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Tipping the scales: Iran in the SCO

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Abstract: In September 2022, Iran signed the memorandum to become a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the largest economic and military organisation in the world. Its accession into the Asian bloc signals Tehran's willingness to enter closer strategic cooperation with Beijing and Moscow in pursuit of its own regional geopolitical interests. This paper briefly analyses Iran's primary geopolitical objectives and instruments, and then addresses the implications of Iran's SCO membership. Iran's ambition for regional hegemony and through a powerful net of proxies as well as its decades-long fight to break the economic isolation imposed on it provides the why to its own 'pivot to Asia' policy, although to what extent it will be able to utilise its new alliance to reach those objectives still remain unknown.

Following the death of a young girl in police custody, a wave of demonstrations broke out in Iran during the fall of 2022. While the protests do not yet pose a serious risk for the regime at the time of writing, they happen at a time of significant geopolitical development for Iran. Its recent accession into the SCO perfectly illustrates the long-term shift in Tehran's foreign policy – a newfound approach to multilateralism that could easily have global implications as well.

Iran's struggle for regional hegemony

Challenging the status quo: Iran's Middle Eastern proxy network

Iran's ultimate geopolitical ambition is to become an acknowledged and respected regional power. Besides being among the region's largest and most powerful countries, the reason for this ambition is two-fold. As the main historical and geographical successor of the ancient Persian Empire, its national identity is infused with the pride and self-esteem of those who once gave birth to great civilisations, further exacerbated by its unique culture and language compared to its neighbours.¹ As the primary stronghold and *de facto* political leader of Shiite Islam, it acts with a sense of divine duty in trying to extend its religious influence and authority all over the Middle East; a mission that was reinvigorated by the 1979 Revolution that gave birth to the world's first Islamic Republic as we know it today.

The current status quo of the Middle East undoubtedly favours Iran's greatest strategic opponents, such as Turkey, Israel, the rich Sunni-majority Gulf countries and especially Saudi Arabia, which – by being home to Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina – also claims primacy within the Muslim world. Despite this, modern Iran has no tradition of expansionism and is unlikely to forcefully invade any country in order to change the status quo. Instead of aiming to assume direct control over neighbouring territories by the use of military power Iran is a strong proponent of 'regionalism' – the development of a strong regional system based on the cooperation of local players of which Tehran can assume gradual leadership.² In theory, both political necessity and a continuous export of ideology would contribute to the establishment of such systems, but their ultimate success depends on what extent is Iran capable of limiting the presence of global powers in the region. In spite of Tehran's objections, the Saudis and the Gulf states repeatedly chose to compensate for their vulnerability through foreign military alliances while rejecting wider regional cooperations – precisely because of fear of increased Iranian influence.

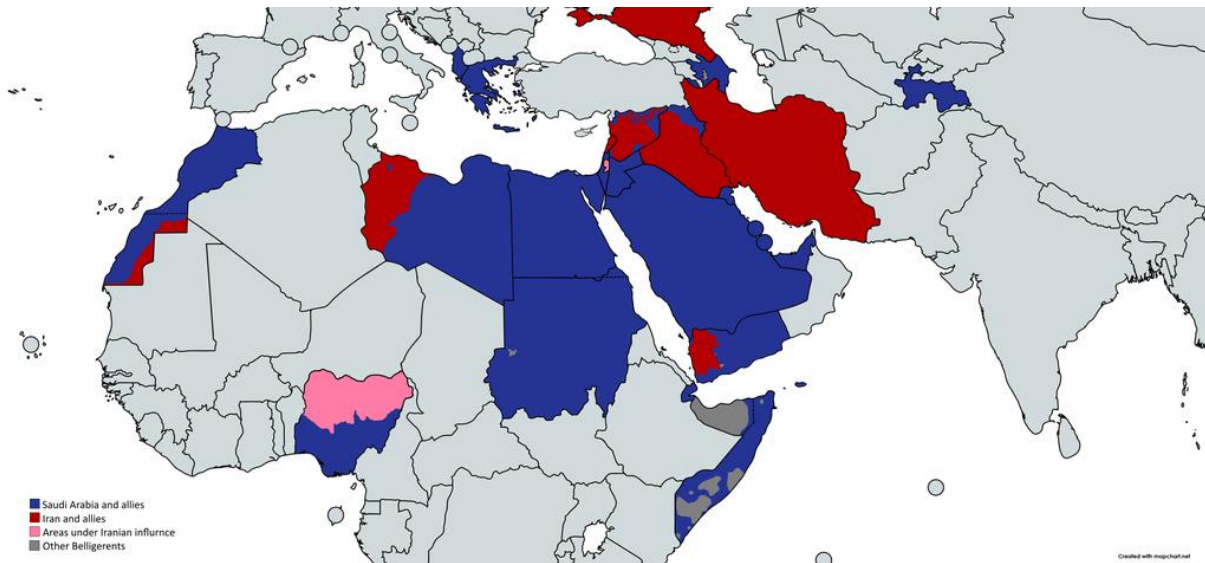
There is an underlying but growing frustration within the Iranian foreign policy circles that stem from the country's apparent potential to become an influential regional power paired with its scant chances of exercising it. Iran's ability to act on its true geopolitical weight is hindered by multiple factors, such as the coalition of Sunni countries

