



Iran's Political Opportunities and Challenges after Permanent Membership in the SCO based on the SWOT Model

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ABSTRACT

Iran's nearly two-decade-long pursuit of full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) culminated at the 21st Summit on September 17, 2021, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, when the country was formally accepted as a permanent member. While Iran's accession marks a significant diplomatic achievement, it also presents notable political implications that warrant closer examination. This study seeks to address the question: "What are the political opportunities and challenges facing Iran following its full membership in the SCO?" Using the SWOT analysis framework, we explore the strategic prospects and potential obstacles Iran may encounter. Our findings indicate several opportunities for Iran, including fostering interdependence, counterbalancing global hegemonic influences, combating extremism and drug trafficking, and altering security perspectives on Iran. However, challenges persist, such as disparities in power and bargaining influence among the SCO members, a tendency to limit mutual cooperation, and ambiguities concerning the organization's primary identity. Finally, the study suggests strategies to enhance Iran's strategic benefits and effectiveness within the SCO.

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1. Introduction

*I*ran's approach to international organizations has evolved significantly. Initially, the country expressed skepticism toward membership in such organizations, but this stance shifted as various administrations recognized the value of regional and international engagement. Today, Iran's involvement with these organizations reflects periodic government strategies and policies aimed at enhancing its global standing. This research focuses on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which originated as the Shanghai Five in 1997 and officially became the SCO in 2001. It aims to build upon previous research by analyzing the opportunities and challenges of Iran's SCO membership, especially following its transition from observer status to full membership in September 2021. By providing a structured framework for optimizing the benefits of SCO membership, this study seeks to offer some practical solutions for Iran. Given that China and Russia—both members of the United Nations Security Council and representing a significant portion of the global population—are central players within the SCO, Iran stands to gain a valuable platform for reducing international isolation and fostering cooperation, which could amplify its influence in the region. Through a SWOT analysis, this research aims to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for Iran as a permanent SCO member. While challenges, such as power imbalances among member states and economic dependencies on major powers, persist, Iran's membership could still yield substantial advantages. These include strengthening relations with regional partners and enhancing its position as an active and influential regional power.

In the following, we will examine the methodology of the article and then, based on the Memorandum of Obligations of Iran with the aim of obtaining the status of the Member State of the SCO and two lists of the international treaties in force within the SCO, we will examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Iran's membership separately in two sections. And finally, we will conclude and provide practical solutions to address challenges and increase achievements.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have contributed to the understanding of Iran's role in the SCO, laying a foundation for this research. For instance, an article by Dizboni et al. (2010), titled "Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Counter-hegemony as common Purpose" argue that the main goal of Iran to join the SCO is to build a counter-hegemon bloc against the United States' hegemonic behavior. Another article titled "Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. A SWOT Analysis" by Honrada and Ranjbar (2023), examines the dynamics of Iran's engagement with the SCO from June 2005 to September 2021 also examines how Iran uses diplomatic, information, military, and economic national power instruments to pursue SCO membership. In addition, the study uses SWOT analysis to assess the direction and challenges Iran faces in its full SCO membership. In addition, Biari, et al. (2022), discusses the challenges Iran faces as a permanent member, offering valuable insights into the complexities of this role. Salimi, et al. (2022), explores cooperative areas, the future trajectory of Iran's membership, and the potential security and economic implications. Similarly, Shariatinia's (2022) delves into the security and economic ramifications of this development. Additionally, Hamiani and Sajjadpour (2022), examines the membership through a constructivist lens, analyzing its geopolitical significance. Hakim and Irannia (2022), seeks to answer the question of what effect Iran's permanent membership in the SCO have on Iran's geopolitical weight? It assumes that Iran's permanent membership in this organization can increase Iran's geopolitical weight in the region and bring political, economic and security benefits for Iran. Eslami, et al. (2018) considering Iran's capabilities in the security and political fields in the region and the international system, while the SCO can use Iran's capabilities in the field of security and politics, there are also many opportunities for Iran. In sum, research in this field, much of it conducted prior to Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), has not conducted a deep study of the

Memorandum of Obligations of Iran and two lists of the international treaties in force within the SCO. By content analysis of these treaties, this research aims to expand on the prior studies by providing a comprehensive examination of Iran's role within the SCO and exploring strategies that will maximize the benefits of its full membership.

