Why is Iran Joining the SCO?

At the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to be held on September 16-17 in Tajikistan, the official announcement of the procedure of Iran’s admission to its membership is expected.

It will be an anniversary summit of the organization founded 20 years ago in 2001 by six states - The Shanghai Five (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan), formed in 1996, and joined by Uzbekistan. Today, the SCO includes eight countries: in 2017, in addition to the already mentioned six states, India and Pakistan became members of this regional organization dealing with security, economic and humanitarian cooperation. As a result, the total area of the SCO has made up about 23% of the planet’s landmass, and its constituent countries’ population has reached 45% of the world’s population.

In addition, the SCO has four more observer countries (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia) and six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey). Given the constantly growing international prestige of the SCO in recent years, another 12 countries interested in cooperation claim observer or partner status - Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Maldives, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, Ukraine, and Vietnam.

Thus, the SCO is becoming a central and bridging structure in Eurasia. The expansion of the SCO increases its power and influence. "As for the economic aspects, I am sure that we should focus on combining efforts,
The SCO Charter emphasizes that all decisions within the organization are based solely on the principle of consensus. Therefore even if some small state conditionally opposes it, the decision will simply not be made. In addition, the SCO is characterized by the "Shanghai spirit" - a code of conduct in which countries commit themselves to develop cooperation based on the principles of trust, mutual respect and mutual consideration of interests.

Given the SCO is a platform for discussing a wide range of regional issues, during the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the SCO member states held in Dushanbe in July, Russia insisted on a favorable consideration of Iran's application for membership in this organization. After all, Iran is also a regional state. It needs to discuss these problems on an equal footing and seek common solutions, particularly to the ongoing situation in and around Afghanistan. Therefore, Tehran's full membership in the SCO would further emphasize that Iran participates in the regional security debate.

Tehran received observer status with the SCO back in 2005 and applied for full-fledged membership in 2008. However, due to the international sanctions against Iran, it could not be accepted into the association until 2015 because, according to SCO rules, a country under UN Security Council sanctions cannot become a member. The sanctions were lifted in 2015 after Tehran agreed to curtail its nuclear program.

However, then Tajikistan unexpectedly blocked the Iranian application, accusing Tehran of supporting the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (banned in Tajikistan and Russia) and indirect involvement in the organization of contract murders and terrorist acts committed in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, according to another version popular in Iran, the conflict between the two countries was due to financial reasons. According to the Iranian media, Dushanbe intended to embezzle money from Iranian businessman Babak Zanjani, who kept it in Tajik banks to circumvent sanctions by trading oil on behalf of the authorities. A third version of the possible reasons for the rift between Dushanbe and Tehran was the growing influence of Iran's longtime adversary, Saudi Arabia, on Tajikistan's politics. In 2016, Tajik leader Emomali Rahmon visited Riyadh, where he described Saudi Arabia as his country's "important partner" in the Arab world. In the spring of 2017, the media reported that Saudi Arabia was allegedly planning to build a parliamentary complex in Dushanbe, requiring the demolition of several buildings in the center of the city, including the Embassy of Iran (although in July 2017, the Tajik authorities announced that they had given preference to a Chinese contractor).

Some time ago, the conflict between Tajikistan and Iran was resolved, and even Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi intended to fly to Dushanbe personally. And this will be his first foreign voyage since his election as President of the Islamic Republic in June of this year. In April, Iran and Tajikistan agreed to establish a joint committee on military defense and armed forces to facilitate further security cooperation between the two countries. It also cannot be ruled out that Tajikistan's support for the Iranian application is partly due to the landlocked country's need to access ports. Iranian ports, including Chabahar in the upper Arabian Sea, offer the cheapest and shortest shipping options.

The transformation of Iran's observer status in the SCO into full membership would undoubtedly be an important geopolitical victory for the Islamic Republic regarding its positioning in Eurasia, including in regard to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In addition, it would refute Western propaganda that Iran is in international isolation and could be another boost to the recently concluded Sino-Iranian cooperation agreement. Although, unlike the 25-year-old Iran-China cooperation agreement, which does not imply the binding of any actions, such a scheme is not possible in the SCO.

More intense participation in the activities of the SCO corresponds to the adjustment of foreign policy by the current Iranian authorities. Recall that the Supreme Leader of Iran recently indicated the main outline of the current phase of the country's foreign policy and the course Raisi should follow: strengthening relations with non-Western countries, including China and Russia. During Raisi's confirmation ceremony as President by Ayatollah Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader in international affairs, also said that the priority of the Raisi government should be "oriented towards the East" and "cooperation and strategic relations with China, India and Russia," which can "help our economy to progress." At the same time, Iran indeed seeks constructive participation in Eurasian economic and security institutions hoping to reduce the pressure of Western sanctions and possibly creating additional leverage in communicating with the West.

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