscored the importance of utilizing available opportunities to unlock the full potential of both countries, reaffirming Iran's dedication to nurturing its relationship with Kazakhstan as a valued partner ("Head of State met with Ebrahim Raisi", 2023).

On June 18, 2023, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan and Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, convened for a historic summit in Iran, marking a pivotal moment in bilateral relations. The summit underscored the profound historical, cultural, and economic ties between Iran and Uzbekistan, highlighting avenues for enhanced collaboration. Ayatollah Khamenei expressed his satisfaction at the renewed engagement between the two nations after a prolonged period of limited interaction, stating, "Unfortunately, for many years, the relations between Iran and Uzbekistan were very limited." The summit signaled the beginning of a promising era in bilateral relations, with discussions in Iran paving the way for a brighter

future. Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized Iran's potential to facilitate Uzbekistan's access to the open sea via Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, thereby creating new avenues for commerce and transportation. Additionally, the conference addressed the imperative of boosting Iran-Uzbekistan trade, with Abbas Aliabadi, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, and his Uzbek counterpart, Lazes Kudratov, deliberating strategies to elevate annual bilateral trade to \$1 billion. The ministers stressed the importance of infrastructural enhancements, particularly streamlined customs clearance processes, to facilitate smoother business transactions. This landmark summit between the leaders of Iran and Uzbekistan marks a significant milestone in the revitalization of bilateral relations. Leveraging their shared history and cultural affinities, both nations have committed to deepening their engagement across various sectors (Jalal, 2023).

SCO' Mediating Role in Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

The partnership between Russia, China, and Iran is anticipated to bolster the SCO's resilience and facilitate the resolution of conflicts within the region. Saudi Arabia, a significant Arab player in the Middle East, is seen as a potential candidate for SCO membership. Initially, Saudi Arabia's animosity towards Iran made its accession to the SCO improbable. However, the geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically when, under China's mediation in March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic ties. This thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran not only underscores China's diplomatic prowess but also underscores the limitations of American influence in the region.

Saudi Arabia's trajectory towards potential SCO membership signifies a departure from its previous confrontational stance towards Iran and a shift towards a more multilateral approach. Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has sought to assert itself as an independent geopolitical actor within a broader framework. Joining the SCO would afford Saudi Arabia the opportunity to forge stronger and mutually beneficial relationships with its primary economic and energy partners, China and Russia. Over time, this move could potentially mitigate tensions arising from global power dynamics and foster greater stability in the region.

The SCO framework presents Saudi Arabia with the opportunity to engage in economic, transportation, and communication projects with Iran. It is plausible that China's primary condition for Saudi Arabia's SCO membership was the resolution of tensions with Iran. Moreover, for its integration into the SCO, Saudi Arabia will require the support of all members, including Iran. The recent accession of Iran to the SCO, coupled with the potential membership of Saudi Arabia, signifies a significant expansion for the group, with far-reaching political, economic, and security implications. This development alters the landscape of international relations by paving the way for new geopolitical alliances and enhancing the SCO's influence on global politics.

Is Iran Membership Beneficial for Member Countries in the Future?

Iran's acceptance of the invitation to join the SCO is viewed as a "historic development" and a "strategic achievement" by the Islamic Republic. This comes at a crucial juncture when Iran faces isolation from major international actors due to internal conflicts, its support for Russia in the Ukraine War, and stalemates in nuclear negotiations with the United States. Ayatollah Khamenei perceives Asia as poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future global order, potentially replacing the current system dominated by the United States. By joining groups like the SCO and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)¹, Iran signals its ability to circumvent sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe. This move underscores Iran's assertion of independence from Western political influence, particularly regarding its nuclear program and other contentious issues.

Participation in organizations like BRICS and the SCO marks a shift away from Iran's previous "Look to the West" foreign policy stance. While

the potential benefits of membership remain to be fully realized, particularly in the context of ongoing Western economic sanctions, proponents argue that joining these organizations could offer significant advantages. Membership in the SCO, for example, could facilitate expanded trade with member nations while potentially avoiding placement on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) blacklist². The FATF, an international organization, aims to promote transparency and integrity in global financial activities. Additionally, the Shanghai Charter stipulates that member nations will not be subject to Chapter Seven of the United Nations Charter, which designates countries as threats to global peace and security. This is a notable departure from Iran's previous status prior to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, a nuclear agreement. However, the future of the JCPOA is uncertain, which may impact Iran's position within the SCO and its ability to leverage membership for economic and diplomatic gains. During the 23rd online conference of the SCO Council of Heads of State, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi made a significant call for de-dollarization. Joining him were notable leaders including President Xi Jinping of China, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and others. Raisi emphasized the importance of establishing a more equitable global order where the dominance of the U.S. dollar is diminished. In his speech, Raisi highlighted how the Western powers' reliance on economic pressure and sanctions has negatively impacted global security, economic growth, and the principles of free trade. He underscored the historical role of the U.S. dollar in perpetuating Western dominance, stating that alongside military influence, the dollar's hegemony has been a cornerstone of Western power. Raisi's call for de-dollarization is particularly relevant for the SCO member states, which consist primarily of

