

# IRAN AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: IS IT POSSIBLE FOR IRAN TO BECOME FULL MEMBER OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION UNDER PRESSURE OF NUCLEAR ISSUE?

Aylin ÜNVER NOI\*

## Abstract

*In this article, the Islamic Republic of Iran's willingness to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) under the shadow of Iran's nuclear tension with the US is evaluated with a special focus on the conditions, which prepares the grounds for the establishment of the Shanghai Five in 1996, its transformation to the SCO in 2001 and Post Cold War developments and the United States' presence in the region after the 9/11 terror attacks to the US. Iran's relations with the six SCO members is also given as an additional information in order to provide the reader with a general perspective about the possibility of Iran's prospective membership to the SCO and to analyze the answers to these questions: Is it possible for Iran, which is under great pressure of the US due to its nuclear program, to become a full member to the SCO in the near future? If it is possible, what would be the repercussions in the US?*

## Keywords

Shanghai Cooperation Organization, observer status, full membership, Iran's nuclear issue, the US' stance towards Iran-SCO relations.

## Introduction

After disintegration of the Soviet Union, 15 sovereign and independent newly established states emerged; and five of them, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, are Central Asian states.<sup>1</sup> This development provided opportunity for the regional powers like Turkey and Iran due to their linguistic, religious and

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\* PhD Programme, Marmara University EC Institute, EU Politics and International Relations Department.

<sup>1</sup> Dash, P.L. 'Political Landscape across Central Asia', Dialogue (A quarterly journal of Astha Bharati), October-December 2004, Vol. 6, No. 2 URL: [http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia\\_Oct04/dash.htm](http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Oct04/dash.htm), (18 July 2006).

cultural ties with these Central Asian states to establish themselves as the dominant power in this region. However, these newly established Central Asian states first removed themselves from a Russian-centered security complex, considered and then rejected a Turkey-oriented security complex, shifted towards an Iran-oriented one and after the 9/11 terror attacks and the US presence in the region in terms of its fight against terrorism shifted towards the US-oriented one.<sup>2</sup> The rapid religious resurgence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was mostly focused on restoring the rights of Muslims and on a transition to political Islam led to the emergence of radical groups opposed to secular system of government and seek an Islamic state in these states.<sup>3</sup> Bad governance of governments in terms of economy and democratic rights pushed people of this region to the extremes and helped such radical groups to be seen as savior for the people who are experiencing a long and difficult transition and suffering from bad living standards and pressures. As Roy said, these radical groups are very fundamentalist in the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan) and in the South of Tajikistan in comparison to other Central Asian states.<sup>4</sup> Most of these radical groups are inspired or funded by Saudi Wahhabi organisations since Muslims in Central Asia are mostly Hanafi Sunnis.<sup>5</sup> This growing threat of militant Islam, extremist and separatist groups not only in Central Asian states, but also in Russia and China, necessitated the establishment of a regional security organization which enable parties to gather and to analyze information by exchanging data, exchanging experience on matters of struggle against terrorism, separatism and extremism and taking other kinds of measures against these three threats of the region.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of superpowers, the multipolar international system paved the way for the expansion of regionalism by different regional

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<sup>2</sup> Peimani, Hooman. (1998). *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey and Russia* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger Publishers, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> The so-called 'neo-traditionalist' or 'militant Islam' or 'fundamentalist Islam' advocates a literalist interpretation of the Quran and Hadith as practiced at the time of Muhammed and/or the caliphates. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is good example of these kind of neo-traditional Islamists who oppose the move towards secular social values and see Islam not only as a religious ideology but also a political ideology. (Jason D Söderblom, 'Central Asia: Terror and Militant Islam', World International Community Experts, <http://world-ice.com/Articles/Militantislam.pdf>, (14 July, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ferghana Valley (Ferganskaya Dolina) has become the center of international terrorism, religious extremism and national separatism.

<sup>5</sup> Roy, Olivier. (2000). *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, New York: New York University Pres, p. 143, 144; Asia Report No. 72, 22 December 2003 (International Crisi Group Report), 'Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement', <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?1=1&id=2432&m=1>, viewed in July 15, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> SCO Official Website, 'Information on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of SCO', <http://www.sectSCO.org>, (20 July, 2006).

powers to fill the vacuum which emerged as a result of this development. In order to lower the risks and challenges of the post-Cold War era and to maintain peace and security in their region, all countries of the world started to use their preferences towards regional cooperation. The predecessor of the SCO, the Shanghai Five was established in 1996 as this kind of regional security organization by the initiation of People's Republic of China to provide peace and security in Central Asia. The Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which suffer from this insecure environment, became part of the SCO to combat with the so-called "three evils", "separatism, extremism and terrorism".<sup>7</sup>

The SCO initiated a new global vision in which cooperation takes part on the basis of mutual trust, disarmament, cooperation and security. Also, its interstate relations are based on partnership, not union. Another distinctive feature is its model of regional cooperation such as the joint initiative, a priority on security and a mutually beneficial interaction of big and small states. The SCO, with these distinctive features, gradually acquired international weight and this made it more attractive for the neighboring countries as well. Some neighboring countries such as Pakistan, India, Iran and Mongolia obtained observer status. Some of them expressed officially or unofficially their willingness to become full member of the SCO. Iran is one of these countries that showed its desire to become full member of the SCO clearly with a speech made by President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the recent summit held in Shanghai on 15 June 2006.

In the first two parts of this article, the establishment and evolution of the SCO and the relations between Iran and SCO member states are evaluated in order to provide the reader with a general perspective concerning why Iran wants to strengthen its ties with the SCO and the possibility of Iran's full membership to the SCO. In the last part of this article, the answer to the following question is examined with a view shedding light on SCO member states views on prospective membership of Iran and the possible repercussions of prospective membership of Iran to the SCO in the US: Is it possible for Iran, which is under great pressure of the US due its nuclear program, to become full member of the SCO in the near future?

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, Ariel, 'Competition over Eurasia: Are the US and Russia on a Collision Course?', URL: [www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/h1901.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/h1901.cfm), (19 July, 2006).

