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IRAN'S PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: ITS EFFECTS ON THE REGION AND AFGHANISTAN



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IRAN'S PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: ITS EFFECTS ON THE REGION AND AFGHANISTAN

INTRODUCTION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an intergovernmental political, economic and security international organization that was announced on June 15, 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Shanghai. Before this, all the above countries except Uzbekistan were members of Shanghai Five, which was established for the first time in 1996. In 2001, following the membership of Uzbekistan, the name of the Shanghai Five was changed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Over time, the organization included political, economic and cultural issues in its framework, but still defense and security cooperation is the priority of the organization.

The main objectives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are to strengthen trust between member countries and good relations between neighbors; Promoting effective cooperation in politics, business, economy, science and technology, culture as well as education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection and other fields; Joint efforts to maintain peace, security and stability in the region and to create a new, democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order.

The highest decision-making body of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the Council of State Leaders, which meets once a year on the organization's activities and other important issues. The Council of Governmental Leaders meets once a year for multidisciplinary cooperation and priorities and approves the organization's annual budget. There are mechanisms for meetings at directorate level on emergency aid, economy, transport, culture, education and health care. In addition to the meetings of state and government leaders, at the level of the organization, Parliamentary Speakers, Security Council Secretaries, Foreign Ministers, Defense Ministers. The organization has two permanent bodies: There is a secretariat in Beijing, the capital of China, and a regional anti-terrorism structure in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. The General Secretary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the head of the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure are appointed by the Council of State Leaders for a three-year term. It is worth noting that Iran recently became a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. What achievements the organization has; What are the consequences of Iran's permanent membership in the organization for Iran, the region and Afghanistan, and what are the challenges facing the activities of the organization as a whole?

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

Scholars of the world have different opinions about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Some scholars believe that this organization is similar to a conference, it only holds annual meetings and cannot pursue the set goal. Others believe that the member countries of the organization have different political systems, economic systems, religions and cultures.



Therefore, its decisions are not effective, because these differences prevent the single consensus of the organization on various issues. It is worth noting that many Westerners see the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an anti-NATO organization.

Many supporters of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) believe that it is a newly formed and relatively young organization. It is natural that there will be problems at first, but with the passage of time, the organization will be able to make significant achievements. Throughout history, this is the first organization to be established in a geographical area where its members have political, economic, security and cultural differences as well as border disputes, which can affect the organization's coordination.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a multilateral structure with three types of cooperation. It includes cooperation in (a) politics and security, (b) trade and economic activities and (c) cultural development and human relations. The organization's leadership is trying to create economic initiatives to prevent conflicts in the region, which can help reduce military costs. Although the member countries of the organization have signed more than 100 legal documents in various fields such as banking, investments, production, agriculture, transport, customs and tourism, their effectiveness is not very clear.

As mentioned earlier, security is a priority for the SCO. Member countries have increased coordination and cooperation in order to prevent terrorist acts and separatist groups and share intelligence information with each other. And sometimes they conduct joint military exercises. It is worth noting that the Shanghai Five was created primarily for the purpose of strengthening security in the region. But with the change in the political and economic situation of the region, there was a change in this concept, and today, economic cooperation has taken the place of security cooperation in this organization. But it should be added that if the member countries of the organization are experiencing security and economic development today, it is the initiative of the countries outside the framework of the organization and is largely not related to the organization.

The greatest achievement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is to spread the concept of joint cooperation in the member countries, which has political, economic, security and cultural aspects. Economic cooperation forms another important part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Recently, the economic potential of the organization has increased, not because the economic interaction within the organization has increased, but because the economic power of each member country outside the framework of the organization, especially China, has increased. In addition, along with the development of economic cooperation in the regional geography of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, technology has also made significant progress. As a whole, bilateral trade between the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has expanded, and some universities in the member countries under the organization's coverage have been designated for higher education for the citizens of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.



IRAN'S PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE REGION

On June 9, 2017, India and Pakistan became permanent members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. This was the first time that the organization expanded further after 2001. Also, Iran's application for permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2021 was accepted. After 18 years, Iran became a permanent member of this organization on July 4, 2023 through a meeting in India.

Iran is one of the powerful countries in the Middle East that has an anti-Western stance and is trying to strengthen its position and expand regional relations through membership in various regional organizations. Iran becomes a permanent member of the organization while it wants to expand and strengthen its relations with China and Russia. To break the economic sanctions of the United States and Europe in one fell swoop. According to some Iranian media, in 2022, the trade between Iran and the member countries of the organization reached at least 39 billion dollars, of which only about 19 billion dollars were exported by Iran to these countries. Membership of the organization will further expand Iran's trade with Central Asia and may facilitate customs tariffs.

Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a step towards the east. When Iran's relations with the international community worsened during the rule of President Ahmadinejad, Iran prioritized moving towards the East in its foreign policy. At the same time, one of the main foreign policy efforts of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is Iran's eastward movement and also emphasizes multilateralism. Iran's permanent membership in the organization will further strengthen Iran's multilateralism policy.

Iran will ask for Chinese technology in the military sector, but China can also consider the sensitivities of countries that do not have good relations with Iran. At the same time, China may also use Iran's membership in the Organization to its advantage to pressure the United States not to use Taiwan against China. In addition, Iran's membership in the organization increases the chances of permanent membership of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, so that normal relations and regional competition are reduced. Because recently, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been restored through the mediation of China.

Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is also an achievement for the organization, because it is possible to expand the organization's relations with Islamic countries. Moreover, Iran's permanent membership in the organization also increases the organization's influence in the Middle East to address security concerns in the Middle East. Iran's membership in the organization stems from China's involvement in Western Asia. The 25-year agreement between Iran and China in 2021 shows the close relationship between the two countries. At the same time, this organization is also an important factor for Iran's economic development.

Iran has vast oil and gas reserves that can cooperate with the member countries of the organization in the field of energy. It is assumed that Iran's membership in the organization was done by mutual necessity. This means that on the one hand, the countries of the region need Iran's energy, and on the other hand, Iran also benefits from the organization's regional influence



to present its demands to the international community within the framework of the organization. Also, Iran's permanent membership in the organization can provide regional transit facilities to the member countries of the organization.

IRAN'S PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

Iran and Afghanistan are two neighboring countries, and every incident has direct and indirect effects on both countries. Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not ineffective, it can cooperate with Afghanistan in the development of relations and economic development.

Although for the past four decades, the neighbors have interfered in Afghanistan's internal affairs against the principles of good neighborliness. Therefore, their membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will not have any special effect on their position towards Afghanistan, to bring about a positive change in their policies regarding Afghanistan. However, there are still hopes that Iran's permanent membership in the organization will lead to a positive direction in Iran-Afghanistan bilateral relations and multilateral relations within the framework of the organization.

After the withdrawal of the United States, the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have bilateral political and economic relations with the Islamic Emirate. But Afghanistan is still in political isolation and the organization cannot take Afghanistan out of political isolation through an independent decision, which clearly shows the weak position of the organization. If the organization wants to express a good opinion about Afghanistan, it should help with the implementation of regional projects in Afghanistan with the support of its member countries, including Iran, in order to establish regional connectivity and stop competition.

Afghanistan has been an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2012. That the leadership of the organization has not implemented any regional project in Afghanistan so far, and also that no economic corridor of the China-led One Belt One Road initiative passes directly through Afghanistan. Therefore, it is necessary to give Afghanistan a permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, so that Afghanistan's strategic position can be taken advantage of and a series of regional projects can be implemented in Afghanistan with the help of the organization.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has a neutral and economic foreign policy and wants good relations with all countries, including its neighbors. The fact that Iran has close relations with the Islamic Emirate can create a regional consensus about Afghanistan within the framework of the organization, so that the countries of the region can stop competing regionally and Afghanistan can experience economic development.

CHALLENGES FACING THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

The geography of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has historically been characterized by regional rivalries. In the region, the United States, China, Russia and India are



major powers that compete with each other. The United States competes with China and Russia in Central Asia and with China in the Pacific region. Also, China and Pakistan have competition with India that increases regional security challenges, affects the organization's activities and hinders regional economic development.

In its structure, the organization has great economic powers as well as weak countries, which give priority to their strategic goals over the interests of the organization, therefore, it overshadows the purpose of establishing the organization. The idea of a single community in the organization is in a weak state. If there is a security problem in the region, the member countries cannot respond urgently in case of protecting the interests of the organization. A good example is Afghanistan, where this organization does not have any special program for the end of political isolation and economic development.

In the security sector, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has not yet played an important role in responding to security incidents, because each of the member countries has a different definition of the current situation. And they try to turn it to their own advantage, until some consider the friend of another as their enemy and the enemy of another as their friend; In such a situation, it is difficult to create common interests, which calls into question the purpose of the organization.

The effectiveness of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is only because it covers the world's largest geography, has a large population and a high annual gross domestic product. There are some countries in the organization that have weak political systems and developing economies. When these countries cannot improve their national economy and get out of the political crisis, what will the organization benefit from?

CONCLUSION

Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can expand bilateral and multilateral relations between Iran and the member countries of the organization. And it is also possible to increase the economic interaction at the regional level and save Iran from the political and economic sanctions of the West. But there are also concerns that various differences between the member countries of the organization will weaken the effectiveness and activities of the organization.

In the past 20 years, the concept of regional cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has improved and the areas of cooperation have expanded. However, since the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it has not proven to be effective in relation to Afghanistan, except for expressing concerns. He has also failed to create a regional consensus on Afghanistan. On the one hand, there is no single definition of interests in the organization and coordination is at a low level, and on the other hand, throughout history, regional organizations have not proven to be very effective for Afghanistan. Therefore, it is necessary for the Islamic Emirate to strengthen and expand direct bilateral relations with the member countries of this organization in addition to efforts for membership in the organization. To create mechanisms for creating common interests with the mentioned countries.

As long as the member countries of the organization do not solve their mutual problems and do not share the benefits with each other, the actions within the framework of the organization will



not be effective. Therefore, it is recommended to create and strengthen mutual trust among the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to recognize each other's capabilities, to overcome differences and to use each other's capabilities for the benefit of the organization. Since China does not have a long history of establishing regional and international organizations on its own initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its membership and development is a new experience for China, from which it will learn new lessons for the future.

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Contact Us:

Email: info@csrskabul.com - csrskabul@gmail.com

Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.net

Phone & WhatsApp: +93780618000

