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The Strategic Role of Iran for the SCO: Strengthening Eurasian Integration

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Abstract. The process of integration in the Eurasian region is important for all states and after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russia's greater Eurasian policy and the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the conditions for integration have become more suitable than before. After a decade and a half of observer membership, Iran has finally become an official member of SCO in 2022, and it seems that due to the wide territorial contiguity from the borders of Türkiye to Afghanistan, new possibilities for regional integration have been created. This article is written with the aim of discussing Iran's role in Eurasian integration after the membership in the SCO. The main question in this article is that how Iran can contribute to Eurasian regional integration within the framework of this organization? The author's idea is that Iran's membership in the SCO, through the increasing expansion of the connections of the Eurasian region to South Asia and the Middle East, provides more opportunities for cooperation in confronting the sources of regional insecurity, cooperation in the field of trade and the expansion of regional transport and communications and this issue can contribute to economic development, security and broader regional integration in the region. The author has tried to use the theory of regional integration and the method of qualitative content analysis of documents, texts, reports and news related to the Eurasian integration to verify the hypothesis. The findings of this research show that the greater Eurasian region needs a wider integration in the fields of economy, trade, communication and transportation, and the solution to reduce its problems is possible through the cooperation of all effective regional actors, and Iran is also one of the effective countries that has been a missing linkage in Eurasian integration and any comprehensive security and economic integration in Eurasia requires its active participation, which an official member of the SCO has created this opportunity.

Key words: Eurasia, Russia, China, Iran, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, development, security, integration, geopolitics

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Стратегическая роль Ирана для ШОС: укрепление евразийской интеграции

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Аннотация. Процесс интеграции в Евразийском регионе важен для всех государств, и после украинского кризиса 2014 г. в контексте евразийской политики России и расширения Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС) условия для интеграции стали более подходящими, чем прежде. После полутора десятилетий членства в качестве наблюдателя Иран наконец стал официальным членом ШОС в 2022 г., и благодаря его большой территории, простирающейся от границ Турции до Афганистана, были созданы новые возможности для региональной интеграции. Цель исследования заключается в изучении роли и места Ирана в евразийской региональной интеграции после вступления в ШОС. Автор приходит к выводу, что на фоне расширения связей Евразийского региона с Южной Азией и Ближним Востоком членство Ирана в ШОС предоставляет значительные возможности для взаимодействия в противостоянии источникам региональной нестабильности, сотрудничества в области торговли и расширения региональных перевозок и коммуникаций, что, в свою очередь, может способствовать экономическому развитию, безопасности и более широкой региональной интеграции. Для подтверждения данного тезиса автор обращается к теории региональной интеграции и контент-анализу официальных документов, выступлений государственных лидеров, новостных лент, относящихся к евразийской интеграции. Результаты этого исследования показывают, что регион Большая Евразия нуждается в более глубокой интеграции в области экономики, торговли, связи и транспорта, и решение этих проблем становится возможным благодаря сотрудничеству всех влиятельных региональных игроков, в том числе Ирана, одного из ведущих региональных игроков, который был недостающим звеном в евразийской интеграции. Достижение всеобщей безопасности и углубление экономической интеграции в Евразии требуют активного участия Ирана в решении этих проблем, и его официальное вступление в ШОС создает новые возможности для этого.

Ключевые слова: Евразия, Россия, Китай, Иран, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, ШОС, развитие, безопасность, интеграция, геополитика

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

In the turbulent world of the third decade of the new millennium, the main centers of tension and conflict are still located in the Eurasian sphere, and the year 2022 should be seen as turning point in the development of this region and even the world in the new century. The political and international equations of Central Eurasia have become more complicated than ever, especially since 2014. The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), China's more active policy with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's eastern policy after the Ukraine crisis and the pursuit of the Greater

Eurasia project, the expansion of the SCO with the membership of India and Pakistan are some of the most important events that have complicated the situation in the region. One of the important trends in this region is changing the position and role of Iran. The beginning of the eastern-oriented policy in Iran, the preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union and the membership in the SCO on September 16, 2022 have also led Tehran to focus more on the Eurasian region.¹

¹ The Samarkand Declaration of the Heads of State Council of the SCO // Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The SCO was created with the aim of ensuring the security of Central Asia, but after Russia's Greater Eurasia project in 2016, this organization also expanded and pursued broader goals, gradually gaining importance beyond Central Asia and, in fact, throughout Eurasia. The issue of development, security and integration in this region remains important for all states. In fact, Iran's strategic location at the link point of the three geostrategic regions of the Middle East, Eurasia and East Asia gives it a unique position in the 21st century. The changing world system cannot underestimate these regions. It seems that Iran's role in this process is very important and due to its geographical proximity to Eurasia, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, it has a unique strategic opportunity to operate in the emerging international system. Although, this acting depends on strategic, wise and realistic decisions, and more importantly, on the will and the provision of appropriate tools in these new conditions.

