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# Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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## Abstract

Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer member in 2005 and the year after applied for full membership. This application raised debates among SCO members, inside Iran and outside this organization in international politics. In the positive side, Iran's geostrategic importance and huge energy resources give impetus to SCO members. On the negative side, Iran's challenge with the West, nuclear in particular, discourages SCO members to accept Iran at this juncture because they hesitate to pretend that they are standing against United States and the West. This article studies these debates in the theoretical framework of neo-realism and examines these events through historical analysis and according to their historical context. Considering the current international environment, membership of Iran in the SCO seems remote and very much depends, on the one hand on future progress of negotiations over Iran's nuclear dossier, and on the other hand on relations between SCO members and the West.

**Keywords:** The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran, Nuclear Dossier, Russia, China, Central Asian States, USA, the West

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## Introduction

It has been centuries that nation-states have been main actors in international relations. Yet new challenges such as security and environment have proved that states by themselves are insufficient in resolving the challenges, and in some issues the states are even the main players. The necessity of international organizations has led to the emergence of many new non-state players. United Nations, NATO, the European Union, the Arab league, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), ECO, ASEAN, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization are examples of such organizations which all appeared after the Second World War and intervened in the balance of power and world order. The Islamic Republic of Iran due to its rich natural resources and geopolitical position has always been important for international organizations and has had an active policy in dealing with these organizations. Iran is the founding member of the UN, NAM, OIC, OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) and ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of 15 new sovereign states. In 1996 China concerned with the security of its borders with the newly established states in Central Asia initiated the regional security organization of "Shanghai Five Organization" with the participation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2001 Uzbekistan joined "Shanghai Five" and the organization was renamed to "the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (SCO). The common concerns of all six



members were security threats including Islamic radicalism and separatism. In the founding charter, they especially emphasized on fighting against the so called three evils of “separatism, extremism and terrorism” to safeguard stability in the region and of course maintain the status quo of the nondemocratic and secular regimes of the Central Asia which inherited power from former Soviet Union.

Three factors led to the development of SCO in the early years: First, the membership of China and Russia soon made this organization visible in the political world. Second, the vacancy of such an international organization in the East, made many other regional states and neighboring nations eager to join it. According to the SCO charter some of these principles are: "respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, mutual non-use or threat to use of force; equality among all member states." (SCO Charter, 2001) Hence, third, the principles and structure of this organization made it attractive to other nations.

From its early days, controversial views had emerged about the future of the SCO. "Extreme views on the nature of this organization, often accompany the lack of accuracy by many commentators. Some describe the SCO as a paper tiger while others suspiciously eye it as a counterweight to NATO". (Boland, 2011, P.7) There are clear differences between NATO and SCO. While NATO is exclusively a military alliance organization, SCO is an organization for cooperation in different fields of security, politics, economy, military, technology, culture and energy. In the security aspect, SCO is not a military organization like NATO; in the economic cooperation it is not like the European Union with high level of integration to threaten the sovereignty of member states. All these characteristics made SCO ready for horizontal enlargement and of course to lag in vertical development. (Aylin, 2006, P. 86)

In 2004 Mongolia received observer status and in 2005 Iran, Pakistan and India Joined as observer members. On 15 June 2006,



President Ahmadinejad of Iran at the SCO summit held in Shanghai unofficially expressed his nation's desire for full membership. It was until 2008 that Iran officially applied for full membership through formal procedures required by the SCO. (Aylin, 2006) In 2012 summit in Beijing, Afghanistan joined the organization as an observer. The six SCO members and five observers together account for more than half of the world population and a huge geographical territory. The club also includes the world's second and third highest military spenders (Germanovich, 2008). Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey later became dialogue partners of the SCO.

This article in the framework of neo-realistic perspectives studies the motivations and obstacles related to full membership of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. According to the neo-realism theory, states are major players in the international system, yet non-state actors like international organizations are also taken into account. States are rational actors and consider many factors before following their own interests. They may resort to bilateral and multilateral treaties to follow their own interests and elevate their security. Therefore, in the case of Iran's membership in the SCO, each side, Iran and members of this organization, considers its national interests and sets plans to meet those interests. Historical analysis is used to scrutinize each event in its historical context to understand it, and disclose the intentions behind it. Here, the debates inside Iran for and against membership in the SCO are studied and analyzed. The positive and negative consequences of Iran's membership for other SCO members are also studied. And finally US repercussions over possible membership of Iran in this organization are analyzed. A conclusion is presented at the end to analyze final results.