## **The Establishment and Evolution of the Shanghai Five (SCO)**

The increasing threat of radical Islamist groups not only in Chechnya and Xinghcao, but also in the Central Asian states, led to Russia's and China's attention to this region and gave them a chance to establish their sphere of influence.<sup>8</sup> The coordination required to combat terrorism achieved through the establishment of Shanghai Five in 1996. With the establishment of Shanghai Five, the demilitarization of the border between China and the former Soviet Union and strengthening confidence-building among its member states were realized.<sup>9</sup>

Although two leading countries of the SCO- China and Russia- have shared desire to eliminate US influence, which was established after 9/11 terror attacks to the US through US' military bases in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Krygzstan and Uzbekistan to fight against Taliban forces in Central Asia, both countries have different expectations from the SCO. Russia wants to transform the SCO into a club of energy producers in which Russia would play a leading role and also seek to restore their position in their lost sphere of influence as old dominant power of Central Asia through the SCO; whereas China wants to use the SCO as a facilitator of regional trade and investment that China would enable to play a leading role.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned above, the SCO's predecessor, Shanghai Five, which was composed of China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, originated from the endeavor of these countries to strengthen confidence-building and disarmament in the border regions. The leaders of the Shanghai Five member states therefore signed the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions in Shanghai in 1996 and the Treaty on Reduction Military Forces in Border Regions in Moscow in 1997. China and Russia announced their "strategic partnership" at Shanghai summit held in April 1996. This annual meeting became a regular practice and the topics of the meeting extended to cooperation in the political, security, diplomatic, economic, trade and other areas among its five states.

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<sup>8</sup> Russia fights with Chechen separatists. China fights with Uighur "splittists" and religious groups who want to separate Xinjiang from China. Tajikistan, Krygzstan and Uzbekistan fights with violent Islamist movements "religious extremists" such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Sean L. Yom, Power Politics in Central Asia, Harvard Asia Quarterly, Vol.VI, No.4, Autumn 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Aljazeera.net, 'Iran offers Shanghai bloc energy ties',

<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/DC0A3199-8358-441C-9331-24B55D1F1A2E.htm>, (16 August 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Blank, 'The SCO: Cracks Behind the Facade', [http:// www.euroasia.net.com](http://www.euroasia.net.com), (19 July 2006).

Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five and Shanghai Five become Shanghai Six with its new member and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in the Shanghai meeting held on 15 June 2001.<sup>11</sup> In June 2002, SCO member states signed the SCO Charter which shows the SCO purposes and principles, organizational structure, form of operation, cooperation orientation and external relations. Purposes of SCO Charter were determined as follows:

strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborliness and friendship among member states; developing their effective cooperation in political affairs, economy and trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, environmental protection and other fields; working together to maintain regional peace, security and stability; and promoting the creation of a new international political and economic order featuring democracy, justice and rationality.

In addition to the above mentioned purposes, SCO Charter also determined the following principles:

respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, mutual non-use or threat to use of force; equality among all member states; settlement of all questions through consultations; non-alignment and no directing against any other country or organization; opening to the outside world and willingness to carry put all forms of dialogue, exchanges and cooperation with other countries and relevant international or regional organizations.

Hence, the so-called "Shanghai spirit", characterized by mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, cooperation, respect for diversified civilizations and common development, gradually took shape.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> SCO member states cover an area of over 30 million km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 1.455 billion, about a quarter of the world's total. SCO's working languages are Chinese and Russian. 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization', <http://www.globalsecurity.org>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China's Official Website, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization', <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/sco/t57970.htm>, (20 July, 2006).

The Security cooperation of the SCO mainly focuses on the fight against “three evils” terrorism, separatism and extremism. The Shanghai Convention Against Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism and the Agreement of the SCO Member States on Counter-Terrorism Regional Structure which was signed in 2002 and the anti-terrorism headquarters which was established in Tashkent in 2003 are some measures taken by the SCO within this context.<sup>13</sup> Although the SCO was established as a security organization, it expanded its cooperation among member states to other fields as well. Economic cooperation is one of these fields in which cooperation among the member states of the SCO realized. The Memorandum Between the Governments of the Member States of the SCO on the Basic Objectives and Orientation of Regional Economic Cooperation and the Launching of a Process of Trade and Investment Facilitation were signed on 14 September 2001. Moreover, SCO member states signed a multilateral economic cooperation Framework Agreement to deepen economic cooperation among the SCO member states in 2003 meeting of the SCO. Also, the first budget of the Organisation for 2004 was approved on September 23, 2003.<sup>14</sup> China made three proposals at this meeting; the establishment of a SCO free trade area within the SCO, taking immediate measures to improve the flow of goods across the member states including reducing non-tariff barriers and creating projects on economic and technologic cooperation. With this development, an important step was taken by the Six for economic cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

The SCO member states agreed to transform the SCO into an international organization in 2004. Following this decision taken by the Six member states, the SCO Secretariat was established in Beijing on January 15, 2004.<sup>16</sup> The establishment of the Secretariat symbolised the end of the formation phase of the SCO, which is described as a mature regional force on the one hand, and the beginning of a completely new phase, which can be assumed as international organization, on the other.<sup>17</sup> The SCO became a UN observer and signed memorandums of understanding with ASEAN,

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<sup>13</sup> Shanghai Convention Against Terrorism, Separatism is a document which clearly defines terrorism, separatism and extremism for the first time on the international arena.

<sup>14</sup> SCO Official Website, ‘History of Development of Shanghai Cooperation Organization’, <http://www.sectsc.org/html/00035.html>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China’s Official Website, ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/sco/t57970.htm>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, ‘China proposes SCO free trade area’, <http://www.ictsd.org>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.sectsc.org/html/00035.html>, (20 July, 2006).

CIS and Euroasia Community and established ties with EU and OSCE.<sup>18</sup>

At the Sixth annual meeting of the SCO, held on 15 June 2006 in Shanghai, a joint communique was issued. At this meeting, the council of the heads of state adopted a Resolution on strengthening the role of the SCO Secretariat in the structure of the organization and changing the title of the head of the secretariat to Secretary General. With this principle, which provides institutional reform of the SCO Secretariat and the rotation of staff for the SCO's permanent body, the continuity of the SCO's work was aimed. The implementation of the Programme of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation among SCO member states and its Action Plan had begun. Member States also gave priority to cooperation in the fields of energy, information technology and transportation.<sup>19</sup>

At the 2006 annual meeting of the SCO held in Moscow, another important issue which related to the enlargement of the organization, was discussed. Recommendations were made in the direction of the procedure of SCO membership enlargement. According to the recommendations made, this procedure should fully conform to the purposes and goals set forth in the Charter of the SCO, ensure the effectiveness of all treaties that form the legal basis of the SCO, help strengthen its unity and guarantee the applicability of the principle of consensus to consultations on all matters and at all levels of the SCO.<sup>20</sup>

Another important decision was taken in 2006 related to joint military exercise on Russian territory in the summer 2007 in order to enable member states to use their forces together to fight against new threats, such as international terrorism, by the SCO member states as a part of security cooperation. This decision is interpreted as the SCO is gradually acquiring a military feature.<sup>21</sup>