3. Methodology

The SWOT analysis method serves as the primary analytical framework in this research. While traditionally employed in management and organizational studies, this methodology is particularly well-suited to the current study, which focuses on Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—one of the most significant regional organizations. The SWOT method allows for a comprehensive evaluation of internal and external factors, both positive and negative, that influence strategic decision-making. For the purposes of this research, the methodology has been adapted to fit the context and objectives of analyzing Iran's role and potential in the SCO. To examine the opportunities and challenges of Iran after its permanent membership in the SCO, the following steps were taken using the SWOT analytical model.

- Identifying strengths: In this section, we examined Iran's strategic advantages, such as natural resources, geographical location, and economic capabilities, and presented a selection of them that were related to political strengths in the article.
- Identifying weaknesses: Then, we analyzed internal challenges such as international sanctions, economic and political weaknesses, and presented a selection of these cases.
- Identifying opportunities: We studied the opportunities created, including economic and political cooperation with the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and increased trade, and referred to the most important possible political opportunities in the article.

- Identifying Threats: We also evaluated the threats arising from competition with other countries, changes in global policies, and regional instability, and expressed the political threats in accordance with the topic in the article.

In conducting this research, an extensive review of academic literature and analyses of Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis regional and international organizations was undertaken. As well, we reviewed the content of the Agreement between Iran and SCO for permanent membership and all treaties in force in this organization. Based on this review, a detailed list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to Iran's membership in the SCO was developed and systematically categorized under the aforementioned headings. Accordingly, Iran's membership in the SCO has been analyzed through a SWOT framework, examining its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the context of these complex regional dynamics.

Strengths: Based on the international treaties in force in the SCO, Iran's permanent membership in the SCO presents several strengths, particularly in the realm of regional security and economic cooperation. Firstly, according to Article 2 of the Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure¹, regional cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which are recognized threats to the security and stability of all member states, would be enhanced. According to Article 6 of this agreement, it provides Iran with a platform to collaborate with other member countries, sharing intelligence and resources to address common security challenges. Moreover, the establishment of a dedicated body like RATS (article 3), allows for coordinated actions that can help protect Iran's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Additionally, the immunity provisions outlined in the agreement (article 13) ensure that RATS can operate effectively within Iran, fostering an environment conducive to international cooperation against terrorism. Finally, the opportunity for Iran to participate in the development

1. Available at <https://eng.sectsco.org/20010615/1625891.html>

of international legal instruments related to counter-terrorism (article 6) positions the country as an active player in shaping the regional security framework, further enhancing its diplomatic stature in the region. According to article 3 of the Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security¹, the establishment of a joint monitoring system will allow Iran to better detect and respond to emerging threats in the information space. Also based on the same Article, participation in the agreement provides Iran with the opportunity to contribute to the development of international legal provisions that limit the use of information weapons, thereby enhancing its own national security. In addition, Iran will gain support in combating cybercrime through shared expertise and resources, which can strengthen its capabilities in this area. Article 4 of the agreement emphasizes the importance of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, aligning with Iran's interests in promoting its own civil rights within the context of information security. Article 6 shows that, Iran can safeguard its national interests by ensuring that sensitive information is protected and that state secrets are handled appropriately under the agreement's provisions.

Based on article 7, the agreement allows for the possibility of cost-sharing arrangements for joint initiatives, which can alleviate financial burdens on Iran when participating in international security efforts. Article 10 presents that by engaging in dialogue and cooperation with other member, Iran can strengthen its diplomatic relations and enhance its influence in regional security matters. According to the Article 9 of this agreement the provision for consultation and negotiation in resolving disputes offers Iran a structured approach to address any disagreements that may arise under the agreement. Article 12 shows that the agreement's openness to other states allows Iran to potentially expand its influence and collaboration with other countries that share similar security goals. By joining this agreement, Iran can enhance its capabilities in information

