

## Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Future of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Role

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### INTRODUCTION

In this article it is first tried to bring a history of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and then to show the multi-dimensional work of this organization. Finally, the possibilities of the presence of new members, including the Islamic Republic of Iran will be discussed.

In 1996, China founded an international alliance known as the “Shanghai Five”. It consisted of China, Russia and three Central Asian states. This alliance specifically focused on battling the terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and tried to ensure regional stability. In June 2001, Uzbekistan was invited to join and the group was officially named Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (SCO).

The SCO is now applying for formal recognition from the United Nations. Russian President Vladimir Putin, at the conclusion of Shanghai Summit in June 2001, stated, “We are confident that the example of good relations among neighbors and a mutually advantageous partnership across the wide space from Europe to the Pacific Ocean, which the sunrise of the

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Shanghai Cooperation Organization are demonstrating, will be positively received by the world community”.<sup>(1)</sup>

In June 2002, the heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states met in St. Petersburg and signed the SCO Charter, which clearly expounded the SCO purposes and principles, organizational structure, form of operation, cooperation orientation and external relations, marking the actual establishment of this new organization in the sense of international law.

### **I. PURPOSES AND PRINCIPLES OF SCO.**

According to the SCO Charter and the Declaration on the Establishment of SCO, the main purposes of this organization are strengthening mutual trust, good-neighborhood and friendship among member states: developing their effective cooperation in political affairs, the economy and trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, environmental protection and other fields; working together to maintain regional peace, security and stability and promoting the creation of a new international political and economic order featuring democracy, justice and rationality.

The basic principles are as follow: Adherence to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations; respect for each others independence; sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-interference in each others territorial affairs; mutual non-use of threat of force; equality among all member states; settlement of all questions through consultations; non-alignment and no directing against any other country or organization; opening to the outside world and willingness to carry out all forms of dialogues, exchanges and cooperation with other countries and relevant international or regional organizations.<sup>(2)</sup>

## II. INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP OF SCO.

The SCO institutions consist of two parts: the meeting mechanism and the permanent organs. Five nations are temporary members and two of them are permanent.

1. Council of Heads of States: This council is the highest SCO organ. Its main functions are to identify priority areas and basic directions of SCO activities; to determine matters or principle concerning internal set-up and operation; to decide on matters of principle of SCO cooperation with other countries and international organizations. It also studies pressing international issues.

2. Council of Heads of Governments: The main functions of this council are to adopt SCO budgets and to study and determine the principal matters of the economic field. Once a year, regular sessions of the council of heads of government are held.

3. Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs: Functions of this council are to study and resolve major issues of current SCO activities including SCO decisions from the meetings of the Council of Heads of States; implementing SCO decisions, and holding consultations on international issues. Regular sessions of the council are arranged to take place one month before the meeting of the Council of Heads of Governments.

4. Conference of Heads of Agencies: The main function of this conference is to study and resolve specific questions of cooperation in specialized areas. At present, the meeting mechanism has been established for attorney generals and ministers of defense, economy, commerce, transportation and culture as well as heads of law enforcement, security, emergency and disaster-relief agencies.

5. Council of National Coordinators: This council is a coordinator and management organ of SCO routine activities. It meets at least three times a year and the chairman is the national coordinator of the host country and may represent the SCO externally subject to authorization by the chairman of Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

6. Secretariat: This institute is SCO executive organ based in Beijing and was established in January 2004. Its main functions are to provide

organizational and technical support for SCO activities, to participate in the study and implementation of SCO documents, and to put forward suggestions for SCO annual budget making. It is a permanent part of SCO.