The SCO as a regional security organization is different from other international or regional organizations in nature since it was not set up

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<sup>18</sup> Deguang, Zhang, 'Review Past Achievements and Deepen Cooperation to Ensure SCO's Success in the Next Five Years' in *Foreign Affairs Journal*, No. 81, Autumn 2006.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.sectSCO.org/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.sectSCO.org/news_detail.asp), (20 July, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.sectSCO.org/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.sectSCO.org/news_detail.asp), (20 July, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Iran also showed its willingness to take part in SCO's joint military exercise on Russian territory scheduled for summer 2007. 'Shanghai Six Emerges as a Bloc-SCO Acquires Military Character', <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1622663/posts>, (10 September, 2006).

according to an elaborate plan, it is a natural outcome of the geopolitical evolution in Eurasia in the post-Cold war era. As Deguang stated, the SCO is also different from other regional cooperation models based on strong geographical, cultural and economic homogeneity since it was initiated and developed in an area with diverse civilizations and a modest development of a market economy.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it initiated a new global vision in which cooperation takes part on the basis of mutual trust, joint initiative, a priority on security, mutually beneficial interaction of big and small states, disarmament and cooperation. Although the SCO is both security and economic organization, its security cooperation is not like NATO's military alliance and its economic cooperation is not like the EU-style high level integration. Also, its interstate relations is based on partnership not union. All these features not only make the SCO different from other organizations but also help its contribution as a new model of international relations in the Post-Cold War era.<sup>23</sup> However, the Central Asian states' rapprochement with the US through the establishment of US bases in Central Asia signaled the lack of unity in the SCO. Moreover, its inability to develop a cohesive strategy towards the threat from Afghanistan hurt credibility of the SCO for a while, but today, Russia and China seem to be the best guarantee for regional security due to uncertainty over future presence of the US in the region (US' bases will not remain open indefinitely as happened in Uzbekistan).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the increasing weight of the SCO in the international arena made it an organization taken seriously, and time to time taken as a potential threat to the interests of some countries in the region. To sum up, its increasing international weight, cooperation among its member states in different fields, the existence of leading countries in terms of economic growth rate such as China, Russia and Kazakhstan which give a much stronger impetus to regional cooperation, the region's huge market and rich resources and the SCO's distinctive feature from other kinds of organizations also made it center of attraction for the neighboring countries like Pakistan, India, Iran and Mongolia.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Deguang, Zhang, 'Review Past Achievements and Deepen Cooperation to Ensure SCO's Success in the Next Five Years' in *Foreign Affairs Journal*, No. 81, Autumn 2006, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> SCO Official Website, 'History of development of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', URL: <http://www.sectSCO.org/html/00035.html>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Yom; 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Deguang, Zhang, 'Review Past Achievements and Deepen Cooperation to Ensure SCO's Success in the Next Five Years' in *Foreign Affairs Journal*, No. 81, Autumn 2006, p. 83.

## Iran and its Relations with the Members of the SCO

In this part of the article, Iran's relations with Russia, China and the other four SCO member states are analyzed with a special focus on Iran's foreign policy determinants. As a religious regime in Iran led to Western opposition and its isolation, Iran's foreign policy during 1979-89 forced Iran to explore economic ties with the USSR and the Far East.<sup>26</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly established independent states in Central Asia, presented Iran with new opportunities to establish its sphere of influence and, opened up possibilities for economic and ideological gains from this region. Besides these calculations, the isolation of Iran in the Middle East through the peace process launched in 1994 and the ILSA legislation passed by the US Congress in 1995, led to shift in Iran's foreign policy from Middle East to Central Asia to break out from isolation and containment.<sup>27</sup> However, the shift from the Middle East to Central Asia was too slow, since Iran was reluctant to accept the status quo in the Middle East. In Central Asia, Iran did not have the clerical connections as it had in Lebanon and Afghanistan since the majority of Central Asian Muslims are Suni Hanafi. Central Asian states neither have clerics who are trained in Iran nor an Islamist movement which has an Office in Tehran or Qom. The underdeveloped nature of both political and orthodox Islam in Central Asia, the strength of the Soviet secular legacy that lasted for 70 years and, the strength of local and regional coalition that the fear of Islam generated, prevented Iran from becoming the dominant power through exporting Iran-styled Islamic revolution.<sup>28</sup> Iran also hesitated to play its Islamic card overtly, since it did not want to harm the newly established good relations with Russia. Hence, Iran kept a relatively low Islamic profile in Central Asia.

However, Iran did not hesitate to play its Islamic card in this region from time to time. For instance, it provided support to the Tajik IRP (Islamic Renaissance Party) in 1992 and provided asylum to some of its

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<sup>26</sup> Moshaver, Ziba, 'Revolution, Theocratic Leadership and Iran's Foreign Policy: Implications for Iran-EU Relations' in *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Winter 2003, p. 292.

<sup>27</sup> ILSA (Iran Libya Sanctions Act) prohibited investment of US oil companies in Iran. With this Act, investments above USD 20 million for oil and natural gas were prohibited not only for US companies, but also for other foreign companies. Under the law, the US would penalize foreign companies who invested more than USD 20 million in Iran's energy sector.

<sup>28</sup> Roy, Olivier, 'The Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Central Asia', <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006) Mesbahi, Mohiaddin, 'Iran and Tajikistan' in *Regional Power Rivalries in the New Eurasia: Russia, Turkey and Iran* (eds.) Alvin Z. Rubinstein & Oles M. Smolansky, New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1995.

leaders such as Qazi Akbar Turajanzade in Tehran. IRP militants used Iranian type-slogans, dress and revolutionary rhetoric during the civil war in Tajikistan. Broadcasts and literature originating in Iran found audiences among Muslims living in Central Asian states.<sup>29</sup> Although Iran did little in terms of providing support to Islamic radicalism in the region, there is a general distrust towards Iran in Central Asian states, particularly in Uzbekistan. There is a general misgiving concerning the concept of an Islamic republic in these countries. In other words, Central Asian countries, which have experienced potential for Islamic militancy in their own countries, do not trust Iran.<sup>30</sup> However, prospective SCO membership might give Iran a chance to establish good relations with these four SCO member states which perceive Iran as destabilizing and threatening due to its particularistic characteristic as an Islamic state with its revolutionary ideology.

