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Strategic Approaches and Institutional Tools of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Resolving Iran’s Security Concerns

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ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing global interdependence and regional integration, Iran’s security challenges and strategic imperatives must be analyzed through the lens of multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This paper examines the implications of Iran’s transition from observer status to full membership in the SCO, highlighting the geopolitical, economic, and security ramifications of this shift. Iran's accession represents a significant geopolitical achievement that enhances its positioning within Eurasia and counters narratives of international isolation promoted by Western powers. The study explores key benefits for both Iran and the SCO, including enhanced energy cooperation, expanded economic connectivity, and strengthened regional security mechanisms, particularly regarding the Afghan crisis and the fight against terrorism. Iran's strategic orientation toward the East—articulated by its leadership—aligns with the SCO's broader objective of promoting a multipolar world order independent of Western hegemony. Furthermore, Iran’s integration into transnational infrastructure projects and its role in regional trade corridors such as the North-South Transport Corridor and China's Belt and Road Initiative amplify its strategic value within the organization. The paper also assesses the potential tensions with pro-Western Gulf monarchies and the strategic balancing required to mitigate intra-regional frictions. Ultimately, Iran’s SCO membership may serve as a catalyst for deepening regional integration across Eurasia and contribute to the emergence of a “fourth pole” in the global order. The study employs scenario-based analysis and case study methods to forecast the trajectory of Iran-SCO relations and assess the organization’s capacity to absorb Iran’s strategic weight while addressing collective security challenges.

Keywords: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran, Regional Security*

ABSTRAK

Dalam konteks meningkatnya saling ketergantungan global dan integrasi regional, tantangan keamanan dan imperatif strategis Iran perlu dianalisis melalui kerangka multilateral seperti Organisasi Kerja Sama Shanghai (SCO). Artikel ini mengkaji implikasi dari transisi Iran dari status pengamat menjadi anggota penuh SCO, dengan menyoroti konsekuensi geopolitik, ekonomi, dan keamanan dari perubahan tersebut. Akses Iran merupakan pencapaian geopolitik yang signifikan, yang memperkuat posisinya di kawasan Eurasia sekaligus menanggapi narasi isolasi internasional yang didorong oleh kekuatan-kekuatan Barat. Kajian ini mengeksplorasi berbagai keuntungan utama bagi Iran maupun SCO, termasuk peningkatan kerja sama energi, perluasan konektivitas ekonomi, dan penguatan mekanisme keamanan regional, khususnya dalam merespons krisis Afghanistan dan memerangi terorisme. Orientasi strategis Iran ke arah Timur—yang ditegaskan oleh para pemimpinnya—selaras dengan tujuan lebih luas SCO untuk mendorong tatanan dunia multipolar yang independen dari hegemoni Barat. Lebih lanjut, integrasi Iran ke dalam proyek-proyek infrastruktur transnasional serta perannya dalam koridor perdagangan regional seperti Koridor Transportasi Utara-Selatan dan Inisiatif Sabuk dan Jalan (BRI) Tiongkok meningkatkan nilai strategisnya di dalam organisasi tersebut. Artikel ini juga menilai potensi ketegangan dengan monarki Teluk yang pro-Barat dan strategi penyeimbangan yang diperlukan untuk meredam friksi intra-regional. Pada akhirnya, keanggotaan Iran dalam SCO dapat berperan sebagai katalis bagi pendalaman integrasi regional di kawasan Eurasia serta turut berkontribusi pada kemunculan 'kutub keempat' dalam tatanan global. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan analisis berbasis skenario dan metode studi kasus untuk memproyeksikan arah hubungan Iran-SCO serta menilai kapasitas organisasi dalam menyerap bobot strategis Iran sembari menghadapi tantangan keamanan kolektif

Keywords: *Organisasi Kerja Sama Shanghai, Iran, Keamanan Regional*

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected global landscape, Iran's security challenges cannot be comprehensively understood without considering the broader dynamics of globalization and regional integration. These global trends necessitate collaborative frameworks to ensure sustainable economic growth, political stability, and regional security. Within this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a pivotal multilateral institution, promoting effective cooperation among member states in economic, humanitarian, and military spheres.