7. Regional Anti-terrorism Structure (RATS): This body is a SCO permanent organ based in Tashkent and was opened in January 2004. Its main function is to coordinate SCO member activities against terrorism, separatism, and extremism. RATS is composed of a council and executive committee. The council is a decision-making and leading body of RATS and composed of leading officials of competent authorities of member states. The executive committee is RATS routine part.<sup>(3)</sup>

### **III. THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IS SCO'S FUTURE.**

It is important to understand the role of great powers in the SCO for the future of the Islamic Republic of Iran's accession. For the cooperation of Iran in this organization we must answer the questions of cost and benefit and dimensions of this working group. What is the role of Iran in case of accession? Which areas are best compatible with Iran's foreign policy? Can this organization overlap and help the ties inside the Economic Cooperation Organization? (ECO)

In answering these questions it is better to first look at the declaration of SCO and then at new roles for this organization. Looking at the future of SCO can enhance the knowledge of predicting the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this body. This section is divided into four parts. First, the potentials of the Islamic Republic of Iran will be reviewed under scrutiny. Second, the Shanghai Declaration will be discussed. Third, the role of Iran will be studied, and finally, the future of SCO with respect to including or rejecting Iran will be discussed.

#### **1. IRAN'S POTENTIAL.**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is located South of the Caspian Sea. The system of governance is an Islamic Republic under the authority of a Supreme Leader. The constitution of Iran accepts division of powers and the

President is head of government. Iran is composed of many different ethnicities and religious groups including Azeris, Kurds, Baluchs, Arabs, Turks, Lors, Armenians, Jews, Assyrian, Zoroastrians as well as others.

Contemporary Iran has passed some stages including an imposed war by Iraq, economic reform under the Rafsanjani administration in the 1990's, political transitions in President Khatami's era and newly turned stability in political and economic affairs.

Iran's foreign relations in Central Asia, the former Soviet's south, and with the SCO is influenced by Russia's presence, cultural and historical ties with countries of the region, Islamic fundamentalism, and the United States' presence in the region.

#### **A. RUSSIA'S PRESENCE.**

Russia's national interest in Central Asia is a variable dependent of its economic and security interests. Russia wants to influence its former republics in order to use their energy resources and transfer their oil and gas reserves in a way best compatible with Russia's energy sector. Examples of such a policy is that Russian President Vladimir Putin in April 2001 appointed Victor Caliogeny as special representative in the Caspian Region and pressed Yokos and Gasprom to participate more actively in gas and oil projects.<sup>(4)</sup>

Also in the security realm, Russia has adopted a doctrine of making the countries of Central Asia more dependent to it. In regard to issues like the presence of a transnational power like United States, NATO's expansion to the region, and Islamic fundamentalism, in November 1999, Sergey Ivanor, Defense Minister of Russia, declared that United States foreign policy aims at the undermining of Russia's international position and the omitting of Russia from strategic zones of world, mainly from the Caspian Region, transcaucuses, and Central Asia.<sup>(5)</sup> Russia has also stated that any military presence of the U.S. will be answered by atomic attack. Another security issue is Islamic fundamentalism, which will be discussed later.

Regarding Iran's presence because of rich historical ties with countries of region, in 1995, great powers influenced Turkmenistan in declaring its

neutrality in all aspects. Russia also has had a two-sided policy or ambiguous diplomacy with Iran in the region. The factors of this vague policy are on one side because of U.S presence in the region and Islamic fundamentalism, (Russia wants Iran's cooperation to limit these two threats), and on the other side because Russia wants to limit Iran's rivalry in economic, especially energy, sectors. The legal dispute over rights in the Caspian Sea is an example where Russia seeks its own interests.<sup>(6)</sup>

With respect to these two issues, Iran can participate with Russia in economic terms in order to omit United States companies from winning the energy contracts, and in security terms by cooperating on issues like NATO's presence and Islamic fundamentalism. This becomes more important if we note that Russia is faced with terrorism and one of the main objectives of SCO is fighting terrorism.<sup>(7)</sup> Regarding U.S.-Iran relations, Russia declared that it wants to be a strategic partner with Iran but this does not necessarily mean that they will have the same diplomacy towards the U.S.<sup>(8)</sup>

#### **B. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TIES WITH THE REGION.**

Historically, most of the countries in Central Asia were once a part of Iran. After the Islamic periods of Taheri, Samani, and Ghaznavi dynasties used this region as a mainland and some of the cities like Bukhara, Samarghand and Taskent were used as a capital or have been illuminated under Iranian sovereignty. Another factor is language and religion. Most people of these countries are Muslim. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are examples where Islamic fundamentalism is a matter of concern of SCO members. This is especially strong in Tajikistan.<sup>(9)</sup>

The language of Farsi can also be considered a unifying a tie with region, which is less controversial in conflicting with SCO objectives.