## I- Debates in Iran on SCO Membership

There have been controversies on Iran's membership in SCO. While the Iranian state has fully supported the full membership, there has been disagreement among Iranian analysts. Some Iranian analysts



believe joining the SCO is wrong or at least useless for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The followings are arguments of the deniers and supporters of the full membership:

**Ideological Challenge:** The Islamic Republic of Iran is established based on the Islamic Constitution of 1979. Some analysts believe joining the SCO is not in accordance with the basic obligations of the Constitution. One of these obligations is independence from great powers of the East and the West. They argue that Iran should not join an organization like the SCO in which Russia and China dominate and set the rules. For them, in order to join this organization, the state must withdraw from its constitutional bases and work in accordance to the rules and standards of the international policy and values and national interests will stand in second place. Furthermore, joining the SCO is not compatible with Iran's membership in the Non-Aligned Movement which has been in accordance with its constitutional principle. "Accession to the SCO where security and military issues matter most, will be at odds with the Iranian Constitution and certain policies of our foreign policy... permanent membership of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will cause problems and incompatibilities. A case of incompatibility is opposition of member states to radical and political forms of Islam as most of them are currently suppressing radical Islamist figures that are opposed to central governments of those countries." (Ahmadian, 2011)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was originally founded to fight against the so called three evils of "extremism, separatism and terrorism". These three evils, of course include the Islamic movements which exist inside all six members of the SCO. Russia is fighting against Muslim separatists in Chechnya and Dagestan. China is suppressing the rising Muslims in Xinjiang. The other four secular and nondemocratic regimes of the Central Asian states which are the legacy of the Communist Soviet Union are suppressing local Islamic movements like Hizb-ut-Tahrir, The Islamic Renaissance Party of

Tajikistan (IRPT), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), and the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG). (Sorkina, 2010, P. 121) These movements expect support from Iran and the Islamic world. China, Russia and other Central Asian states use the pretext of the 9/11 attack and 'War on Terror' to suppress these movements, though some of them have democratic wishes.

Membership in the SCO limits freedom of action in Iran's foreign policy. For example Iran cannot support allies in Lebanon and Palestine and other Islamic movements in the East or West. "A potential threat is Iran's definition of terrorism which is quite different from the definition that other member countries [of SCO] have in mind. If something happens in the region and Shanghai Cooperation Organization adopts a statement (when Iran is a full member), Iran's name will be also mentioned as an undersigned" (Shariatnia, 2011).

**Interest Disadvantage:** The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been designed primarily to establish security in Central Asia. It is wrong to expect it to be the Eastern rival to NATO. For an organization to be globally successful there should be a common ground for cooperation and common goals. In the case of NATO, a spirit of Western ideology dominates all the members. NATO is exclusively a military organization which is usually used against the so called non-democratic countries and of course in the final run meets common Western ideology and interests. Despite the prevailing view in Iran that SCO members have a common sense of anti-Western and anti-Americanism, all six members of the SCO have a closer relationship with the United States and the European Union than with Iran (Aris, 2011, P. 159). As an example, although the United States and China are rivals to one another, the former is China's first trade partner and in 2011 trade between the two countries totaled about 500 billion dollars (Census, 2011). It grew by 8% in 2012. (China Daily, 2013) The US has established military bases after the



9/11 attacks in Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan during the War on Terror (Blank, 2007). Then what is the common ground for cooperation among members of the SCO? And what is the common ground for Iran to join the SCO? Iran has little in common with China and Russia; rather in many areas they have a sense of rivalry toward Iran and try to limit Iran's influence in the region. Furthermore, "Russia is competing with Iran on energy and the more Iran is marginalized in energy matters, it would serve Russia better... although China and Russia are rivals in the geographical expanse of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, they are not willing to let other regional countries, including Iran play a role in their areas of influence. Therefore, it would be quite realistic for Russia and China not to allow Iran to follow an independent agenda in SCO. They will only allow Iran to follow suit with the agenda set by Moscow and Beijing." (Shariatinia, 2011)