A significant milestone in the institutional evolution of the SCO is the inclusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a full member. This development represents not only a geopolitical achievement for Tehran, particularly in countering narratives of international isolation perpetuated by Western powers, but also signals a broader shift in regional alignments. Iran's accession marks a deepening of its strategic orientation

toward the East, aligning more closely with powers such as China and Russia, and enhancing its leverage in Eurasian geopolitics—especially vis-à-vis regional actors like Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

This development raises several critical questions: What strategic opportunities does full membership in the SCO present for Iran? How will the SCO shape its engagement with Tehran amidst Iran's ongoing tensions with the United States? Can SCO mechanisms be effectively mobilized to address Iran's security concerns, particularly those related to regional conflicts and Western sanctions? What risks, if any, does Iran's entry pose to the cohesion and objectives of the SCO?

To address these questions, this article examines the multifaceted implications of Iran's full membership in the SCO. It explores Iran's regional and global positioning, the mutual strategic interests shared with SCO member states, and the potential for deepened cooperation across security, economic, and geopolitical domains. Particular attention is paid to Iran's "Look East" policy, its critical role in regional transit and energy networks, and its shared security concerns with SCO countries—especially in the wake of the Afghan crisis and growing tensions with Western alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). (Fredholm, M. 2015).

Furthermore, this analysis considers the broader implications of Iran's integration with both the SCO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), evaluating the prospects for constructing a multipolar regional order. By employing case studies and forward-looking analytical frameworks, this article aims to delineate the strategic benefits and potential challenges of Iran's participation in the SCO, offering insights into its evolving role within an increasingly multipolar international system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia has witnessed significant transformation, particularly with Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The interplay between regional integration and global security challenges necessitates new forms of multilateral cooperation, especially for states like Iran that have historically navigated complex relationships with both Western and Eastern powers. ((Fredholm, M. 2015).

A growing body of literature has identified the SCO as a critical regional mechanism for ensuring political stability, economic collaboration, and security among its members (Bratersky, 2022). As an organization that explicitly rejects the unipolar world order led by the United States, the SCO positions itself as a counterbalance to Western hegemony, promoting multipolarity and strategic autonomy. Within this context, Iran's full membership marks a pivotal moment, not only for Tehran but also for the organization's broader geopolitical orientation.

Several scholars emphasize that Iran's entry into the SCO is more than a diplomatic victory; it signals a broader reorientation of Iranian foreign policy toward the East, as declared by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi. (Badawi, T. 2015). Their consistent advocacy for stronger ties with China and Russia aligns with Iran's strategic desire to circumvent Western sanctions and reinforce sovereignty through diversified alliances (<http://casp-geo.ru/geopoliticheskaya-strategiya>).

Moreover, Iran's inclusion enhances the SCO's capability in dealing with pressing regional challenges, particularly the Afghan crisis. Analysts argue that Iran's geographical and political proximity to Afghanistan renders it indispensable in any multilateral security framework aiming to address terrorism, drug trafficking, and political instability in the region. This adds a new layer of operational depth to the SCO's collective security strategy.

Iran's membership is also seen as a strategic response to the establishment of rival geopolitical blocs such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), further embedding the SCO in the architecture of multipolar resistance against Western-dominated institutions. Iran, along with Russia, China, and Pakistan, could thus spearhead efforts to establish a new regional order anchored in non-Western values and interests. (Chung, C. P. 2006).

Economically, Iran's role is equally crucial. It occupies a central position along major transit routes including the Silk Road, the North-South Corridor, and China's Belt and Road Initiative. This geographical advantage strengthens the SCO's logistical network and enhances economic interdependence among its members. Studies estimate Iran's potential revenue from these initiatives could vastly surpass current oil export figures, especially amid ongoing sanctions.