surrounding it as well as being isolated through political and economic means, i.e. the multitude of Western sanctions it endures ever since the Islamic Revolution.

During the past three decades, these circumstances left few options for Tehran to grow its influence, but it had found one, nonetheless. Since the early 1980s, Iran has been carefully cultivating a network of proxies throughout the Middle East, through which it can assert power and balance its interests in the region without risking direct confrontation.³ These proxies (opposition parties, rebel groups, militias and terrorist organisations) also serve the purpose of exporting Tehran's Shia ideology. However, even though the religious split plays an important role in Iran and Saudi Arabia's conflict, their opposing political and strategic interest remain the foremost reasons.

Tehran and Riyadh's decades-long proxy conflict most resembles a regional cold war. Iran, for its part, has been attempting to (indirectly) get involved each time a conflict flares up in the Middle East to try to sway the outcome towards benefitting its interests and away from the realization of Saudi and American ones. For their part, in turn, Saudi Arabia and the United States support groups that can keep Iran's growing influence in check on these various battlefields.

Iran's proxy network under the de facto control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (and its subsequent elite contingency, the Quds Force) began with the creation of Hezbollah during the Lebanese Civil war by funding and arming various Shia militias and then combining them together. The Iran-backed militias not only successfully influenced the outcome of the conflict but managed to remain a considerable force in the country even after the US and Israel had pulled out. Later, Iran followed the same strategy in Iraq after the country collapsed in the wake of the US-led invasion, and over the next several years its militias played an active role in the post-2003 Shia-centred nation-building efforts. The process eventually gave way to a Shia-dominated Iraqi government solidifying the power a decade after the US went in, and Tehran's ex-militias taking up core positions in Iraq's new armed force.⁴ Similarly, it is Iranian funds and weapons that back the militias sympathetic to Assad's regime in Syria ever since the civil war broke out in 2011, and that provide strength to both Israel's Hamas and the Houthi rebels of Yemen. To a lesser or greater extent, the Iran-Saudi 'Cold War' now involves certain groups and conflicts in nearly two dozen countries from the South Caucasus and Central Asia down to Western Africa and even Nigeria.



Situation of the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict as of August 2022. Source: Mauseburu, 2022.⁵

Throughout the past decades, the strategic placement of these proxies provided much success in weakening the US-Israeli-Sunni grip on the region,⁶ which further erodes as the United States continues to withdraw from the Middle East in its ongoing ‘pivot to Asia’ (as well as because of growing tensions between Russia and NATO in Eastern Europe). As the civil wars in Syria and Yemen remain unresolved, ongoing clashes threaten the frail ceasefire agreement of 2020 in Libya and remnants of ISIS are still at large in northern Iraq, the gradual withdrawal of the US presents even more opportunity for Iran to solidify and extend its hard-earned influence. But on its road towards its goal of regional hegemony, it would also need the support of global players as well.

From Hormuz to nukes: instruments of global pressure

Apart from emerging as a powerful geopolitical player within the context of the wider Middle East, Iran’s ambitions point toward a desire to put its weight into global developments as well. While its primary strategic goals remain reserved for achieving regional hegemony, the instruments in Iran’s possession have global implications and Tehran is prepared to use them accordingly. On one hand, Iran continuously attempts to break the economic and political isolation imposed on it by the West by seeking out other partners to balance the scales (more on that below), while on the other hand, it uses rapid technological advancement and geography as instruments of deterrence and leverage against the US and others.