### **Iran-China Relations in the Post-Cold War Era**

The current relations of China with Iran are mostly based on security. China seems to replace Russia in terms of weapon sales, including chemical weapons precursors and guided missiles to this country. In addition to weapon sales, China also helped Iran for zirconium production facility at Esfahan that will enable Iran to produce fuel for a nuclear reactor. Related to Iran's nuclear issue, China alongwith Russia, is opposed to the implementation of economic sanctions to Iran because of its uranium enrichment activities. From the beginning of this issue, China also supported the idea that the solution of Iran's nuclear issue should be found by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) instead of UN Security Council.<sup>31</sup> China also has good economic relations with Iran. Iran is one of the main oil suppliers of China.<sup>32</sup>

When US President Bush labelled Iran as a member of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Tehran, and with his Iranian counterpart conveyed the following message: "prevent domination

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> John J. Tkacik, 'Confront China's support for Iran's nuclear weapons', <http://www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/wm1042.cfm>, (10 September, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> China's energy consumption is increasing tremendously due to its increasing production scale. China is interested in to keep oil prices as low as possible. Iran often express its strategy to increase world oil prices by closing Persian Gulf for oil transportation if a US' strikes realizes as a last resort in case of Iran's nuclear issue unresolved. China would be the country most effected by such an increase in oil prices.

of a superpower on the entire world". Accordingly, these words can be interpreted as China's policy in the region is mainly to prevent American deployments in Central Asia and the Middle East by establishing close relations with Iran, Russia and other Central Asian states.<sup>33</sup>

### **Iran-Russia Relations in the Post Cold War Era**

In the late Soviet period, Moscow has been increasingly concerned about Islam since Khomeini's Islamic revolution and the war in Afghanistan intensified religious and ethnic tensions among the 60 million Muslims living in the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian counterweight disappeared.<sup>35</sup> The sudden emergence of newly established independent states from the former Soviet Union raised completely new security considerations for both Russia and Iran. In this environment, the main aim of Iranian foreign policy towards resource rich Central Asia became to prevent the American, Turkish and Saudi influence in this region. Iran-Russia relations therefore has improved, especially after the OSCE Summit in 1999 when the US said that it would give priority to the construction of Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan pipeline. In this respect, Iran played its Russian card on a North-South strategic axis (Moscow-Erevan-Tehran), which opposed the East-West axis (Washington-Ankara-Baku-Tashkent), in order to control the road of the 21st century's the most important materials-natural gas and oil. Russia, on the other hand, established close relations with anti-American Iran as a response to NATO's extension in the east.<sup>36</sup> Russia also gave priority to its relations with Iran and Turkey since influence of these countries in Central Asia and Transcaucasia might undermine Russia's influence in the region.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, with the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the only issue which created a contention between Iran and Russia disappeared. Moreover, the conjunction of interests of these two countries led to alliance on strategic and military issues with Russia. As mentioned above, on the strategic level, Iran wanted the Russians to maintain its strong position on the newly independent Central Asian states

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<sup>33</sup> Tkacik, <http://www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/wm1042.cfm>, (10 September 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Rubinstein, 1995, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Yelda Demirağ, 'Russia's and US's oil policies in the Middle Asia' <http://www.kafkas.org.tr/abmak/showarticle.php?articleID=20>, (10 September, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s', <http://www.meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue2/jv4n2a5.html>, (18 July, 2006).

in order to prevent penetration of the US into the region. On this strategy, these two countries' interests merged. Their opposition to any Turkish influence in the area, their cool relations with Uzbekistan and Georgia and, their stance towards Taliban were also the same.<sup>38</sup> Both of them also advocated a condominium on the Caspian Sea and were opposed to a territorial division of the waters. Iran also has been very cautious not to support the Chechens against Russia.<sup>39</sup>

Iran and Russia also have a strong military alliance. This alliance was established to supply Iran weapons due to Iran's need for these conventional weapons after eight years war with Iraq and the ban on weapons implemented by the Western countries. Their military alliance was not restricted with the sale of weapons. Russia replaced the Europeans and the Japanese for support of Iran's nuclear program. Russia declared that they would build four civilian nuclear plants in Iran in 1995. In this connection, Russia helped to complete the Bushehr atomic energy plant which had been started by two German firms in the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> The military alliance of Russia, in terms of supplying weapons and building nuclear plants, became the source of friction between Russia and the US. The US Congress put pressure on Russia to halt its delivery of nuclear related material to Iran.<sup>41</sup>

Despite some misgivings of Russia, such as war in Chechnya and Iran's stance towards this issue, Iran's call for spreading Islamic radicalism and Iran's offer to transport energy resources from Central Asia and Transcaucasus as an alternative to Russia, Iran became Russia's most important ally in the Middle East, its ally against the Taliban government in Afghanistan, its ally against the US presence and Turkey's influence in the Central Asia. Moreover, Russia also helped Iran's efforts to eliminate US led efforts to isolate Iran. When the decision related to the isolation of Iran was taken by the US, Russia continued its nuclear cooperation with Iran and cooperation on Caspian energy projects. From Iran's point of view, Russia is a secure source of modern weapons, a diplomatic ally at a time when the US has sought to isolate them, an ally against Taliban forces in

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<sup>38</sup> Both Russia and Iran have been supporting an anti-Taliban coalition since 1994 in Afghanistan. Sunni Taliban are enemies of the Iranian backed Shi'a force in Afghanistan.

<sup>39</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> The Bushehr nuclear power station was never finished by German firms because of the Iran-Iraq war. Besides this, Germany decided not to resume the Project by claiming that its construction might acquire a military dimension. (Rubinstein; 1995, p. 40, 41).

<sup>41</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

Afghanistan and, an ally in helping to curb Azerbaijan's possible irredentist threat.<sup>42</sup>

### **Iran- Four Central Asian SCO Member States Relations in the Post-Cold War Era**

Tajikistan is the only Farsi-speaking state which has cultural connection with Iran. For that reason, among the members of the SCO, Tajikistan has a special place for Iran. Tajikistan's significance is also lies in the existence of the most politicized and active Islamic tendencies among Central Asian states, although the role of Islam in politics has been rejected and legally banned by the ruling Tajik government.<sup>43</sup> When Tajikistan's civil war broke out in 1992, Iran therefore favored Islamist group since the Tajikistan Islamist movement, which advocated both Persian and Islamic identity, became the only opportunity for Iran to establish a foothold in Central Asia. However, Iran hesitated to play on ethnic identity with the Tajiks in order not to antagonize the "Turks"(Uzbeks, Kyrys, Kazakhs etc.), since the majority of Central Asia is composed of these populations.<sup>44</sup> It focused on Islamic identity. Many Islamic opposition leaders, including Akbar Turajanzode, took refuge in Iran.