But the main question in this article is what impact will Iran's membership have on the Eurasian region? And how can Iran contribute to Eurasian regional integration within the framework of this organization? The author's hypothesis is that Iran's membership in the SCO, through the increasing expansion of the Eurasian region's links with South Asia and the Middle East, will provide more opportunities for cooperation in the field of confrontation with sources of regional insecurity, cooperation in the field of trade and the expansion of regional transport and communications, and this can contribute to economic development, security and broader regional integration in the region.

I have tried to use the theory of regional integration to discuss the relationship between the variables of "institutionalism," "integration" and "regional security." The main claim of this theory is that regional institutions are

established because important states create them to reduce transaction costs, establish norms and rules in their favor, or respond to their demands. These developments often occur at critical junctures in the history of international relations, where uncertain environments either require great power interventions or demand the creation of stabilizing institutions (Keohane, 2005). But the institutions that are created, if they are successful in the field of economic cooperation, will gradually spread to other political and security fields and eventually lead to a security regional society (Bellamy, 2004).

In order to test the hypothesis, I will use the method of qualitative content analysis of documents, data, reports and texts related to the study region of Eurasia, Iran and Russia. Naturally, the main focus of my discussion is on the possibilities of Iran's membership in the SCO for the integration of the Eurasian region. However, I have also tried to discuss the limitations and challenges of this subject. In the structure of the research, I will first discuss the developments in Eurasia since 2014 and the expansion of the SCO, then I will present the characteristics of Iran's foreign policy and its capabilities, and finally, I will discuss the implications of this new policy for cooperation and integration in the region, and conclude the discussions.

Expansion of the SCO in Greater Eurasia

The Eurasian region has gradually changed over the last decade, becoming a region with the presence and influence of various actors. Since 2014, the political and international character of the region has become more complex, and its future after 2022 has become more clouded. Most importantly, Russia's policy in the region has undergone significant changes over the past three decades, from the time of the Common European Home in the late 1980s, to European integration in the 1990s, to the Comprehensive European Security Plan in 2009, to the

Ukrainian crisis in 2014. This crisis led Russia to conclude that it could never have a proper place in the European equations, and therefore it has been pursuing a new Eurasian policy since 2014.

Russia's grand strategy for maintaining and strengthening the ties of the Eurasian region in the post-Soviet space has been through regional institutionalism and in the form of three organizations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the EAEU. There are different interpretations of the concept of Eurasia and Eurasianism and it is understood in different ways in different countries of the region.² However, despite these differences, Eurasianism can be considered as one of the strategies to create a multipolar world order (Bazavluk, Kurylev & Savin, 2022, p. 30). The crisis in Ukraine in 2014 faced major problems. In fact, without Ukraine's participation in the EAEU, this institution will not be very effective for Russia. V. Putin first publicly spoke about a "Greater Eurasia Partnership" in his annual address to parliament on December 3, 2015. His speech drew on the ideas outlined in a Valdai Club report³ on how to link the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt within a larger Eurasian framework (Sakwa, 2021, p. 13). The aim was to maintain stability in Central Asia and to avoid Russian-Chinese rivalry. On June 16, 2016, V. Putin announced the "Greater Eurasia" project, which aims to increase cooperation between regional states such as Iran, Türkiye, and China.⁴

Therefore, when the dialogue with the West was cut off and the European Union no longer considered Russia as a strategic partner, the

Russian political elite emphasized the "Greater Eurasian Partnership" project. The main idea is to create a new Asian policy by Russia and to form the political, economic and security space of Eurasia on the basis of civilizational cooperation. According to this project, Russia sees itself as a large and strong Eurasian state and an autonomous power pole in a polycentric world with a unique European and Asian geopolitical orientation.

In practice, this plan has focused on energy and transport corridors, trade and economic relations, and cross-border issues. However, in a broader sense it affects the areas of strategic security, political ideologies, long-term socio-economic problems and cultural values. At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016 the Russian president stated that the Eurasian Economic Union could become one of the centers of wider integration with the participation of China, India, Pakistan, Iran and other interested states and institutions (Arsentyeva, 2021).

Such attention to the neighboring countries of the Eurasian region and the request for wider cooperation with them is a new issue that has been welcomed by these states. The strengthening the position of Asia as a driving force of the world economy will strengthen the process of creating a regional system of mutual economic relations, and the institutional basis necessary for this will gradually mature. The forms and mechanisms of cooperation within the framework of the SCO and the EAEU will be developed and improved, which will ultimately help to further deepen the interaction between the countries of Southeast Asia (Alimov, 2018, p. 29). The development of the EAEU occupies a special place in this regard. The purpose of this organization is to implement the interaction between European and Asian countries and to realize the ideas that are the basis of Eurasian integration (Kurylev et al., 2021).