In relation to military technology, Iran is among the most advanced countries in the region, especially in terms of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and UAVs (Iranian military drones are on par with the Turkish and Israeli ones). But since the country shows considerable restraint when it comes to the prospect of direct confrontation, the world is less concerned about its military and way more concerned about its potential nuclear capabilities.

The motivation behind Iran's ambitions to become a nuclear power is a complex one. One of the contributing factors is Tehran's sense of self-importance stemming from its rich history and religious significance (as discussed above) fully warrants such an aspiration. So does Iran's apparent paranoia when it comes to the West and particularly the US: decades-long anti-Iran rhetoric convinced Tehran that only with military deterrence can it avoid an eventual American intervention. Witnessing the fate of Saddam and Gaddafi once they let go of pursuing their own nuclear programs, the Iranian elite will certainly continue with theirs. Secondly, becoming a nuclear power is seen by Iran as the most effective way of asserting ultimate strategic control over its immediate neighbourhood and balancing Israel in the wider region. Learning from the example of India, Pakistan and North Korea, Tehran is convinced that once it announces the crossing of the nuclear threshold, the world will have no chance but to accept it.

Moreover, the state of its currently ongoing nuclear program is shrouded in obscurity on purpose. As long as its opponents (Saudi Arabia, Israel, United States and the general West) are not sure how close Tehran is from crossing the nuclear threshold – or even if it has already done so – the country can use the idea of nuclear weapons as both deterrence and bargaining chip (empowering Tehran to negotiate favours from the West in return to token nuclear concessions).⁷ Regardless of where it stands now and what it chooses to disclose, Iran's ambitions of becoming an established nuclear power are very real and are cause for serious concern for the US and its allies.

Similarly, Iran can utilise its geographical position in order to gain strategic and economic advantage. The Strait of Hormuz which connects the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman is one of the world's most important strategic chokepoints, as approximately 30% of the globe's seaborn-traded crude oil flows through it.⁸ The southern shores of the strait belong to the UAE and Oman, while the north is under

Iran's control entirely. Additionally, a number of other important oil producers depend on the strait, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar. A perfect place for conflict.

Since as early as 1984, the Strait of Hormuz has been the scene of ever-oscillating tensions. In 1988 a one-day battle took place between the US and Iran, resulting in the sinking of several vessels in the strait. Ten years later, a series of naval stand-offs took place between the same parties, prompting the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard to declare that if either Israel or the US attacks Iran, it will seal off the Strait of Hormuz, 'holding hostage' a third of the world's oil.⁹ In 2011-12 the same threat was made again in response to newer sanctions on Iranian oil. The situation escalated until a coalition flotilla made of eighteen American, British and French vessels had to be dispatched to deter Tehran from doing so. General escalation would continue from 2015 onward with incidents nearly every year, involving stand-offs, captured tankers, brief exchanges of fire and provocative missile tests.¹⁰

Neither the significance of the Strait of Hormuz as leverage in the hands of Tehran nor its ability to hinder shipping by sealing it off should be underestimated. A 2002 US war game, for instance, proved that Iran was not only capable of closing the strait but even defeating the far superior US naval forces within it using tactics of asymmetrical warfare.¹¹ Furthermore, even without taking deliberate steps on either side, the situation in the Strait of Hormuz remains one of the most dangerous, since the narrow sea lane teeming with both military and civilian vessels provides ample chance for accidents and mistakes as well. Any escalation within the strait, therefore, also increases the possibility of unplanned incidents happening, driving the conflict further.¹²

The new Axis in the making?

Iran and the SCO: common strategic interests and objectives

As a country that formerly enjoyed observer status in the organization, Iran's ascension to permanent membership within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) did not come as a surprise; Tehran signed the memorandum of obligations to join the Russia and China-led bloc on 15 September 2022 after one year of submitting its application and the process is expected to be finalised by 2023. Yet, the future

implications of this move hold much uncertainty. The SCO (also involving the membership of India, Pakistan and most of Central Asia) is not only an economic and energy cooperation but also a platform for defence cooperation, large-volume arms sales and geostrategic balancing of the US-led West.