The energy sector also emerges as a key domain for cooperation. Iran's integration into what some scholars call the SCO "energy club" offers promising prospects for joint infrastructure projects and strategic resource distribution. Analysts predict that such cooperation will deepen economic ties while offering mutual protection against external economic pressures. (Marochkin, S., & Bezborodov, Y. (Eds.), 2022)

Furthermore, the literature notes that Iran's membership lends a quasi-bloc character to the SCO, enabling enhanced policy coordination in security, trade, and diplomacy. This bloc-like feature strengthens collective bargaining power and creates a platform to challenge U.S. military and economic dominance in the region.

Finally, the potential synergy between the SCO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), facilitated by Iran, has sparked academic interest in the notion of a "Greater Eurasian Union." This emerging macro-bloc could serve as the "fourth pole" in a multipolar world, standing alongside Western liberal democracies, China, and regional formations like ASEAN. Although structural limitations remain—such as overlapping oil-based economies—experts argue that strategic cooperation, especially with China and India, compensates for these shortcomings and offers Iran a viable path out of isolation (Christensen, T. J. 1996). In sum, the scholarly discourse increasingly portrays Iran's accession to the SCO as a multidimensional development with implications for regional integration, global security dynamics, and economic transformation. Future studies may benefit from case-based methodologies to further analyze how these emerging alliances will shape Eurasia's political future and Iran's role within it. (Rumer, B. 2024).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily utilizing a case study approach to investigate the strategic implications of Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The research is grounded in a

comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources that reflect the geopolitical, economic, and security dimensions of this development.

1. Case Study Design

The central case examined in this research is the process and impact of Iran's transition from observer status to full membership in the SCO. This case is selected due to its relevance in understanding broader regional shifts in power, alliances, and integration dynamics in Eurasia. The case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of complex interactions between Iran, the SCO, and external actors such as the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

2. Data Collection Techniques

The research relies on documentary analysis, including:

- Official SCO documents and press releases,
- Statements and speeches from Iranian political leaders (e.g., Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi),
- Policy reports from think tanks (e.g., Caspian Geo, Iranian foreign policy advisors),
- Scholarly articles and news sources on Iran-SCO relations,
- Geopolitical analyses of regional security frameworks and international cooperation.

These documents are analyzed to identify Iran's strategic motivations, policy shifts, and the regional/international responses to its SCO membership.

3. Analytical Framework

The data will be analyzed using a geopolitical lens, focusing on:

- The role of regional integration and multilateralism in Iran's foreign policy,
- Iran's economic and security interests in the context of the US-China rivalry,
- The impact of Iran's SCO membership on regional blocs such as the EAEU and QUAD,
- The broader implications for the construction of a multipolar world order.

Additionally, **content analysis** is applied to assess how Iran's discourse of "orientation to the East" aligns with the objectives and mechanisms of the SCO, particularly in relation to energy cooperation, counterterrorism, and trade routes such as the North-South Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative.

4. Limitations and Delimitations

The study is limited to publicly available information and does not include fieldwork or interviews due to geopolitical sensitivities and access constraints. Furthermore, while the research highlights possible future developments, it does not aim to predict outcomes but rather to critically assess emerging trends and strategic alignments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The accession of Iran as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) marks a significant geopolitical development with multifaceted implications for Iran, the SCO, and the broader Eurasian regional order. The analysis reveals key benefits and strategic opportunities spanning political, security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Political Benefits and Opportunities

Iran's full membership in the SCO substantially strengthens the organization's stature as a regional security guarantor and increases its global influence. This inclusion effectively counters narratives of Iran's international isolation, positioning the country as a pivotal actor in Eurasian geopolitics. Through its ties with major SCO members—China, Russia, and India—Iran gains enhanced capabilities for strategic maneuvering in the Middle East and Near East. Membership facilitates the protection of Iran's national interests in a multipolar world increasingly defined by the waning dominance of the United States. The SCO's adherence to principles of non-alignment and respect for sovereignty aligns with Iran's foreign policy goals, enabling Tehran to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with regional powers and expand its international legitimacy. Furthermore, Iran's membership dovetails with the development of critical transcontinental infrastructure initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the North-South transport corridor, thereby bolstering Iran's geopolitical significance as a logistical hub.

