

Iranian Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Motivations and Implications

by [Nicole Grajewski \(/experts/nicole-grajewski\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Nicole Grajewski \(/experts/nicole-grajewski\)](#)

Nicole Grajewski is an international security fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs in Harvard's Kennedy School.



Brief Analysis

The Russian/Chinese-led bloc is expected to approve Iran's accession this week amid uncertainty over President Raisi's foreign posture and ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan.

On September 16, Iran's newly inaugurated President Ebrahim Raisi will embark on his first foreign trip to attend the twentieth-anniversary summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tajikistan. Russian special envoy for SCO affairs Bakhtiyor Khakimov has indicated that a major item on the agenda will be moving forward with Tehran's longstanding application for full membership—an initiative that may proceed despite the notable absence of leaders Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, both of whom are isolating due to COVID-19. Although the direct benefits of this decision would be modest for Iran, the news still represents a major diplomatic victory for Raisi at a time when his government faces pressing questions over stalled nuclear talks in Vienna, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and the perpetual challenge of regime survival.

Iran's Long Road to Membership

The SCO grew out of the "Shanghai Five" format, which involved a series of meetings in 1996-1997 over border issues between China and its neighboring Soviet successor states Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined them to formally establish the SCO, broadening the bloc's scope to encompass economic, cultural, and security cooperation aimed at combating what Beijing describes as the "three evils": terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

Iran expressed its interest in participating a year later, eventually applying for observer status in 2004. At the July 2005 SCO summit in Astana, the organization approved the request, naming Iran an observer alongside India and Pakistan. Tehran applied for full membership in 2008, but China, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan were apprehensive about going that far at the time, in part because of the regime's continued intransigence over its nuclear program

and the resultant international pressure. At the 2010 Tashkent summit, the SCO adopted new criteria stipulating that an aspiring member state “should have no sanctions imposed on it by the United Nations Security Council.”

Once UN sanctions were removed in the wake of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, considerable discussions were held about admitting Iran. Yet the delay persisted for years due to multiple factors, including the accession of other members (India and Pakistan), the downturn in relations with Tajikistan over Tehran’s outreach to that country’s opposition, and Beijing’s continued hesitance over Iran exploiting the SCO to promote anti-American policies.

Even so, the lack of progress on accession did not impede substantive interactions—Iranian personnel have frequently participated in SCO summits, ministerial meetings, conferences, and counterterrorism exercises. Moreover, recent developments suggest that past objections are no longer an impediment to full membership. This was confirmed on August 11 by Iran’s Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani, who announced that “political obstacles” to accession had been resolved following a conversation with his Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev. In addition to smoothing over its differences with Tajikistan, Iran has apparently convinced China to support its accession as well. Although Beijing has been less vocal on this front than Russia and Tajikistan, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian reportedly thanked his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi for supporting the membership bid during a phone call they held earlier this month.

Policy Implications

The SCO is often portrayed as an inherently anti-Western bloc, with some even calling it the “anti-NATO.” Yet differences between individual member states have constrained the bloc’s policy coordination and regional integration since its inception. This is partly due to institutional design—the SCO is governed by consensus, which limits the extent of substantive cooperation, while its two permanent bodies (the Secretariat in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent) lack the legal capacity to enforce decisions. Consequently, the SCO functions more as a forum for discussion and engagement than a formal regional alliance akin to the EU or NATO.

In practical terms, then, conferring membership on Iran will have only modest implications. Tehran will now be able to partake in SCO decisionmaking, including the preparation and signing of documents. Yet despite the organization’s reliance on consensus, giving Iran a say is unlikely to entail any fundamental changes to the organization’s posture, since China and Russia remain crucial to Tehran’s foreign policy and will presumably sway its votes on important matters.