When the defeat of the opposition became obvious, Iran changed its policy and advocated a political solution. Iran took place in the diplomatic process of Tajikistan, along with Russia, and an agreement was signed in 1997 between the government and rebel Islamic forces in Tajikistan. The major reasons, which led to Russian-Iranian convergence, were the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, increasing military strength of the Tajik opposition and the importance of the Russian-Iranian relationship.<sup>45</sup>

In comparison to Iran's relations with other Central Asian countries, Iran's relations with Kazakhstan can be defined as distant. Iran signed agreements for joint cooperation in the fields of transportation, communication, agriculture, energy, marine matters, trade, industry, banking, customs and consular affairs at the time of Rafsancani's presidency (1993). However, in cultural terms, Kazakhstan kept its distance from Iran due to the fear of an export of Iran-styled revolutionary Islamic

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<sup>42</sup> Freedman, <http://www.meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue2/jv4n2a5.html>, (18 July, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Mesbahi; 1995, p.119, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Roy; <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006) Rubinstein; 1995, p. 46.

fundamentalism. As a result of this fear, Kazakhstan did not permit Iran to open bookshops which would be free to distribute the ideology of Khomeini.<sup>46</sup> Fear of Islamic fundamentalism and the US government's opposition restricted Iran's relations with Kazakhstan to trade and transportation agreements signed in 1996 and 1997. However, a pipeline construction by China, which links Uzen with Xinjiang, led to a closer link between Iran and Kazakhstan.<sup>47</sup>

Islamic radicalism, like other Central Asian states, has existed in Kyrgyzstan for a long time. Kyrgyzstan, faced with armed bands belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan also faced with another extremist group Hizb-ut Tahrir whose activities intensified to eliminate existing regimes and to establish an Islamic caliphate in Central Asian states including Kyrgyzstan.<sup>48</sup> Iran's relations with Kyrgyzstan are very poor and even strained. One of the reasons for this poor relation between Iran-Kyrgyzstan is Iran's objection of the close relations between Bishkek and Tel Aviv. In addition to this, Kyrgyz Interior Minister, Felix Kulov's incrimination of Iran for the Wahabi activities in the religious center of Kyrgyzstan, Osh in 1998 became another factor of this poor relationship.<sup>49</sup> However, it is inconceivable that Iran would be behind Wahhabi activities since Wahhabis consider the *Shi'as* to be worse than infidels and believe that the killing of *Shi'as* is not a crime.<sup>50</sup>

Among the other SCO member states, Uzbekistan has the coolest relations with Iran. One of the contentions between Iran and Uzbekistan is related to the Uzbeki fear of spreading Islamic fundamentalism, possibly supported by Iran. Geographical proximity of Uzbekistan to Afghanistan also necessitated to take more concrete measures for its fight against militant Islam. The joint declaration between Uzbekistan, Russia and Kazakhstan was signed to fight against Islamic fundamentalism in 1998. Interestingly, this declaration stirred protest from the United Tajik Opposition and from Iran's IRIB Television. However, there is another

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Justin Burke, 'Kyrgyzstan's Revolution: Be Careful What you Wish For', <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032505.shtml>, (19 July, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, In 1998, a bus explosion in Osh, religious center of Kyrgyzstan in which Wahhabiism is wide spread, killed four people.

<sup>50</sup> Hunter, T. Shireen, 'Iran, Central Asia and the Opening of the Islamic Iron Curtain' in Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (eds.) *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* (Washington: Centre for Strategic and Political Studies, 2000) p. 171.

reality that Uzbek Islamist opponent Tahir Yuldashev passed through Tehran, but the Office and Uzbek IRP's militants are in Lahore, Pakistan. Also, there are Central Asian guest houses in Medina and Mecca. This event showed Uzbeks that the Islamic threat is a tool for Pakistan, not for Iran, since most of the population living in Uzbekistan are not Shiites, they are Suni Hanafis.<sup>51</sup>

The other contention between Iran and Uzbekistan is related to the revival of Tajik nationalism possibly supported by Iran. Iran is aware of the fact that Uzbekistan, which is close to Moscow and suspicious of Iran, would like to keep its traditional enemy Tajikistan weak. In this respect, Uzbekistan pushes for a Russian military intervention as the way to prevent spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Iran's support to Iranian origin Shiites, mostly living in Samarkand and Bukhara, irritated Uzbekistan due to the fear of a revival of the Persian origin population's nationalism. Iran's attempt to open Iranian cultural centers in Samarkand and Bukhara was refused in 1993 for this reason.<sup>52</sup>

Uzbekistan also is the only country in the region which has supported the ILSA (Iran Libya Sanctions Act).<sup>53</sup> It also has close relations and a defense cooperation with the US. However, the Taliban victory in Afghanistan led to a rapprochement between Iran and Uzbekistan since the main danger seems to be coming from Suni radical groups based in Pakistan and Afghanistan, not from Iran.<sup>54</sup> The SCO's declaration called for a deadline to be set for the withdrawal of US military bases from Uzbekistan became another factor which might serve the rapprochement between Iran and Uzbekistan.<sup>55</sup>

### **Significance of the SCO for Iran**

In order to understand whether it is possible for Iran to become a full member of the SCO, we should first understand why Iran wants to become a full member of this regional organization. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech made in the SCO's meeting held in

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<sup>51</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Shiites living in Samarkand and Boukhara are descendents of traders who came from Persia. Roy; 2000, p.143.

<sup>53</sup> The US congress passed the ILSA in 1996 in order to deter not only US oil companies, but also foreign companies from investment to Iran.

<sup>54</sup> Roy, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/regional/royoniran.html>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> Michael A. Weinstein, 'Intelligence Brief: Shanghai Cooperation Organization', The Power and Interest News Report, [http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=325&language\\_id=1](http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=325&language_id=1), (19 July, 2006).

Shanghai on 15 June 2006 is quite important in terms of indicating his willingness to become part of a bloc to counter Western intervention. In his speech, he expressed his views with the following words:

We want this organization to develop into a powerful body influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, serving to block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries.<sup>56</sup>

This speech can be interpreted as both a wish to transform the SCO into a bloc against the West to counter the US influence in the region and Iran's desire to become full member of such an organization instead of an observer state in the near future. Timing of this speech is also another factor that makes it significant since the argument is that Iran is seeking SCO membership in order to boost its defenses against US-led international pressure to halt uranium enrichment activities. From this point of view, desire to develop the SCO into an organization that can actively counter interference in the region by Western powers for Iran is quite understandable. In this respect, Ahmadinejad's words can be easily interpreted as his desire to prevent outside forces from intervening not only in Central Asia, but also in Iran through the SCO membership.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman of China, Jiang Yu's, answer to the question of a journalist related to Ahmadinejad's above mentioned statement in the press conference dated 29 June 2006 is important to show China's view on the SCO and the remarks of Ahmadinejad.

