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An Analysis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran's “Look East” Policy

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Abstract

The inclusion of Iran has forged a connection between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and West Asia. From the “Shanghai Five” mechanism to the SCO, this organization has shifted its focus on regional connections to a sense of community and a shared future. It has now evolved into a major force in the construction of a more stable security environment in the Eurasian region. The SCO welcomes new members from near and far. The accession of Iran marks the beginning of the SCO’s “westward expansion”, showing the SCO’s growing regional influence and organizational appeal. Confronted with the diplomatic siege amidst extreme pressure and international sanctions, Iran upholds the diplomatic principles of “Dignity, Wisdom and Expediency.” It flexibly adjusts its “Look West” policy to a “Look East” policy and uses dynamic diplomacy to shift its status from “Independence” to “Engagement”. In the meantime, Iran’s attitude towards its accession to the SCO changed from a “vague attempt” to a “clear action”, and it secured full membership in the SCO with its determination for “firm accession”. Iran insists on strategic independence in the complex international environment, actively integrates into the SCO, and seeks membership in the BRICS. Its “Look East” policy aims to amplify its strategic depth, avert internal and external difficulties and shuttle the hegemony of the “Western” liberal international order.

Keywords: Iranian Diplomacy, SCO, “Look East”.

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Introduction

Since its establishment, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has played a unique role in regional security and political, economic and cultural development. The SCO not only strengthened multilateral cooperation in the Eurasian region and bilateral ties among member states but also emerged as an essential platform for regional issues and cooperation. This, in turn, has significantly contributed to a stable and harmonious environment and regional security. The inclusion of Iran, a major country in West Asia, as the ninth official member of the SCO marks a new stage for the “westward expansion” of the SCO’s cooperative space. This development is poised to exert a growing impact on the vast number of developing countries in Eurasia. According to the expanding role of the SCO, what are the main motivations and strategic considerations for the decisions of Iran, a major power in the Middle East? How does the decisions reflect Iran’s changing role in diplomatic development and its contribution and influence on the SCO’s “westward expansion” strategy? In the academic literature of the relevant system discussing Iran’s accession to the SCO, firstly, the reasons for Iran’s accession to the SCO are mostly analyzed from the ideological and realpolitik perspectives. Whether Iran can join the SCO depends to a large extent on the progress of the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue, and also depends on the relations between SCO member states and western countries. Secondly, it mainly analyzes the motives of the SCO’s engagement with Iran from a geopolitical perspective, aiming to balance the influence of the west (especially the United States) in Eurasia, and regards Iran’s accession as an important force to strengthen the “anti-western” nature of the SCO. The above two types of studies explored the reasons, process and influence of Iran’s accession to the SCO from different perspectives, but they separated the relationship between Iran and the SCO and could not properly examine the interaction between them. This paper examines the overall relationship between Iran and the SCO, analyzes the internal and external factors of Iran’s application to join the SCO, and selects the two-way perspective of Iran’s “looking east” and the SCO’s “looking west” to analyze, which has theoretical value and practical significance to understand the logic and motives of deepening the relationship between them.

1. The Evolution and Change in Iran’s Policy on Joining the SCO

A reflection on the origins of Iran and the SCO suggests that Iran's accession to the SCO is a step-by-step process, which shows Iran’s continued efforts to activate collaborative networks in its vicinity and shake off isolation and sanctions. After its application for observer status in 2004, Iran attained observer status together with Pakistan and India at the SCO Astana Summit in July 2005, followed by a formal application for full membership in 2008. However, factors such as US-Iran relations, the Iranian nuclear issue, international sanctions, and lack of consensus within the SCO on Iran’s attitude posed a hindrance to Iran’s formal membership. The status quo changed on September 17, 2021, at the SCO 20th Anniversary Summit in Dushanbe, where the SCO Heads of State Council initiated the process for Iran to join the organization. After consultations

between authorized representatives of the SCO member states and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the formal accession protocol was signed On March 11, 2022, in the capital of Uzbekistan. In accordance with the legal procedures for accession to the SCO as a member state, the document determines Iran's obligation to abide by the goals and principles of the SCO Charter and accede to all valid international treaties and normative documents. At the SCO Samarkand Summit, Iran formally communicated its intention to sign a memorandum of commitment to join the SCO. On July 4, 2023, Iran officially joined the SCO as the 9th member of the SCO.

Iran has been an observer member of the SCO for 15 years. During this period, the country has seen three presidents – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani, and Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi. Despite their different domestic factions, such as hard-line conservatives, moderate reformists, and traditional conservatives, as well as their different foreign policy priorities, all of them inherited, adjusted, and developed Iran's overall foreign policy principles and policies. Especially under the Khamenei era, Iran's overall diplomacy remained consistent. Successive presidents have adjusted Iran's diplomacy based on the international environment, regional situations, and the country's internal situation. Therefore, from the perspective of time and space, the accession to the SCO is Iran's long-cherished wish.

1.1 Origin: From “Iranian Independence” to “Iranian Engagement”

In the era of Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, Iran's diplomatic principle of “Neither East, nor West, Islamic Republic” derived the country to independency. In the post-Khomeini era, Supreme Leader Khamenei inherited and adjusted Iran's foreign policy. Its diplomatic principles of “Dignity, Wisdom and Expediency” have steered Iran away from the independence of the Khomeini era and enabled a shift towards engagement with national characteristics and improved integration into the international community. Under the Khamenei era, the “independence” of Iran's diplomacy is reflected in the balanced foreign policy adopted by successive Iranian presidents, who “want both the East, the West, and Islam.” Specific manifestations include political, economic and trade exchanges and cooperation between Iran and the West during the Ali Akbar Hashemi Rahmani Rafsanjani period, cultural interaction with global civilizations under the Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, and diplomatic exchanges with the East during the Ahmadinejad period. The Rouhani era witnessed détente with the West and constructive interaction with the East until President Raisi's diplomatic strategy of “balanced diplomacy, dynamic diplomacy, and smart interaction,” which focused on the East. It can be seen that Iran's foreign policy under Khamenei's leadership is characterized by flexible and pragmatic diplomacy centered around national interests. At the same time, Iran continues to vacillate between “westward” and “eastward”.