¹ BRICS refers to certain emerging market countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and more—that seek to establish deeper ties between member nations and cooperate on economic expansion, including trade. The countries act as a counterbalance to traditional Western influence. BRICS is a group of five countries with emerging economies that want to instate

their own world economic and trade systems and has discussed creating a new currency.

² The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) leads global action to tackle money laundering, terrorist and proliferation financing. The FATF researches how money is laundered and terrorism is funded, promotes global standards to mitigate the risks, and assesses whether countries are taking effective action.

developing nations. By advocating for reduced dependence on the dollar, Raisi aims to promote greater financial autonomy and sovereignty among SCO member states, potentially fostering a more balanced and inclusive global economic system.

Ayatollah Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the critical importance of enhancing the region's transportation network and infrastructure for fostering overall economic development. He noted the ongoing efforts at the Eurasian level aimed at connecting member nations and providing the necessary infrastructure to facilitate increased trade. Raisi highlighted two major projects, the North-South Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative, which Iran has prioritized and fully supported. Specifically, he mentioned that the North-South Corridor rail route has progressed to the implementation stage through the collaborative efforts of Iranian experts and cooperation between Iran and Russia. The establishment of such communication highways not only enhances regional security but also contributes to the stability and improvement of global supply chains. Raisi emphasized that the historical and cultural linkages among SCO member states create common principles, aspirations, and interests, which serve as the foundation for peace and cooperation. In conclusion, Raisi expressed optimism about the SCO's ability to establish new horizons of convergence and cooperation, leveraging its civilizational potential and shared values to promote peace and prosperity in the region.

Iran's accession to the SCO heralds mutual benefits for both Iran and the organization's members, amplifying the SCO's significance as a pivotal regional entity. This positive development not only fosters regionalism but also aligns with the best interests of all participating nations. During his address at the 23rd online conference of the SCO Council of Heads of State, President Ebrahim Raisi underscored the imperative of de-dollarization. He emphasized the necessity of establishing a more equitable global order, where the dominance of the U.S. dollar is no longer paramount. This stance on de-dollarization aligns with the SCO's interests and underscores its role in shaping global economic dynamics. Raisi further emphasized the vital importance of enhancing the region's transportation infrastructure to drive overall economic development. Efforts at the Eurasian

level are currently underway to foster connectivity among member states, facilitating increased trade and economic cooperation. Initiatives such as the North-South Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative are pivotal in this regard, offering the necessary infrastructure for bolstering trade ties and regional integration. Iran's membership in the SCO not only enhances the organization's stature but also contributes to regional prosperity and stability. Raisi's remarks highlight the shared commitment of SCO member states to promote economic growth, connectivity, and cooperation across Eurasia.

Iran Joining the SCO as Game Changer

Iran's recent inclusion in the SCO marks a significant development with far-reaching global implications. As Western sanctions continue to exert pressure on countries like Iran, China, and Russia, these nations are forging stronger ties, reshaping the landscape of international trade in the process. Initially established with six members, including Russia, China, and four Central Asian nations, the SCO's primary focus was on combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism in the region. The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US led to increased Western military involvement in Afghanistan, influencing the SCO's approach. Iran's journey to full SCO membership faced obstacles due to disagreements over its nuclear program with the international community. However, the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, commonly known as the "Iran nuclear deal," paved the way for Iran's full integration into the SCO. Both Russia and China, parties to the JCPOA, viewed the nuclear issue as resolved, facilitating Iran's accession. The unexpected withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA in 2018 disrupted the progress, reinstating economic sanctions and hindering Iran's participation in the emerging economic sector of the SCO. Overall, Iran's inclusion in the SCO signifies a shift from security-oriented concerns to economic collaboration within the organization. As Iran navigates the challenges posed by renewed US sanctions, its membership in the SCO offers opportunities for economic cooperation and regional integration.