Security Benefits and Opportunities

From a security perspective, Iran's accession enhances the regional security architecture by extending the SCO's "security belt" to encompass Iranian territory. This integration fosters a consolidated military-political alignment among member states, creating a counterbalance to U.S. and allied influence in the Middle East. It opens the door for intensified bilateral and multilateral military cooperation, including coordinated counterterrorism efforts and intelligence sharing aimed at combating terrorism, extremism, illegal migration, arms trafficking, and drug smuggling. The joint naval exercises conducted by Iran, Russia, and China underscore this growing military collaboration and serve as a clear political message of mutual support in opposition to Western pressure. Importantly, Iran's SCO membership provides a deterrent against possible foreign military interventions, enhancing its national security environment within a framework supported by two permanent UN Security Council members.

Economic and Financial Benefits and Opportunities

Economically, Iran's integration into the SCO promises diversification and resilience amid ongoing sanctions from Western countries. The organization's energy-centric cooperation offers Iran new opportunities to leverage its vast oil and gas resources in multilateral projects, potentially increasing its revenue beyond current levels constrained by sanctions. Iran's strategic position along key transit routes such as the Silk Road, Trans-Asian Railway, TRACECA corridor, and the North-South corridor significantly enhances the SCO's role in Eurasian trade and logistics. The expansion of bilateral and multilateral trade, along with cooperation in technology and industrial development, aligns with Tehran's "Eastward" policy focus, particularly strengthening economic ties with China, Russia, India, and other SCO members. Iran's prospective membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) alongside SCO membership could further solidify its role as a bridge between major regional economic blocs, contributing to the emergence of a multipolar economic world order. (Akbarzadeh, S. 2015).

Although less emphasized, the expansion of cooperation in science, education, and culture presents an important avenue for Iran's integration into regional frameworks. SCO membership provides a platform for cultural exchange and educational collaboration, facilitating greater people-to-people connectivity among member states. These dimensions contribute to soft power development, promoting mutual understanding and cultural diplomacy that can underpin long-term regional stability.

Challenges and Risks

Despite these benefits, Iran's SCO membership is not without risks. The deepening ties with China and Russia and Iran's position within the SCO may provoke adverse reactions from pro-Western Arab monarchies in the Middle East, who could perceive Iran as a proxy for Chinese and Russian influence. Furthermore, ongoing U.S.-Iran tensions represent a complex challenge for the SCO, as the organization must balance its members' interests while avoiding exacerbating regional conflicts. The ability of SCO mechanisms to effectively address Iran's security concerns, particularly in the face of external pressures, remains to be tested.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represents a pivotal shift in Eurasian geopolitics with significant strategic implications. Politically, Iran gains enhanced legitimacy and regional influence by aligning with major powers like China, Russia, and India, which supports its foreign policy goals amid U.S. decline. From a security perspective, Iran's integration strengthens regional cooperation on counterterrorism and defense, offering a deterrent against foreign interventions. Economically, SCO membership provides Iran opportunities to circumvent sanctions, diversify trade, and participate in key regional infrastructure projects, reinforcing its role as a crucial transit hub. Additionally, cultural and educational cooperation within the SCO contributes to Iran's soft power development. However, this membership also entails risks, including heightened regional tensions with pro-Western states and challenges arising from ongoing U.S.-Iran antagonisms. Overall, Iran's accession to the SCO reflects emerging multipolar dynamics and underscores the organization's growing role as a strategic platform for regional integration and power realignment.

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