In the 1990s, faced with the United States' proposal of a “dual containment” strategy against Iran, Iran's “Eastern Strategy” came into being. This approach primarily contains relations with the United States and European countries but fosters closer ties with Eastern powers. Iran significantly strengthened its relations with Eastern countries such as China, Russia, India, and those in Latin America. Against this backdrop, Iran began to intensify

its interaction with Eastern countries, with a specific focus on expanded cooperation with the SCO, as advocated by successive presidents.

During the presidency of Khatami, Iran applied for an observer state of the SCO in 2004. Ahmadinejad became the president in June 2005, and Iran attained observer state status of the SCO in July of the same year. Since then, the United States has intensified pressure on Iran through its "dual containment" strategy. The Ahmadinejad administration firmly implemented a "Look East" diplomacy in an attempt to stitch itself closer with China, Russia, India and other countries. Iran expressed its intention to become a full member of the SCO and submitted a formal application in 2008. As Ahmadinejad put it, "The SCO is a very effective organization that helps maintain peace and stability in the region and the world." Iran is willing to strengthen its partnership with SCO member states. However, Western concerns over the Iranian nuclear issue and the nuclear weapons of SCO members created impediments to Iran's formal membership in the organization.

1. 2 Obstacle: Diplomatic Siege under International Sanctions

Between 2006 and 2010, the United Nations Security Council issued ten anti-Iran resolutions, four of which imposed international sanctions on the country. At that time, the SCO exhibited varying attitudes towards Iran's full membership. In particular, the 2010 Tashkent Summit adopted the "Regulations on the Acceptance of New Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", which stipulates that member within the SCO "should not be subject to any sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council". At the same time, Iran's resistance to the West diverged from the comprehensive and cooperative foreign policy of SCO members with the West. In response, then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad decided not to attend the SCO summit in Tashkent in 2010. Since then, Iran's diplomacy has focused on its nuclear game with the United States and other Western countries while maintaining strong interactions with Europe and other countries to alleviate the pressure of international sanctions. During this period, Iran's enthusiasm towards the SCO has waned, and the Rouhani government in Iran focused on negotiations with Western nations concerning the nuclear issue throughout its first term.

In the 2013 Iranian presidential election, Rouhani, a moderate reformist, became the president of Iran. His administration introduced domestic and foreign policies of "hope" and "constructive interaction," which greatly alleviated internal and external difficulties. Especially after the signing of the Iran Nuclear Agreement (JCPOA) in 2015, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions on Iran. As a result, Iran's diplomatic space and options expanded. Despite these developments, the moderately reformist Rouhani government continues to prioritize its diplomacy on exchanges with the West over its pursuit of SCO membership. The easing of sanctions gave rise to a flocking of global business into Iran. Faced with the enthusiasm of European countries, Iran's urgent need to join the SCO has once again weakened. Although senior Iranian officials have been participating as observers in SCO activities such as summits, ministerial meetings, and anti-terrorism exercises, progress towards Iran's SCO membership remained static during this period.

In addition, the Tajikistan factor has become a major obstacle to Iran's accession to the

SCO. Specifically, sectarian ties between the two countries have limited Iran's inclusion in the SCO. It is undeniable that Iran and Tajikistan share common historical and cultural ties. In addition, Persian, as the official language of both countries, should form a basis for cultural relations. However, the divergence in religious beliefs - Tajikistan's commitment to Sunni Islam and Iran's Shia Islamism - has erected barriers to sound relations between the two countries. In particular, Tajikistan's violation of the principle of good neighborliness and friendship escalated tensions, which prevented Iran from formal accession to the SCO in 2017. At the end of 2015, Mukhiddin Kabiri, leader of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), attended the Islamic Unity Conference in Iran as a special guest and held a meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Subsequently, Tajikistan issued a protest note to Iran's ambassador, Hojjatollah Faghani, accusing Iran of supporting the IRPT, which triggered a severe crisis in bilateral ties. Tajikistan strongly criticized Iran's sectarian policies and closed the Imam Khomeini Assistance Committee (IMDAD Foundation) and cultural and charity centers in Tajikistan in 2016. In 2018, the Tajik Ulema Council accused the Iranian authorities of their use of the opposition to destabilize Tajikistan. Since then, bilateral relations remained tense until the SCO Astana Summit in June 2017, when Tajikistan, which wielded veto power, opposed Iran's SCO membership. As a result, Iran's bid to join the SCO had been put on hold.

1. 3 Promotion: Flexibly adjust "Look West" and "Look East"

