



**Quest for Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization:
Iran's Leap Toward a Multilateral Regional Role**

Tatheer Zahra Sherazi,¹ & Lubna Abid Ali²

Abstract:

This study aims to examine Iran's quest for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the context of its calculated move to strengthen its multilateral regional position. The core question is in what way do Iran's objectives and position within the organization correspond to or depart from those of the other members? The study has been undertaken with the conceptual framework based on regionalism and complex interdependence. The study's qualitative methodology makes use of secondary sources to investigate Iran's political and economic maneuvers inside the SCO. According to the findings, Iran uses its SCO membership to pursue security assurances, business possibilities, and diplomatic influence while navigating the conflicting interests of major players like China and Russia. The study examines how, in the face of complex geopolitical circumstances, Iran is able to fulfill its ambitions both locally and regionally thanks to these intraregional political contestations. Overall, this study emphasizes how important the SCO is to Iran as a means of expressing its power and responding to outside criticism, especially from the West.

Keywords: SCO, Iran, regionalism, institutionalism, complex interdependence, multilateralism

INTRODUCTION

At Dushanbe, in the 21st Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on September 17, 2021, Iran obtained membership of SCO. Back in Tehran, Kayhan International hailed it as a diplomatic success (The Importance of Iran's SCO Membership, 2021). In 2005 Iran was given Observer Status in SCO. It took Iran fifteen years to obtain full membership of SCO. As a regional organization SCO membership comprises China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan since its inception in 2001. Process for membership of India and Pakistan started in 2015 and took only two years.

Previously, SCO had thus 8 members and now Iran's inclusion makes nine full SCO member states. Region comprised half of world's population and covers more than 20 percent of global GDP. Thus, geographically it is the largest regional organization. With 615 miles of longest Gulf Coastline; population twice the size of all Gulf States combined together, and rich energy sources, SCO

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: tatheersherazi@gmail.com

² Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Contemporary Studies, National Defense University (NDU), Islamabad. Email: lubnaabidali@ndu.edu.pk

membership offers Iran relative gains as a formidable regional player (Combined Maritime Forces, n. d.).

The paper is divided into four parts. First, Introduction which contains literature review, research methodology and conceptual framework which draws major assumptions from regionalism, and complex interdependence and. Second part examines the core objectives of SCO and Iran's participation in SCO. Third part comprises Iran's expectations and role in SCO along with convergence and divergence of interests. Finally, how the intraregional political contestations enable Iran to achieve success in its domestic and regional aspirations. In the age of interdependence and multilateralism, various regional and international organizations have emerged as crucial response to transnational conflicts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most important developments in Iran's geopolitical policy has been its entry to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Many academics stress the significance of the SCO as a political, economic, and security alliance that provides its members with a chance to oppose Western hegemony. Aris, for example, examines how the SCO promotes multilateral cooperation and an Eastern-oriented substitute for Euro-Atlantic dominance structures (Aris, 2013). Iran's goal to resist U.S. dominance in the area is in line with its pivot towards Asia, particularly through the SCO, as Ehteshami and Zweiri (2008) explore. Additionally, Allison points out that the SCO provides a platform for important regional players to handle intricate security and economic matters (Allison, 2021). These studies highlight Iran's strategic goal in using multilateral forums to strengthen its relationships with key countries like China and Russia and lessen the isolation caused by Western sanctions.

Power and Interdependence Revisited (1987), a landmark study by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, challenges conventional power politics by presenting the idea of complex interdependence, in which governments interact via a variety of means other than military force. comprehension regional organizations that function on the basis of cooperation rather than rivalry requires a solid comprehension of this idea. Keohane and Nye go on to explain that connections between the social and economic spheres influence state conduct and encourage cooperative agendas in times of conflict (Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner, 1998).

A comparative study of realist and neoliberal ideas is provided by Whaeeda Rana who highlights how complex interconnectedness contradicts realist ideas about anarchy and military might. Rana makes the case for a more complex theory of international relations that takes into account the effects of globalization and transnational challenges by examining the interconnection of nations (Rana, 2015).

