



## Iran's Eastern Alliance

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On Wednesday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [rejected](#) any possibility that Iran would accept potential European offers of incentives in exchange for suspending uranium enrichment. What accounts for Ahmadinejad's boldness? One explanation is that Iran may have discovered the ideal strategy for satisfying its nuclear ambitions while escaping the pressure of the United States and its European allies.

Specifically, the mullahs and President Ahmadinejad have decided that they will look to the East to achieve their objectives. As a result, they have now made it a foreign policy priority to become a full member (Iran presently maintains only observer status) in the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) (SCO). The Russia and China-led SCO, which also includes the former

Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is an expanding alliance that is increasingly competing with the United States and its NATO allies for international influence.

While the organization has yet to draw widespread concern in the West -- a vast miscalculation on the part of Western geostrategists -- recent developments certainly give cause for concern. On April 14 in Moscow, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mohammadi expressed his country's desire to become a full member in the SCO, explaining that "Iran has started a policy of looking to the East." Mohammadi added that Tehran perceives "major prerequisites in the Shanghai organization for ensuring its interests, since it can make the world more just."

Of further concern was SCO Secretary-General Zhang Deguang's recent statement that the group's upcoming summit in Shanghai will discuss amending the organization's charter to facilitate the admittance of the current observer nations. The June 15 meeting will celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original Shanghai Five and could have a dramatic impact on the current structure of the international system. India, Pakistan, and Mongolia are the other three observer nations to the alliance, and their incorporation would be a geopolitical development of enormous proportions.

There is a vast web of factors that will determine the outcome of this summer's consideration of an SCO expansion. Neither China nor Russia has decided on a position - at least publicly - on whether they support Iran's inclusion as a full member. Both have claimed at one time or another that there is no mechanism in place to admit new members. Each has also claimed that they would welcome certain states as full members.

China and Russian share common interests with Iran on a variety of issues. Thus, there is some reason to believe that Beijing and Moscow may support Tehran's bid for full member status. According to Iran News, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing stated in October 2005 that Beijing and Tehran "have common outlooks on many international issues and urged the need for bolstering of cooperation in international affairs such as the UN [and the] Shanghai Cooperation Organization." Russian Deputy Foreign

Minister Alexander Alexeyev stressed "the closeness and coincidence of the positions of Moscow and Tehran on a broad range of international and regional problems" to Itar-Tass in March.

Both Beijing and Moscow fear that Washington would like to install a friendly regime in Tehran in an effort to establish regional hegemony. Both countries also have significant economic interests in Iran. They therefore consider maintaining stability in the country a priority. At the same time, while Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has stated that the SCO would not intervene militarily on behalf of Iran, the alliance can play the "engagement" card to obtain concessions from Tehran while enhancing the group's international standing as a diplomatic power.

But the members of the SCO do not share an identical set of interests. While they all desire an increase in the influence of the organization, they face several difficulties. As noted by the Russian publication *Kommersant*, "One of the problems comes down to this: China actively promotes full membership of Pakistan but Russia will only agree with it if India too joined the SCO at the same time." China and Pakistan have been strengthening their traditionally dynamic alliance, and the Kremlin has no desire to become the junior partner to China in the organization's leadership.

Moreover, the prospect of India receiving an invitation and accepting the offer is highly unlikely. If it has not yet, Washington should make it clear to New

clear to New Delhi that India's interests are best served by cooperation with the West. Additionally, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - two countries balancing their interests between the United States and the regional powers - will be pressured by the Washington to oppose expansion.

Despite the competing interests of its members, the possibility that the SCO will increase its membership should not be easily dismissed. Secretary-General Zhang Deguang has been a leading advocate for an extended role of the organization in world affairs. In an interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in early April, the Chinese diplomat stated that the two leading states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China and Russia, "should realize clearly that they must stay together." To clarify Zhang added, "I don't mean that Russia and China should stay together to attack someone else. They are staying back to back to efficiently defend their interests." Enthralled by the prospect of an expansion including India, the alliance's secretary-general noted: "If we manage to strengthen our interaction within the SCO, it will be of truly priceless significance for our region and the entire world, as the SCO embraces nearly half of humankind."

Richard Giragosian recently wrote in the *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* that the SCO "continues to be dominated by a Chinese and Russian tactic of using the SCO to pressure the U.S. and garner greater leverage. This is especially evident in the move to incorporate the Irani-

ans." It is believed that Washington has requested observer status in the organization, but was denied. While the geographic location of the United States could certainly be a reason - Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has stated that a similar request from Belarus may be denied because they are not an Asian country - it is clear that many of the organization's interests run counter to those of the United States.

Tehran and the SCO consequently share a common adversary: the United States. This not only provides the geopolitical motivations for an increased Iranian presence in the SCO, but also carries enormous strategic implications. In addition to reducing American influence in Central Asia, Iran's First Vice-President Mohammad-Reza Aref has noted that Iran's acceptance as a full member in the organization could help facilitate the SCO's influence in the Persian Gulf and its surrounding states, and potentially in Europe.

Should Iran emerge as a full member of the alliance, it would be a devastating blow to the international community's efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear arsenal. The reason is that Iran's membership would likely result in further political cooperation between the parties in international disputes. As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Russia and China already have provided greater support to Tehran than Washington and its allies in the nuclear negotiations. However, after Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki publicly praised Bei-

praised Beijing's approach to his country's nuclear program last fall, an Iranian delegation traveled to Moscow for a meeting of prime ministers of SCO member states. According to the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the country's official news service, the deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Mohammad Saeedi, also made the trip. This suggests that Tehran views the SCO as a vehicle to promote its position on its nuclear program, and the alliance has since adopted an official stance that calls for the dispute to be settled in the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In Iran the SCO faces a difficult decision. Russia and, to a greater extent, China prefer to direct the United States' attention away from their domestic and international actions. This has contributed to their reluctance to agree to strong measures to curb both Iranian and North Korean nuclear ambitions. Giving Tehran full membership in the SCO could shift Washington's attention to them. However, the aforementioned benefits of stability in Iran and its incorporation into their alliance are also extensive. Thus, Beijing and Moscow, along with the group's other members, must decide how they can use Iran to their greatest benefit.

The Kremlin does not welcome the idea of a nuclear armed Iran. But it is equally concerned about an in-

creasingly intrusive United States. Russia and China may decide that they have much more to lose with instability in Iran than with condemnations from Washington about officially welcoming Tehran into the fold. Western influence would also suffer should the SCO play an ostensibly constructive role with Iran. It is entirely possible that the Iranian wavering on the potential deal to transfer the enrichment process to Russian territory is being negotiated (behind closed doors) with Iranian membership in the SCO as a principal enticement. It is doubtful, however, that the Iranian regime values SCO membership over nuclear progress, though an invitation to join could very well produce temporary concessions.

To those unfamiliar with the actions and intentions of the SCO, such a development would appear as a significant breakthrough. Yet the opposite seems more likely. Intermittent concessions on Iran's nuclear program would be of little benefit to the United States were Tehran to become a full member of the SCO. In such a scenario, American interests in the Middle East and Central Asia would not only face a constant threat from the world's leading sponsor of terrorism; they would have to contend with an Iran backed by an expanding Eastern alliance.

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