For critiques, the past two decades have shown that in the case of Iran's nuclear challenge with the West, SCO is not a reliable ally for Iran. In fact one of the major obstacles in way of Iran joining this organization has turned out to be the Iranian anti-American stance and its nuclear profile. Furthermore, SCO has not been successful in economic integration and joining SCO cannot help Iran's sanctioned economy. "It has often been exaggerated about the economical aspect of the SCO. It is said that great population and huge sources of energy exist in this area. But all problems in the field of energy are solved in a bilateral relation. Basically all economical relations in this are on bilateral basis and this organization has given nothing to members." (Shouri quoted in IRAS, 2012)

Basically the economical relation between China and Russia as the dominant powers and the four central Asian states is one-sided. It means these weak states have nothing in return for Chinese and Russian finance, goods and services. Even some members such as Tajikistan and Kirgizstan can not afford to pay membership fees. (Ahmadian, 2011) Finally, the SCO is not a successful organization in





dealing with regional crises and global challenges such as the American 'War on Terror' initiative and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.. It is partially because SCO suffers from dual leadership of China and Russia and hence lacks a unique and qualified leadership like the role of the United States in NATO. Furthermore, there is a huge economical difference between members. Central Asian states are not comparable with China and Russia. The United States may have influence over SCO decisions through its close relations with some members. Furthermore this organization has not presented a coherent and comprehensive definition of its identity, whether it is a purely economical cooperation or a political alliance. (Beheshtipour, 2012) However, for many other political analysts, Iranian interests and motivations for presenting the application for full membership in this organization are convincing.

Stance Against US: Through SCO membership, Iran can cement political relations with Russia and China as leading members of the SCO and permanent members of UN Security Council (SC), to resist western pressures over its nuclear issue, including the SC resolutions. Among the 'Resistance Front' which includes Brazil, Iran, Russia, Venezuela, South Africa, India and China there exists a general concern about American unilateralism and they struggle for a multipolar world. Any alliance between these countries can seriously deteriorate US hegemony. In 2005 the same year Iran joined SCO as an observer member, Jephraim P. Gundzik, a Western analyst, warned about the threat of 'China-Iran-Russia axis' and wrote "Beijing's increasingly close ties with Moscow and Tehran will thwart Washington's foreign policy goal of expanding US security footholds in the Middle East, Central Asia and Asia... The SCO is becoming an increasingly powerful regional mutual security organization". (Gundzik, 2005)

The United States, Israel and the European Union have repeatedly threatened Iran with more sanctions and even possible military strikes to force Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment, regardless



of Iran's continuous cries for having a peaceful nuclear plan under UN watchdog supervisions. Hence, full membership at SCO, will increase the potential of an alliance with Russia and China and can prevent more sanctions and probable threat of a military strike against Iran. According to Mahmoud Vaezi, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic Research in Tehran, "Basically, under present global conditions, participation in regional cooperation processes is not only useful, but also necessary... It will be beneficial for Iran to be a member of SCO. This issue will boost Iran's regional role..." (Vaezi, 2012)

Notwithstanding the membership in powerful organizations such as SCO has preventive impacts on further sanctions and military threats against Tehran, it is very helpful in keeping regional balance of power. Iran's traditional rival in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia and recently Turkey has entered the race. While the former gains membership in Organizations such as the Arab league and the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Turkey is a member of NATO and seeks EU membership. "In the case of membership in regional organizations, Iran is in a somewhat weak status. Our neighbors including Arab states in the Persian Gulf have gained membership in the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League. In the north of Iran in the CIS region there are different organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and CIS. In the East and West of Iran there are many regional organizations which follow the interests of the members, but ECO is the only regional one in which Iran is a member. ECO is a limited economical organization which lacks security and strategic dimensions. Membership in the SCO can lead to advantages for Iran." (Karami, 2012)

**Reinforce Iran's Economy:** Iran has wide economical ties with China as the leading member of the SCO. China is the second economical power of the world and is major trade partner and a major oil importer of Iran with more than \$45 billion total trade in



2011. (Global Post) "More than 100 Chinese state companies are operating in Iran to develop ports and airports in the major Iranian cities. China's economic initiatives in Iran go far beyond the energy field, including electricity, dam building, cement plants, steel mills, railways, shipbuilding, motorways, airport infrastructure and metros. As some European countries have decreased their economic trade with Tehran in response to US pressure, China and other Asian countries have stepped in to fill the void." (Lei, 2010) Through membership in the SCO relations between Iran and China will find much deeper and broader dimensions. Iran has an overt interest in energy cooperation with China as the number one oil importer in the world. Currently, Iran-China oil and gas projects exceed \$100 billion. In 2006 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad invited the SCO member states to a meeting in Tehran to discuss energy exploitation and development. (Alyson J. K. Bailes, 2007, P. 18)

Russia is one of the strongest military powers of the world and Iran has developed an indigenous military industry potential in the post-Revolution era. Iran's military need due to the dangerous-level of military buildups by GCC member states in the Persian Gulf is augmenting. Close military industrial relations with Russia and also China can help Iran flourish these potentialities. Moreover Iran and Russia possess about half of the world deposits of gas and subsequently both countries have common interests in keeping gas prices at a high level.