The Rouhani government's "westward" engagement was temporarily interrupted by the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran. In this regard, the Supreme Leader Khamenei said, "One of the priorities of our foreign policy today is to give priority to the East over the West, to give priority to neighboring countries over remote countries and nations, and to give priority to countries that share common characteristics with us over other countries." Afterwards, Iran's "Look East" policy reemerged on the agenda of the 12th administration. From the perspective of Rouhani's foreign policy, concerted efforts, on the one hand, were made by him and his diplomatic team to develop constructive interactions with the West and ease conflicts: including the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue and the prospects for "considerable" investment from Europe. On the other hand, the decision made by Trump, the former president of the United States, to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement and impose stricter sanctions on Iran, dealt a major blow to Rouhani's diplomacy. Since then, the Rouhani government's diplomacy has been to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and participate in negotiations to lift US sanctions on Iran. Although Rouhani could not launch the "look east" "alternative" in time during his first presidential term, Rouhani did not wholly give up non-Western development directions. The signing of the Iran nuclear agreement opened the door for Iran to integrate into the international community and eliminated recognition obstacles. Since then, resistance to Iran's inclusion in the SCO has gradually diminished. In addition, Iran's close interaction with Russia and China in the follow-up process laid the groundwork for its accession to SCO. On May 17, 2018, Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) signed an agreement to establish a

free trade area (FTA), effective from October 27, 2019, with a three-year duration. Subsequently, Iran and China signed a comprehensive 25-year cooperation agreement on March 27, 2021, at the end of President Rouhani's term. It is worth noting that Iran's attempts to reach the Iran nuclear deal, eliminate sanctions, interact constructively with the world, and integrate into the international community are only partially in vain. Iran is increasingly being recognized as an essential player on the international stage.

Then, Iran attempted to gain consensus among SCO member states on the acceptance of the country into the organization. The political differences between Iran and Tajikistan had remained an impediment to Iran's attainment of full SCO membership even after the above obstacles were lifted. Iran continued efforts to mend relations with Tajikistan after 2017 and achieved remarkable progress, especially under the constructive diplomatic approach of the Rouhani government amid regional changes. Faced with Tajikistan's secular government and largely Sunni population, Rouhani's administration has emphasized the shared Persian civilizational identity and deep cultural and linguistic ties between the two nations by downplaying the sensitivity related to Shia Islamism in the relationship. To unfreeze the bilateral relationship, Rouhani said that "the ancient and unbreakable cultural ties between the two countries are unparalleled and are based on the relationship between the two countries." In addition, Iran has taken advantage of changes in traditional and non-traditional security issues in the regional situation, which has enabled it to leverage its regional strengths to further deepen cooperation between the two countries. The objective is to not only eliminate resistance from Tajikistan but also promote the sound development of bilateral relations. In early November 2017, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Dushanbe with the main purpose of inaugurating the new Iranian Embassy building in Tajikistan. In addition, Minister Zarif communicated with Tajik leaders for the smooth advancement of future relations, which shows Iran's determination to reconstruct ties with Tajikistan. Forward to June 2019, Iranian President Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif held a meeting with Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin in Tehran. Both sides stated that they "will do their best to resolve issues of common concern to both countries." to further develop relations between the two countries in all areas." This meeting marked the first amicable diplomatic one between the two countries since 2013, with signs of positive changes in their relationship from then on. The Iranian Foreign Ministry extended an invitation to Tajikistan's Ambassador to Tehran, Nizamuddin Zahedi, to participate in the "Yalda, Regional Solidarity" webinar hosted by Iran to commemorate the Common, Ancient Yalta Festival" and emphasized the role of cultural factors in the unity of regional countries. In April 2021, Iran and Tajikistan reached an agreement to establish a joint defense committee, which paved the way for the further deepening of bilateral security cooperation. Ali Shamkhani, former secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said the "political obstacles" to Iran's accession to the SCO as a full member have been removed.

1. 4 Acceleration: Dynamic Diplomacy of "Looking East"

In the midst of complex changes in the international landscape and regional situations,

such as the US-Russia game and, Sino-US competition, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Taliban in Afghanistan have accelerated the decision-making process for Iran to formally join the SCO. In addition, Iran made diplomatic adjustments after the United States withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Agreement and continued to revise its "resistance" policy. In 2021, Iranian conservative Seyed Ebrahim Raisi will serve as the president of Iran's 13th government and officially clarify Iran's diplomatic orientation as "looking east". On September 17, 2021, during the Dushanbe Summit, a resolution was to initiate the process of accepting the Islamic Republic of Iran as a member state of the SCO. The Memorandum on the Obligations of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Join the SCO was signed on September 16, 2022, during the Samarkand Summit. It is undeniable that the approval of Iran's membership in the SCO is a "diplomatic achievement" for President Raisi, with an important impact on the Raisi government's all-round cooperation initiatives based on its peripheral and Asia-oriented policies.

Based on its diplomatic strategy and its national, regional and international goals, Iran began to seek a constructive and impactful presence in regional and international relations and structures. The objective has been to achieve peace and stability and create a region in which the Islamic Republic of Iran actively plays a role in international security cooperation. The Raisi administration has formulated a diplomatic strategy labeled "Balanced Diplomacy, Dynamic Diplomacy, and Intelligent Interaction." This strategy emphasizes the traditional principles of "Neither East nor West" and "Independence, Freedom, and the Islamic Republic" and adheres to the diplomatic principles of "Dignity, Wisdom and Expediency" to ensure and consolidate Iran's national security and regional stability. It can be seen that this coordination marks a prelude to further advancement of Iran's neighborhood policy in order to ease tensions and manage existing challenges based on common interests with neighboring countries. Raisi said that his "most important and main priority in foreign policy is to improve relations with neighboring countries" and create the basis for a peaceful environment for regional development and stability.

Within the framework of this diplomatic approach, the Raisi administration places a high priority on cooperation with neighboring countries and focuses on interaction with Asia. Iran's membership in the SCO has become an important strategic foundation for the Raisi administration's "Look East" foreign policy. This process is particularly important in the context of an apparent deadlock in negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear deal. After then-U.S. President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement, trust between the U.S. and Iran remained in a deadlock, which created uncertainty about the prospects for a new agreement. Even after President Biden, who is affiliated with the Democrats, assumed office, he did not take many practical actions on the Iran nuclear agreement, with continued imposition of sanctions on Iran. Even if greater progress may occur in the Iran nuclear agreement in the future, the Raisi government, under its balanced and dynamic diplomacy, will regard it as one among several diplomatic options. In 2021, President Raisi's attendance at the Dushanbe summit would be his first foreign visit since his election as president, which shows a shift in diplomatic focus towards the East and symbolizes Iran's direction of consolidating its ties in the East. At the same time, it reflects a consensus within Iran on the importance of the SCO in its "Look East" policy. The

evolution of Iran's membership status in the SCO from an observer in 2005 to a full member in 2021 demonstrates the importance of the SCO in Iran's "Look East" policy. At the SCO Samarkand Summit in 2022, the Raisi government showed its diplomatic sincerity. It not only actively participated in the SCO summit with a high-level delegation but also held separate talks with leaders of SCO member states and signed a number of cooperation documents.