#### **C. ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM.**

Islamic Militancy is an important factor in Central Asia. In some respect we can link it to international network like Al Qaeda and in other regards it is linked with war and political instability in neighboring countries like Afghanistan.<sup>(10)</sup> The American war in Afghanistan in pursuit of omitting

violent Islamic radicalism did not eliminate it, but in fact caused these groups to disperse and hide across Central and South Asia. In addition, other Islamic groups like Hizbo-u-Tahrir (Islamic Freedom Movement) have actually grown more radical and violent since the conflict due to increased animosity towards the U.S. as well as the presence of new arms and equipment left by fleeing Taliban and Al Qaeda forces.

Iran can contribute through a process of peaceful settlement of conflicts. Russia in Chechnya and other Muslim provinces like Tatarstan have been faced with some difficulty. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan all struggle with Islamic movements like Hizb-U-Tahrir and the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), fermenting in the volatile Ferghana Valley, where Iran played a great role.<sup>(11)</sup>

#### **D. UNITED STATES PRESENCE AND IRAN.**

After the dissolution of the Former Soviet Union, United States as a first move of relations with new independent countries tried to accept Russia's dominance between 1991 and 1993. The second stage started with expansion of U.S. presence. Strobe Talbott, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large in the region, declared that this country does understand Russia's security concerns but also allotted its effort to maintain territorial integrity of these countries and contain Russia and Iran's influence in the region.<sup>(12)</sup>

Third, U.S. showed its interest in region by helping commonwealth independent states (CIS) members in the region. For example, U.S. used its financial resources to help the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, which had anti-Iranian and anti-Russian tendencies.<sup>(13)</sup> It is also notable that in the economic realm, President Clinton ordered a working group consisting of Strobe Talbot and deputies of the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Energy and National Security Council (NSC) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to be formed. The aim of this working group was eliminating Iran and Russia from oil contracts.<sup>(14)</sup>

One of Russia's objectives in forming the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was to limit U.S. presence. Although it is aimed at Central Asia, but in some other issues like Iran's atomic crisis and other mutual

economic interests it can help the process of Iran's accession to this organization. Working on anti-terrorism is most fruitful.<sup>(15)</sup>

## **2. SHANGHAI DECLARATION.**

At the St. Petersburg in 2002, the Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) stated that it wanted to show the “Shanghai Spirit”, featuring mutual respect to different civilizations and common prosperity that was developed in the course of “the Shanghai Five”, is a treasure accumulated through the member state's cooperation in recent years. This spirit should be carried forward and developed into the principle of bilateral and multilateral action of the SCO countries in the 21st century.<sup>(16)</sup>

In another part of declaration it is articulated that all the SCO member states should abide by the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, respect each others independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, not to interfere in each others internal affairs, not to use force or threaten to use force, achieve equality and mutual benefit, solve all issues through consultation never to try to gain military superiority over neighboring countries.<sup>(17)</sup>

Looking closely at the materials of the article shows that its aim of non-violence, non-interference and rejecting presence of a superior military power best accords with principles of Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. Especially notable is the declaration's stress that on the basis of unanimous agreement through consultation among the existing member states, the SCO is also willing to accept new member who agrees with the organization aim, task, principle and other provisions.<sup>(18)</sup>

If we compare this organization with the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) which Iran seeks to be dominate, SCO can be more fruitful for Islamic Republic of Iran, because at one side the declaration has accepted the pursuit of principles of non-alignment and the United Nations Charter and on other hand, Russia and China are two contemporary great power with the “Libeum Veto” in the Security Council of United Nations. These factors are important for Iran because these two countries have similar attitudes hot issues like Iran's atomic power dispute, human rights and

responsibility of Iran in Islamic militancy. In another part of the declaration, it is stated that the SCO attaches special importance to make every effort to ensure regional security. All members must try to cooperate closely with each other in implementing the Shanghai treaty on the crackdown on terrorism, separatism and extremism. It is notable that this organization is one among exceptional organizations that do not impose their ideology over medium-size and smaller countries and accept equal cooperation. Compared to NATO and former Warsaw pacts, it is possible for the Islamic Republic of Iran both adhere to its principles of neither East nor West while helping Muslim countries in foreign policy and enjoy the security and economic advantages of this organization together.