Expanding upon the institutional processes of regional organizations, Krasner (1998) contends that convergence among member states—a prerequisite for cooperation—is fostered by common aims. This is consistent with Haas's neo-functionalism viewpoint, which holds that political cooperation can result from economic integration through spillover effects. The idea clarifies how governments cooperate on political and security matters due to economic interests, strengthening regional unity (Katzenstein et. al., 1998).

The discourse is enhanced by constructivist approaches, as expressed by Hooghe and Marks which emphasize the significance of identity, norms, and social constructions in forming regional connections. They contend that even in disparate geographical contexts, collaboration may be fostered by shared cultural and historical links (Hooghe, 2019).

The debate surrounding Iran's SCO membership has attracted a lot of attention. Iran's reasons for joining the SCO and the possible advantages it may experience are examined by Ayden Guven (2021), with a focus on security and economic cooperation. The author draws attention to how Iran's participation may affect regional dynamics, especially in light of its connections to powerful nations like China and Russia (Güven, 2021).

In the discussion of the geopolitical implications of China's \$400 billion agreement with Iran, Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers suggest that China's power in the Middle East may grow as a result of this collaboration (Myers, 2021). The partnership has the potential to yield economic benefits for Iran, which emphasizes the significance of regional alliances in augmenting economic stability and national security.

In her analysis of the importance of Iran's SCO membership, Nazila Fatehi (2021) makes the case that Tehran now has a platform for increased influence and participation in the area. Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould's thesis, which examines the significance of regional cooperation in Central Asia for Iran and its larger geopolitical consequences, echoes this (2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to comprehend regional dynamics and Iran's participation in the SCO, this article takes a qualitative approach, referencing governmental statements, books, expert opinions, and already-published academic sources. Data is taken from SCO-related journals, Iranian foreign policy papers, and a variety of geopolitical news. Iran's political and economic discourse on the SCO is analyzed using discourse analysis, while secondary sources provide data about the main players and goals of the organization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Due to rapid global transformations in the last two decades, IR scholars have shifted focus from states to institutions. States are no longer considered to be the only predominant actor in the study of International Politics. The mainstream IR literature has scientifically incorporated the role of transnational organizations. Study of regionalism in discipline of International Relations is defined as commonality of interests and shared goal through institutional mechanisms that shape collective action within a geographical region. The idea behind increased regional networks is that economic unifications may lead to political and strategic integration as well. European steel and Coal Community (ESCC) in 1951, for example resulted in the formation of supranational body EU through Epigenesis. As explained by Etzioni "a model of epigenesis includes statements about the sector in which the process starts; the functional sectors are added; and the relationship between growth in performances, power and communication capabilities" (Etzioni, 1963).

Liberal institutionalism, which holds that institutions, common objectives, and interdependence may achieve international cooperation, is the fundamental tenet of this paradigm. According to the theory, governments can cooperate within predetermined frameworks to address shared problems,

lowering conflict and fostering collective benefits. This concept demonstrates how institutional norms, regulations, and shared interests, in addition to power, impact interstate interactions.

As a critique of political realism, (Keohane & Nye, 1987) coined the term 'Complex Interdependence.' It was a response to emerging complexities of global interactions due to technological advancements and multiplicity of non-state actors and international organizations. Stephen Krasner further elaborated the conceptualization of regional organizations as comprising institutional mechanism. It is based on set of principles, values, and rules and agreed upon procedures. Shared goals therefore bring the convergence of actor perceptions about give set of issues (Katzenstein et. al, 1998).

Meena Singh Roy (2010) and Michael Fredholm (2013), who examine the SCO's position in Afghanistan and Eurasian geopolitics, respectively, provide insight on the difficulties associated with regionalism. They make the point that although the SCO seeks to promote security and stability, effective collaboration may be hampered by the intricacies of regional links and long-standing conflicts.

Iran's historical and cultural ties to Eurasian states like Russia and Central Asia help it accord with the goals of the SCO. A common regional identity and common threats (such terrorism and economic advancement) serve as unifying factors to reduce regional conflicts. Iran's SCO participation fosters associative coherence with other members and creates a shared regional narrative on security and economic prosperity. Iran's location in the Persian Gulf and its enduring rivalries, such those with Saudi Arabia, make wider regional cooperation difficult. Nevertheless, cooperation is encouraged by Iran's strategic significance and shared security concerns (such Afghanistan stability) with other SCO members.