It is undeniable that Iran's Islamic revolutionaryism and its desire for ideological expansion once became obstacles to its entry into the SCO. However, Iran has shown, through foreign policy adjustments and practical actions, its readiness for constructive and substantive interactions with the international community. At the same time, Iran's revolutionary ideology is increasingly overshadowed by realism, and its expansionist ideals are constantly being clamped down. In addition, Iran's willingness and ability to combat terrorism (such as its fight against the "Islamic State" and mediation on the Afghan issue, etc.) are largely consistent with the SCO vision. Practical factors such as the ever-changing international situation, Iran's continued shift toward a greater rejection of ideology in its foreign policy, and its own strength have all contributed to the agreement among member states on Iran's full membership. For Iran, accession to the SCO marks its formal membership of an important regional organization, which not only greatly increases Iran's regional influence but also expands its "countermeasures space" to counter sanctions pressure and get rid of international isolation.

2. Analysis of the Motivations for Iran to Join the SCO

Iran's "Look East" policy is based on resistance, survival and development. Considering the power balance and identity politics game in the region's geopolitical transformation, Iran has adopted strategic flexibility to play an important role in Eurasian regionalism and expedite its infrastructure projects and economic initiatives. With its strategic position, economic capabilities, energy resources and rich experience in counter-terrorism efforts, Iran is poised to inject greater development impetus into the SCO. In addition, Iran's Persian-Islamic identity, characterized as a "civilized country," serves to bridge the conceptual and physical gap between the East and the Islamic world. It positions Iran to achieve more common political and economic visions in various fields in the region and form a development framework based on shared values on the international stage.

2.1 Unleashing Geographical Location Advantages at the International Level

Iran plays the role of a connecting link between West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia. As a key transit point between the Caucasus and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, Iran's transit capabilities will enhance the SCO's transport capacity. Geographically, this plays a role in Iran's aspirations to act as a regional power. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in his speech at the 2018 SCO Summit: "Iran's strategic position makes it possible to connect the east and west and the north and the south. Central and East Asian countries can connect with Iran's help. Connect with the Persian Gulf region." Iran's participation will play an important role in

connecting the international north-south transportation corridor. Specifically, it will facilitate the connection of Afghanistan and Central Asia into this corridor and contribute to the resolution of issues related to cargo transit. Iran's involvement is also expected to boost trade and energy interconnection as well as transportation efficiency. Therefore, Iran's accession opens up promising prospects for the development of the SCO as an organization that ensures transportation security along the Eurasian transport corridor, creates favorable conditions for the coordinated development of initiatives such as "Belt and Road" and the North-South Transport Corridor, and deepens the integration of the SCO into the regional economy.

It is objectively realistic for Iran to build itself into a critical transportation and energy node for the entire Eurasian continent. Iran's unique geographical location has historically rendered this land a crossroads of civilizations and a bridge between the East and the West. In addition, Iran's abundant oil and gas resources, large population, and unique geopolitical and geoeconomic status form the basis for its international relations. Iran, with its role as a transit route for Central Asian countries, plays a key part in major transit initiatives in the region, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Central Asian Railway and the North-South Corridor. Furthermore, its geopolitical position is unique as it covers most of the political geography in Asia: it is a member of the Middle Eastern countries, the Persian Gulf countries, a nation with a coastline along the Caspian Sea, and connected to Central Asia. This unique geographical makeup establishes Iran as a crossroads for exchanges between East, West, south, and North. Iran has seen an increase in its importance as a transit and transport hub connecting China, Central Asia, Russia and South Asia to Europe, especially in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war and Western sanctions against Russia, which have disrupted international trade and transport routes. Iran has long been committed to promoting synergy between the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and other east-west latitude corridors, especially the Central Asia-West Asia Corridor (BRI) of the Belt and Road Initiative. At the SCO Summit in September 2021, President Raisi once proposed a vision where key infrastructure projects such as the "Belt and Road", the Eurasian Economic Union, and the North-South Corridor are not competitors but complementary initiatives. In this context, Iran serves as a link between the above three infrastructure projects.

2.2 Gaining Important Influence on Regional Issues

The regional level is the extreme area where national and global security interact and where most actions take place. Iran's counter-terrorism capabilities have kept Iran at the forefront of the regional fight against terrorism. Iran contributes to the maintenance of regional stability and security by dealing with regional non-transmission security such as Takfiri extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking, as well as hosting Afghan refugees from neighboring countries. After its accession to the SCO, Iran continues to play an important role in the fight against terrorism. Originally established to forge a regional security cooperation mechanism, the SCO give top priority to combating terrorism, extremism and separatism. Over time, it has expanded to implement regional strategies within the framework of the SCO, aiming to combat the "three evil forces" of terrorism,

ensure border security and regional stability, and participate in economic development and energy cooperation. The regional events, such as the "Islamic State" and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, have thrust anti-terrorism cooperation among SCO member states into the spotlight. At the same time, the core of Iran's security interests in its surroundings centers around regional security and stability. Therefore, there exists an overlap in the interests of Iran and the SCO. The common ground in anti-terrorism and extremism promotes cooperation between Iran and the SCO, diversifies security strategies and strengthens dialogue and cooperation under the new security concept. Iran has carried out extensive cooperation with SCO member states in combating international terrorism. In addition, the SCO's counter-terrorism policies and actions have met Iran's regional security concerns, including the adoption of the Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, as well as the establishment of the Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RATS) to coordinate joint operations.