Therefore, "Greater Eurasia" is characterized by a network of maritime trade

² For more information, see: (Erşen, 2022).

³ Toward the Great Ocean-3: Creating Central Eurasia // Valdai Discussion Club. June 4, 2015. URL: https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/toward_the_great_ocean_3_creating_central_eurasia/ (accessed: 18.05.2023).

⁴ Karaganov S. Russia in Great Eurasia // Russia in Global Affairs. July 29, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/rossiya-v-bolshoj-evrazii/> (accessed: 04.12.2022).

routes, which will certainly be the most profitable in the long run for transporting goods produced in Asia due to reduced travel times. “Greater Eurasia” will be completed with the development of two international transport and logistics corridors “East — West — the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway” and “North — South,”⁵ whose main proponents are India and Iran. These developments show that the conditions for Eurasian cooperation within the framework of the new plan are available. Dmitri Trenin believes that “in order to achieve a greater Eurasia, Russia’s strategy must be realistic in the short term, because a credible strategy will focus on developing relations with China and establishing a continental arrangement between China, India and Russia, and its goal is to transform the SCO into a platform for diplomacy and continuous negotiations at the continental level, as well as a consensus-building structure for the region.”⁶

Therefore, it seems that the Greater Eurasia plan includes a set of connections and links with neighboring powers which, in institutional cooperation with Russia and the states of the region, can provide the possibility of further development and security, and of course, the most important development in the Eurasian region should be the expansion of the SCO.

The SCO was established in 2001 on the basis of the Shanghai-5 summit and became a new organization comprising China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Then, in 2017, India and Pakistan were admitted as members, and on September 16, 2022, Iran.⁷ The tasks of the organization

⁵ International North — South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

⁶ Trenin D. Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work? // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. July 20, 2017. URL: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2017/07/20/russia-s-evolving-grand-eurasia-strategy-will-it-work-pub-71588/> (accessed: 18.11.2021).

⁷ The Samarkand Declaration of the Heads of State Council of the SCO // Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

changed from solving border issues to counter-terrorism cooperation, and it developed in political, economic, cultural and educational fields, gradually becoming a new model of multilateral cooperation (Xue & Makengo, 2021). The focus of the mission and activities of this organization is in Central Asia, and the main goal of this organization is to contribute to peace, security and expansion of economic cooperation in the region. Although this organization has not yet been able to become an important and effective institution of regional integration, the membership of Russia, China, India and Iran in this organization shows that an important eastern cooperation has begun in the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism and can play a more serious role in the future due to the rise of the Taliban⁸ in Afghanistan since 2021.

Researchers have different views on the nature of this organization. Some call it a “paper tiger,” while others see it as a counterweight to NATO. Some consider it a means for stability, peace, security and prosperity in the region. However, the activities and orientations of the organization show that it is becoming something more in the middle of the positions of these researchers in response to the changing issues and games at the global level and in the Eurasian region (Xue & Makengo, 2021). But what is very important is that the creation of organization in 2001 was the first fundamental institutional divergence from the Western-led global multilateralism that dominated the entire 1990s (Fabbrini & Marchetti, 2017, p. 24). Therefore, the organization should be considered as an institution on the way and a forward process in international developments, which is a basic symbol of pluralism in the international system.

In fact, the image of greater Eurasia looks weak without taking into consideration the

September 16, 2022. URL: <http://eng.sectsco.org/load/914622/> (accessed: 14.10.2022).

⁸ Hereinafter, an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned.

activities of the SCO, and therefore one of the key mechanisms for maintaining stability and security in Eurasia is this organization. Over the years, it has gained considerable weight and political authority on the world stage. Although some see it as an Eastern NATO (Ozer, 2018). Its charter emphasizes that it is not against any other state or alliance.⁹ Nevertheless, its military weight is gradually increasing due to the extensive agreements between Russia and China, especially in the last year, and it is taking on an anti-Western orientation. From Garbuzarova's point of view, "the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021 have shown extremely pessimistic scenarios for the development of events, and there is a possibility of intensifying regional challenges and threats, and the SCO as an element Important in the security architecture of Eurasia, it has a good ability to deal with these threats" (Garbuzarova, 2021).