Presence in Central Asia: Iran historically, geographically, religiously and culturally is close to central Asian countries. But during the seventy years of communism of the Soviet Union the relationship between Iran and these countries was completely cut off. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran and Turkey competed for presence in this region. Turkey stressed on ethnical ties to attract these newly emerged nations moreover turkey as a close ally of the West and America enjoyed the tie between these newly independent states and the West. "Despite a common ethnical identity with Tajikistan, Iran



hesitated to play on ethnic identity with the Persian Tajikistan in order not to antagonize the "Turks" (Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs etc.), since the majority of Central Asia is composed of these populations. Instead Iran focused on Islamic identity." (Aylin, 2006, P. 91) Iran's attempt during the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani was initially successful but because of the fear of the so-called Islamic fundamentalism in these countries, they turned away from Iran and went closer to Russia and Turkey.

After 9/11 with the presence of the US and the pretext of war against Taliban of Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran and Russia lost attractiveness for central Asian states. In the US led war on Afghanistan, they got united to allied forces to combat Islamic fundamentalism in the form of Taliban and Al-Qaida. In response, China and Russia, concerned with American influence in their backyard, developed and activated SCO to attract these states and stand against US presence in Central Asia (Gonzalez, 2007). Through SCO membership, Iran can get closer to these states and reestablish its historical ties with these Muslim states in the central Asia. During the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, China and these central Asian states stood in the same front against the Taliban and this political stance made Iran more reliable for central Asian states which previously were suspicious to Iran's policies. Iran's firm stance against the Taliban and Al-Qaida made it closer to SCO members and perhaps this Iranian policy was one of the factors that led to their collective agreement in 2005 to accept Iran as an observer member in this organization.

Iran has limited economical cooperation with Central Asian members of the SCO. Membership in this organization can complement Iran's ECO economic ties and lead to a reliable economic relationship and new opportunities to find common interest and activate potential capacities for more cooperation. Due to Iran's geographical position, transition of goods and services is one of the best modes of cooperation between Iran and Central Asian States.



## II- Iranian Full Membership Question

Following Iran's membership in the SCO as an observer in 2005, many discussions rose inside and outside this organization about Iran's possible full membership. The decision makers for this application are current SCO members; yet the international political environment, internal condition of members, the Iranian international condition, and relations between Russia-China and US-EU can affect the outcome of this decision. The followings are the positive factors or motivations and negative factors or obstacles for Iran's full membership.

**Opportunities; Geo-strategic Position:** Iran owns 11% of the proven global oil reserves and 16% of the world's natural gas resources which translates into 133 billion barrels of oil and 27 trillion cubic meters of gas, totaling to \$4000 billion by the current price of oil and gas (Lei, 2010, P. 44). Hence, Iran holds a strategic commodity which some SCO members are in great need of. Aside, Russia and Iran can influence gas OPEC and price to a favorite level. Iranian Geo-strategic position in the oil rich Middle East and as a bridge between East and West and between central Asia and the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean is very attractive for the SCO members as well. An Iranian membership in the SCO gives huge potential to this organization to be one of the most effective international organizations. According to Andranik Derankian (2011) Russia's political and security affairs expert "SCO member states need Iran due to its highly strategic geographical situation, huge energy resources and natural reserves as well as efficient manpower. It can provide necessary impetus for growth and development in other member states and, perhaps, this is the most important reason why the west is opposed to Iran's accession to SCO." Energy has turned to one of the engines of growth for Asia, for China, Japan and India in particular. Abundant energy resources of Iran, Caspian basin, and Persian Gulf have increased the geo-economic importance of Iran.



