



Iran's SCO Entry Could Complicate U.S.-Israeli Strategic Options

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Iran's impending entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Eurasian bloc that China and Russia lead, has great potential to limit U.S., Israeli and Western leeway in confronting Tehran's nuclear and hegemonic aspirations, sponsorship of international terrorism and efforts at regional de-stabilization.

Iran's SCO entry comes as the Institute for Science and International Security, a leading nonproliferation think tank, reported that due to its aggressive nuclear enrichment of recent months, the Islamic Republic now has enough enriched nuclear fuel to produce a single nuclear weapon within no more than about a month—if it chooses to do so.

Iran's entry also comes amid mounting evidence that it continues to impose roadblocks to international monitoring of its nuclear activities. Tehran admitted recently that it removed surveillance cameras that the International Atomic Energy Agency had previously installed at a key centrifuge manufacturing site in the city of Karaj.

Nuclear experts have cautioned that, in advancing its nuclear program, Tehran may be seeking to pressure Washington to quickly resurrect the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran, from which former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States in 2018, prompting Iran to surpass the deal's limits on its nuclear activity.

By focusing on U.S.-Iranian maneuvering over the nuclear deal, however, policymakers and pundits may miss the strategic forest for the trees. That's because whether the issue is Iran's nuclear progress or its regional behavior, its entry into the SCO will raise increasingly serious strategic issues for Washington, Jerusalem and the West.

Simply put, Washington and its allies may have to think more seriously before taking military steps to derail Iran's nuclear or other activities, given that the Islamic Republic is now part of a security-related pact with China and Russia—two nuclear powers that continue to undermine America on the world stage.

Iran's entry into the SCO—which encourages member cooperation on economic, cultural and security issues—is perhaps the logical follow-up to the news of about a year ago that Beijing and Tehran were developing a new economic and military agreement that would give China a greater foothold in the Middle East and give Iran potential economic and military outlets to sidestep U.S. pressure.

Under that 25-year agreement, China is to invest \$400 billion in Iran's energy and other sectors and buy discounted Iranian oil, and the two nations will conduct "joint training and exercises, joint research and weapons development and intelligence sharing," according to an early description.

Now, Iran's entry into the SCO, which will make it the ninth member of a pact that also includes India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, signals Tehran's growing ties with a rising China and a revanchist Russia. And it comes after persistent Iranian efforts over many years to reach this stage.

Iran first sought observer status in 2004 and secured it (along with India and Pakistan) a year later. While various issues, including U.N. sanctions against Iran, complicated Tehran's push for membership, Iranian officials have played active roles over the years in the organization's meetings, conferences and other activities. With membership, Iran now will have a decision-making role.

None of that will be welcome news in Washington and Jerusalem, both of which have sought to isolate the Islamic Republic as an outlaw state and deploy a variety of strategies to contain its activities.

Washington has imposed tight economic and financial sanctions on Iran in recent years, particularly under President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, and steered other sanctions through the U.N. Security Council, while Israel has slowed Iran's nuclear progress by sabotaging its facilities and targeting its nuclear experts.

Reducing its global isolation, Iran's entry into the SCO further legitimizes its status as an international player—and Iran's leaders wasted little time in trumpeting their achievement. Its new hardline President Ebrahim Raisi said Iran's entry signals a rejection of U.S. "unilateralism" and added that all SCO members are ready to expand their economic ties with the Islamic Republic.

The move also raises questions as to whether China and Russia, which previously signed on to U.S.-driven Security Council sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program (albeit after watering them down), will continue to do so—especially at a time when U.S. relations with both continue to deteriorate.

At some point, Iran may reach a nuclear threshold that Washington or Jerusalem deem untenable. Or perhaps Iran's efforts to extend its influence by destabilizing U.S.-backed regional governments will prompt a concrete U.S. countermove.

With Iran's entry into the SCO and growing military ties with China, will Beijing feel more inclined to come to Iran's defense—in response to a U.S. or Israeli diplomatic, economic, or military move to curtail Iran's activities—via a diplomatic, economic, or even military move of its own? It's a question that U.S., Israeli and Western officials will now have to ask themselves more seriously.

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