Beyond regional security issues in Central Asia and problems such as the situation in Afghanistan and the possibility of terrorism spreading to neighboring countries, the SCO tries to actively intervene in global and regional affairs and is one of the most important trends in the Eurasian geopolitical space (Kurylev et al., 2021). However, it seems that over time, the SCO has become a vital regional institution for China's growing interests in Eurasia and is an example of a new regionalism in the form of open, functional and interest-based cooperation of neighboring states (Kawalski, 2010, p. 107). Beijing is increasingly seeking to influence and shape this organization to support of its institutional balancing strategy in the region, which includes energy security, greater economic integration, and the prevention of the US influence (Yuan, 2023). Therefore, it seems that "the institutionalization of the SCO in the security, economic and political arenas, along

with other regional institutions such as the CSTO and the EAEU, has enabled China and Russia to formulate and implement exclusive institutional strategies to eliminate the US presence and minimize its influence" (Yuan, 2023).

Of course, China's ability to use the SCO as an exclusive institutional balancing strategy and as an inclusive strategy depends on Russia's support. This is because Moscow and Beijing share common interests in countering American influence (Yuan, 2023). Therefore, it seems that China has given more importance to this institution than other states. Although Russia also attaches a special place to it, especially after the Greater Eurasia project in 2016. It seems that the efforts to expand the SCO, operationalize the Greater Eurasia project and the role of regional powers are the most important examples of gradually limiting the influence of the West and especially the United States.

Therefore, the set of developments, especially from 2014 to 2022, shows fundamental changes in the Eurasian regional environment and the formation of new realities, and the will of statesman for wider cooperation within the framework of the EAEU, the BRI and the Greater Eurasia project represents an important part of this transformative process. But the expansion of the SCO is one of the fundamental developments that is considered the point of connection between the three regions of Eurasia, South Asia and the Middle East, and as an inter-regional institution, it can have serious consequences for the future world. Of course, Iran's membership in this institution can be very important for the organization and the region, given its attitude and performance in the coming decade.

Eastern Policy of Iran and the SCO Membership

Since the independence of the regional countries, Iran has established extensive relations with them and presented plans in the

⁹ Article 2 of the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization approved in 2002. For more information, see: Shanghai Cooperation Organization. URL: <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents> (accessed: 10.01.2023).

field of security and development of the region. In this regard, we can mention the expansion of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 1992, the proposal to demilitarize the Caspian Sea and the formation of the Caspian Coastal Countries Organization in 1995,¹⁰ and the priority given to regional cooperation in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In addition to three thousand kilometers of border and nearly five thousand kilometers of neighboring geography from Afghanistan to Türkiye and in the Caspian Sea, Iran has become an important reality for the region.

On the other hand, the open regional environment in the South Caucasus and Central Asia and the conditions for the presence and influence of Iran's competitors have made this region a priority of Iran's foreign policy. Iran has extensive interactive capabilities in the field of history, culture, religion, language and coexistence with the countries of the region.¹¹ Moreover, Iran's geographical, economic, infrastructure and transportation capabilities for energy transfer, trade and road access to marines are very important.

Due to a number of internal and external problems, and most importantly, America's pressure on the countries of the region and the pursuit of the "everything without Iran" policy,¹² it is less possible to realize Iran's plans. Therefore, Iran has inevitably turned to the "Eastern Policy"¹³ in order to reduce the US pressure. Based on these facts, Iran's Eastern policy is more than anything else rooted in the long-term tensions between Iran and America over the past four decades. After the Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement

in 2018, both Iranian reformists lost their place in Iranian politics and Eastern foreign policy became a necessity and an inevitable reality for Iran. This matter has been the concern of Iran's high authorities and Ayatollah Khamenei has said about this approach: "In foreign policy, the preference of East over West, preference of neighbor over distance, preference of nations and countries that have common features with us over others, is one of our priorities today. Mainly the view should be towards the East; looking to the West has no effect for us except to cause trouble. We must look towards the East; there are countries that can help us, we can face them equally, we help them, they help us, we can have scientific exchanges with them."¹⁴

In fact, Iran's Eastern policy has been a gradual process. Since 2005, it has become an important topic and has been emphasized by the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and after D. Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and then after the presidential election in the spring of 2021, and the prioritization of "Eastern policy and neighborhood policy" (Soleimani, 2022, p. 10), it has become an important agenda in foreign policy of the new president.

It should be noted that the Middle East's regional interactions with Eurasia and East Asia have expanded more than ever in terms of economic connections, corridors and security issues. In this new situation, the role of China and Russia in Iran's strategic environment has become more important than ever. Iran's neighborhood with South Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea basin, the South Caucasus and Russia has made the concept of the East an important issue in Iran's foreign relations. Also, Iran's land and sea

¹⁰ In 1992, Iran's then president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani proposed demilitarizing the Caspian Sea and forming the Caspian Coastal Countries Organization at the meeting of the leaders of the Caspian coastal countries. For more information, see: (Karami, 2009).

¹¹ For more information, see: (Safavi & Hosseini, 2012).

¹² For more information, see: (Mesbahi, 2004).

¹³ For more information, see: (Sanaei & Karami, 2021).