Thus, a cooperation and competition game had started in the region. “The energy security for the West and the huge potential for oil and gas in the Caspian Sea made this region a focus of global attention. It turned into a potential field for global governance competition as well. Russia, Iran, and China are concerned with the U.S. influence; Russia takes Turkish proximity to the region as a geo-political challenge; Iran’s presence and, to a lesser extent, Russia’s presence in the Caspian is worrisome to the US; and China and Russia have turned to be adversaries on economic cooperation in the region. This regional competition and cooperation started at the end of the Cold War, thus opening up a limitless range of possibilities in the Caspian region and elsewhere in the world”. (Mousavi 2010: 159-169)

**Source of Stability:** The main purpose in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is stability and security in the region. The number one concern of the founding members is Islamic radicalism. They established SCO to fight against the three evils of ‘terrorism, separatism and extremism’ as referred to in the SCO Charter. Iran is the best ally in fighting against these “three evils” and establishing security in the SCO zone. In contrast to what Western propagandas suggest, Iran is a source of stability in the Islamic world. During the fight against the Taliban of Afghanistan, Iran proved a reliable ally against Taliban extremism and Al-Qaeda terrorism (Joya Laha, 2011). Ideologically, Iran has been against extremist interpretation of Islam, Saudi kind of Salafism in particular which has inspired Al-Qaida and Taliban. Iran has played a constructive role in preserving peace in the region including in Tajikistan, meddling between the Tajik government and the Tajik Islamist parties; and in Qarabakh crises between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Regarding Afghanistan as the center of the threat of radicalism and instability in the region, the presence of Iran in the coalition of the SCO is very helpful.

What makes Iran a more reliable ally, is its independent policy from Western and American influence. Central Asian states are

concerned about American intervention in their own domestic affairs which in some ex-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine led to 'color revolutions'. The United States and its allies follow their own interests by escalating instability in Central Asia to establish pro-western regimes and to weaken SCO. Kamoliddin Rabbimov, an independent Tashkent-based analyst in Uzbekistan says: "I believe Iran's accession to the organization will be in Uzbekistan's interests at the moment, because if anti-American sentiments grow within the organization and its potential to confront the U.S. and the West grows, the Uzbek government is likely to feel safer." (quoted in Saidazimova, 2006)

**Reliable Ally:** Although it has never openly been stated, standing against US hegemony is one of the key intentions in the establishment of the SCO. Both China and Russia as leading members, regard US unilateralism as a source of threat against their own national interests and the desired 'world order'. Occasionally, they have revealed their grand strategy of seeking a multipolar world. Russia and China are concerned about US influence and NATO expansion into the Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2005 the United States applied for observer status in the SCO, but due to these concerns the US application was rejected. (Pikayev, 2008) Moreover Russia stands against NATO expansion which extends US hegemony to Russian borders. Russia has repeatedly expressed its concern and disagreement even threatens NATO expansion and possible membership of countries such as Ukraine. Many analysts view SCO as an Eastern response to NATO expansion. Close Cooperation between Central Asian states and the United States in the War on Afghanistan "threatened to further expand Western influences in Central Asia and even opened the possibility that the Central Asian states could one day become NATO members" (Gonzalez, 2007, P. 66)

China is also concerned about US hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 2002 US President George W. Bush labeled Iran,



North Korea and Iraq as 'Axis of Evil'. In response shortly after Bush's offensive address, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Tehran. His travel to Tehran at that critical moment conveyed this message to the world: "Prevent the domination of a superpower on the whole world". (Aylin, 2006, P.88) The common concern of China and Russia is gradually moving SCO in a direction to stand against US unilateralism. As an Iranian Parliamentarian puts it: "At international level, Shanghai Cooperation Organization is gradually turning into an Eastern version of NATO. In case of more eastern expansion of NATO, SCO will focus more on security matters and this will lead to the establishment of a secret alliance between China and Russia to fight US unilateralism." (Sanaci, 2010)

Iran as an independent regional power can be a strategic partner for Russia and China to follow their common interest in standing against US hegemony and moving toward a multipolar world. Iran's independent voice in the Muslim world, its geostrategic position in the oil rich Middle East which connects central Asia to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, multiplies the importance of this potential strategic partner for SCO leading members. The triangle of Russia, China and Iran is the major obstacle in the way of US unilateral policy whether it is in Syria of the Middle East, Central Asia or North Africa. "China, Russia and Iran are widely considered to be allies and partners. They form a strategic barrier directed against U.S. expansionism. The three countries form a triple alliance which constitutes the core of a Eurasian coalition directed against U.S. encroachment into Eurasia and its quest for global hegemony" (Saremi, 2012).