The body of research on regionalism, intricate interconnection, and Iran's SCO membership demonstrates the complexity of the field of international relations. Theoretical models like neo-functionalism and complex interdependence offer important insights into the workings of regional cooperation. Analysis based on empirical data highlights Iran's SCO membership's strategic goals and possible effects on regional dynamics. This corpus of work emphasizes how crucial it is to comprehend theoretical underpinnings as well as real-world applications while examining modern international relations. The basis for further investigation into the changing dynamics within regional organizations and the part played by state actors in creating cooperative frameworks in a world growing more linked is established by this overview of the literature.

By conceptualizing the conduct of interstate relations as interdependent, (Nye, 2012) differentiated between dependence and interdependence through the notion of issue-area. The outcomes of political bargaining will increasingly vary by issue area. Linkages among issues will become more problematic and will tend to reduce rather than reinforce international hierarchy. This explains the coexistence of conflict and cooperation in issue areas pursued by states simultaneously. Thus, existence of conflict in one issue-area does not prevent cooperation in host of other areas of mutual interest and shared goals.

Three underlying assumptions of Complex Interdependence are:

- i. Multiple Channels of actions between societies for conduct of inter-governmental and transnational relations.

- ii. Absence of hierarchy among issues and linkages between issues prioritized.
- iii. Minor role of military force in conduct of interstate relations. The stress on cooperative agenda is with the objective to discourage the role of coercive power in state interaction (Nye, 2012).

Decisions are jointly made on principles of unanimity on the basis of shared institution. The Process of European unification is elaborated in the context of enhanced institutional capacity, arbitrary delegation of sovereignty, where actor expectations converge in distinct political settings. Shared economic interests bring stronger regional nations to engage with weaker ones under the same rules and policies. For instance, from US to Asia, Africa to Eurasia or Australia a host of regional organizations have emerged to counter trade barriers and allow free movement of people (Haas, 1971).

What, Ernest Haas, elaborated in the context of spill over, the liberal trade policies within custom's unions initiated the 'spill-over' from economic policies to the formation of "Political Community" (Haas, 1958). Stanley Hoffman, however, warned against, role of national self-conception that might lead to withholding of information and denial of legitimacy to supra national authority. He suggested, "in areas of key importance to national interest, nations prefer the certainty, or the self-controlled uncertainty, of national self-reliance, to the uncontrolled uncertainty" (Hoffman, 1966). Thus, integration theory was reformulated by Lindberg and Scheingold (Lindberg, & Scheingold, 1970). It incorporated three mechanisms of 'integration' in the spill-over concept of Ernest Haas.

- a. Demand on the system in the form of bargaining exchanges.
- b. Actor-socialization i. e, mobilization of interest groups, to develop new perspectives, loyalties and mutual interactions.
- c. Feedback, which refers to the impact of output on the public at large. To overcome national resistance and facilitate supranational leadership. The success of decision being ensured by mass support.

The neo-functionalist theory of international integration and Intergovernmentalism was revised by the work of Andrew Moravcsik (1998). He combined liberal and rationalist perspectives by drawing together core concept of power and national preferences.

Andrew Moravcsik's Liberal Intergovernmentalism included three phases: national preferences, interstate bargaining and institutional choice. National preferences are influenced by domestic group's objectives. The outcomes relate to economic interdependence and geopolitical (national security) interests. Thus, the core group's preferences shape the choice for the necessity of cooperation at international level to initiate corresponding changes in domestic institutions. Trade liberalization requires exchange rate adjustments, fiscal arrangements and removal of tariffs to trade or commercial regulations. So as to establish mechanism of bargaining for balanced common profits at international negotiations interstate bargaining requires state's efficiency. The outcomes require equal distribution of gains. The decisional outcomes are usually shaped by powerful governments. It is here that regionalism addresses the equation of power asymmetry by a host of governments pursuing similar agenda for distribution of relative gains.