The prestige that Iran may accrue from membership is more significant. Joining the SCO has been a longstanding goal for Tehran—not so much as an aspect of its policy approach to the Middle East, but rather as an extension of its efforts to boost the Islamic Republic’s international legitimacy and ties to the East. For the most part, Iran has acted as a status-quo power in Central Asia, deferring to Moscow and Beijing’s hegemony and supporting the territorial integrity of SCO states. Gaining full membership has been perceived as a vehicle for Tehran to consolidate these regional relationships. The regime has also positioned itself as a desirable partner through its commitment to combatting Beijing’s “three evils” (e.g., by frequently emphasizing Iranian measures to stem narco-trafficking and refugee flows).

Such efforts have taken on added significance in light of Tehran’s ongoing struggle against the United States. Iranian officials tend to portray the SCO as a symbol of shifting global power dynamics away from America to the collective non-West. Previously, China and the Central Asian states were more willing to accommodate U.S. concerns about allowing Iran to become more deeply involved in the SCO, especially during the Ahmadinejad era, when Tehran sought to use the organization as a platform to promote its nuclear policies. Yet the Biden administration may not be able or willing to elicit such concessions given its fraught relations with Moscow and Beijing, not to mention the

general lack of attention Washington has paid to Central Asia in recent years.

Afghanistan and regional security. As early as 2007, the SCO started allowing observer states to participate more regularly and deeply in ministerial meetings, working groups, and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure—a shift that gave Iran access to limited information sharing on terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. In 2017, the organization decided to revitalize the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, indicating its desire to play a collective role in that country. Tehran is now part of that calculus—the U.S. withdrawal and the uncertain stability of the new Taliban government strengthened the case for making Iran a full member, and Moscow has been emphasizing the need to bring Iranian officials into the quadrilateral Russian-Chinese-Pakistani-U.S. talks on Afghanistan.

As in the past, however, the divergent policies of SCO member states will likely limit the organization’s ability to advance meaningful dialogue on [post-withdrawal Afghanistan \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/stop-doomsaying-us-credibility-will-weather-afghanistan\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/stop-doomsaying-us-credibility-will-weather-afghanistan). Neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have adopted contrasting approaches to the Taliban, with Dushanbe vocally opposing the new government and Tashkent adopting a more measured and accommodating tone. For its part, Iran has condemned Pakistan’s support for the Taliban offensive against the Panjshir resistance and called for an inclusive government in Kabul. Despite these differences, however, SCO members share an overarching concern for stability in Afghanistan due to their deeply intertwined interests in regional security.

Regime survival. The SCO’s aversion to democracy promotion and external interference has long resonated with the Iranian regime, often influencing its [methods of holding onto power \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control) at home. In response to the opposition Green Movement that emerged during the 2009 election cycle, Tehran strengthened its control over information technologies by using Chinese internet surveillance practices and cyber technology. Similarly, Iranian legislation on information security began to emulate the language used in Russian, Chinese, and SCO documents, particularly in linking state sovereignty to control over the internet.

As a full SCO member, Iran would be able to invite election monitors from the organization to provide a semblance of legitimacy to its future balloting. It would also be able to formally label certain groups as “terrorist, extremist, or separatist” organizations on the declassified list maintained by the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure—a practice that several SCO states use to marginalize domestic opposition factions. In short, the SCO’s promotion of authoritarian stabilization practices has both domestic and foreign policy implications for Iran.

Conclusion

Iran’s full accession to the SCO—a process that could take up to two years once formally set in motion—is unlikely to spur substantive changes to the organization itself. Rather, the move should be viewed in the context of Tehran’s efforts to alleviate its international isolation by expanding bilateral and [multilateral ties \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-eurasian-wager\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-eurasian-wager) with Russia, China, and the Central Asian states. Membership would also bolster Tehran’s role in managing regional security and further its quest to add an “Eastern vector” to its foreign policy.

Nicole Grajewski is an international security fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs in Harvard’s Kennedy School and a doctoral candidate in international relations at the University of Oxford. ❖



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