¹⁴ Baianat dar didare mardome Azarbaijane Sharghi [Statements at the meeting of the people of East Azerbaijan] // Information base of the Office of the Supreme Leader. February 18, 2018. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.leader.ir/fa/speech/20596/> (accessed: 10.11.2022).

border with the East from the border of Armenia to the Gulf of Oman is about 5000 km.¹⁵ Iran has an important position in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus, and it connects these closed lands to the open seas in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Indian Ocean. Therefore, cooperation with Eastern countries is a geographical, economic, social and cultural necessity for Iran.¹⁶

It is an important fact that Iran's position and role as a major regional power has changed compared to the past. In response to the US sanctions, Iran is trying to diversify its foreign trade and make Eurasia and China its main economic partners. The interim free trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU signed in 2018 (came into force in 2019) and extended until October 27, 2025, or until a final agreement is reached and takes effect.¹⁷ On January 20, 2023, Iran and the EAEU also signed an agreement on a Free Trade Zone.¹⁸ The Ukraine crisis and Moscow's efforts to counter Western sanctions strategies also strengthened Tehran's position in the Kremlin's policy. As the United States and the European Union are trying to find suitable options to pressure Russia, the Ukrainian crisis may be useful for Tehran in fine-tuning its evolving strategy in this vast and resource-rich land of Eurasia.¹⁹

¹⁵ For more information about Iranian borders, see: (Gharehbeigi & Otikand, 2018).

¹⁶ Shesh dalile tarjihe Shargh bar Gharb [Six Reasons to Prefer East to West] // The Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. January 31, 2018. (In Persian). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=38981> (accessed: 05.10.2022).

¹⁷ Iran: EAEU Interim Free Trade Agreement Extended Until 2025 // Special Eurasia. January 3, 2022. URL: <https://research.hktdc.com/en/article/OTQ4OTMyMTAx/> (accessed: 25.07.2022).

¹⁸ Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union Signed an Agreement on a Free Trade Zone // Special Eurasia. January 20, 2023. URL: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/01/20/iran-eaeu-free-trade-zone/> (accessed: 15.02.2023).

¹⁹ Hussain A. How the Ukraine Crisis Benefits Iran's Eurasia Strategy // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. July 7, 2022. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87457> (accessed: 13.01.2023).

On the other hand, the weak economy, youth unemployment and the negative impact of the US sanctions on Iran's economy have caused many economic problems in Iran. These facts have forced Iran to look for friends and new opportunities in the region. The SCO, with the presence of emerging regional powers China, Russia and other member countries, is perhaps the best platform for the reconstruction of Iran after being severely damaged by sanctions. Based on these facts, Iran's membership in the SCO has become a fundamental issue and the decision to accept Iran as a full member of the SCO was an important event for both sides (Iqbal & Bukhari, 2022).

We should also pay attention to the internal public opinion of Iran. Iran's revolutionary foreign policy has been based on the principle of "neither East, nor West." Some people in Iran consider looking to the East and extensive cooperation with Eastern states to be against that principle. Under the influence of virtual space and Western global media, a part of the intellectual community of Iran is pessimistic about cooperation with Eastern countries and ignoring Western states, and this causes the social capital to expand relations with Eastern countries to be limited. At the same time, due to domestic economic problems, most people pay more attention to the results and consequences of relations with Eastern countries on the domestic economic situation, and as long as this policy leads to positive results, they do not oppose it.

Cooperation on regional security should be seen as the main goal of Iran's membership of the SCO. Since 1991, Iran has always tried to establish security in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In this regard, we can refer to the efforts to mediate in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in 1991—1993, to help peace in Tajikistan in 1992—1996, and to cooperate with Russia to support the "Coalition of North Afghanistan" against the Taliban in 1996—2001. We should also mention the strengthening of regional relations with the countries of Central Asia.

In fact, Iran has come out of a kind of regional institutional isolation, and given the common goals with Russia and China against the unilateralism of the United States, membership in this organization can limit some of the external pressures. Iran became an observer member of this organization in 2005 and applied for official membership in 2007, but could not achieve this goal due to the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).²⁰ After the resolutions were removed in 2015 in the light of the JCPOA,²¹ and the organization's tendency to accept new member, the necessary conditions were provided. The Samarkand meeting on September 16, 2022²² and the acceptance of Iran's membership in the SCO will strengthen the process of cooperation and connection between Iran and the Eastern countries more than ever.