There are the factors that shape interactions of peoples and groups based on identity. Simultaneously, the diversity challenge and nationalistic impulse is unified by organizational coherence (Owens, 2010). This has been made possible with ideational attributes drawn from the

core assumptions of social constructivism. Thus actors' interests and identities are shaped in the context in which they find themselves interactive and productive. The identity is not only rooted in immutable laws of power politics or anarchy. Therefore, role of history, culture identity, norms and perception are equally significant in the formation of actor preferences. Regionalism has emerged as a mechanism to give identity and sense of purpose that is expressed by institutional framework. Thus, constructivists emphasize ideas and communication networks. The process of integration was defined by Karl W. Deutsch as "the attainment, within a territory, of a 'sense of community' and of institutions and practices strong enough and widespread enough to assure, for a long time dependable expectations of 'peaceful change' among its population" (Deutsch et. al., 1957). As such, Deutsch did not mean integration necessarily as "the merging of peoples or governmental units into a single unit." Instead, for him it means the achievement of "sense of community" or "the common 'we' feeling." According to Deutsch, a "security community" includes "a group of people which has become integrated" and its members are assured that they "will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way" (Ahmad, 2013).

Buzan and Waever define region on the basis of regional organization to promote economic, political, cultural and military cooperation (Wæver, 2003). Similarly, on the basis of organizational structures civil society is enabled to communicate values across the region. This breaks the deterministic outcomes of politics diluted with possibilities of change and emancipation. Within the pace of emerging technologies and globalizations, regionalism seems to gain strength. It focuses on economic growth, integration, enhanced security, institutional coherence and facilitates state building, through pooling of resources.

CORE OBJECTIVES OF SCO AND IRAN'S PARTICIPATION

Thus, the study of regionalism based on liberal institutionalism has emerged as a subject of International Relations and is closely entertained with political realism (Grieco, 1988). Key objections of SCO since its creation in 2001 are;

Preservation of Regional Peace

The SCO's primary goal continues to be the preservation of regional peace. Members often engage in cooperative military drills and intelligence sharing to counteract the danger posed by terrorist organizations and insurgencies, especially in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Economic Integration

Member nations are now collaborating on projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a prime example of the growing economic cooperation among them. With the goal of assisting its members' economy, the SCO works to promote infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and intraregional commerce.

Political Cooperation

In order to lessen the influence of the West in world governance, the SCO gives its members a forum to coordinate their foreign policy goals. It promotes cooperation and multilateral diplomacy on global issues when the West has a substantial effect, including military operations or sanctions (Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), 2017).

In the SCO meeting of the Heads of State Council, on 17 September, 2021 Chinese President, Xi Jinping announced the commencement of process to grant full membership to Iran in SCO. With the admission of Iran, SCO now has all the relevant players to obtain its objectives, regional security, elimination of terrorism and economic, development. Afghanistan, Mongolia and Turkey are observer states. In addition, Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been added as dialogue partners. Late Ebrahim Raisi, the President of Islamic Republic of Iran stated “Let me express my satisfaction for attending this important and influential meeting which is one of the few opportunities for dialogue to ensure real peace and cooperation at the regional level” (Güven, 2021).

Iran contributes to the creation of a common regional narrative on security and economic success through SCO membership, which encourages associative coherence among members. It is challenging to achieve more regional collaboration with Iran due to its Persian Gulf position and long-standing rivalries, including those with Saudi Arabia. However, Iran's strategic importance and common security concerns with other SCO members—such as the stability of Afghanistan—encourage collaboration. Foremost, SCO membership provides Iran an opportunity to break the sanctions wall of US. At SCO Summit, the Iranian late President Ebrahim Raisi, hailed it as a diplomatic victory and stated “The World has extended a new era, hegemony and unilateralism are declining” (Javad, 2024). SCO's acceptance of Iran's membership means Iran is subject to unilateral sanctions and SCO does not recognize them as international sanctions. This membership enables Iran to draw diplomatic support and question the legitimacy of US sanctions;

There are three cardinal principles of Islamic Iran's foreign policy as enshrined in Constitution:

- i. Islami Jamhuriya-e-Iran; it means the continuity of principle of *velayat-e-faqih* (the governance of juris consult)
- ii. *Iqtisadiye Khud Kefaya-e-Iran* Economic independence of Iran
- iii. *Irane-Mustaqil* National independence and sovereignty.

