

Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. A SWOT Analysis

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Abstract. On 17 September 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) approved Iran's complete membership application 15 years after obtaining observer status in 2005. Iran is slated to receive full SCO membership in April 2023, marking its first move to join a significant regional organization since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iran's future membership in the SCO brings many opportunities and challenges, which can affect its future growth and direction. This study focuses on Iran's membership application to the SCO from 2005 to 2021 and analyzes the opportunities and challenges that Iran's membership can bring to the organization. It uses a SWOT analysis of Iran's diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments of national power as it has used them in its application. Through this analysis, the study shows that overcoming sanctions is the primary driver of Iran's push to join the SCO, and its instruments of national power are sufficient to contribute to security cooperation within the SCO's framework.

However, Iran's membership may complicate SCO decision-making processes and fuel additional Western pressure on the SCO as an anti-Western alliance. It remains to be seen if Iran's membership will be a game-changer for the SCO in achieving its goals. Ultimately, as the SCO matures as an organization, it gives the impression that the Western-led international order is one of many viable frameworks for the international order. With its disadvantaged position in the Western-led international order, Iran may seek to play a more prominent role in shaping an alternative where it can protect and forward its interests.

Keywords: SCO, Iran, sanctions, regional organization, challenges, opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

Regional power ambitions and the desire to counteract Western sanctions are the driving forces for Iran to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO initially held an ambivalent view toward Iran's membership. However, Russia and China, the leading players within the SCO, noted that Iran's membership could bring benefits and risks to the organization. This ambivalence can be traced to four main reasons (see: [1]).

First, Iran's membership in the SCO is a loss for the US and the West because it defeats the latter's attempts to isolate Iran and limit its regional and international influence.

Second, SCO members have limited shared strategic interests. For example, the Eastern Mediterranean has long been a focus of Iranian foreign policy. In contrast, Russia has only been recently involved in the region, starting with its intervention in the Syrian Civil War. This situation requires longstanding shared interests and coordination mechanisms between Russia and Iran in the region.

Third, SCO members have different positions regarding Iran's membership. Russia has supported Iran's membership, while China has taken a more conservative view. Central Asian countries, notably Tajikistan, have opposed Iran's membership.

Fourth, SCO membership legitimizes the Iranian government's policies to domestic and international audiences through the former's emphasis on sovereignty, non-intervention in internal affairs, and consultation.

In addition, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei mandated the Raisi government to reinforce relations with non-Western countries such as China, India, and Russia, emphasizing the improvement of strategic relations with these countries to advance Iran's economy [2]. Iran expects membership in the SCO to give it access to alternative markets, facilitate energy cooperation, and increase its strategic importance and indispensability by turning it into a bridge between Russia, Central Asia, and India.

METHODOLOGY

The study examines the dynamics of Iran's engagement with the SCO from June 2005 to September 2021. The rationale for the lower limit of this study is that, in June 2005, Iran acquired observer status in the SCO. Accordingly, the study's upper limit of September 2021 was determined by the SCO Council of Heads of State that year, wherein the organization granted Iran membership effective in April 2023.

It uses neorealism as its theoretical framework in framing Iran-SCO relations. Neorealism is based on the premise that states exist within an anarchic international system and that states aim to achieve relative power against other states, positing that the characteristics of the international system explain state behavior, not human nature [3]. Iran's reaction to international sanctions and pressure on its nuclear program shows neorealism through the Western use of sanctions to change Iran's regime policy.

The study also examines how Iran uses diplomatic, information, military, and economic national power instruments to pursue SCO membership. In addition, the study uses SWOT analysis to assess the direction and challenges Iran faces in its full SCO membership.

DISCUSSION

Through SCO membership, Iran aims to break international isolation, participate in regional security mechanisms addressing security concerns in Afghanistan, and legitimize its government policies to domestic and international audiences.