Members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (Source: Sputnik)

For Iran, the SCO is seen as a way to break out from its diplomatic and economic isolation. Being the world's largest regional organisation (accounting for 30% of the global GDP and 40% of the population), the SCO's multilateral institutions can provide effective shortcuts for Iran to circumvent the crippling sanctions imposed by the West. In exchange for this opportunity, Tehran appears to have forgone its former foreign policy doctrine 'Neither East nor West' and instead began to pursue its own 'pivot to

Asia' policy both geopolitically and geoeconomically. In Supreme Leader Khamenei's own words, '*One of our priorities today in foreign policy is preferring the East to the West, neighbours to remote countries.*'¹³ In other words, Iran's long-held objective of hegemony through regionalism still stands, but now it's supplemented with a desire and a chance to play active an active role in shifting the global order on Beijing's and Moscow's side and take a stronger stance against the US' much-opposed regional interventionism. At least as Tehran hopes so, hailing the accession as a 'diplomatic triumph'.¹⁴

From the side of the SCO (mainly meaning Moscow and Beijing), the benefits of Iran's inclusion into their ranks are much less obvious and still subject to debate. In the past, the two eastern superpowers were against Iran's accession because of its explicit anti-Westernism and in fear of rapid escalation on any of Iran's multiple direct or indirect fronts against the US. Nonetheless, with rising tensions between Russia and NATO over Ukraine, as well as growing American hostility against China, Iran is no longer viewed as a strategic liability, but an asset on the geopolitical playing field. Furthermore, China and Iran have grown considerably closer in recent years and Beijing hopes to gain much economic benefit from this partnership, especially in terms of its ever-increasing energy requirement.¹⁵

However, it must also be noted that while China and Russia are happy to have Iran on their side as a strategic partner in the long term, the SCO is unlikely to offer short-term solutions to Iran's strategic problems.¹⁶ For one, the bloc is still absent strong multilateral institutions, at best it offers a chance of strengthening the bilateral ones. Also, the way other members are still divided over Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that the SCO does not have a clear, working framework for defence cooperation and most members are reluctant to join or even support open hostilities – such as the ones Iran showed a willingness to undertake in the Strait of Hormuz. In the same way, the SCO has no alternative mechanism to completely nullify the effects of the sanctions on Iran, but can merely alleviate them for now. Nonetheless, SCO membership does provide Tehran with a certain degree of international prestige while increasing its bargaining power when dealing with the United States.

Possible areas and outcomes of strategic cooperation

While Russia's primary military organisation, the CSTO was never regarded as a worthy adversary for NATO in terms of capability, the SCO may turn out to be one. With four nuclear powers among its members and Iran on the verge of crossing the nuclear threshold, it emerges as a global challenger to NATO and the West in general. Iran's inclusion in the SCO not only increases its military power significantly but also lets the Organisation access the strategic chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's extensive proxy network, better and cheaper deals for Iranian energy and arms shipments as well as greater leverage when negotiating or pressuring its global adversaries. As outlined above, this military power within the SCO is meant to be only used in diplomatic settings for the moment, but that fulfils its purpose nonetheless.

As for concrete examples of cooperation, we can only guess for the time being. Nonetheless, recent reports suggest that Russia is already benefitting from closer ties to Iran and easier access to its arms manufacturing industry. It has become apparent that Iran already supplied Russia with thousands of its cheap and flexible *Shahed* drones which wreaked havoc in the centre of Kyiv in mid-October.¹⁷ Moscow and Tehran are also negotiating other deals for a number of even more advanced *Arash* drones as well as short-range ballistic missiles, complete with instructors and other services. In exchange, some observers suspect that Russia would have offered more beneficial terms for the construction of two additional nuclear reactors in Iran – and perhaps help in speeding up its nuclear arms program, albeit without proof yet.¹⁸ Reports also seem to confirm that IRGC troops – 'military advisors' – have been deployed in the Ukrainian war and already sustained ten casualties as of 26 October. This prompted Western observers to state that 'Iran is now at war with Ukraine.'¹⁹

The implications of these reports are concerning. If the military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow continues at the same rate, Iran could turn the tide in favour of Russia in the conflict while also increasing the chance of multilateral escalation. Iran knows that its involvement in Ukraine will further solidify the Western sanctions as well as hinder any hope of resurrecting the failed nuclear agreement, the JCPOA. Tehran's decision to support Russia anyway, therefore, could indicate that Iran no longer wants to negotiate with the west and is certain that it would receive all the economic

assistance it needs from Russia once the war is over. If this is the case, it makes the situation even more dangerous.