Iran's joining the SCO is a symbol that consolidates its eastern orientation in the development of its foreign relations.²³ For Iran, membership in this organization represents its first participation in a multilateral and transnational organization that focuses on collective security. Few among Iran's foreign policy officials doubt the importance of Russia for Iran, considering their joint support for the multipolar world order and Moscow's support for Iran's membership in multilateral Eurasian institutions such as the EAEU and

SCO. However Iran's desire to participate in this forum, in addition to increasing the country's economic independence, will increase the asymmetry in Tehran's bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing (Therme, 2022, p. 26). Even the possible return of the U.S. to the nuclear deal does not seem to change this trend. Iran's entry into the SCO takes place in a situation where there is a growing demand to create new cooperation mechanisms among the members. In the past, the organization seemed to be an alternative to the Western order, but today "this 'alternativeness' is not just an option but a need".²⁴

In the Eurasian region, Iran is also fundamentally opposed to the three main threats agreed in the SCO charter, including radicalism, terrorism and separatism, and has always been very interested in economic cooperation in Central Asia. In addition to the Eastern policy, the president of Iran Ebrahim Raisi attaches great importance to cooperation with Iran's neighbors and the five Eurasian countries in the common land and sea borders, and therefore, membership in this regional body will be an important opportunity for Iran's Eurasian policy, which will continue to examine the dimensions and we will discuss its regional consequences.

The Constructive Role of Iran in Eurasian Integration

In the previous discussions, it was said that Iran's Eurasian policy has become more of a priority than ever before and joining to the SCO will have important consequences in terms of security, communication and economy for the region. In the security dimension, it facilitates Tehran's active participation in the formation of

²⁰ Cheshmandaze ozvyate Iran dar Sazmane Hamkarie Shanghai [The Prospect of Iran's Membership in the SCO] // *Tasnim News*. August 1, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/05/10/2547137/> (accessed: 20.03.2022).

²¹ Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) // European Parliament. July 14, 2015. URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf> (accessed: 23.02.2023).

²² The Samarkand Declaration of the Heads of State Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization // The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. September 16, 2022. URL: <http://eng.sectsco.org/documents/> (accessed: 12.02.2023).

²³ For more information, see: (Ansarinasab & Bidmal, 2023).

²⁴ Smagin N. Iran in the SCO: A Forced "Look East" Strategy and an Alternative World Order // Russian International Affairs Council. October 11, 2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/iran-in-the-sco-a-forced-look-east-strategy-and-an-alternative-world-order/> (accessed: 09.12.2022).

regional security and can play an important role in the development and evolution of the organization. Because Iran's regional interests have an important advantage for the organization in solving regional problems in order to prevent the region from becoming a center of terrorism and extremism.

In particular, Iran can become one of the key factors in establishing relations with the new government of Afghanistan. Therefore, the SCO has a significant integration potential in the field of security and should play its positive role in Afghanistan. This issue has become more important especially after the withdrawal of America. As Garbuzarova writes, "Iran has always closely followed the events in Afghanistan and has tried to actively participate in curbing the challenges and threats posed by Afghanistan. The special concern of the Iranian authorities in this regard are problems such as international terrorism and drug trafficking, which directly affect Iran's national security" (Garbuzarova, 2021, pp. 431—432).

Therefore, Iran's role in the security of Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus is a very important issue for strengthening the stability and security of the Eurasian region. In addition to the experience of the past three decades, it should be noted the president's serious will to oppose the destructive influence of Western powers and to cooperate with Russia, China and other countries in the region, which is naturally institutionalized within the framework of the SCO and a strong process of sustainable security cooperation will create. President of Iran E. Raisi also stated at the Samarkand meeting on September 16, 2022 that "maximum interaction and cooperation with the members of the SCO and effective presence in regional arrangements is at the center of the foreign policy of Iran, and Iran plays a role in ensuring stability and security in the region, especially against terrorism and extremism, drug

trafficking and other forms of international organized crime are on its agenda."²⁵

Iran's military and economic cooperation with Russia and China will increase the importance of the Greater Eurasia project. Iran is a bridge connecting North / South / East and West with ports accessible to Eurasian countries and has a large transport system linking the major population centers of Eurasia with the Middle East and Africa. Iran can close the Eurasian ring and make it impenetrable, or Iran's alliance with the maritime powers can trouble Eurasian powers.²⁶

But Iran's role goes beyond security issues, and Iran's new strategy which is mainly based on the priority of extensive cooperation with Eastern and Asian countries such as Russia and China can play a key role in Eurasian issues considering its national and regional capacities and geopolitical position. In fact, Iran has been the missing linkage of any Eurasian regional initiative, order, cooperation and integration, because it connecting point of cultural, intellectual, security and institutional trends in the three strategic regions of the Middle East, Eurasia and Asia.

These important communication features, together with economic, energy and security capabilities, can create an important position for Iran as a responsible and positive actor in shaping the future regional and international system. With Iran's membership in the SCO, its geographical scope has expanded to the Greater Middle East. Iran's membership increases the strength of the SCO (Yuan, 2023). In this regard, Iran's vast communication and

²⁵ Hozoure faal va moaser dar Sazmane Hamkarye Shanghai [The Active and Effective Presence in the Activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization] // Foreign Ministry of IRI. September 25, 2022. (In Persian). URL: <https://mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/693493/> (accessed: 24.10.2022).