**Challenges: Western Pressure:** The relations between Iran and the West, the United States of America in particular, have become more challenging since 2003 after it came to light that Iran had been developing its nuclear program. Since then, regardless of repeated announcements by Iran over its peaceful nuclear intentions and actions and further negotiations between IAEA and Iran over





safeguards, the American administration has put fearful doubt on Iran's intentions. Hence, the current nuclear challenge has deepened the mistrust and enhanced confrontation between US and Iran. Mousavi & Nouruzi (2010) using game theory on US-Iran nuclear stand off argue "the ongoing absence of mutual trust between the two countries, has forced both of them to opt for a decision in their nuclear game with the highest cost for the other side." (P 148) This has led to the lack of initiative by either side for taking major steps towards a permanent solution. "Some US officials have even gone so far as to announce - and repeat - the possibility of a military strike against Iranian facilities to end the nuclear program. In reality, up to now no such drastic action has taken place. Rather,.... the US, aided by its European allies and enjoying Russian and Chinese lukewarm acquiescence, has imposed several rounds of sanctions against Iran through the adoption of obligatory resolutions by the United Nations Security Council". (Mousavi 2010, P122) But, these actions have failed to force the Iranians to end their peaceful program.

Western pressure against Iran's nuclear profile that has led to international sanctions is the main obstacle for membership of Iran in the SCO. Although Iran's resistance against US hegemony can be regarded as a positive factor for some SCO members, it can give an anti-American identity to this organization, which is not the disclosed intention of its member states. "In the eyes of China, Russia, and Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Iran's full membership, despite its economic and security advantages, can drag SCO into the fight between Tehran and the West." (Karami, 2011)

At the 2010 summit in Tashkent, the heads of states of the SCO approved a draft document on the 'regulations on procedure for admitting new members'. "The nature of these criteria is unclear, but it was spelled out by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev that any state that is currently the subject of UN sanctions cannot become an SCO member state". (Aris, 2011, P. 158) This document can be



referred to as the main obstacle in the way of Iran's membership in this organization. Yet any decision in this case depends on the will of the SCO members which depends on many other considerations. The SCO Secretary-General Muratbek Imanaliyev a few days before 2012 Summit in Beijing emphasized once again that "a request for membership by Iran, like requests by other countries, is at the center of attention and a special working group deals with these issues". He referred to the same document, underlining that Iran's membership request would not be ignored because of that. (Imanaliyev, 2012)

In the current international environment Iran's membership in the SCO implies the meaning that China, Russia and other members of the SCO generally stand by Iran's side in the nuclear struggle with the West. In that case if the United States, NATO or Israel ever attack Iran, SCO members are faced with the crisis of standing against them to support Iran; otherwise the SCO will lose its credibility and this certainly weakens the organization. This is while China albeit with some political challenges, is the first economic partner of the United States and seems not to fear its rising economy for support of Iran. Furthermore some other central Asian members of the SCO have close relationships with the West to the point that NATO established military bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the pretext of fighting against Taliban. (Sznajder, 2006)

In addition, Central Asian states have more challenges with their neighbors such as Russia, China and other Central Asian states. For example Uzbekistan is more concerned about its disputes with Tajikistan, Kirgizstan and Russia. So it's very unlikely for these small states will stand beside Iran or seriously take part in a coalition against the West or the United States (Karami, 2012). According to Tokayev, Kazakh Foreign Minister: "It is principally important not to give cause for speculations about SCO gradually turning into some kind of a 'nuclear club' of anti-Western orientation." (quoted in Aylin, 2006, P. 100)

**Radicalism:** Islamic movements in diverse forms exist in all six



members of the SCO. Russia has continuous friction with Muslim separatists of Chechnya and after the collapse of the Soviet Union has repeatedly resorted to military suppression against Chechnya's popular uprising. China has a similar entanglement in Uyghur in the Muslim province of Xing Jiang and in 2007 used military forces to suppress the separatist movement. The other four members of the SCO in central Asia are faced with newly rising radical Islamic groups. Continuous confrontation between secular governments as the legacy of 70 years of the Soviet rule and these groups is a permanent challenge which threatens security of these states.