In 2005, Iran obtained SCO observer status, the first step in its membership process. During the SCO summit in 2006, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad underscored the security role of the SCO in Iran's interests, stating: "We want this organization to develop into a powerful body influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, serving to block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries"¹. Iran sought full SCO membership in 2008, only for the SCO to reject its application due to UN Security Council sanctions. Despite this, Iran renewed its attempts at obtaining SCO membership, only to be rejected in 2010, as the SCO drew up a set of regulations barring countries under UN sanctions from membership [4].

The SCO again rejected Iran's membership application in 2016 and 2017 due to strained relations with Tajikistan. In 2015, Iran invited Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) leader Muhiddin Kabiri to attend the International Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran, a group that Tajikistan banned in 2016 after accusing it of complicity in a failed coup [5]. Despite this, Tajikistan and Iran have set aside ideological disputes in favor of practical cooperation. For instance, in April 2021, Tajikistan and Iran signed a defense cooperation agreement that could facilitate further defense cooperation between them. This agreement helps alleviate the pressure of US sanctions against Iran and gives Tajikistan access to the Persian Gulf via Iran's territory².

US views on Iran harmed the SCO's perception of the latter. For instance, China's policy of peaceful coexistence with the US has caused it to have reservations about Iran's SCO membership, with the view that Iran's membership might cause the organization to be perceived as an anti-US bloc. As a result, China waited for improved relations between the US and Iran. However, this delay was noticed and interpreted as a gap between China and Russia, which supports Iran's membership [6].

The international situation has changed in Iran's favor in recent years. US-China relations were marked by a decline in the past few years, with issues such as the Hong Kong protests, human rights in Xinjiang, the international status of Taiwan, and the ongoing trade war being friction points. Given the situation, China finds strengthening relations with Iran an excellent choice to maintain a favorable balance of power and contain US influence. In addition, Iran's strategic location connecting East and West plays a vital role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become possible with the recent signing of a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement in March 2021 [7].

During the presidency of Hassan Rouhani from 2013 to 2021, Iran showed little enthusiasm for SCO membership. The Rouhani Administration sought to improve relations with the West, as negotiations with the US

¹ Iran urges Central Asian bloc to counter West. *CBS News*. 15.06.2006. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-urges-central-asian-bloc-to-counter-west-1.569790> (accessed 24.08.2022)

² Tajikistan ends cold war with Iran as it seeks new trade, security partners. *Eurasianet*. 03.06.2022. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-ends-cold-war-with-iran-as-it-seeks-new-trade-security-partners> (accessed 29.08.2022)

over Iran's nuclear program and the idea of large-scale investments from Europe exceeded what other international projects had to offer [8]. This pessimism was reflected in the 2017 SCO Summit, wherein Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, instead of President Rouhani, participated, indicating a weak desire to obtain membership. Also, in his 2020 SCO Summit speech, President Rouhani did not raise the issue of Iran's membership.

There are doubts about whether SCO membership benefits Iran in the long term and if China and Russia see any opportunities with Iran's SCO membership. Moreover, although China and Russia have expressed disapproval of the Trump Administration's withdrawal from talks over Iran's nuclear program, they did not perform any actions to alleviate the effects of sanctions on Iran's economy. Thus, the incumbent Raisi Administration in Iran, which was elected with low voter participation, needs to win the support of people who are not optimistic about the SCO's two major players.

ANALYSIS

It is necessary to analyze Iran's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in its diplomacy, intelligence, military, and economic instruments of national power to understand the opportunities and challenges it can bring to the SCO with its membership.

a. Diplomacy (SWOT)

Although the SCO is not a military alliance, it is impossible to discuss international relations without military alliances which foreground the process of multilateral cooperation and power balancing between states, and cautions against allowing military buildups and empowerment threatening the sovereignty and security of other political actors [9]. One of Iran's readily visible diplomatic strengths with the SCO is its solid diplomatic ties with lead SCO members China and Russia. Iran and the SCO share the same guiding norms and values, such as emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference in international affairs, and an implicit distrust of Western-led security arrangements and alliances. One of the foundations of the SCO is standing up against US hegemony, which makes the organization especially attractive to Iran. With Iran's Eastern-oriented foreign policy that emphasizes respectable and balanced interaction with countries and broad communications with its neighbors, the SCO and Iran can find common ground³.