President Raisi made his first foreign visit to Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan to attend SCO Summit. It provided opportunity on increasing bilateral political and economic cooperation. Both late President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Ali Khamen had stressed the policy of “look to the East” (Mehdi, 2021). This was in national interest of Iran not only to end its economic isolation from the West, but also compensate its banking and trade problems created by US sanctions. SCO includes both the largest fuel producers and the largest buyers of hydrocarbons. That constitutes relative gains for Iran, crippled by US sanctions (Heiran-Nia, 2022). SCO is providing Iran to operate in the following domains by giving it a leverage strategically, diplomatically and economically.

Iran's Strategic Links with Eastern Bloc

The Russia-Ukraine War, which has been raging for more than a year, solidified the "East-West" hostility that has been brewing on a global scale since March 2022. It seems that the "East-West" rivalry has the potential to become a turning point in international affairs, akin to the conclusion of the Cold War or the September 11 attacks, as the war moves from a state of tension to full-blown warfare (Uygur, 2023).

Security Assurance

Iran, standing with Russia, China, and India, represents the fourth side of the Eastern power equation. This is the Shanghai Organization's greatest output: a new amalgam of the Eastern bloc in the face of the Western bloc. Our nation's influence and strength in the regional power dynamics will grow as a result of this move, which was made in response to Tehran's deal with Saudi Arabia and other diplomatic victories. Additionally, it will improve Iran's standing and fortify ties and collaboration with its allies in the neighborhood and beyond ("Benefits of Iran's official membership," 2023).

Diplomatic leverage

However, the UN Security Council grants veto power to China and Russia, two significant members of this organization, which raises the organization's political stature. Consequently, the organization's members' ability to work together and generate synergy has the potential to alter the global power structure and contribute to the creation of a new global order.

Bilateral Treaties

Concrete evidence of the current state of affairs includes the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China, the Saudi normalization facilitated by China, and the swift development of relations with Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, which had never before improved significantly due to a number of factors, including the Israeli factor ("Benefits of Iran's official membership," 2023).

Economic Gains

Iran's decision to join the SCO in full underscores its aim to broaden its international ties and lessen its dependency on Western markets, which are getting harder to access as a result of sanctions. Iran wants to obtain significant economic gains from the SCO, as stated in the Iranian news, having been hit hard by Western sanctions. However, from a practical standpoint, the SCO's main objective is to eliminate shared risks to the national security and territorial integrity of member nations from separatist and extremist groups, rather than becoming a regional community centered on commerce and economics (Uygur, 2023).

Convergence and Divergence of Interests amongst SCO Members

China has provided Iran with technological know-how to develop its energy resources, to develop its military hardware and advance its outmoded oil infra-structure (Myers, 2021). Officially, the foreign ministries of China and Iran signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, also known as the Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program of 400 billion dollars, in Tehran on March 27, 2021. It is a 25-year cooperation agreement on the continued growth of Iran-China ties ("Iran-China 25-year," 2020).

Culturally Iran and China are different and have divergent regional interests, but a common adversary, the United States, that has prompted the two countries to work together (Fatehi, 2021). Moreover, SCO provides both Iran and China to cooperate against a common threat of instability from their neighboring country Afghanistan. US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August Pakistan shares 2, 640 Km of long border, with Afghanistan, Iran has 921 Km long border with Afghanistan

and China shares a small border with Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor (Gould, 2009). The common perception is humanitarian crisis that could turn Afghan territory into a base for terror networks like Islamic state, Al-Qaeda and The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Beijing fears that ETIM could not only draw inspiration from Afghan Taliban but use Afghan territory for attacks in the neighborhood. Thus stability in Afghanistan is a key for the success of economic cooperation in the region. To curb extremist ideology, both Pakistan and China share the objective to offer economic incentives to Taliban regime to promote stability and harmony.