We have always held that state-to-state relations should be dealt with on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence and the spirit of the UN Charter. We endorse SCO's "Shanghai Spirit"? mutual trust and benefit, equality, coordination, respect for diversified civilizations and common development. The SCO is a non-aligned organization which does not stage a confrontation or target at any third party or country. The past five

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<sup>56</sup> cbc news, 'Iran urges Central Asian bloc to counter West', <http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/06/15/iran-thurs.html>, (18 July, 2006).

years has witnessed the significant contribution of the SCO in maintaining world and regional peace and stability, pressing ahead with democratic international relations and promoting harmony in the region and the world at large. Iran is a sovereign country. The remarks of President Ahmadinejad during the meeting represent the position of Iran.<sup>57</sup>

Iran's intention to transform the SCO into a security group in opposition to the US and NATO seems one of the major obstacles in front of Iran's prospective membership to the SCO, although Ahmadinejad's comments on "interference of the West in the internal affairs of other states" is shared by the leaders of six SCO member states and three observer states. The following joint declaration, which was signed by these countries, overtly indicates that they back the Iranian President on this issue: "Differences in cultural traditions, political and social systems, values and models of development formed in the course of history should not be taken as pretext to interfere in other countries' internal affairs".<sup>58</sup>

The SCO presents itself as an unaligned security and economic group committed to countering terrorism, religious extremism and separatism. Its intergovernmental and unaligned character, along with its respect for diversity of civilization and the model of development feature, made it more attractive for the neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and India. Furthermore, some western analysts view the SCO as an organization aimed at countering the US and the EU influence and eliminating the US military presence in Central Asia.<sup>59</sup> For instance, the SCO with the July 2005 Communiqué declared that US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan should provide a final deadline for the use of facilities and deployment of military contingents in the region. Uzbekistan also asked the US to leave the K-2 air base which was established for war in Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> All these developments played important roles in making the

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<sup>57</sup> Website of Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China; <http://www.fmrc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t258306.htm>, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Timesonline, 'Iran in talks to join alliance against West', <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,13509-2228233,00.html>, (14 July, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> US established bases in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan after 9/11 terror attacks to the US to provide support for its fight against Talibans in Afghanistan (Demirağ; [www.kafkas.org.tr](http://www.kafkas.org.tr)).

<sup>60</sup> Robert McMahan, 'Central Asia: Q&A with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried',

SCO attractive security organization for the neighboring countries who are not happy with the US military presence in the region, like Iran.

Following the admission of Mongolia to the SCO as an observer state in 2004, Iran along with other two countries, namely Pakistan and India, obtained observer status in Astana summit held on 5 July 2005.<sup>61</sup> The SCO's increasing international weight made it center of attraction for these observer states. Hence, India, Pakistan and recently Iran, indicated their willingness to become members of the SCO in different ways. Pakistan has officially applied for the membership, whereas India has unofficially expressed its intention to join the SCO.<sup>62</sup> Iran expressed its willingness to become member of the SCO recently. Reasons for that are manifold. One of the reasons which encourages Iran to become member of this regional bloc, is that Russia's and China's support for Iran's peaceful nuclear research from the beginning and their hardly opposition to the implementation of any kind of sanctions to Iran. In this connection, it is better to give why these two leading powers of the SCO show less reaction in comparison to the US and the EU on Iran's nuclear issue. As mentioned in the previous part of this article, Iran is a good market for Russia to sell its weapons and nuclear reactors. It is a good ally against Taliban regime in Afghanistan and US hegemony in the region. For China, Iran is one of their major oil suppliers. Oil is very precious material for China since its production scale is increasing tremendously and keeping oil prices as low as possible its one of the major policies. If US' strike realizes as a last resort in the case that Iran's nuclear issue cannot be solved through diplomatic ways, Iran will close the Persian Gulf for oil transportation, as it expressed often. This will engender not only increase in oil prices but also shortage of oil. China would be one of the countries which will be greatly effected this development.

On the other hand, Russia's and China's anti-American tendencies, which is shared by Iran, particularly in terms of keeping the US influence away from this region, play an important role in the decision of Iran to join

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<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp100605.shtml>, (18 July, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Mongolia has officially became the first observer state of the SCO at the Tashkent Summit of June 17,2004 ([www.sectsc.org](http://www.sectsc.org), (15 July, 2006) Chronology of Main events within the framework of "Shanghai Five"and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

<sup>62</sup> 'Shanghai Six Emerges as Bloc - Shanghai Cooperation Organization acquires military character', [www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1622663/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1622663/posts), (10 September, 2006).

the SCO.<sup>63</sup> In this context, both countries agree with Ahmedinejad's complaints about interference. Moreover, a year before, the SCO through a declaration made the same complaints. Although the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman of China, Jiang Yu, interpreted Ahmedinejad's words as remarks represents the Iran's position, Russian and Chinese officials sympathize with Ahmadinejad's complaints about this issue. China and Russia supported a new international policy based on "multipolarity" against US hegemony in the region, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US. The overall strategic aim of such an alliance is to curb the US' influence in Central Asia.<sup>64</sup> From this point of view, we can not say that the SCO does not share the views of Iran in terms of the US's interference in the region. The Declaration signed by the leaders of the SCO can be shown as a good example of the SCO's leaders complaints about the US's peresence and interference in the region.

One of the important feature of the SCO, which is respect for diversity stated with the following words, is another factor that makes the SCO membership attractive for Iran: "Diversity of civilization and the model of development must be respected and upheld. Differences in cultural traditions, political and social systems, values and model of development formed in the course of history should not be taken as pretext to interfere in other countries' internal affairs".

In addition to above mentioned reasons, ending the isolation of Iran on the international scene, to build a real Asian policy that Iran has wanted to develop for many years, to become a more active actor in the international politics through the SCO can be listed as other factors which made SCO full membership for Iran significant.

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<sup>63</sup> The United Nations Security Council offered Iran a package of incentives to resume negotiations to suspend its nuclear program. If Iran refuses this package of incentives, economic, and other sanctions, are going to be implemented to Iran. These sanctions are not desirable for two states of the United Nations Security Council permanent members, China and Russia. This makes China's and Russia's position difficult, although they both support the UN to defuse Iran's nuclear ambitions. In this context, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, expressed his support for Iran's right to engage in peaceful nuclear research at the Shanghai Summit of 2006 (Ariel Cohen: Washington Ponders Ways to Counter the Rise of the SCO: [www.euroasianet.org](http://www.euroasianet.org)).