Iran's influence over the "Shia Crescent" stretching from Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran can provide the SCO with new markets. Moreover, Iran's long-term strategic goal of creating a land path to the Mediterranean complements China's BRI. It provides the SCO economic, diplomatic, and security opportunities in the Middle East. China understands that Iran plays a critical geopolitical role in its BRI, connecting Western Europe to China via Iran, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Iran's SCO membership will facilitate diplomatic negotiations to address regional security.

Despite these diplomatic strengths, Iran has substantial weaknesses which can affect the SCO. First, political sanctions against Iran limit its diplomatic abilities to engage other countries. Most political sanctions against Iran were imposed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and became more severe after the discovery of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program in the 1990s and 2000s.

Nevertheless, Iran's membership in the SCO opens opportunities to institutionalize and expand the Shanghai Spirit in the Middle East, the guiding vision of the organization, which is based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equal rights, consultations, respect for the diversity of cultures, aspiration towards joint development, non-alignment, non-confrontation, and openness⁴.

However, Iran's full SCO membership poses long-term challenges to the organization. Iran's full SCO membership can put other members under secondary Western sanctions due to their interactions with Iran. While China and Russia can manage Western sanctions, Central Asian states may be reluctant to engage Iran within the SCO framework, impacting how the organization functions. However, it should be noted that China and Russia are trying to mitigate the effects of Western pressure within the organization and assuage the concerns of other members.

³ Iran's permanent membership in the SCO has accelerated after 15 years/ Regional economic and political development. *Borna News*. 31.08.2022. <https://www.borna.news/fa/tiny/news-1371296> (accessed 02.09.2022)

⁴ What is the SCO? *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. <http://eng.sectsc.org/docs/about/faq.html> (accessed 02.09.2022)

Also, Iran's membership may complicate SCO decision-making processes. Each SCO member has interests and different views of the organization, viewing Iran according to their agendas. For example, China views the SCO as a regional organization primarily concerned with securing its economic agenda and views Iran's membership as helpful in this area. In contrast, Russia views the SCO as a counterweight to Western ideology and NATO and views Iran as helpful in achieving this objective. Central Asian states view the SCO as a balance between China and Russia and are reluctant to bring Iran as a full member, as shown by Tajikistan.

b. Intelligence

Iran's strong intelligence agencies can count as one of its strengths in joining the SCO, contributing to SCO intelligence sharing and practical cooperation for counterterrorism. Iran's primary intelligence agencies are the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which act in concert with each other.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) is Iran's elite foreign intervention arm, active in eight global operational directories conducting covert operations, intelligence gathering, and anything that requires plausible deniability for Iran [10]. In contrast to the IRGC-QF, the MOIS has an internal security focus, emphasizing infiltrating political opposition groups, monitoring international and domestic dissidents, counter-intelligence, countering conspiracies, and liaising with foreign intelligence agencies⁵.

Another of Iran's intelligence strengths is its extensive information operations capabilities, which aim to influence the public sphere. Iran's information operations capabilities address the SCO's concerns about interference of external powers in domestic affairs, which aim to instigate so-called "color revolutions" and subvert legitimate state authority. Iran's digital influence operations are a continuation of its public diplomacy, presenting a consistent message to various international audiences to tell Iran's side of the story, just as any Western government broadcaster may do.

However, one weakness of Iran in the information sphere is that international perceptions of it as a rogue player have resulted in low trust towards its official state information channels, forcing it to rely on clandestine means in social media to influence public opinion [11]. Also, sanctions make it difficult for Iranians to access outside information and force the Iranian tech community to confine their operations within Iran, where the Iranian government can easily monitor them [12].

Iran's membership in the SCO is an opportunity to deepen cybersecurity cooperation within the organization. Russia and Iran signed a cybersecurity cooperation agreement in January 2021, citing the significance of growing problems in cyberspace and their impact on contemporary international relations. The agreement details broad cybersecurity cooperation between the two countries, including coordination of actions, technology exchange, and training of specialists while balancing security and human rights to create a secure information environment.⁶ In addition to cybersecurity cooperation with Russia, Iran has been cooperating with China to create its National Internet Network (NIN), set up 5G networks, and strengthen scientific, legal, and economic cooperation within cyberspace [13].

