

# Iran, the SCO and Major Geo-strategic Shifts in a Post-Ahmadinejad Era

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HOSSEIN AGHAIE JOOBANI, SEP 24 2013

The 13<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which was held in mid-September in Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek brought into focus issues pertaining to the 'New Great Game' in Central Asia. The negotiations between the heads of the member states of the SCO took place as the spectre of war still haunts the Levant and key regional stakeholders, such as China, Russia and Iran remain deeply apprehensive about the future of security and stability in the SCO region. But what has less been discussed following the summit is the question of whether or not Iran's strategic approach toward the SCO will undergo major changes under the presidency of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani, and if yes, how these anticipated policy changes will affect regional stability and possibly international security.

This article seeks to assess the implications of Iran's engagement within the SCO. It argues that the prospect for accession of Iran as a full member to the SCO is likely to improve at the start of a post-Ahmadinejad era, but the choice for Iran might be a costly and very tricky one.

### What is the SCO and why is it important for Iran?

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is worth knowing a bit about the SCO and its place in international politics.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an inter-governmental security cooperation organization which comprises China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as permanent members, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, Mongolia as observer states, and Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey as dialogue partners. The SCO is the successor to the Shanghai Five, which was established in 1996 after the signing of a "strategic partnership" in April of the same year between Russia and China. The Sino-Russian rapprochement was intended to settle mutual longstanding territorial disputes. With the accession of Uzbekistan in 2001, the grouping eventually changed its name to the SCO. In 2005 Iran gained an observer status along with Pakistan and India. These three countries have shown willingness, albeit to varying degrees, to become full/permanent members of the organization.

Most particularly, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was considered an enthusiast of the Russo-Chinese-led grouping, as evidenced by his speech on 15 June 2006 which was construed by many pundits as an attempt to portray the SCO as an overtly anti-Western security bloc.[1] Broadly speaking, most Western commentators view the SCO as a "vehicle for the permanent members and observers to justify and legitimize their own forms of domestic politics while providing a balance to U.S. hegemony." [2] However, China and to a lesser extent Russia have sought to refrain from using explicit anti-Western discourse in their bilateral relations with other members of the SCO and in their relations with the Western countries. Thus, it can be argued that it was mostly because of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric against Israel and the U.S. and most notably due to Iran's indifference to the UN Security Council resolutions (over its nuclear program) that China and Russia were less enamored with the idea of giving Iran a full membership in the organization.

For Ahmadinejad and the hardliners who supported him, the SCO presented a unique opportunity to reinforce Iran's 'go east' policy in the face of toughening economic sanctions. It was a temporary soapbox upon which he could firmly

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stand, albeit unsuccessfully, to gain much-needed legitimacy and recognition from the SCO members, particularly Russia and China, who hold veto-power within the UN Security Council. Notwithstanding Russia's and China's lukewarm positions on Iran's bid for full membership, some Central Asian states, most notably Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were also critical of Iranian accession.

Thus, for most of Ahmadinejad's tenure (2005-2013), Tehran maintained close relationships with Russia and China and placed the "View to the East" as well as developing close ties with Latin America's leftist governments at the very top of its foreign policy agenda.[3] Within the SCO framework, Iran enjoys friendly and amicable ties with Tajikistan and to a lesser extent with Kyrgyzstan, whereas its relations with Uzbekistan have in recent years become frayed over a range of political and security issues.<sup>[4]</sup> Having said this, the claim is that for the past seven years Iran's SCO approach tended to be *reactive* rather than being a *proactive* policy aimed at effectively utilizing the geopolitical influence of the member states to narrow down wild differences over its nuclear program or creating conditions for expending the organizational capacity of the SCO in sustaining regional stability.

The Iranian government's poor domestic policy in the face of international sanctions compounded the country's economic woes and as a direct consequence of low expectations about a possible *rapprochement* between Iran and the West, a major shift in Iran's geostrategic thinking took place and the SCO became an anchor of Iran's 'marching eastwards' policy. China and Russia made the best of Iran-West diplomatic alienation and further expanded their economic and security outreach as a counterbalance to U.S. strategic and economic interest in the Middle East and Central Asia. Russia sought to sell its weapons and nuclear reactors to Iran, while China concentrated mostly on imports of oil from the Middle East, particularly from Iran. In reality, China and Russia benefited the most, as Iran's fuel oil, according to a report by the Wall Street Journal, was sold even at discount prices due to the existing sanctions.[5] [6]