1. Available at <https://eng.sectscsco.org/20090616/1626432.html>

security, foster international cooperation, and protect its national interests effectively. Additionally, the Memorandum on the Fundamental Goals and Directions of Regional Economic Cooperation¹ allows Iran to actively engage in economic initiatives aimed at creating favorable conditions for trade and investment, thereby facilitating economic development. Based on article 4 of the Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Trafficking of Narcotic Drugs² by collaborating with other SCO member states (article 1), Iran can enhance its strategies and joint measures against drug trafficking, leveraging shared intelligence to combat organized crime. Furthermore, adhering to the principles outlined in the agreement (article 2) allows Iran to implement effective preventative measures and promote rehabilitation programs for drug addiction, addressing public health concerns directly. The exchange of information on illicit trafficking activities (article 4) will facilitate a more coordinated response to drug-related threats, while the establishment of direct contacts between central competent authorities (article 5) will streamline communication and operational efficiency. Additionally, Iran's involvement in joint research and training initiatives (article 4), will bolster its capacity to tackle drug-related issues, ultimately leading to a safer and healthier society. Finally, the commitment to maintaining confidentiality and protecting sensitive information (article 10), ensures that Iran can collaborate effectively without compromising national security. In sum, the main factors strengthening Iran's position as a result of joining the SCO³ are as follows:

Commitment to SCO Principles: based on article 2.1 of memorandum of obligations of Iran with the aim of obtaining the status of the member state of the SCO, Iran is obligated to abide by the goals and principles of the SCO, which enhances its legitimacy and alignment with regional cooperation efforts.

1. (<https://eng.sectsco.org/>)

2. Available at <https://eng.sectsco.org/20040617/1627620.html>

3. The text of the treaty on Iran's accession to the organization is available at <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6486537#undefined>, July.2023

- Contribution to SCO Budget: based on article 4.2 of memorandum of obligations of Iran with the aim of obtaining the status of the member state of the SCO, Iran's financial contribution of 5.8% to the SCO budget grants it a significant role in the organization's financial framework.
- Staff Positions in SCO Bodies: based on article 5.2, Iran is allocated positions at the SCO's permanent bodies, which allows it to participate actively in decision-making processes. It also leads to the creation of employment for employees in international businesses.
- Access to International Treaties: based on article 3.4, Iran's membership provides access to various international treaties within the SCO framework, facilitating cooperation on security, trade, and other issues.
- Strategic Location: Iran's geographical position allows it to facilitate trade and cooperation among SCO member states via land and sea routes.
- Abundance of Natural Resources: Iran has significant oil reserves, which can attract investment and enhance its economic connections within the SCO.
- Potential for Economic Growth: The potential for collaboration with economic giants and neighboring countries can revitalize Iran's economy. (Iqbal and Bukhari, 2022:780).
- Iran's strong intelligence agencies can count as one of its strengths in joining the SCO (Honrada and Ranjbar, 2023:33).
- Iran's military power is one of the strengths that it could contribute to the SCO, Iran also hosts military exercises with key SCO members China and Russia, with its membership in the organization opening the possibility that these exercises be elevated and expanded at the organizational level, the SCO could benefit from Iran's extensive counterterrorism experience in the Middle East and counter-narcotics experience in Afghanistan (Ibid,34).

Weaknesses: Based on international treaties in force in the SCO and, Iran's permanent membership, Iran faces several weaknesses as a result of its permanent membership in the SCO. One significant challenge is the

obligation to adhere to the various international treaties and agreements, such as the Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Crime¹.

Iran's participation in this agreement presents several weaknesses. First, the broad scope of cooperation outlined in article 1 may lead to extensive obligations that could overwhelm Iran's current law enforcement and judicial capacities, especially in areas such as cybercrime and organized crime, where resources may be limited. Additionally, the requirement to share information on criminal activities and suspects (article 3) could raise concerns about national security and privacy, as sensitive data may be exposed to other member states, potentially leading to misuse or leaks. Moreover, while the agreement emphasizes cooperation, it does not provide specific mechanisms for resolving disputes (article 9) that may arise from differences in legal interpretations or approaches to crime, which could complicate collaboration and lead to diplomatic tensions. The stipulation in Article 6 allowing for the refusal of requests based on national interests could also result in inconsistent support from Iran when addressing cross-border crime, undermining the effectiveness of the agreement.