A long-term threat that Iran's information sphere faces is that external perceptions of Iran as a rogue state and of the SCO as an emerging anti-NATO alliance may dissuade other regional organizations from pursuing cooperation. This situation may hinder the growth of the SCO as a regional or even global organization. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has taken a rather lukewarm approach to the SCO, with only Cambodia having observer status in the latter organization, despite signing a Memorandum of Understanding in 2005 to deepen security and economic cooperation.

c. Military

Iran's military power is one of the strengths that it could contribute to the SCO. Iran is ranked 14 out of 142 countries, with its military strength comparable to Egypt, Germany, and Indonesia⁷. It has the 8th largest army

⁵ Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile. *Federal Research Division*. 01.12.2021. <https://irp.fas.org/world/iran/mois-loc.pdf> (accessed 30.08.2022)

⁶ МИД раскрыл детали соглашения Ирана и России об информационной безопасности. *Известия*. 26.01.2021. <https://iz.ru/1116475/2021-01-26/mid-raskryl-detali-soglasheniia-irana-i-rossii-ob-informatcionnoi-bezopasnosti> (accessed 31.08.2022)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed the details of the agreement between Iran and Russia on information security. *Izvestia*. 26.01.2021. (In Russ.). <https://iz.ru/1116475/2021-01-26/mid-raskryl-detali-soglasheniia-irana-i-rossii-ob-informatcionnoi-bezopasnosti> (accessed 31.08.2022)

⁷ Iran Military Strength. *Global Firepower Index 2022*. 04.09.2022. https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=iran (accessed 07.09.2022)

in the world based on total numbers of active personnel, with 523,000 active-duty forces, and 350,000 reserves, with its active forces consisting of 350,000 in the regular army and 150,000 in the IRCG [14].

The SCO could benefit from Iran's extensive counterterrorism experience in the Middle East and counter-narcotics experience in Afghanistan. The IRCG has played a critical role in counterterrorism efforts against ISIS and other UN-designated terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al Nusra Front, and other state-supported terrorist groups, assisting at the request of affected countries in the Middle East⁸. Iran has also played a significant role in global counter-narcotics efforts, as 90% of opium, 70% of morphine and 20% of heroin have been intercepted by Iran from neighboring Afghanistan, making Iran the world's largest interceptor of narcotics⁹.

Iran also hosts military exercises with key SCO members China and Russia, with its membership in the organization opening the possibility that these exercises be elevated and expanded at the organizational level. For example, in 2019, China, Iran, and Russia held a four-day naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman to improve the security of international maritime trade and information exchange regarding rescue operations and operational and tactical experience [15]. Also, in January 2022, China, Iran, and Russia held the Marine Security Belt naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, marking growing cooperation between the three countries¹⁰.

However, Western sanctions since 1979 have hobbled Iran's military modernization efforts. Much of Iran's equipment dates to the 1970s, most of which was acquired before the Islamic Revolution. Among Iran's military capabilities seriously impacted by Western sanctions are combat aviation and expeditionary capabilities, with these handicaps on Iran limiting its capabilities to project conventional military power beyond its borders [16].

Despite these weaknesses, Iran's strong domestic defense industry can provide opportunities to strengthen the SCO's capabilities against non-traditional security challenges. For example, Iran's drone program can be an enabler for smaller SCO members such as Tajikistan to have an industrial base and, at the same time, improve the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities against terrorist and drug threats [17].

However, Iran's membership in the SCO may reinforce Western perceptions of the organization as an anti-NATO alliance, despite the SCO being more than a security organization. By increasing pressure on Iran and imposing sanctions on Russia, the West is creating a self-fulfilling prophecy through its actions.

d. Economics

One of Iran's strengths in the economic sphere comes from its strategic location that can help the SCO, particularly landlocked Central Asian members such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have secured and easier access to South and West Asia via the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which Iran is a part. The multi-modal INSTC connects Iran's southern Chabahar port to the Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan's ports to Uzbekistan, which neighbors Tajikistan.