The Islamic Republic of Iran with an Islamic ideology has been regarded with suspicion to be a supporter of Islamic fundamentalism, which may threaten the security of all six members of the SCO. Western media have a crucial role to depict Iran as a sponsor of radicalism and terrorism. Yet Muslims in Central Asia have very little connections with Iran. Because they are Suni Hanafi (which are ideologically close to Salafist thinking) and Iranian Muslims are Shiites. "Hanafi Wahhabis consider the Shi'as to be worse than infidels and believe that the killing of Shi'as is not a crime". (Eisenhower, 2000, P. 171) Most of the Islamic movements in Central Asia have offices in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia due to their Wahhabi and Hanafi population: "Central Asian states neither have clerics who are trained in Iran nor an Islamist movement which has an Office in Tehran or Qom." (Mohiaddin 1995)

In past years, SCO members have followed different strategies in dealing with Islamic Iran. China and Russia improved their relation with Iran and through the strategy of a 'closer relationship' tried to control Muslim separatists in these countries. Other four Muslim States took a reverse strategy and followed a 'cold and cautious relationship' with Iran in order to control Islamic fundamentalism. For example Uzbekistan in 1993 refused Iran's request to open Iranian cultural centers in Samarkand and Bokhara in the suspicion that Iran may agitate Islamic fundamentalism in this country. (Aylin,



2006, P.93) Another example, Kazakhstan did not permit Iran to open a bookshop in that country in the fear that Iran may distribute fundamentalist ideology in that country. (ibid) After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Iran just like SCO members joined international combat against Taliban, and supported Mujahedin of Afghanistan to establish a democratic regime there (Joya Laha, 2011). It showed central Asian states that their judgment and subsequently their strategy to keep away from Iran rooted in misunderstandings, and on the other hand, it showed that Chinese and Russian strategy to make a closer relationship with Iran was more applicable. The positive vote of four central Asian states for observer membership of Iran in the SCO in 2005 can be interpreted as a change in their look toward Iran.

**SCO Special Interests:** SCO members consider their own interests and then decide about admission of new members. Iran's membership in the SCO challenges some interests of some members and this can be regarded as a negative factor in their calculations to make their final decision. China and Russia are concerned about Iran's influence in Central Asia. Of course they have a sense of rivalry in Central Asia among themselves, but both of them do not want to see a third party with the capacity of Iran put steps in their de facto realm (Shariatinia, 2011). Iran has a lot in common with Central Asian states as most of this region was part of Persia: common history, culture and religion can shake Chinese and Russian influence. Russia also disagreed with Iran in creating an organization with the participation of countries bordering the Caspian Sea and made Iran's efforts abortive in that case in order to hinder Iran's influence in the region where Russia is dominant. (Karami, 2012) Furthermore Russia considers Iran as a great rival in the field of energy competition, including in the Caspian Sea basin, because Iran is a major oil producer and controls the second gas deposit after Russia (Blank, 1995). China as the world's greatest oil consumer is a common market for Iran and Russia.

Central Asian states consider Iran a great regional power.



Membership of great regional powers such as Iran, India and Pakistan can dwarf their role and marginalize them. For instance, among Asian states Uzbekistan has a traditional sense of rivalry with Tajikistan. Membership of Iran may benefit Persian-speaking Tajikistan due to its ethnical ties with Iran. So Tajikistan may be the first supporter of admission of Iran in that organization.

### III- United States Factor

For over three decades since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, there has consistently been a conflict between Iran and the United States over a host of issues (Mousavi et al 2010, P122) The role of the United States and its repercussion over the possible membership of Iran in the SCO is another factor that should not be ignored. In 2005 the United States made an application to gain an observer status in the SCO, but SCO members rejected this application. (CIMUN, 2009, P. 4) At the same time Iran successfully gained an observer status in this organization. Iran's membership in on one hand and rejection of the US application on the other hand irritated American authorities which tried not to be absent from an international organization such as SCO with grand members such as China and Russia.

The United States has at least four reasons to work against Iran's full membership in the SCO:

1- First, The United States has tried to isolate Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979. After 9/11, and especially after the escalation of challenges over Iran's nuclear dossier in 2003, the United States increased its political and economical pressures against Iran and successfully tried to refer Iran's nuclear issue to the UN Security Council in 2006 to impose several rounds of international sanctions against Iran (Fayazmanesh, 2008, P. 9). Iran's membership in the SCO will make US effort to isolate Iran abortive and is regarded as a failure to US policies against Iran.