Another part of declaration puts stress on making use of the great potential and extensive opportunities in trade and economic cooperation among the member states. For this cause, the SCO will promote the further development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between member states and the pluralism of cooperation. Within the SCO framework, the SCO will start the negotiation procedure of trade and investment facilitation.

If we compare this part of the declaration with the ECO we can reach the conclusion that in economic areas there is no contradiction between the principles of these two organization and they can develop or even promote each other.<sup>(19)</sup>

### **3. ROLE OF IRAN IN SCO.**

To discuss the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the SCO, we must first look at Iran's foreign principles and then try to understand the degree of accordance of these principles with the SCO. Then, we will analyze the possibility of cooperation between this organization and other regional or international organizations like ECO and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the role Iran can play. Also, prospects and obstacles of these relations will be discussed.

Iran's basic foreign relations principles is the slogan neither East nor West, giving aid to other Islamic countries, rejecting any dominance and

cruelty from other countries and asserting mutual respect in foreign relations. After this study we will examine SCO's agenda.

#### **A. SCO AGENDA.**

Another look at SCO shows that this organization tries to make a better situation in Eurasia as Russian President Vladimir Putin says, "This establishment will radically better the political scene of Eurasia".<sup>(20)</sup>

The first aim of SCO is maintaining security and prosperity of member states, and for this cause it wants to enhance bilateral and multilateral trade and economic cooperation among its members and take specific steps to that end. Therefore, SCO will promote the stability and development of the six members and the region. Iran can participate in this project and enjoy the economic benefits.<sup>(21)</sup>

The second aim of this organization is the sound development of regionalizing of Eurasia. Since Eurasia is in the process of regrouping and forming a cooperative mechanism, Iran can play a role in this regrouping by participating in the region. Iran can do this through economic projects like oil-swap and reaching the countries to high seas change the geo-economy of the region.<sup>(22)</sup>

The third and most important aim of SCO is fighting terrorism, which is a contemporary issue and matter of concern for Russia and China. Iran, with now reduced aspirations for exporting revolution, can help to some extent in this regard.<sup>(23)</sup> With both U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Iranian President Mohammed Khatami's tours in the region, the SCO sought to become the region's authoritative voice.<sup>(24)</sup>

#### **B. SCO COMPARED WITH ECO AND OIC.**

The second matter is the possible relations between SCO and ECO and OIC and the role of Iran. The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is an economic area that links Central Asia to Turkey and therefore Europe through Iran.<sup>(25)</sup> This organization can be linked with SCO through initiatives such as the "Silk Road" transportation project that member states adopted after the West endorsed a separate transportation initiative called

TRACEA.<sup>(26)</sup> According to functional theories, other economic activities such as agriculture, fishery and light industry can lead to the upgrade of low-politics to higher politics.

Iran is also an active member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which is a reputable international organization. By connecting the Central Asian countries to the Islamic world, Iran can reduce the tensions between these countries and some provinces in Russia and China like Chechnya and Xin Kiang.<sup>(27)</sup>

### **C. PROSPECT AND OBSTACLES OF IRAN PRESENCE AT SCO.**

It is clear that economic ties can lead to higher issues like security and political issues to go forward. Therefore, Iran can participate in this realm although Russia has shown an ambiguous and vague policy towards Iran in the region.<sup>(28)</sup> Also, China's hopes to weaken American influence with Russia's desire to create a "multi-polar world" in the generations after the Cold War. In order to achieve this end, the SCO has mulled expanded membership. Alexander Yakovenko told Interfax on 29 April 2002, "Russia does not pose as an obstacle, since Iran is in the process of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) which is difficult for Iran to enter. WTO can help Iran achieve a high bargaining position in SCO in case of membership. As of now, Russia is an active member and China has newly joined and wants to promote its position. It seems the joining of WTO will facilitate Iran's accession to SCO.