Further, the Caspian Sea connects Turkey and Europe through the West of Azerbaijan, while from the south to Chabahar, it opens markets in the Middle East, Africa, and India. Moreover, an additional rail line leads from Iran's part of INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) to the Afghan border, with plans to extend east across Afghanistan to Kabul, where it will intersect with the Trans-Afghan rail line from Uzbekistan to the north and run southeast across Afghanistan to Pakistan, where it connects to Pakistan's road and rail network and eventually to its Karachi and Gwadar ports¹¹.

However, the weak side of Iran's economic cooperation with the SCO stems from international sanctions and pressure. Therefore, Iran needs to address these issues to gain economically from its SCO membership. Despite that, the Iranian government believes that its membership in SCO can help the country bypass these sanctions and achieve a new level of economic cooperation. However, the fact remains that sanctions and international pressures limit and stagnate Iran's economy.

⁸ Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations. 20.09.2020. https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/76/int_terrorism/iran_e.pdf (accessed 07.09.2022)

⁹ Iran spearheads global campaign against narcotics. *Mehr News*. 30.06.2022. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/188580/Iran-spearheads-global-campaign-against-narcotics> (accessed 09.09.2022)

¹⁰ Trilateral naval drills between China, Russia and Iran start on Friday. *Reuters*. 20.01.2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-china-iran-hold-joint-naval-drill-friday-isna-2022-01-20/> (accessed 07.09.2022)

¹¹ The works of membership of Tehran in Shanghai: Central Asia's view of Iranian Ports. *Tawhid Verstan*. 02.09.2022. tahlilbaazar.com/x3txY (accessed 13.09.2022)

Sanctions notwithstanding, Iran's SCO membership is an opportunity for the organization and its members to bypass geographic limits to access other markets. It is difficult for Central Asian countries to access new southern and western markets without Iran as a link between East and West. Iran's absence would also interfere with China's BRI plans to build east-west land across Central Asia, linking China to the Black Sea and the Middle East. Therefore, Iran's strategic position along China's BRI is vital to achieving the latter's goals. Iran's economic role, strategic position, key transportation routes, and critical port infrastructure can be effective assets to pursue these opportunities.

However, Iran faces long-term threats connected to Western pressure and sanctions in its economic participation in the SCO. Iran's failure to join the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is a significant obstacle that seriously challenges Iran's participation in the SCO. Also, Iran can only partially count on economic cooperation within the SCO framework, as some of its members have conflicting interests, such as China, India, and Pakistan. Thus, Iran's economic benefits in its full SCO membership are closely tied to lifting sanctions. If Iran's economic linkages to the world remain severed, the SCO could only do so much to make up for this fallout.

CONCLUSION

Iran's journey to becoming a full SCO member was arduous. Different Iranian governments from 2005 put a high priority on this membership process. However, other aspects made this process harder for Iran. SCO members have different perceptions of Iran's membership during its application process. These perceptions range from supportive, as in the case of Russia, reluctant for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and ambiguous for China. In addition, the different diplomatic reactions of successive Iranian governments, from President Ahmadinejad, Rouhani, and Raisi, to international sanctions and pressure further complicated its membership process. However, the emerging multipolar international order and Iran's diplomatic, information, military, and economic improvements eased the difficulties of Iran's SCO membership application.

However, it remains to be seen if Iran's membership will be a game-changer for the SCO in achieving its goals. Although the SCO is nowhere near entities such as the G7, EU, or NATO, it is an organization that has exhibited strong strategic independence in its decision-making processes. For one, it has put China front and center as the de facto head of the organization, presenting an alternative to Western-backed international organizations. Even India, which enjoys good relations with the West, sees value in the SCO as an alternative to the Western-led international order wherein it can play a leading role. Ultimately, as the SCO matures as an organization, it gives the impression that the Western-led international order is one of many viable frameworks for the international order.

With its disadvantaged position in the Western-led international order, Iran may seek to play a more prominent role in shaping an alternative where it can protect and forward its interests.

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