Thus, geographically and on the basis of ethnic connectivity Afghanistan constitutes an integral part of SCO. Out of 150 ethnic groups living in SCO region, around 30 are living in Afghanistan. Though ethnic groups are scattered across the region, yet Afghanistan is situated at the juncture of most ethnicities represented in SCO member states. Chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in Taliban's return to power in Kabul. Due to instability in Afghanistan conflict may spill over to neighboring countries. Enlargement of SCO members are with the purpose to bring committed efforts to resolve the situation in Afghanistan by making its economy and trade functional (Roy, 2010). Michael Fred Holm in his evaluation has considered SCO, as the key regional security group in Asia. It is considered as NATO of the East (Fredholm & Schlyter, 2013) in terms of achieving political and strategic interest. SCO offers Tehran to obtain connectivity to end its isolation. This enables Iran to offer a bridge for landlocked Central Asian States and advance Iran – Afghanistan – Uzbekistan Corridor. There by, to link Mazar Sharif and Herat directly to Iran's Chahbahar Port. China already has intention to link Iran and Pakistan.

An underappreciated aspect in this context is the significance of organization from Russian perspective. Iran has been considered as a force against drug trafficking, terrorism and transnational crime. This challenge has gained salience by Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August and rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham-Khoraasan. SCO membership of Iran strengthened by Russia with the need to engage Tehran under the quadrilateral Russian – Chinese – Pakistan – US talks.

On October 5, 2021 Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdullahian travelled to Moscow to meet his Russian Counterpart. Iran has also been part of Russia's greater Eurasia project, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It combines SCO's founding members, except China. Iran's Interim free trade agreement with the EAEU, "covering 50 percent of traded goods to a permanent free trade zone" (Sim & Grajewski, 2021) is to counter the US-EU all-encompassing partnership.

Intraregional Political Partnerships

SCO has provided Iran a platform to efficiently handle its own internal and regional objectives through its SCO's intra-regional political dynamics. Despite the fact that the main players have different goals, Iran has greater leeway on the platform. To counter the three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism the SCO has its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure since 2001. It headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan serves as a permanent organization of SCO. In 2019 the UNCTED, Counter Terrorism Committee Executive directorate, of United Nations and Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), SCO signed an MOU for framework of cooperation which was established in 2012-13. The agreement provides information exchange on counter terrorism and support of capacities related with border security as well (New framework for enhanced

cooperation between RATS SCO and UN CTED, 2019). Iran has the potential to increase its sway over Central Asia and the larger Eurasian continent. Its geopolitical alliances, economic connections, and cultural diplomacy with China and Russia establish it as a major regional force. Within larger members of SCO like Russia and China there exist divergence and convergence of interest China's increased involvement in Central Asia is a concern for Russia which considers this region as its sphere of influence.

Iran's membership in SCO provides Russia institutional mechanism to observe deepening ties between China and Iran. At the same time Russia may acquire a balancing leverage to settle modalities with Iran over the renewal of its agreement with Iran that expired in March. It was signed by Mohammad Khatami, the then President of Iran, 2001. Then, a new approach to foreign policy shaped and converged the mutuality of interest between Iran and Russia. The key elements included a pragmatic, non-ideological perception of the world beyond their borders. During that time a 'Treaty on the Foundation of Relations and Principles of Cooperation' as the framework to conduct politics, trade, economy, science, research, technology, culture and other areas was also adopted (Dunaeva, 2013). A moderate assessment of security threats, an emphasis on global economic priorities, and the replacement of the "multi-polar strategy with a multi-vector one" (Dunaeva, 2013).

Iran is under economic pressure due to US sanctions and currently under influence of Ghaza war. Iran had finally decided to go 'East'. Iran's ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali in July 21, 2021 called on China and Russia to form an anti-sanctions club. Russia is one of the countries that opposes the US request for extension of UN arms embargo on Iran. The Syrian crises are a mutual concern of Iran and Russia. One of the important issues in extending the 20-year contract is the future of Syria and Iran's role in it. Jalali claimed that based on Khamenei's letter and a reply by Putin it was decided to set a 20-year period for the new agreement (Grajewski N., 2021).

Bilateral Iran Russia trade volume about US \$1.6 billion (2019) is expected to increase with Russia-Iran longer term free trade agreement within Eurasian Economic Union. To counter the possibility of a Russia- US - Israel - Saudi alliance in Middle East, may be countered by a renewal of bilateral treaty and Iran's membership in SCO. The most important factor is mutuality of 'trust' between the powerful members of SCO and Iran.