## **4. IRAN POSITION IN PROSPECTS OF SCO.**

In the final part, there is needed to discuss about prospects in ahead of SCO and the role of Iran in case of accession. First, we will focus on relations of Russia and China in this organization and then try to relate Iran's position regarding these two great powers.

### **A. THE RELATION OF RUSSIAN AND CHINA IN SCO.**

Russia and China are two great powers that have mutual interests in political and economic realms. Both countries are against U.S. dominance in Central

Asia and fight against terrorism. Both countries are active members of WTO and are powerful political and economic engines of SCO that move this organization forward. Also, as two permanent member of the Security Council they can use “Liberum Veto”. All of these factors mentioned above make this rule out the expansion of the SCO in the future. “So far some have suggested that Mongolia or Iran might consider to be a member in the organization,” said Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov at April of 2002 at a Moscow meeting of SCO. “We want the SCO to become a modern organization of a new type in line with the demands of a multi-polar world.”<sup>(29)</sup>

About the obstacles of Iran's presence in the SCO we must refer to a difference in ideology and attitudes of Iran versus Russia and China regarding Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic movements. According to its principles, Iran regards the Islamic movements as freedom movements that must be helped all over the world. Although there has been the period of détente during the time of President Khatami, but this principle remains untouchable because it is tied with identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Russia and China with their secular thinking have concerns about these movements and call paramilitary Muslim groups terrorists because of SCO principles which announce crackdown on terrorism.

Separatism and extremism: it seems that Iran must reach a mutual definition about these hot issues to reach a conclusion with Russia and China.<sup>(30)</sup>

It seems difficult, however, for two parties to reach such a point. Two countries reliable partners, especially when we note that the former ideology of Russia as a successor of the Soviet Union has been communism that is now is a pragmatic ideology in China. The geopolitical strategies of Russia and China in Eurasia seem to be identical and which might have led to the exchange of engineers, scientists and military official training programs. In June 2001, “Governmental Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation” was signed as the first formal friendship treaty since beginning of the Cold War.<sup>(31)</sup>

From the present changes it is clear that the Moscow-Beijing axis wants a higher position in the world arena to battle American hegemony.<sup>(32)</sup>

Also there are some factors which are weaknesses of the relations between the two countries. The hottest issues are military and terrorism, which have a two-face relationship between Russia and China. United States President George W. Bush, after declaring war on terrorism, spearheaded an American Rapprochement with Russia that concerned Chinese leadership. The Treaty of Moscow was signed in May 2002 in Moscow at the NATO-Russian Council, which allowed Russia a voice in NATO for the first time and raised a considerable disquiet in Beijing. President Jiang Zemin at the time feared that this would marginalize China and weaken relative power vis-à-vis the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle.<sup>(33)</sup> Also, fighting against terrorism with U.S. global leadership can weaken Moscow-Beijing ties because it make a cleavage in determining what is the stance of China in this regard.

#### **B. IRAN'S POSITION IN CASE OF ACCESSION IN SCO.**

It seems that Iran wants to develop its relations with Russia and China because these two countries have developed economies and have similar stances regarding regional and international issues as the Islamic Republic of Iran. By joining the SCO, Iran can receive a good position and use its capability of being a mediator between Islamic opposition groups and the governments of Russia and China and therefore decrease the tensions in the region and help regional and global peace and stability. In economic realm, would be fruitful for Iran to enjoy tax free zones, reduction of tariffs and participation in oil and gas projects and, in the atomic case, receive the protection of these two permanent members of the Security Council. In the case of Iran's joining, it can promote its bargaining position in the international arena.

## CONCLUSION

By the end of this article, we can to some extent answer the questions which we put forward at the beginning regarding the costs and benefits of the acceptance of Iran in this organization and whether it would be fruitful for the economy and the international position of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The role of Iran would be to mediate the conflicts and reduce tensions in the region and also participation in economic infrastructure and projects of the region which can promote political ties.

Investment in oil and gas projects and using the “Silk Road” as a strong transportation system would be the best areas for Iran. Also, the SCO can overlap with ECO and, help the prosperity and stability of the region. ❖

**NOTES:**

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