Iran and Afghanistan share deep connections in terms of ethnicity, religion, history and culture. This bond is manifested in many aspects, such as the cross-border Baloch people, the Hazara Shias in Afghanistan, and the large number of Afghan refugees accepted by Iran. These factors have provided Iran with a strong voice and influence on the Afghan issue. At the same time, Iran's pragmatic policies and actions have demonstrated its important role in the resolution of the Afghan issue. From January 8 to 10, 2022, Afghan Taliban Acting Foreign Minister Mottaki led a delegation to visit Iran. Under the mediation of Iran, talks were held with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and members of the anti-Taliban faction National Resistance Front. Although not framed as formal peace talks, this direct dialogue helped build trust between opposing forces amid a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's multi-ethnic country makeup makes it crucial to establish an inclusive government that represents all ethnic groups for political stability. In response to calls for inclusivity, the Taliban has awarded deputy ministerial posts to minority Hazara (Shiite) and Panjshir forces. Despite the perilous future in Afghanistan, Iran's actions to coordinate the situation in Afghanistan through dialogue and support the formation of an inclusive government demonstrate its strength in maintaining regional security and stability.

2.3 Urgent Needs for Domestic Governance and Development

Iran's accession to the SCO is a recognition of its Eurasian identity. This move is also an important measure for Iran to improve its international image and foster its trust, goodwill, cooperation, stability, and positive image in various fields. The Raisi administration evaluates Iran's SCO membership as an important means to bolster its influence and role in the regional and international security systems. This development not only opens a new chapter in all-round cooperation between Iran and SCO member states but also has implications for Iran and the United States, an important factor in its relations with the West. Therefore, Iran is of important strategic importance for the SCO. From Iran's perspective, the maximum pressure and economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. Trump administration have exacted a large toll on Iran's strength. Iran languishes under difficulties such as a plummet in its foreign exchange earnings, a rise in domestic

unemployment and the consumer price index, as well as depreciation of its currency due to significant restrictions on financial and crude oil trading. In light of these hardships, Iran's decision to join the SCO aims to resist Western maximum pressure, oppose unilateral sanctions, and strengthen peace, security and good-neighborly relations in Eurasia. Moreover, these moves also seek to increase political and economic ties with culturally close Central and South Asian countries and ease domestic pressure. The primary goal is not only to gain political prestige and end isolation but also to escape from the sanction's dilemma through SCO membership. Therefore, Iran not only hopes to end negotiations to rebuild the nuclear deal and lift economic sanctions but also maintains diversified economic ties with Russia, China, and neighboring countries, to ensure security by risk spreading. Joining the SCO represents a pathway for Iran to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with member states, play a meaningful role among its wider neighbors, and thereby gain political influence both regionally and globally.

Although economic and trade cooperation between Iran and SCO countries has undergone rapid development, its potential has not yet been fully tapped. Iran is exposed to a significant trade deficit. Therefore, the nation's accession to SCO gives an opportunity for Iran to continue to dig deep into how to bring economic dividends to Iran, including consumer market expansion, stable imports of oil and other commodities, as well as the technical and material resources vital for industrial development. This becomes an important factor in the organization that provides Iran with more opportunities to diversify its exports. Facing increasing sanctions pressure from the United States and other Western countries, Iran is prepared to increase exports of oil, natural gas and petrochemical products through its SCO membership. It will take advantage of its geographical advantages to generate income through cargo transportation and transit, make full use of the SCO platform to deepen cooperation in advanced technology fields and attract foreign investment and foreign exchange. In response, Iran formally proposed to the SCO in 2022 the creation of a single currency to promote trade among SCO member states.

On other non-traditional security issues, Iran seeks to join hands with the SCO to address regional and global challenges related to climate change, environment and food security. In the context of global climate change, Iran is confronted with water resource shortage and food security. Natural climate conditions, government mismanagement, and limited water resources exacerbate water-related challenges as the country continues to suffer a severe and prolonged drought that constitutes grave threats to water supplies across all sectors. Climate change is expected to increase the risk of drought in some regions and trigger flooding in others, as seen in the largest flood in Iran's recent history in April 2016, when the Karon River overflowed in the southwestern province of Khuzestan. Additionally, the diversion of rivers and drying out of wetlands due to dam construction in Iran and its neighbors (such as Turkey's GAP project) is a major contributor to the increased sandstorms in Iran. In short, Iran faces challenges in terms of water resources and food security. It needs not only to improve its national governance and management capabilities but also actively interact with neighboring countries and regional organizations to manage common issues such as water governance.

2.4 The SCO fully Attracts Iran

Iran's "eastward expansion" marks the prelude to the SCO's "westward expansion". Based on the continued strengthening of political mutual trust among SCO member states, the SCO is expected to become an important regional cooperation organization that can contribute to regional stability and prosperity. With the ever-growing influence of the SCO, Iran hopes to promote multilateralism through the SCO, establish a new security order in Eurasia, and connect the Iranian economy to non-Western capital and technology markets. For Iran, the SCO is not an economic organization but a platform with economic opportunities. Beyond regional security and the fight against extremism, the goals of the SCO extend into the proposed framework of modern regional sustainable development beliefs. This framework emphasizes stability, cooperation, and economic reciprocity as important factors for the vigorous development of each country's independent capabilities. The SCO serves as a key mechanism to strengthen multilateralism and as a model for positive bilateral and multilateral interactions. President Raisi said that the SCO and its "Shanghai Spirit" will be important tools for maintaining peace in the 21st century. At the regional level, amid the geopolitical adjustments in Central Asia after Taliban's ascent to power in Afghanistan, Iran, as a regional power, has promoted partnerships with Central Asian countries based on its geographical advantages and its own strength. The SCO has become a lever for the establishment and fortification of bilateral relations between Iran and Central Asian countries. In addition, the significance of Iran's inclusion in the SCO is that it opens up a new avenue for security cooperation. Iran's previous attempt to join the Gulf Cooperation Council was greeted by opposition from Arab countries. Given the international sanctions and maximum pressure from the United States, formal membership in the SCO will be conducive for Iran to play a meaningful role in its wider regional context. It enables Iran to participate in discussions on trade routes, capital flows and technical requirements. SCO member states hold great potential in adjusting and changing the balance of power in the international relations system.