²⁶ Asisian N. Iran, China, and the Future World Order: Unipolarity or Multipolarity? // Kenney Papers. March 15, 2022. URL: https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Papers/KP_01_Asisian_Iran_China_and_the_Future_World_Order_Unipolarity_or_Multipolarity.pdf (accessed: 19.08.2022).

transportation infrastructures are abundant for access to the open seas, and its territory is very close and economical for transferring energy to the ports and open seas.

As we know, one of the important problems of the Eurasian countries is the issue of access to the global markets and the issue of corridors, despite many efforts, has not yet been able to reach a clear end and be effective in the economy of the countries. The main reason is related to the exclusive and competitive view of the corridors, which has ignored the main and closest route, which is the North — South corridor from Iran, due to the hostility of the West and the pressure on the regional states.

According to the developments that were mentioned in the second topic of this article, Iran's extensive capabilities in terms of infrastructure, situation and institutions are increasing, and the international and regional conditions are also increasing because of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's Eastern strategy, tensions between the U.S. and Russia and China and Iran's membership in the SCO have also provided important opportunities to actualize these capabilities. Iran's focus on eastern policy can create a more suitable situation. Regarding the importance of Iran's communication for the organization, R. Kaplan believes that "for the SCO, Iran's territory will serve as a strategic transit belt between Eurasia and West Asia. Iran is located in the south of the central and vital heartland region intended by Mackinder and within the peripheral region desired by Spykman, and this is Iran's positional advantage that should be taken into account. The dictate of geography is that Iran will be a pivotal country in the development process of Central Eurasia" (Kaplan, 2012).

As part of its Eastern policy, Iran has signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China. According to this agreement, China will invest a lot in the development of communication and port infrastructure of Iran, which connects Eurasia to

the Persian Gulf (Khanmohammadi & Sun, 2022). Also, according to the Foreign Ministry of Iran, the twenty-year strategic agreement with Russia will be signed soon.²⁷ These two agreements, along with numerous agreements concluded between Iran and the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and the activation of the North — South Corridor, which will be operational in 2022, can create extensive economic interdependence between Iran and the region to create Eurasia.

The 7,200 km long network of highways, sea routes and railways makes the North — South Corridor the shortest communication route (about 35 to 37 days) between Russia and India. According to experts, it will also reduce the cost of transport between the two countries by around 30%.²⁸ In his address to the Federal Assembly on February 21, 2023, Vladimir Putin said, "We will pay special attention to the North — South International Corridor, as those who work on this every day know. Vessels with a draft of up to 4.5 meters will be able to pass through the Volga — Caspian Sea Canal this year. This will open up new routes for business cooperation with India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle Eastern countries. We will continue developing this corridor."²⁹

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, published on March 31, 2023, pays special attention to the North — South Corridor. Paragraph 54 emphasizes the strengthening of

²⁷ 20-year Cooperation Agreement with Russia at Final Stage, Iran says // *Tehran Times*. December 12, 2021. URL: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/467983/20-year-cooperation-agreement-with-Russia-at-final-stage-Iran/> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

²⁸ Koridore Shomal — Janub ruye reile amalyati shodan dar doulate sizdaho [The North — South Corridor is on Track to Become Operational in the 13th Government] // *IRNA*. September 15, 2022. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.irna.ir/news/84882554/> (accessed: 06.12.2022).

²⁹ Presidential Address to Federal Assembly // *The President of Russia*. February 21, 2023. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565/> (accessed: 29.02.2023).

the economic and transport interconnectivity in Eurasia, including through the rapid launch of the International North — South Transport Corridor.³⁰

The main obstacles to Iran's participation in regional communication corridors to the global maritime routes over the years have been the pressure of economic sanctions and the American pressure on regional countries to limit cooperation with Iran. With Iran's membership in the SCO and broader cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Policy, these obstacles will be greatly reduced. As a result, Iran's cooperation in the field of transportation, energy transfer and wider economic relations will help the natural flow of transportation and trade in the region and this issue will improve the efficiency of regional states and this can not only It will contribute to greater economic cooperation and integration in the region, but it will also pave the way for greater security participation of Iran in regional security equations.

Moreover, within the framework of Iran's Eastern policy, a broader partnership will be established with Russian plan for Greater Eurasia and China's BRI, and this issue is of great importance to Central Asian countries and will help their economic development. It is natural that the continuation of business cooperation between Iran and Eurasia with more seriousness will lead to good results.