Furthermore, the requirement for prior written consent before sharing information with third parties (article 7) could limit Iran's ability to engage with other international organizations or countries that are not part of the SCO framework, potentially isolating it in broader anti-crime initiatives. Finally, the indefinite duration of the agreement (article 12) may restrict Iran's flexibility to adapt its commitments in response to changing domestic and international circumstances, making it difficult to withdraw or renegotiate terms should the agreement not serve its interests effectively. Iran's participation in the Agreement on Cooperation in Education² may present several weaknesses and challenges. First, the requirement for mutual exchange of trainees and educational staff (article 3) may strain Iran's educational institutions, which could face challenges in accommodating

1. Available at <https://eng.sectsco.org/20100611/1626562.html>

2. <https://eng.sectsco.org/20060715/1627748.html>

international participants while maintaining their own educational standards and resources. Additionally, while the agreement encourages the establishment of mechanisms for recognition of diplomas (article 9), there might be discrepancies in educational standards and curricula among member states, which could lead to complications in the recognition process and affect the mobility of students and professionals. Moreover, the financial terms outlined in article 13 place a significant burden on individuals and sending institutions for travel expenses, which could limit participation in exchange programs, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The stipulation that the receiving Party will provide scholarships and support (article 13) may not be consistently enforced or adequately funded, leading to unequal opportunities for Iranian students compared to their peers from other member states.

The establishment of a standing expert working group (article 14) may also result in bureaucratic delays in decision-making and implementation, as frequent meetings and coordination among multiple parties can complicate the process. Furthermore, the reliance on negotiation and consultation to resolve disputes (article 16) may not provide swift solutions to conflicts that arise, potentially hindering collaboration and progress in educational initiatives. Lastly, the indefinite duration of the agreement (article 21) may restrict Iran's flexibility to adapt its commitments and withdraw if the agreement does not align with its evolving educational priorities or if the cooperation does not yield the expected benefits. This could result in a situation where Iran remains bound to an agreement that may not serve its best interests in the long term.

First the broad scope of cooperation outlined in article 1 of the Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation ¹could lead to resource allocation challenges, as Iran may struggle to prioritize multiple areas of cooperation (e.g., environmental protection, life sciences, and energy efficiency) simultaneously, especially when facing domestic needs and

1. Available at <https://eng.sectscsco.org/20130913/1625823.html>

constraints. Article 2 requires cooperation to be conducted in accordance with national legislation, which may create bureaucratic hurdles that can delay or complicate joint research projects and initiatives. This could hinder timely collaboration and innovation. The reliance on mutual consent for changes and amendments (article 7) may result in prolonged negotiations and possible impasses, limiting Iran's ability to adapt quickly to emerging scientific and technological developments or partnership needs. The establishment of a standing working group (article 5) for coordination may introduce additional layers of bureaucracy, potentially slowing decision-making processes and the implementation of joint initiatives. (Article 3 emphasizes the protection of intellectual property rights, which could lead to concerns among) Iranian researchers and institutions about sharing proprietary information or technologies, particularly in sensitive fields, limiting the potential for collaborative advancements.

Additionally, joining to the Protocol on Cooperation and Coordination of Activities between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs¹ may require Iran to align its foreign policy more closely with that of other SCO member states, potentially limiting its autonomy in international relations. Furthermore, the requirement to engage in joint military exercises as stipulated in the Agreement on Joint Military Exercises² could lead to internal dissent, especially among factions that oppose increased military cooperation with certain SCO countries. These complexities highlight the balancing act Iran must perform to maximize the benefits of its membership while navigating the associated obligations and expectations. (<https://eng.sectesco.org/>). In sum, the main factors may weaken Iran's position as a result of joining the SCO³ are as follows:

- Financial Contributions: Article 4.3 mentions that Iran must ensure timely contributions to the SCO budget, which could strain its economy if financial conditions worsen.