Keeping the above in mind, it is worth noting that although some pundits argue that the election of Rouhani is unlikely to result in drastic changes in Iran's relations with the West, this will contribute greatly to the relative softening of Iran's anti-Western discourse on the global stage. For the time being, Rouhani seems to have refrained from delivering acerbic speeches against Israel, or the United States. His self-proclaimed 'Government of Hope and Prudence', at least for now, does not see the world as a zero sum game. In his first post-election press conference on June 17, Rouhani said that his government will take steps to "deliver on its promises in saving the economy, reviving ethics and interacting constructively with the world through a moderate policy,"[7] Rouhani even went so far as to state that Tehran was ready for "serious" negotiations with Washington to resolve the nuclear issue. Clearly, the conciliatory tone adopted by the new president could usher in significant changes in Iran's foreign and economic policy in the region and beyond.

## Getting shanghaied or going westward under Rouhani

In his first foreign trip since taking office on August 4, Rouhani visited Kyrgyzstan and attended the SCO summit. Unlike Ahmadinejad, who in the past seemed to be desirous of transforming the SCO into an anti-Western security bloc, Rouhani used the SCO platform to express Iran's willingness to end the stand-off with global powers over its nuclear program, and to engage more actively with the member states. "Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, we want the swiftest solution to it within international norms," Reuters quoted Rouhani as saying at the meeting with Putin in Bishkek.[8] When juxtaposed and compared to Ahmadinejad's defiance of international norms— he called the UN Security Council resolutions "worthless paper"[9]— Rouhani's remarks imply that Tehran follows positive-sum thinking and will be in pursuit of mutually beneficial cooperation bargains with the East and West. In fact, Iran's recent pragmatist foreign policy tilt will stand a better chance of convincing the West as well as the SCO that the country intends to be a responsible regional and global actor in the face of common security and economic challenges in today's increasingly interdependent world.

Clearly, this foreign policy detour will have profound implications for the future engagement of Iran with the SCO and the West. As far Iran's SCO approach under Rouhani is concerned, it can be argued that Iran's prospects of gaining full membership in the SCO is likely to improve, given Rouhani's disposition. However, there are certain limits and geopolitical consideration to Iran's accession, which taken together are expected to pose formidable challenges for

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both Iran and the SCO.

On the one hand, it can be argued that if the P5+1 talks with Iran over its nuclear program results in a win-win outcome, China may become more supportive of Iranian full membership within the SCO, mainly because Beijing could keep Tehran in China's orbit. This balance of power strategy depends on future developments between Iran and the West, and not least on how Russia and some Central Asian states, namely Uzbekistan would react to Iran's bid. All in all, China and Russia, albeit for different purposes, are expected to keep a wary eye on the upcoming Iran-P5+1 talks and become more engaged with Tehran in order to undermine the U.S. influence in Central Asia and the Middle East. As NATO plans its withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, it is extremely important for both Russia and China to maintain strong relations with Iran and, as one observer argues, to engage Tehran as a "mediator in the reconciliation process between the Afghan Government and insurgents." [10]

On the other hand, however, if Rouhani and his foreign policy team led by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif decide to seek for full membership within the SCO, this decision might be interpreted by the U.S. as a balancing strategy aimed at counterpoising the American influence in a region occupied by the world's largest suppliers of oil and gas. Therefore, the contention is that although the Obama administration has spoken of a strategic "pivot" from the Middle East to East Asia, it is unlikely that Washington risks losing the 'New Great Game' to the SCO.

In sum, it seems fair to say that Iran's future interactions within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will pose serious dilemmas for Tehran and other regional actors. For now, so much depends on how Rouhani will put his rhetoric into reality, and on how diplomacy with American unfolds.

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[3] Kucera, Joshua. "Rouhani May Go To Bishkek, But Unlikely To Focus On SCO", [eurasianet.org](http://eurasianet.org), August 15, 2013, [online] available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67397>; M K Bhadrakumar. "Foreign policy priorities of Iran's Rouhani", *The Russia and India Report*, June 17, 2013.

[4] For example, when the US Congress introduced economic sanctions against Iran in 1995, better known as the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian country to welcome this decision. Iran-Uzbekistan relations have relatively improved after Tashkent's relations with the West deteriorated over the Andijan unrest.

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