In the case of future Chinese-Iranian cooperation, Iran's accession to the SCO will mostly manifest in speeding up its integration into the Chinese economic networks. With regard to China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), Iran's geographical position becomes pivotal to its success. As the only country occupying the land corridor between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, Iran cannot be bypassed by the project. Tehran signed a memorandum of understanding to join the initiative back in 2016 when the leaders of the two countries announced an ambitious 25-year-long partnership. A subsequent meeting in 2019 revealed that China is planning to invest as much as \$400 billion in Iran. The central pillar of the new deal is a \$280 billion investment into Iran's oil and gas sector, while the rest will go to developing the country's manufacturing and transport infrastructure – to conform to larger BRI plans.²⁰ While these plans play well into both countries' above-mentioned strategic goals (helping to fulfil China's growing energy demands as well as helping Iran alleviate the effects of the sanctions), it must be noted that, as many experts pointed out, the plans are perhaps too ambitious and expensive to be realized in the envisaged way and will probably have to be scaled down in time.²¹ But to what extent is yet to be seen.

Neutralizing Iran from within? The protests of the fall of 2022

Periodic social and political unrest is common in Iran, with sometimes thousands of civilian casualties reported in just a few days of demonstrations, as in 2019. The recent wave of protests during the fall of 2022 – sparked by the death of a 16-year-old girl who died in police custody after being arrested for not wearing her hijab properly – has gained more international attention than any other in the last decade.²² Despite this, the clashes on the streets appear to be relatively restrained (with only hundreds of casualties in over 40 days)²³ and the movement itself seems to lack appropriate momentum. Part of the reason for this is that it lacks central leadership and clear opposition demands and is mainly focused on sexual liberation which leaves the potential of entire social classes – otherwise uninterested in feminism – fully untapped. Nonetheless, while the demonstrations as they stand pose no serious danger to the regime, their timing is a curious one. The death of Mahsa Amini, the girl who became

the martyr of the Iranian protesters happened on 16 September, the same day the leaders of the country signed the MOU and became a permanent member of the SCO. The demonstrations began the very next day. For obvious reasons, Western powers are interested in the success of any popular movement that could end the Islamic Republic's regime, and there are examples of foreign involvement in Iran before (the 1953 coup), although no evidence supports yet that this would be the case now. Regardless, if the protests – by some miracle – would turn successful and eventually end the Supreme Leader's reign, it could easily result in a long-term reversal of its 'Turn to East' policy, scrape its SCO membership before the ascension process is finalised in 2023 and steer Iran in a pro-West and pro-US direction.

Conclusions

Iran's primary geopolitical aim – to become the foremost regional power in the Middle East – remains unchanged in the past four decades, but recent years have brought gradual changes in Iran's geostrategic positioning in its pursuit of it. Iran's preferred road to Middle Eastern hegemony in the past was through the promotion of regionalism while mostly rejecting both Western and Eastern influence. It has built up a major proxy network throughout the MENA region, made up of local Shia militias and organizations, which allows it to export ideology and assert political influence in key countries and conflicts. On the other hand, its nuclear arms program and control of the Strait of Hormuz give it certain leverage to limit the realization of western geopolitical ambitions, although with a high risk of increasing global tensions.

Iran's recent accession into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation signals Tehran's abandonment of its former foreign policy doctrine ('Neither East nor West') and its willingness to enter closer strategic cooperation with Beijing and Moscow in pursuit of its own regional geopolitical interests. This shift can be seen as an attempt to gradually break from the economic isolation imposed on Iran by the western sanctions. For China, Iran could be an important future partner for securing the supply for its increasing gas and oil demand, as well as it makes easier to build on and expand their previously established partnership within the Belt and Road Initiative. For Russia, Iran's SCO membership could provide more strategic benefits in its current struggle

against the West by having a secure ally in the Middle East. Also, Iran has already proved to be an important partner in supplying weapons to the war in Ukraine.

Although the members of the SCO are powerful players on the global geopolitical scene, the organisation itself lacks the detailed multilateral framework and economic instruments that would make it a truly efficient forum for Iran to solve its current problems in the short term. Instead, the SCO mainly bolsters the improvement of bilateral relations. Nonetheless, even as that, Iran's accession does represent a threat to the global geopolitical aims of the West, something that it will have to take into account over time.

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