In summary, Iran's transformation of its "Look East" diplomacy promotes multilateral development through bilateral interaction and consolidates bilateral ties through multilateralism. This approach not only liberates Iran from the shackles of bilateral relations but also promotes its regional policies through multilateral cooperation, such as regional economic and energy integration projects. This also contributed to Iran's acquisition of approval from member states for its accession to the SCO. Iran has pragmatically focused on economic and political diplomacy with Russia and China and has taken steps to improve infrastructure connectivity with its Central Asian neighbors. The Russo-Ukrainian war disrupted international transportation routes, prompting countries such as Russia and Kazakhstan to prioritize transportation and transit cooperation with Iran, which stimulated Iran's geoeconomic position in Eurasia. The Taliban issue in Afghanistan also caused Tajikistan to set aside sectarian factors and instead cooperate with Iran. In short, Iran has taken advantage of the situation and made proactive responses. Through the identification of areas conducive to balanced reconciliation among all parties, the country has become a full member of the SCO on the basis of enhanced bilateral relations. It has made use of the SCO as a multilateral

cooperation platform to open a new window of opportunity for its regional diplomacy.

3. Opportunities and challenges for Iran joining the SCO

In the context of strategic competition among major powers, Middle Eastern countries are actively charting their own development trajectories in order to jointly build a new pattern amid a century of changes. As a major country in the Middle East, Iran strives to cope with internal and external challenges by adjusting its foreign policy. The recognition and acceptance of Iran by the SCO provide an opportunity for the country to escape from its predicaments. However, how Iran objectively views the international system and repositions its identity poses a challenge to the fruitful cooperation between Iran and the international community.

3.1 Become the Regional Power Recognized by the International Community

Firstly, the SCO provides Iran with a platform to gain recognition from the international community. Considering that the establishment of the SCO was grounded on security cooperation, Iran places greater emphasis on the political benefits of its SCO membership than on the economic benefits. Despite isolation and sanctions, Iran has been working to demonstrate its role as an important contributor to regional cooperation, with the goal of being acknowledged as a regional power. The SCO adheres to the "consensus" principles of "non-interference in internal affairs", "mutual trust, interconnection, and equal consultation." These principles enable Iran to express its stance on matters set by the SCO agenda and exert greater influence on regional issues. Moreover, the SCO's commitment to respect for cultural differences also satisfies Iran's "sense of dignity" for recognition as a regional power. Therefore, it is of greater significance for Iran to play the role of a regional power within the SCO framework and boost its influence through active participation in the resolution of regional issues. Formal membership of the SCO will provide a new echelon for Iran to further integrate into the international community and the Eurasian continent. In addition, Iran is positioned to exert regional influence on new cooperation issues. An illustrative example is Iran's proposal to establish a maritime security mechanism, which will become a new area for the expansion of the SCO.

Secondly, the SCO strengthens the "positive cycle" of constructive interaction between Iran and the international community. Through constructive interactions within the framework of the SCO, Iran has "shown goodwill" to the international community, gradually built trust with its member states, and worked towards wider recognition from the international community in the future. This approach not only serves as an opportunity for Iran to signal its goodwill but also opens doors for broader cooperation. On August 24, 2023, the BRICS countries extended an invitation to Iran to join the BRICS family together with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and other countries. BRICS membership is not only an achievement of Iran's "Look East" policy but also an opportunity for Iran to collaborate with the world's largest emerging market in the establishment of a more multi-level world order and redefinition of the rules of global governance. This event is acclaimed as a "historic event." As Iranian President Raisi said,

"Both the SCO and BRICS are the most important emerging alliances, aiming to combat unilateralism and promote deeper cooperation among developing countries." From the SCO member states to the "associate members" of the BRICS, Iran has strengthened its continued pursuit of "look east," a crucial phase in its "historic development".

Finally, Iran's formal membership in SCO will inject a "boost" into Iran's continued integration into the international community as a "collaborator". The positive response of SCO member states to Iran's membership provides Iran with confidence to build trust with the international community, stimulate cooperation, and ease regional tensions, which, in turn, sets in motion a virtuous cycle of regional development. It can be seen that after formal entry into the SCO, there was a reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia under the mediation of China. This diplomatic development gave rise to the absence of labelling Saudi Arabia as an "enemy" and the suspension of proxy wars. Instead, both nations continue their cooperation as responsible regional powers. The "tide of reconciliation" in the Middle East is an initial step toward regional security, stability, peaceful development, and cooperative growth. This is an important manifestation of the "Shanghai Spirit" and creates a favorable regional environment for the westward expansion of the SCO. It also denies the West's wrong positioning of the SCO as an "anti-Western alliance".