1. Available at <https://eng.sectesco.org/20050225/1626872.html>

2. <https://eng.sectesco.org>

3. The text of the treaty on Iran's accession to the organization is available at <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6486537#undefined>, July.2023

- Need for Policy Alignment: Based on article 2.1, Iran must align its policies with SCO principles and objectives, which may require significant changes domestically and in foreign relations. (<https://lex.uz/uz>, 2023).
- Lack of Trust: Trust among member countries regarding the fulfillment of obligations may be limited, leading to potential challenges in ensuring mutual commitment within the organization.

Isolation Perception: Despite membership, Iran still suffers from an image of isolation due to its past conflicts and sanctions.

- Dependence on External Powers: Relying on China and Russia for economic support may limit Iran's autonomy in decision-making. (Iqbal and Bukhari, 2022:780).

Opportunities: Iran's permanent membership could provide several opportunities for Iran. The main advantage of Iran's membership is its potential to create a balance against the global hegemonic system. The presence of influential members such as China and Russia provides a platform for Iran to strengthen cooperative relations within the organization and enable the formation of a strategic alliance. A primary advantage of Iran's SCO membership is its potential to foster a balance against the global hegemonic system. The presence of influential members such as China and Russia provide Iran with a platform to strengthen cooperative ties within the organization, enabling the formation of a strategic alliance. Within this framework, balancing against hegemonic powers is often achieved through "soft balancing"—a strategy aimed at neutralizing dominant actors' influence without direct confrontation (Reseal and Salehi, 2010: 64). This approach allows Iran to work with other SCO members to navigate the current global order strategically, while reinforcing its own political, economic, and security interests. Iran's recent membership in the SCO and the expanding cooperation between Russia, China, and Iran have significant implications for the international order. By aligning with Asian powers and fostering a coalition within the SCO, Iran seeks to challenge the hegemony of the U.S, potentially reshaping both regional and global dynamics.

Advocates within Iran's foreign policy framework assert that one of the most effective strategies to counter U.S. hegemony is through strategic partnerships with Asian nations. This perspective underlies Iran's desire for an active role within the SCO, viewing the organization as an essential platform to counterbalance U.S.-led unipolarity (Haji-Yousefi and Alvand, 2008: 184). Both Russia and China share a commitment to curbing U.S. influence in Southwest and Central Asia. This shared objective has strengthened Iran's bilateral ties with these powers and reinforced its commitment to the SCO, an organization that positions itself in opposition to a unipolar global structure. Consequently, Iran's drive to foster a regional coalition against U.S. dominance has intensified, leading to a strong desire to join and actively participate in the SCO (Dizboni, et al. 2010). With industrial and technological advancements, interdependence among states has deepened, as countries increasingly align their actions and interests, generating significant mutual benefits. In this expanded international landscape, heightened threats and increased competition across various domains underscore the need for collaborative approaches. As countries recognize that independent action is insufficient to address shared challenges, the demand for regional and international cooperation through multilateral organizations has grown.

Another suitable opportunity that could arise is increased cooperation in the field of combating extremism and drug trafficking. While some Central Asian countries grapple with extremist ideologies such as Wahhabism and Salafism, which have cast Islam in a negative light globally, Iran's involvement in the SCO may contribute to addressing and mitigating these concerns. Afghanistan serves as a pertinent example, struggling with challenges of terrorism, drug trafficking, and religious extremism—a situation of considerable importance to SCO members. Since the Taliban regained control in Kabul, the rise of terrorism has posed an increasing threat to the SCO. Extremist groups, including those associated with separatist movements in North Turkestan and Chechnya, and others like the Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan, raise concerns among SCO members, especially China and Russia. Afghanistan's strategic transit location further underscores its importance; its position as a conduit for trade to Central Asia and for energy supplies from Central Asia to East Asia and beyond is critical to SCO interests. Iran, as a key transit route for drug trafficking from Afghanistan to the West via Turkey, the Balkans, and other regions, has made substantial progress in reducing the flow of narcotics through its territory (Vaezi, 2010: 24). Iran and its neighbors within the SCO face numerous regional challenges, including drug trafficking, religious extremism, weak state governance, and authority crises. These issues present complex obstacles, yet they also highlight the need for stronger, coordinated action within the SCO. By leveraging the organizational capacity of the SCO and engaging in structured, consistent meetings, Iran and other member states aim to address these dilemmas effectively, ultimately presenting a renewed image of cooperation and stability to the world. Iran's security approach, informed by recent regional developments and past experiences, incorporates elements that can foster a sustainable security framework if afforded sufficient regional support and collaboration (Eslami et al. 2018: 12).