The strategic geographical position of the Islamic Republic of Iran serves as a cornerstone for

enhancing the economic connectivity of the SCO. Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the Caucasus, Iran acts as a crucial link connecting these regions within the organization. Key economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the International North-South Transport Corridor heavily rely on Iran's infrastructure network, including its airports, railways, and highways. Tehran's investments in expanding its infrastructure and industrial capabilities, coupled with the establishment of free economic zones, underscore its commitment to bolstering its role as a regional transportation hub. Furthermore, Iran's abundant oil and gas reserves position it as a pivotal member of the SCO's energy sector, contributing to the organization's economic development. Leveraging its substantial population, natural resources, and skilled labor force, Tehran has the potential to significantly boost trade and economic cooperation among SCO member states. In essence, Iran's strategic location, coupled with its economic resources and developmental initiatives, augurs well for fostering greater economic integration and collaboration within the SCO.

Key Findings

- Iran's bid for SCO membership is driven by strategic imperatives aimed at bolstering regional alliances, particularly with key players like China and Russia. By joining the SCO, Iran seeks to tap into a range of opportunities, including access to advanced military technology, increased economic investment, and enhanced cooperation on counter-terrorism initiatives. However, Iran's full membership in the SCO also comes with its own set of challenges.
- Chief among these challenges is the continued imposition of Western sanctions on Iran, which constrain its ability to fully leverage the benefits of SCO membership. Despite its potential to contribute significantly to the organization, Iran's position within the SCO is hampered by these sanctions, which limit its access to international markets and financial resources.
- Moreover, Iran's inclusion in the SCO raises questions about the organization's broader geopolitical dynamics. As a full member, Iran's interests may sometimes diverge from those of other member states, particularly on issues related

to regional security and economic cooperation. Navigating these complexities requires careful diplomacy and strategic engagement on Iran's part.

- Overall, while Iran's membership in the SCO offers promising opportunities for enhanced cooperation and integration within the region, its effectiveness in realizing these benefits hinges on its ability to address the challenges posed by Western sanctions and navigate the intricate geopolitical landscape of the organization.

Conclusion

After years of persistent efforts, Iran has finally achieved full membership in the SCO. This milestone is seen as an opportunity for Iran to strengthen its ties with Russia, potentially leading to the acquisition of modern and advanced weaponry. Additionally, Iran sees China and Russia as crucial sources of capital investment, especially in light of the departure of many Western companies due to EU and US sanctions. Despite Iran's regional importance, its geographical proximity to member countries, and its close alliances with key SCO members like China and Russia, it has faced challenges in attaining permanent membership status. The primary obstacle has been the enduring sanctions imposed by the US and UN on Iran, which have hindered its integration into international organizations. It's worth noting that the SCO is not inherently anti-Western or anti-American. Rather, it has emphasized peaceful cooperation and dialogue with other nations and international organizations. With the removal of sanctions, Iran's full membership in the SCO underscores the organization's commitment to peaceful coexistence and collaboration on global issues. Its primary objectives include fostering relationships, preventing conflicts, and seeking peaceful resolutions through dialogue and cooperation with other nations.

Iran's entry into the SCO represents a significant stride in bolstering its regional relationships, particularly with Russia and China, while enhancing its economic competitiveness. Within the SCO, Iran's strategic location, abundant energy resources, skilled workforce, and robust connectivity offer avenues to pursue its economic and geopolitical objectives. Additionally, Iran's membership reinforces the organization's counter-

terrorism capabilities through increased intelligence sharing and collaborative efforts, addressing issues such as cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking, and regional connectivity. With Iran's inclusion, the SCO undergoes a notable expansion, potentially furthering its influence and impact on regional affairs.

Iran's inclusion in the SCO has raised concerns in the Western world, yet the significance of the Iran-Turkey-China-Russia alliance within the SCO should not be misconstrued as inherently anti-Western, given the organization's commitment to non-intervention and non-interference. For India, as a vital member of the SCO and a key US ally in the region, balancing its relationship with Iran poses challenges. It must carefully navigate its ties with both Iran and the US within the SCO framework, considering factors such as regional dynamics, economic interests, and geopolitical considerations, while remaining true to its broader foreign policy objectives.

Recommendation: To capitalize on its SCO membership effectively, Iran should prioritize constructive engagement, collaboration, and dialogue within the organization. This entails fostering closer ties with key stakeholders, particularly China and Russia, while also engaging with other member states to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. Additionally, Iran should leverage the SCO platform to address regional security challenges, enhance economic connectivity, and pursue sustainable development initiatives. By actively participating in SCO activities and initiatives, Iran can maximize the benefits of its membership and contribute positively to regional stability and prosperity.

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