3.2 Broaden the Geographical Barriers to Maintain and Ensure Security

Faced with a complex regional environment and the maximum pressure from the United States, Iran suffers greater constraints in its "westward" development. Its strategic security environment stands out as an important source of its insecurity. Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, Iran has long been subjected to security threats from the United States and its regional allies. From the Iran-Iraq war through the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Spring in 2011 and the subsequent "Islamic State" and various regional conflicts, the threat of terrorism and the rise of extremism have grown, which places Iran under pressure from peripheral security. In response, Iran has adopted several coping strategies. First of all, to cope with regional changes and the US "Indo-Pacific" strategy, Iran has adopted a tough regional intervention policy and participated in regional activities by supporting proxies; on the other hand, Iran has carried out active diplomacy through the "Look East" policy, which emphasizes the importance of regional stability and cooperation, in order to maintain peripheral security and reduce security threats posed by the United States, its regional allies, and extremist organizations such as the Islamic State.

Secondly, formal membership in the SCO provides Iran with opportunities to break through "Western" restrictions and carve out space for "eastward" development. In the face of pressure from the United States and the West, Iran has been restricted in terms of bilateral cooperation with Central Asia, Pakistan, India and other countries. The SCO provides an interactive platform and guarantee for Iran to ensure its border security and cooperate with neighboring countries. Moreover, Iran's tough regional policies have aroused wariness among neighboring countries. Its accession to the SCO signals Iran's commitment to the SCO charter as its code of conduct and its aspiration for development

through friendly cooperation, which will expand its relations with eastern neighbors and address trust barriers through cooperation.

Finally, by stabilizing security in the eastern region, Iran rebuilds and expands relations with its western neighbors and ultimately achieves security, stability and development in the surrounding areas, which aligns with the development direction of the "Shanghai Process". As Iran officially joined the SCO, the organization initiated "westward expansion". The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait in West Asia have become "dialogue partners" of the SCO, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt have signed a memorandum as dialogue partners of the SCO. The "tide of reconciliation" set in motion by Iran and Saudi Arabia contributes to a more stable environment in West Asia. This has two major effects: first, through the spillover effect of the "reconciliation tide", a more constructive approach can be adopted to seek political solutions to regional conflicts, which will have a positive impact on the security situation in West Asia; second, there is an opportunity to strengthen cooperation in the resolution of transnational security challenges, especially collective action between Iran and the region to address issues such as terrorism, extremism and climate change. Collaboration enhances regional security, mitigates common threats, reduces the risk of cross-border security incidents and finally creates a more secure and stable neighborhood. In addition, improved relations between Iran and its Western neighbors can promote a more cooperative and constructive regional order, which, in turn, encourages actors in the West Asia region to put political stability and economic interests above geopolitical and ideological differences to build a peaceful and harmonious regional environment.

3.3 Clarify and Strengthen the Strategic Position of Regional Hubs

The geo-economic factors in Iran's "Look East" policy hold greater urgency and significance than the geopolitical factors. As the eastward shift of the international economic center, Iran has reviewed the situation and realigned its economic diplomacy. When Raisi took office, Iran was in a state of the domestic economy. In response, the Raisi administration proposed "economic diplomacy" under the guidance of Iran's "resistance economy" policy, hoping to ameliorate the domestic predicament through the eastward expansion of the economic and trade partnership network”.

First, Iran seeks to consolidate its geographical location and become a hub for international transportation from east to west and from north to south through the SCO. Iran is geographically located in the most important international corridors of Eurasia, including the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), East-West Transit Route, Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), Southern Corridor, Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID)) project's Northern Corridor, Central Corridor, Southern Corridor and important transit routes related to "Belt and Road" initiatives. These routes serve as connecting points for the SCO's expansion to the Gulf region and West Asia, deepen regional integration, and also facilitate Iran's strategic commodity exports to the east. Faced with the demands for Eurasian cross-border transportation connectivity from Central Asian countries, Iran's accession not only paved the way for cooperative development between the SCO and West Asia, improved the

efficiency of economic and trade exchanges, but also strengthened its status as a regional hub, which laid a foundation for the transformation of its regional roles.

Second, Iran receives new opportunities to ease the economic pressure from years of decline caused by sanctions. With the rapid development of regional trade, the huge economic potential of the SCO is extremely attractive to Iran, including new market access, closer economic cooperation with member states, and the utilization of the SCO platform for multilateral economic and trade exchanges. Given that SCO member states account for nearly 50% of the world's population and contribute more than 20% to the global GDP, Iran, as it joins the SCO, hopes to promote trade and economic cooperation with other member states and become a major energy supplier in the region, providing potential solutions to the impact of Western sanctions.

Third, Iran's integration into the SCO is equivalent to its participation in a larger group of emerging economies and in global governance. As the ninth official member of the SCO, Iran is set to formalize its membership in the BRICS on January 1, 2024. Its accession to the SCO has won it recognition from the international community. Membership in the BRICS serves as a countermeasure against the negative effects of economic sanctions and promotes the recovery of its economy. Iran can leverage its economic potential in emerging markets, expand its commercial and economic relations with new partners, and deepen its well-established economic and trade ties with "old friends." The "Look East" policy, with a particular emphasis on Latin American countries, can also benefit from Iran's participation in the BRICS, as it enables deeper connections. The move not only strengthened Iran's foothold in Latin America but consolidated established relations with countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. During the tenure of Brazilian President Lula from 2003 to 2010, Iran enjoyed a close relationship with Brazil. Now, Iran also seeks to restore the close friendship of the past. In the 2022-2023 fiscal year, Brazil would become Iran's main trading partner in Latin America, followed by Argentina, another country invited to join the BRICS.

Finally, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as major countries in the Gulf region, have received a joint invitation to join the BRICS. Their collective identity as BRICS members will consolidate reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and turn the "reconciliation tide" into a "cooperation tide." Economic relations based on the cooperation areas will undergo continued expansion to promote stability, peace and development in the Gulf region. At the same time, the first expansion of the BRICS countries since its establishment in 2010 has fixed its eyes firmly on the Gulf region, which demonstrates the importance of the Gulf region in global geostrategy. This effort will also facilitate collaboration between Iran and the Gulf countries in the joint establishment of a global presence and enable Iran to exert huge economic and political influence on the Gulf region.