2- The United States and Western powers are also concerned about the economical impacts of Iran's admission in the SCO. Iran



controls the second-largest gas reserves in the world after Russia. Alliance between Iran, Russia and other Central Asian energy exporters can lead to a Caspian Sea gas and oil cartel which may endanger Western energy security. David Wall, a regional expert at the University of Cambridge's East Asia Institute, told the Washington Times in 2006 that such a cartel "would essentially be OPEC with bombs." (CIMUN, 2009, P.6)

3- President Obama has made it clear that American national security priority for the decade to come is to look to Asia. This shift from Europe and Middle East to Asia is not undermining the former but giving a special priority for the years to come to Asia. The three main rising powers of the new millenniums include China, India and Russia. China with a market of 1.4 billion people is the second biggest world economy with GDP of \$11 trillion, and is expected to be the first world economy by 2025. India with over 1.2 billion population, the most successful democracy of the developing world has turned to be one of the fastest growing economies and a cheap service provider for the world. Russia is still the second biggest military build up of the world, with a high political intention of superpowerity. The combination of these three Asian powers is shifting the post-Cold War world order out of US-EU monopoly control. It is not that far from seeing the geographical modification of global governance center. (Mousavi 2012)

4- Possible formation of the triangle of China, Russia and Iran has concerned the United States of America (Gundzik, 2005). Iran's full membership in the international organization of SCO which depicts eastern counterpart of NATO, will strengthen the triangle and not only be a sever blow to the long-term policy of the United States to isolate Iran, but it will also strengthen the main opposition against US hegemony and its unilateral policy. Iran is a reliable ally for this global ambition. Hence, any serious alliance between Iran, China and Russia to some extent undermines US effectiveness in the Middle East, central Asia (Saremi, 2012), and more importantly in East Asia.



US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld in the following words indicated US stance against Iran's membership in the SCO: "It strikes me as passing strange that one would want to bring into an organization that says it is against terrorism one of the nations that is a leading terrorist sponsor in the world – Iran" (Al-jazeera, 20 October 2006) In response to Rumsfeld, SCO Secretary General Zhang Deguang replied: "We cannot abide by other countries calling our observer nation, sponsor of terror. We would not have invited Iran if we believed they sponsored terror." (quoted in Kimmage, 2006) SCO Secretary General response reveals the fact that "the SCO's definition of terror and terror sponsor is different from that of the US." (ibid)

## Conclusion

Growing challenges over security have led to the increasing importance of international organizations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of these rapidly growing ones. SCO was basically founded in order to establish border security for China, Russia and four Central Asian states. Despite many differences and incompatibilities among member states, SCO has developed to the point that many other regional and international powers such as the United States, Iran, India, Turkey and Pakistan have expressed their desire for membership. This shows that the international role of this organization is increasing far more than what founders have expected.

In 2005 Iran joined SCO as an observer member, and then applied for full membership. This application raised a lot of debates inside Iran, inside SCO members and in the international polity. Despite some views inside Iran against membership in this organization, the majority of Iranian analysts as well as the dominant authorities and decision makers of Iranian foreign policy supported and followed its membership application in the SCO. Yet the road to membership is not smooth for Iran. It is the SCO members, the major powers in particular, that decide the admission of new



members through realistic considerations to meet their realistic interests. In one side Iran has attractive potentials such as huge energy resources and great geopolitical situation to make this organization more effective, on the other side there are obstacles in the way. The most important is Iran's nuclear challenge with the West which has led to global sanctions against Iran. SCO members do not want to stand against the United States and its Western allies through joining Iran in this organization.

Although Iran's membership in the SCO seems remote in the shadow of Western pressures over Iran's nuclear profile, it depends on the international political environment and future events which can change calculations. Any development in Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West can remove the main obstacle. The relations between SCO key members and the West can also change the admission policy of this organization. As a case, the US-Iran negotiations has worsened due to neither side's flexibility and increasing Iranian influences in the regional polity such as Arab uprising, Syrian conflicts and Palestinian cause. Furthermore, expansion of NATO to include ex-Soviet states such as Ukraine can intensify tensions between Russia and the West. In response Russia may try to change SCO policy to stand against NATO and support admission of Iran in the SCO. Chinese economic challenges with the Western powers and China – US struggles over the Taiwan issue and any foreseen or unforeseen event can influence SCO response to Iran's application for membership.



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