According to Peyrouse, Iran has been the "missing link" in the regional integration of the region until now, and the international community's sanctions against it have largely prevented the development of political and economic relations with its neighbors.³¹ Iran's

³⁰ The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. March 31, 2023. URL: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (accessed: 14.04.2023).

³¹ Peyrouse S. Iran's Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic and Political Profit and Loss Account // Aljazeera Centre for Studies. April 1, 2014.

membership in the SCO is not only as a regional security organization, but also as a real regionalism project with long-term economic returns for all member countries, a political and diplomatic achievement for Tehran to avoid dependency and regionalization and promote economic integration (Nabipour, 2021, p. 24).

But from the point of view of the theory of regional integration that I mentioned in the introduction of the article, regional security is generally provided through the expansion of economic cooperation and the formation of economic integration at the regional level. Therefore, it seems that what causes some of the insecurity and rebellion in the countries of the region is the inefficiency of the states in terms of providing livelihood and economic facilities in the communities. In the case of the Eurasian territory, this issue is largely due to the land lock of these countries and the difficulty of accessing world markets, which has severely limited transportation and foreign trade.

Of course, according to the points I mentioned in terms of Iran's geographical and transport characteristics, Iran can play an effective role in helping the regional states to be efficient. In particular, the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus have access to the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean through Iran and through the North — South Corridor. Iran has extensive transport and communication infrastructure, and its rail and road lines extend from the borders of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the ports of the Caspian Sea to the ports of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. If the countries of the region have access to free ports, the economic development of the region can be improved compared to the past and, as it was said, Iran can be considered as the missing link of any regional convergence in the territory of Eurasia.

URL: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2014/04/2014416940377354.html> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

Conclusion

In the course of the arguments I had in the framework of the subtitles, based on the theory of regional integration, I tried to discuss the relationship between the variables of institutionalism, integration and regional security to the importance of the expansion of the SCO. I also emphasized Iran's membership and argued that in the new situation, effective possibilities have been created to expand constructive interactions in the region. The most concrete example of this cooperation is the launch of the North — South Corridor, which has become operational after two decades. In fact, this issue can be clearly understood by considering Iran's role in communication between the Eurasian region and the Middle East and South Asia.

It is an important fact that in the third decade of the new century, the Eurasian region is on the threshold of great changes. Russia, China, Iran and other countries of the region have started extensive cooperation under new conditions. It seems that the state of the international environment inevitably leads these three countries to further cooperation. The crisis in Ukraine, the developments in Taiwan, and the problems of Iran and the U.S., show a vague perspective of the global and regional situation. The territory of Eurasia, as the center of regional communication is under the pressure from Western currents, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, despite its existence for more than two decades, as a common institution for stability, security, cooperation and integration, has been placed in different and dynamic conditions.

These new global and regional conditions have provided new opportunities for Iran to play a role. The Eastern Policy of Iran has given greater priority to the Eurasian region, and its official membership in the SCO gives it new possibilities to this country. Geopolitical realities such as a common border of thousands kilometers with the region, historical, cultural and social ties and, most importantly, Iran's

actions in various issues of the Eurasian region show that Iran's role is both in cooperation and security in the Eurasian region and in connecting this region is undeniable with the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In my opinion, the absence of Iran in the past three decades has been to the detriment of Iran and the countries of the region, and perhaps one country can fill the void of Iran's official and institutional presence in the political, security and economic equations of the Eurasian region.

In today's world, security and development are highly interdependent, and Iran's ability to provide regional access to sea lanes and to transfer energy from the region to global markets will greatly contribute to the efficiency and economic development of the Eurasian region, and this can contribute to regional security. The facts show that there is a large transport infrastructure in Iran. On the eve of the fourth decade of the emergence of the Eurasian arena in international politics, it seems that the time has come to end the limitation of Iran's role in economic exchanges and economic development of the region and to begin the period of positive and dynamic interaction. Just as Russia has agreed to greater participation of Iran, China, Türkiye, India and Pakistan in the region through the Greater Eurasia Initiative, Iran has an opportunity to overcome past limitations on cooperation with the region. By actively participating in Eurasian projects and institutions and playing a role as a regional bridge with the Persian Gulf, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, Iran has the opportunity to contribute to the stability, security and development of the Eurasian region. Therefore, the beginning of the new decade seems to be a new choice for the development and security of Iran and the Eurasian region.

But we should not ignore that there is still the pressure of the US sanctions and the weakness of Iran's private sector, and it seems that these are the main obstacles to any effective role of Iran's regional policy in the economic,

commercial and communication fields. Tehran's ability to play an effective role in the economic and security integration of the region depends on finding a logical way out of the pressure of the US sanctions, making state structures more efficient, strengthening the private sector and

giving priority to economic development. Of course, the Eurasian policy alone will not cure all the problems, but even in such conditions, it is necessary to use all the opportunities that Eurasian integration provides to Iran.

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