3.4 Internal and External Changes Require Flexible Response to Multiple Challenges

The global order is undergoing transformation. Confronted with changes in the internal and external environments, Iran's new status as a formal member of the SCO also brings

multiple challenges in terms of domestic conflict coordination, regional policy adjustments, and international relations management. How does Iran coordinate its national interests with the organization and bilateral relations? It faces critical tests in commitments and positions.

First, Iran has limited ability to resolve its internal issues problems completely through the SCO alone. First, economic cooperation is not the primary agenda of the SCO, and its economic potential remains underdeveloped, which limits its role in Iran's efforts to remove economic sanctions pressure. Second, the Iran nuclear agreement and international sanctions are the "hotspot issue" among the SCO member states, and they impeded Iran's international cooperation. Judging from Iran's "Look East" initiative and the responses from the participating, Iran expects the SCO to play a greater regional role in resolving member states' issues. However, there is skepticism about whether the SCO can coordinate differences among its members. These pose an important challenge, but they also present an important opportunity for the SCO to transform into "global governance" and enhance its international influence.

Secondly, Iran's assertive regional policies and actions, such as proxy wars and revolutionary ideology, may hinder the consensus-building process with other SCO member states on regional issues. Peace and development are the irresistible trends of the contemporary era. Iran must shift to peaceful diplomacy and cooperative development and prioritize dialogue and consultation over excessive interference in the internal affairs of other countries to enhance its external relations. Failure to do so may not only give rise to suspicions regarding Iran's "shows of kindness" but also once again arouse fear among SCO member states. They may cast doubt on the cohesion and influence of SCO, contrary to the principles of the "Shanghai Spirit." Therefore, to prevent excessive historical baggage, Iran must reconsider its identity. It is crucial to manage relations with SCO member states and prevent trust deficits. Historical instances in which Tajikistan and Uzbekistan once blocked Iran's formal SCO membership indicate that it is crucial for Iran to reconsolidate relations with India and improve other bilateral ties. In addition, amid the ever-changing regional security landscape, Iran and its fellow SCO member states need to reach a new consensus on issues such as terrorism and extremism. Otherwise, these issues may jeopardize future regional security cooperation. Therefore, Iran's integration into the SCO as a "helper" rather than a "taker" depends on Iran's promotion of the "Shanghai Spirit" and deep participation in the construction of the SCO community with a shared future.

Finally, as the world undergoes unprecedented changes, the psychological perspectives of Iran and SCO member states and responses to the international order have seen varying degrees of reconstruction. Affected by multiple variables, these changes will have a profound impact on Iran and pose challenges to established strategies. Despite Leader Khamenei's assertion that "the future international order will be centered on Asia, and the hegemonic order led by the United States is declining," there are also internal debates within Iran about the "old and new order," which will have a profound impact on Iran's foreign policy and introduce uncertainty to the future direction. At the same time, amidst the new trend of pluralism in Asia, it remains to be seen whether Iran's repositioning of its "New Asian" identity can be understood and accepted among the SCO member states.

In addition, the SCO member states share a common commitment to equal treatment and peaceful coexistence with the international community as well as a willingness to eschew confrontation. In the future, how can Iran balance its internal demands to achieve consensus with the SCO member states, engage with the international community with a more open attitude, and inject more certainty, stability and positive energy into the SCO and the international community? To address the question, "Iranian wisdom" is even more needed.

4. Conclusion

Iran is an important middle power in Eurasia, a major country in West Asia, a hub country with a strategic position, and a civilized country with a thousand-year history and cultural heritage. Formal membership in the SCO is an important manifestation of Iran's "Look East" foreign policy. Iran emphasized its ability to make constructive contributions to the SCO, provide "SCO" solutions to new security, political and economic issues and strengthen the SCO's organizational resilience in regional security. As Iranian President Raisi affirmed at the SCO Dushanbe Summit, "Iran's foreign policy has always been based on active participation in international organizations and multilateralism. Hoping that the SCO, a mature organization, will continue to embark on a proud path." This statement emphasizes Iran's determination to join the SCO. It is worth noting that Iran's "Look East" foreign policy is not synonymous with an "anti-Western" policy but serves as a response to Western pressure. It is also a proactive choice for Iran rather than a helpless move. On the one hand, the "Look East" policy is integral to Iran's diplomatic strategy, indicating its commitment to active interactions with countries that "look East"; on the other hand, despite the diminished importance of the West for Iran, its role cannot be completely disregarded. Iran will continue to maintain weak connections with the West, and the West will continue to play an important role.

Looking ahead, after Iran joins the SCO and the BRICS, it will forge ahead with a diplomatic approach based on multilateralism. It will, by positioning itself as a major player in the development community, participate in solving regional issues and expand its network of Eurasian relations through regional organizations. Based on the diplomatic principles of "dignity, wisdom and expediency" from the Khamenei era and the Raisi administration's diplomatic strategy of "balanced diplomacy, dynamic diplomacy, and smart interaction", Iran will continue its pragmatic, pluralistic and balanced diplomacy and strive for greater success in both the East and the West to strike a reasonable balance. In conclusion, the Raisi administration's strategic positioning for the SCO is characterized by pragmatism, institutionalism, and Orientalism. Iran's active participation in the "BRICS" is a manifestation of its "eastward" diplomacy after its accession to the SCO. The goal of its "Look East" policy is to disrupt the global hegemony monopolized by Western powers, actively shape the international landscape based on the liberal order of the "Global West", form a new order of the "Global East", and build a more balanced and pluralistic world.

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