<sup>64</sup> Organization" The Power and Interest News Report, Weinstein, Michael A., 'Intelligence Brief: Shanghai Cooperation, CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/06/15/iran-thurs.html>, [http://www.pinnr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=325&language\\_id=1](http://www.pinnr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=325&language_id=1), (20 July, 2006).

### **Is it Possible for Iran to become a Full Member of the SCO?**

SCO membership seems significant for Iran due to the reasons mentioned in the previous part. However, prospective expansion of the SCO does not seem possible under the current situation of the organization.<sup>65</sup> This situation is better explained by the SCO's Secretary General, Zhang Deguang. His views, which represent the SCO as a whole on enlargement issue, are as follows:

Many SCO members are for its intensive, but not extensive, development; now is not the best time to expand the organization, as it might hinder its effectiveness.

With respect to prospective enlargement of the SCO, Zhang Deguang said that admission of observer states as a member to the SCO might hinder the intensification of the cooperation. Besides Zhang Deguang's above mentioned words focusing mainly on giving priority to deepening rather than widening the organization, there are other reasons which hinder observer states, particularly Pakistan's and Iran's acceptance, as a member to this organization.<sup>66</sup>

In this respect, the SCO's organizational structure is another factor which makes prospective membership to the SCO difficult for Iran. As Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister, Li Hui and the SCO's Secretary General, Zhang Deguang, said that, "the SCO is still very young organization and its has long way to go". For that reason, its members need to have further discussions before deciding whether they are ready to accept new members.<sup>67</sup> In this connection, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Liu Jianchao, like other diplomats of the SCO, emphasised the organization's technical limitations and additional deliberation that the SCO requires for the admission of new members into the SCO by saying that, "there are no documents that can regulate membership of the potential candidates, including Iran". At the same time, President Putin's special

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<sup>65</sup> This is not only valid for Iran, it is also valid for other two observer states, namely India and Pakistan. Besides this, the contradiction between China and Russia hinder India and Pakistan to become members of the SCO. China actively supports Pakistan's intention to join the SCO. However, Russia may concede to this only if India is accepted at the same time. They both did not altogether deny the possibility of a new SCO member, but did not name the country by saying that "The SCO is an open organization", [www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1622663/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1622663/posts), (17 July, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Blank, <http://www.euroasia.net.com>, (19 July, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> SCO: [www.euroasianet.org](http://www.euroasianet.org), (15 July, 2006).

envoy on SCO affairs, Vitaly Vorobyov said that, “the SCO is not directed against anyone and is open for all, but its openness has its limits”. Vorobyov also conceded that, “Iran’s stance towards some issues could prove problematic for the SCO”.<sup>68</sup>

Although Uzbekistan has refrained from official comment on the topic of Iran's SCO accession, Kamoliddin Rabbimov, an independent Tashkent-based analyst, explains the anti-Western Uzbek government’s stance towards Iran’s full membership to the SCO with these words:

I believe Iran's accession to the organization will be in Uzbekistan's interests at the moment, because if anti-American sentiments grow within the organization and its potential to confront the U.S. and the West grows, the Uzbek government is likely to feel safer.<sup>69</sup>

Officials in Tajikistan were hinting at possible future support for Iranian membership although Tajik Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov also warned that the SCO, "cannot extend its membership indefinitely". In comparison to Uzbekistan’s and Tajikistan’s relatively positive approach towards Iran’s full membership to the SCO in the future, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have a more cautious approach. For instance, Kazakhstan's foreign minister, Kasymzhomart Tokaev, cited procedural obstacles to accepting new members and hinted there won't be any early solution. Moreover, Kazakh officials are not eager to see greater Iranian influence within the SCO while the legal dispute over the Caspian Sea basin continues. In Kyrgyzstan, officials stated that it is too early to talk about SCO expansion. They argued that the SCO must first focus on cementing ties among current member states.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, Iran’s Islamic feature also makes its acceptance for the SCO difficult for the countries aiming to fight against Islamic radical groups in their countries. Iranian foreign policy, particularly at the

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<sup>68</sup> Sergei Blagov, ‘SCO members expected to punt on the issue of Iranian membership’, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061406.shtml>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Gulnoza Saidazimova, ‘Eurasia: Observer Iran Grabs Limelight Ahead Of Shanghai Alliance Anniversary’, Radio Free Europe, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/06/1c64fc44-9081-49f0-8b69-2c144f52dcab.html>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

time of Khomeini, mainly focused on attempts for the exportation of the Islamic revolution and its religious model of governance to the neighboring countries in the Middle East. The validity of this image even it was abandoned by the following governments maintains its position in the eyes of secular governments of Central Asian states which fight against Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>71</sup>

Above all, Iran's nuclear crisis with the West is the biggest obstacle for Iran since the SCO member states are reluctant to accept such a country, which has great problem with the US and EU regarding its nuclear program. SCO member states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, strongly oppose the membership of Iran since they believe that Iran's confrontation with the US on the nuclear issue could drag the SCO into a global crisis. Such a global crisis would be the last thing that the organization is interested in.<sup>72</sup> Kazakh Foreign Minister, Tokayev's words in this respect are important: "It is principally important not to give cause for speculations about SCO gradually turning into some kind of a 'nuclear club' of anti-Western orientation."<sup>73</sup> In this context, it is obvious to say that Iran's current dispute with the international community over its nuclear issue hinders Iran on the way to SCO full membership, since the SCO member states do not want to take risk of accepting Iran under these conditions.

All the remarks made by SCO technocrats and leaders clearly indicate that Iran's full membership to the SCO for the foreseeable future seems not possible. This means that Iran is going to take part in the SCO activities as an observer state for a while. However, we cannot ignore the possibility for Iran to become full member of the SCO as one of the biggest oil producers in the world and a contributor to the stability in this region, even this will not be realized in the near future. The reality is that economic cooperation between Iran and the SCO member states will play a major role in member's decision-making on Iran accession to the SCO due to Iran's

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<sup>71</sup> As far as Central Asia was concerned, Iran kept a low profile because of the existence of secular governments and sunni Hanefi majority in Central Asian states (Roy; 2000).