A change in security perspectives on Iran is another opportunity that may arise after Iran's permanent membership in this organization. This opportunity is achieved by a change in Iran's foreign policy approach towards regional and international organizations, which has occurred in several presidential administrations in Iran. The shift in Iran's foreign policy following the administrations of Ahmadinejad marked a significant pivot towards increased engagement with other nations and a greater emphasis on participation in international organizations. This change led to a notable reduction in the perception of Iran as a security threat, altering the views held by other countries. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the ensuing negotiations between Iran and the United States were seen as diplomatic successes, positioning Iran as a state capable of constructive international engagement. This shift further paved the way for Iran's

permanent membership in the SCO, as SCO members reassessed Iran's role and potential contributions to regional stability and cooperation (Jafari and Belbasi, 2018: 183). With the inauguration of the Rouhani administration in 2013, Iran actively pursued permanent membership in the SCO. The initiation of JCPOA negotiations initially raised SCO members' expectations for Iran's integration, as they anticipated a lifting of sanctions, which would further reduce concerns about Iran's security risks. This shift promised to open new opportunities for Iran within the international system (Kochra, 2015). Hopes for the JCPOA were high, with SCO member countries encouraging Iran's involvement as a permanent member contingent upon the lifting of U.S. sanctions. However, with the advent of Donald Trump's administration, the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, effectively undermining the agreement. Subsequently, the U.S. reinstated sanctions on Iran, significantly limiting Iran's oil exports. In recent years, global geopolitical dynamics have shifted. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan created space for China to increase its influence and investment in Central Asia. China has since expanded its strategic sphere, particularly with Pakistan, and adopted a more assertive global stance. Amid ongoing conflict in Ukraine and deteriorating Western relations with Russia, China declared a "no-limits" partnership with Moscow. Iran, too, has strengthened its alignment with Russia. In 2021, Iran signed a Chinese-mediated agreement to restore diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, and a cross-border trade hub was established on Iran's border with Pakistan in 2023. China views Iran's SCO membership as a stabilizing factor, especially given Iran's energy resources, although it risks escalating tensions with the U.S. The 25-year cooperation deal signed in 2021 between China and Iran, which includes significant oil trade, further highlights Iran's strategic importance to China. Recent reports indicate that private Chinese refiners are increasingly sourcing oil from Iran, as China remains the world's largest oil importer (Zainli, 2023). In sum, Iran's permanent membership in the SCO, despite the continuation of U.S. sanctions, is a product of multiple converging factors:

geopolitical realignments, a shift in Iran's foreign policy towards cooperation with the East, the influence of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, and the expanding energy and economic ties between Iran, China, and Russia. Iran's role in the Afghanistan crisis and the renewed support from key SCO members, despite U.S. sanctions, ultimately secured Iran's place within the organization. In sum, opportunities that Iran may have after permanent membership in the SCO¹ are mentioned below:

- Enhanced Regional Cooperation: based on Article 3.2 (Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism), membership allows Iran to collaborate on security issues such as terrorism and extremism, which can improve its regional standing.
- Investment and Economic Growth: Article 3.4 (access to international treaties for trade and economic cooperation) mentions that, Iran can attract investment from other SCO member states, leveraging its natural resources and strategic location.

Increased Influence: Based on Article 3.5 (right to participate in international treaties) by participating in SCO activities and discussions, Iran can gain a stronger voice in regional matters and enhance its geopolitical influence.

- Building Relationships with Major Powers: Based on article 3.4 (joining international treaties) Membership provides opportunities to strengthen ties with major powers like China and Russia, which can be beneficial for economic and political support. (<https://lex.uz/uz>, 2023)
- Technological and Specialized Cooperation: Iran's permanent membership enables it to share and showcase its technological and specialized expertise with other members. Iran can also benefit from SCO members' capabilities in military, security, energy, and economic sectors.
- Diplomatic and International Support: In regional or extra-regional conflicts or negotiations, Iran may receive diplomatic backing from SCO member states, in times of international challenges, support from SCO member and regional countries could aid Iran in achieving its strategic interests.