As far as Pakistan is concerned Iran - Pakistan shares about 590 miles of border in the South West of Pakistan (Lamb, 1968). Political instability in Afghanistan has a spill-over affect. A compassing eastern Iran, north-west Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan had been the leading heroin producing region. The so called 'Golden Crescent' (Donald, 1992). The measures to combat drug-trafficking and border security require joint efforts. The contours of any workable solution require a common regional security perception. Iran-Pakistan relations had been historically shaped not only by bilateral and global correlation of forces but shaped by political interaction of regional states as well. SCO has also a complexity of national self-conception that exhibit divergence of interests. Even Pakistan and Iran have irritants and commonality of interests in their mutual relations. It is like a tight wire balancing act. Pragmatism defines Iran's quest for a regional role. The notion of "security umbrella" (Chatrye-amniyat), not in Iran's hand seems acceptable. It is thus amniyat-e-dast-fam' ii (collective security) (Shanahan, February 2015) comprising regional arrangement and a network of bilateral treaties between Iran and regional states. This has been stated by Ambassador Riffat

Masood, former Ambassador of Pakistan to Iran that full membership is an additional commitment. Membership of Iran in SCO within the regional framework may not ensure Iran economic and trade benefits that it has been able to derive on the basis of its bilateral agreement with SCO member states (Masood, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Iran's geopolitical policy has taken a significant turn with its full SCO membership, which enables it to participate multilaterally in regional and international events. Key SCO players have areas of agreement and disagreement, but the group nonetheless offers Iran significant security assurances, business prospects, and diplomatic clout. Iran's participation in the SCO will be crucial to realizing its goals on the domestic and regional fronts as it continues to negotiate the complicated inter-regional political dynamics.

It is indisputable that Western nations oppose Iran's admission to the SCO. Israel, Europe, and the United States are disturbed by Iran's shift from the relatively balanced policies of the Rouhani or Khatami governments to a military-political extension of the Eastern bloc in West Asia, ending its international isolation and positioning itself as a key ally of a nascent but dynamic alliance. In fact, it's thought that Iran's military stance in a number of areas, such as Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, together with the instances of tanker captures in the Persian Gulf, correspond with the strategic preferences of the Beijing-Moscow partnership. Even though there has been much advancement in the nuclear field, these elements are frequently mentioned as major barriers to a potential agreement.

References:

- Ahmad, M. (2013). Integration theory and the role of core state in regional organizations. *Regional Studies*, 31(3), 39-67.
- Allison, G. (2021, Dec. 7). *The Great Rivalry: China vs. the U.S. in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School.
- Aris, S. (2013). *Eurasian regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benefits of Iran's official membership in SCO will remain in history. (2023, Jul. 6). *Tehran Times*.
- Combined Maritime Forces. (n. d.). CTF 152: Gulf Maritime Security. *Combined Maritime Forces* website. <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-152-gulf-security-cooperation/>
- Deutsch, K. W., Burrell, S. A., Kann, R. A., Lee, M., Lichterman, M., Lindgren, E. L., Loewenheim, F. L., & Wagenen, R. W. (1957). *Political community and the North Atlantic area: International organization in the light of historical experience*. Princeton University Press.
- MacDonald, S. B., & Zagaris, B. (Eds.). (1992). *Afghanistan international handbook on drug control*. Bloomsbury Publishing, Greenwood Press.
- Dunaeva, E. (2013). Russo-Iranian political relations in the first decade of the twenty-first century. *Iranian Studies*, 46(3), 443-69. doi:10.1080/00210862.2012.758503
- Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (2008). *Iran's foreign policy: From Khatami to ahmadinejad*. Ithaca Press.
- Etzioni, A. (1963). The epigenesis of political communities at international level. *American Journal of Sociology*, 68(4), 407-21. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1086/223398>
- Fatehi, N. (2021, Sep. 28). What will SCO membership mean for Iran. *Middle East Institute*.
- Fitzgerald, P., & Gould, E. (2009). *Invisible history: Afghanistan's untold story*. City Lights Books.