<sup>72</sup> Under the SCO Charter, members can potentially be asked to come to the defense of another member in case of an attack. According to this Charter, the acceptance of Iran as member to the SCO might create a huge problem while it has a nuclear crisis with the US and the EU and the military strikes is still on the table (as a last resort) Blank, <http://www.euroasia.net.com>, (19 July, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Registan.net, 'Kazakhstan on SCO Expansion'

<http://www.registan.net/index.php/2006/05/15/kazakhstan-on-sco-expansion/>,kazakhstan , (20 July, 2006).

huge natural resources.<sup>74</sup> This worst scenerio for the US is evalutated in the following part in detail.

### **Repercussions of Iran's Relations with the SCO in the US**

The increasing weight of the SCO and the rise of activities of Russia, China and Iran, has already drawn US attention to the region. The attendance and the speech of President Ahmadinejad, in the SCO summit held on 15 June 2006 to become full member of the SCO after 20 years isolation, irritated the US. Russian officials resisted pressures made by American officials related to Iran's participation at the Shanghai summit of the SCO. However, the SCO organizers requested from Ahmadinejad to concentrate any public comments on Iran's role as a regional economic partner instead of speaking about issues related to the US or Israel at the summit in order not to exacerbate the situation.<sup>75</sup> Ahmadinejad's words expressing Iran's readiness for further cooperation, even full membership, with SCO member states in the interests of international peace and security; moreover the desire to transform the SCO into a bloc which can counter interference of Western powers in the region raised eyebrows in Washington since the formation of such a bloc by Iran, China and Russia aiming to prevent the US influence in the region is interpreted as the worst case scenario for the US.<sup>76</sup>

The following statement made by the US defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, clearly indicates the US stance towards Iran's observer status and its prospective membership to the SCO: "It strikes me as passing strange that one would want to bring into an organization that says it is against terrorism... one of the nations that is leading terrorist nation in the world – Iran."<sup>77</sup> However, the reality is that the SCO represents an understanding of terrorism that does not define Iran as a sponsor of terror. The following words of the SCO Secretary General, Zhang Deguang, as a response to Rumsfeld above mentioned words clearly indicates this reality: "We cannot abide by other countries calling our observer nations sponsors

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<sup>74</sup> Tajikistan sought to reach a bilateral agreement for joint Tajik-Iran construction of the Sangtuda -2 hydropower plant. Kazakhstan has always been looking into extending relations with Iran, particularly in the field of oil and gas pipelines. Erica Marat, 'Iran, Tajikistan Strengthen Cooperation in the Energy Sector' [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2370728](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370728), Euroasia Daily Monitor, (15 July, 2006).

<sup>75</sup> Blagov, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061406.shtml>, (20 July, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> Aljazeera.net, 'Iran offers Shanghai bloc energy ties'.

<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/DC0A3199-8358-441C-9331-24B55D1F1A2E.htm>, (16 August, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

of terror. We would not have invited them if we believed they sponsored terror."<sup>78</sup>

As we can understand from the above words of Rumsfeld, the participation of Iran in the meeting of the SCO as an observer state and its desire, declared by Ahmedinejad at that meeting, for being member of the SCO in the near future has caused consternation in Washington since isolation of Iran from the region and reducing Russia and China's effectiveness in the region are major parts of foreign policies of the US towards Central Asia and Iran. In this respect, it is obvious to say that a closer relationship among these three countries and the other four Central Asian states under the SCO framework does not serve the US' interests in the region. The main goal of the US seems to prevent such a development, which will undermine the effectiveness of the US in the region.

## Conclusion

The disintegration of the USSR in December 1991 and emergence of the newly established independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus created an opportunity for the neighboring countries, which has ethnic and regional ties with the Central Asian states like Turkey and Iran, to have influence in Central Asia. As Brzezinski said, Euroasia, which has the majority of underground riches, thus became the chess board for future fights among great powers when the Soviet Union lost its hegemonic power in this region.<sup>79</sup> When the increase in the need for oil and gas, and the decrease in the oil sources are taken into account, the importance of being the hegemonic power in this region is quite understandable. Terrorist activities in that region created opportunity for China and Russia to establish its hegemony particularly through the establishment of the SCO. The 9/11 terror attacks on the U.S. and the following war in Afghanistan created opportunity for the US to enter into the region through the establishment of bases in Georgia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. At that time, Turkey lost its weight, which had been obtained in Central Asia at the beginning of the post-cold war period, by giving priority to EU membership. For Iran, its limited material resources and particular characteristics as an Islamic state hindered it from becoming dominant

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<sup>78</sup> Daniel Kimmage, 'Central Asia: Does the Road to Shanghai Go Through Tehran?', <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2006/iran-060612-rferl03.htm>, (17 July, 2006).

<sup>79</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew. (1998). *Büyük Satranç Tahtası: Amerika'nın Önceliği ve Bunun Jeostratejik Gereklere* (*The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*), Istanbul: Sabah Kitapçılık.

power in this region. In addition to these reasons, Russia's policy to regain its former hegemonic power in this region deterred both Iran and Turkey from playing more active role in Central Asia. Under these conditions, prospective membership to the SCO seems for Iran as a good opportunity to establish further ties with these Central Asian states, along with China and Russia, since it seems not as easy as Iran expected without being part of the SCO. Moreover, growing international pressure over Iran's nuclear issue pushed Iran to become part of such a regional security organization which members of it share similar views with Iran, such as non-intervention of the US in the region. In addition to these reasons, two UN Security Council permanent members, Russia's and China's different stance towards Iran's nuclear issue particularly on the implementation of sanctions to Iran led to Iran to establish further ties with these two states.

Accession of Iran as a full member to the SCO under pressure of the international community due to its nuclear issue, seems an undesirable development for the SCO members. Besides Iran's nuclear issue, developments with regards to the SCO itself, such as its capacity for enlargement, is another factor which determines the possibility of Iran's prospective membership to the SCO. As Kosyrev argued, that without coping with new initiatives taken by the SCO, expansion of the SCO is not possible. However, even the participation of Iran in SCO meetings as an observer state irritates the US. Professor David Wall's characterization of Iran's prospective membership to the SCO as "an OPEC with bombs" because of the existence of world's largest oil and gas reserves, and nuclear power at the same time, clearly express the US worry on Iran's prospective membership to the SCO.<sup>80</sup> The US' policy towards this issue is very clear-cut; to use every diplomatic tool to prevent Iran to become full member of the SCO. In conclusion, we can say that although the leaders of the SCO believed that inclusion of Iran would serve the stability in the region and would give the SCO significant influence over the world's largest suppliers of oil and gas reserves, Iran's full membership to the SCO under the pressure of nuclear issue seems not possible in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>80</sup> Daniel Kimmage, 'Central Asia: Does the Road to Shanghai Go Through Tehran?', <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2006/iran-060612-rfer103.htm>, (17 July, 2006).