1. The text of the treaty on Iran's accession to the organization is available at <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6486537#undefined>, July.2023

Threats: While there are clear benefits to international cooperation, it is essential to consider the challenges Iran may face as a permanent member of the SCO. Despite these diplomatic strengths, Iran has substantial weaknesses which can affect the SCO. First, political sanctions against Iran limit its diplomatic abilities to engage other countries. Most political sanctions against Iran were imposed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and became more severe after the discovery of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program in the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, Iran's membership in the SCO opens opportunities to institutionalize and expand the Shanghai Spirit in the Middle East, the guiding vision of the organization, which is based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equal rights, consultations, respect for the diversity of cultures, aspiration towards joint development, non-alignment, non-confrontation, and openness. However, Iran's full SCO membership poses long-term challenges to the organization. Iran's full SCO membership can put other members under secondary Western sanctions due to their interactions with Iran. While China and Russia can manage Western sanctions, Central Asian states may be reluctant to engage Iran within the SCO framework, impacting how the organization functions. (Honrada and Ranjbar, 2023:32). Iran's permanent membership in the SCO can provide the following threats for Iran: first differences in Power and Bargaining Capacity among Member Countries, one of the primary challenges in achieving mutual benefits and reaching collective decisions within any organization lies in the bargaining power of its member states. Effective cooperation requires a degree of procedural order, allowing members to negotiate and reach collective agreements. Regarding Iran's cooperation with the SCO, it is worth noting that while combating drug trafficking is one of the organization's stated goals, the economies of several SCO members remain partially dependent on drug production and trafficking. (Rezaei & Salehi, 2010: 67) As a result, Iran must consider the possibility of non-compliance among members, as there is no guarantee that all countries will adhere strictly to their commitments. Addressing potential deviations

requires a robust accountability mechanism, ensuring that member countries are held responsible if they violate agreements. Taking such precautions will minimize the risk of conflicts with other states and strengthen trust within the SCO. This dynamic can impact the organization's ability to achieve its stated goals. Additional challenges facing the SCO include limited institutional collaboration among member countries, divergent views between China and Russia regarding the organization's economic and strategic importance within their long-term regional plans, and inadequate financial infrastructure to support robust financial cooperation among members. (Kushki and Hosseini, 2017: 764-747). Ambiguity Surrounding the Organization's Core Identity is another threat. The SCO lacks a clearly defined identity and appears content to operate across a variety of domains, as stipulated by its charter. Although the organization makes commitments in political, economic, military, and security arenas, it faces conflicts regarding its mission and overarching purpose. Numerous regional issues and internal dilemmas have hindered the SCO from adopting a coherent and distinct identity. (Biari et al. 2023: 2543).

In addition, relations within the SCO are especially complex due to strategic alignments and rivalries—such as those between China and Pakistan, India and Russia, and the competition between India-Pakistan and China-Russia—leading to growing polarization. The SCO member and observer countries primarily pursue their own national interests rather than common objectives. For instance, China seeks access to markets for goods and energy resources, while Russia aims to restore its influence over the Commonwealth of Independent States and retain its status as a global superpower. Central Asian members view SCO membership as a safeguard for their sovereignty amid diverse regional pressures and hope to benefit economically from Chinese and Russian investments. These nations perceive the SCO as a mechanism to leverage competition among China, Russia, and the United States to secure investment and maintain their independence (Ibid).

One of the SCO's central challenges is the ongoing disagreement between China and Russia over its goals and functions, with each country attempting to shape the organization's agenda. Since the SCO's inception in 2001, China and Russia have pursued divergent visions: China envisions a trans-regional organization focused on economic collaboration that could bolster the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expand China's geo-economic influence. Conversely, Russia seeks a regional alliance with more members and global geopolitical objectives, striving to counterbalance Chinese influence in Central Asia through initiatives like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union. This clash of interests between China and Russia complicates consensus-building within the SCO and contributes to potential divisions. Another source of internal tension involves India's contentious relationships with both China and Pakistan, revealing the organization's limited cohesion. India and China's conflicting interests add to the complexity, particularly regarding regional security and trade policies. Iran's recent full membership in the SCO is likely to be impacted by these internal disputes, presenting new challenges. Iran will be expected to adopt formal positions and adhere to SCO commitments, which could force it to navigate delicate issues such as the India-China-Pakistan rivalry. Iran's position as an economic partner of both Beijing and New Delhi places it in a challenging situation where taking an official stance might strain its relations with key trading partners (Berinji, 2021). In sum, threats and challenges that Iran may face with them after permanent membership in the SCO¹ are mentioned below:

- Obligations to Join International Treaties: Based on article 3.2 and 3.3 of memorandum of obligations of Iran with the aim of obtaining the status of the member state of the SCO, Iran is obligated to join multiple international treaties by specific deadlines, which can be challenging if internal processes are slow or hindered.

1. The text of the treaty on Iran's accession to the organization is available at <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6486537#undefined>, July.2023

- Dependence on Compliance: Article 6.1 of memorandum of obligations of Iran with the aim of obtaining the status of the member state of the SCO points that, failure to meet obligations can lead to suspension or termination of the Memorandum, which may jeopardize Iran's membership status.
- Internal Political Challenges: Based on article 2.1 (obligation to adhere to SCO principles), domestic political dynamics may impede Iran's ability to implement necessary reforms and align with SCO objectives.
- Potential Conflicts with Other Members: Based on article 2.1 (need for alignment with SCO goals) Iran's relationships with neighboring countries may create tensions within the SCO framework, affecting cooperation efforts.
- International Scrutiny: Iran's actions within the SCO could attract increased monitoring and criticism from the international community.
- Increased Western Pressure: Iran's permanent membership in the SCO, an organization often seen as opposing Western influence, could lead to greater Western scrutiny and complicated decision-making processes.
- Regional Competition: Iran's relationships with certain SCO members, such as India and Pakistan, could be complicated by longstanding geopolitical and historical factors.

The findings of this study provide actionable strategies and recommendations aimed at maximizing strengths and opportunities, addressing and mitigating weaknesses, and countering potential threats. These strategies are intended to enable Iran to optimize its position and role within the SCO while balancing regional and international challenges effectively.

4. Conclusion

Iran's SCO membership holds significant potential to strengthen its political, economic, cultural, and social standing, particularly in security and trade. This inclusion enhances Iran's regional influence by fostering trust among SCO members, which could yield economic, security, and political benefits.

Permanent membership also opens doors to extensive economic exchange opportunities, potentially reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar in trade. Greater economic cooperation within the SCO could stimulate tourism and regional commerce, while Iran's partnerships with China and Russia will expand the SCO's influence into the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Iran's participation in an organization with nuclear powers may provide strategic advantages. However, to fully capitalize on these opportunities, it will be crucial for Iran to address the inherent challenges of SCO membership. In what follows some recommendations for Addressing Iran's Challenges as a Permanent SCO Member, are mentioned:

- developing active diplomacy Iranian ambassadors in SCO countries should prioritize increasing cooperation and influence for example, ambassadors could organize regular meetings in their respective countries to engage in SCO discussions and ensure that Iran's interests are represented effectively. -Establishing trust and resolving past disputes with key member countries—such as addressing border issues with Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—are essential steps. Confidence-building measures, including trade expansion, security cooperation, and cultural exchange programs, can foster goodwill. Public engagement initiatives can further reduce lingering mistrust and help bridge differences, maintaining balanced relationships (SCO membership offers opportunities for member states to reduce external influence and strengthen national identity. -Cultural institutions and academic figures can promote the cultural values of member countries, while regular programs encouraging self-reliance can help smaller countries develop a sense of national confidence, hosting scientific conferences (annual scientific conferences involving experts from member states can address SCO challenges and propose specific solutions. These conferences could foster collaboration among prominent universities and create a shared scientific environment. - Expanding SCO University branches and offering scholarships to

member states could further enhance academic ties and mitigate brain drain. Finally, establishing a military institution within the SCO (It would enable coordinated responses to crises. In the event of conflict among member states, the institution could facilitate peace through mediation efforts or deploy peacekeepers if necessary to restore stability.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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