- Fredholm, M., & Schlyter, B. (Eds.). (2013). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and erasian geopolitics: New directions, perspectives, and challenges*. Nias Press.
- Grajewski, N. (2021, Nov.). *The evolution of Russian and Iranian cooperation in Syria* (Report). Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington D.C. USA. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>
- Grieco, J. (1988). Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: A realist critique of newest liberal institutionalism. *International Organization*, 42(3), 485-507.
- Güven, A. (2021, Sep.). Iran's membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Expectations and possible scenarios. The Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM).
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
- Haas, E. B. (1971). *The study of regional integration: Reflections on the joy and anguish of pretheorizing in regional integration: Theory and Research*. Harvard University Press.
- Heiran-Nia, J. (2022, May 11). How Iran's interpretation of the world order affects its foreign policy. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/how-irans-interpretation-of-the-world-order-affects-its-foreign-policy/>
- Hoffman, S. (1966). Obstinate or obsolete? The fate of the nation-state and the case of Western Europe. *Daedalus*, 95(3), 862-915.
- Hooghe, L. a. (2019). *A postfunctionalist theory of governance: Measuring international authority*. Oxford University Press.
- Iran-China 25-year comprehensive plan for co-op proves failure of efforts to isolate Iran: government. (2020, Jun. 23). *Tehran Times*.
- Javad, H.-N. (2024, Jul. 17). How Iran's next president sees an emerging "New World Order." *Stimson Center*. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/how-irans-next-president-sees-an-emerging-new-world-order/>
- Katzenstein, P. J., Keohane, R. O., & Krasner, S. D. (1998). International organization and the study of world politics. *International Organization*, 52((4-), 645-85.
- Keohane, R. O. & Nye, J.S. (2012). *Power and interdependence* (4th Ed.). Longman.
- Lamb, A. (1968). *Asian frontier: Studies in continuing problem*. Pragar.
- Lindberg, L. N., & Scheingold, S. A. (1970). *Europe's would-be polity: Patterns of change in the European Community*. Englewood Cliffs.
- Masood, A. R. (2021, Dec. 2). Iran's membership in SCO: An opportunity. IRS Webinar.
- Mehdi, K. J. (2021). Iran's eastern policy: Potential and challenges. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 19(3), 25-49. doi:doi: 10.31278/1810-6374-2021-19-3-25-49
- Moravcsik, A. (1998). *The choice for Europe: Social purpose and state power from Messina to Maastricht*. Cornell University Press.
- Myers, F. F. (2021, Mar. 27). China, with \$400 billion Iran deal could deeper influence in Mideast. *New York Times*.
- Myers, F. F. (2021, Oct. 27). Iran applies to join an Asian alliance led by China and Russia. *The New York Times*.
- New framework for enhanced cooperation between RATS SCO and UN CTED. (2019, Mar. 25). *United Nations Security Council - Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC)*. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/new-framework-enhanced-cooperation-between-rats-sco-and-un-cted>

- Owens, J. B. (2010). *Globalization and world politics* (5th Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Rana, W. (2015, Feb.). Theory of complex interdependence: A comparative analysis of realist and neoliberal thoughts. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 6(2), 290-94.
- Roy, M. S. (2010, Jul.). Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan: Scope and limitation. *Strategic Analysis*, 34(4), 545-61.
- Shanahan, R. (2015, Feb.). *Iranian foreign policy under Rouhani: Promise of change*. Lowey Institute.
- Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (2017, Jan. 9). General information: Cooperation with international and regional organizations. (2017, Jan. 9). SCO Website. <https://eng.sectsc.org/20170109/192193.html>
- Sim, L-C., & Grajewski, N. (2021, Oct. 29). What does Russia get out of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization? *Atlantic Council*.
- The importance of Iran's SCO membership. (2021, Sep. 17). *Kayhan*. <https://kayhan.ir/en/news/94491/the-importance-of-iran%E2%80%99s-sco-membership>
- Uygur, H. (2023, Jul. 7). The meaning of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. *IRAM Center for Iranian Studies*. https://iramcenter.org/en/the-meaning-of-irans-membership-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-_en-23988
- Wæver, B. B. (2003). *Regions and powers, The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.

Date of Publication	June 05, 2024
---------------------	---------------