



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Iran as a Permanent Member of SCO: Scope and Challenges**

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<b>Received:</b> April 07, 2022 <b>Accepted:</b> June 02, 2022 <b>Online:</b> June 04, 2022 <b>Keywords:</b> SCO, Iran's Permanent Membership of SCO, Issues Opportunities <b>*Corresponding Author</b>  ranapervaiziqbal @gmail.com	Entering into SCO as a permanent member in September, 2021, Iran is focusing on new economic and strategic goals. Damaged economy and strategic setbacks, due to US sanctions, Iran has focused on the multi-regional support for the strategic and economic takeaways. Iran joined SCO as observer and seated permanently after the struggle of fifteen years. China and Russia at leading positions, Eurasian States with rich resources and Pakistan and India as permanent members, Iran also wants to avail the opportunities as a permanent member of the SCO. The Focused objectives of the article were to explore strategic and economic opportunities and possible challenges for Iran at SCO. The qualitative methodology has been applied to conduct the current study. The present article concludes that SCO may bring huge economic and strategic opportunities for Iran. SCO member states can help Iran coming out of economic depression and providing chances to gain strategic benefits in the region. The article further concludes that US sanctions and some security concerns about Tehran may create some challenges for Iran on the way forward with SCO. Tehran should increase its ties with the SCO bloc and workout wisely on its foreign policy to get maximum benefits from the member states of the organization.

**Introduction**

Islamic Republic of Iran, witnessing crucial phase of economic sanctions for years, is on the way to make new alleys in the region. Iran has made a stance of approaching the regional powers and affiliations for bringing change in the wrecking sphere of the country to a developed state in the region. Scrambled with Iraq war, Iran was again in a nexus of sanctions which brought depression of economic cycle and Iran had to suffer from social disorder. Amid all these crucial times, the Iranian officials did not allow to be marginalized fully. The regional support and the old friends also supported Iran in difficult times. Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a strong forum of the Eurasian region linking with other regions as well, of which Iran has been an observer member in SCO. Iran has put its desire for becoming a permanent member of SCO so the annual session of 2021 brought the great initiative for Iran as status of Iran has been changed as a permanent member of the organization. During these long years, Tehran has been trying to pursue the permanent member with the support of the member states. Doing so, Tehran kept on trying good bilateral ties with Russia, China and other member states of the organization. In the SCO annual meeting 2018, in Qingdao, the President of Russia Vladimir Putin gave positive gesture for Iran's full membership in the SCO. Tehran knows that to get the status of full member of SCO, it has to work a lot to get the political support of the member states (Fluton,

2021). For this, Iran used diplomatic front to keep all the states in confidence so that the SCO platform may be used by Iran as an alternate of the US economic sanctions on the country.

Since 2001, the year SCO was established, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China, Russia and four central-Asian states gave a new dimension to Nation Five and paved way for rest of the world to get connected with SCO. The organization started focusing on endorsing an agenda of strategic cooperation in security, economy and border issues, along with many mutual areas of cooperation. Moving ahead from five to six and then in 2017, SCO member states expanded SCO by declaring India and Pakistan as full members of the organization. It is notable that the SCO has come forward with a huge international population and 23 percent of global territory. Keeping in view the post US withdrawal from JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) scenario, Iran was once again under a threat of being isolated in the region. Iran does not want to destabilize its present status of walking with West as Iran does not violate the JCPOA. But US is again putting pressure on its allies to unanimously support US against the sanction on Iran. Amid this situation, it is very much important for Iran to engage the emerging powers diplomatically as Russia and China may support Iran in reinvigorating its economy. For this purpose, SCO may be the best entity for Tehran. (Kermani, 2019).

To peruse for the permanent membership of SCO, mainly aims to accumulate the economic and strategic gains for Iran. Apparently, Iran wants to avail this opportunity for multiple reasons. Firstly, Iran certainly wanted to be a part of emerging regional organization which has leading economic powers of the future, Iran takes this as an opportunity to get its own economy back to the track which is damaged badly due to the US sanctions. Secondly, Iran also wanted to retain its position in the Middle East. Iran may never want to handicapped itself with the effects of the political turmoil in the Middle East. Thirdly, Iran is well aware of its image in the region and internationally as well. The nuclear issue, US sanctions and Iran's relations with the Arab states, may be dimmed through the SCO platform. (Magenn, 2018)

Iran is an important state in the region. Its strategic location makes it more attractive for the world and the regional powers. Iran's desire to become a permanent member of SCO has been proceeded providing Tehran an opportunity to act what it has planned for the country with the help of SCO bloc. Changing dynamics of the region and reshaping world in the contemporary era, Iran has also taken a policy of new friends and forums for the future strategies. Keeping in view the importance of Iran in the region, it has been awarded permanent membership in SCO. The current study is an attempt to find out SCO permanent membership's impacts on the Iran's strategic schemes and economic gains. Also, the article has focused on the issues and challenges for Iran on the way forward in SCO.

Iran is an important country of the Middle East. For many years Iran has been facing the sanctions over the terrorism and nuclear issues. The present study offers the effects on Iran after granting it permanent membership by China-Russia led organization the SCO. AS the Iran issue is very much important, so the present study is significant to get the latest insight about the Iran's success, benefits and challenges as a permanent member of SCO.

## **Literature Review**

In the article "Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Changing International Environment" Aylin Unver Noi is of the view that despite the economic crises in the country, Iran is fully aware of the changing international and regional scenario. Iran wants to keep all the regional and international forces engaged with it. With this motive, Iran has successfully kept both emerging economic powers Iran and Russia in confidence, Iran is

hopeful that she will get permanent membership of SCO sooner or later with the Eurasian states and China and Russia cooperation.(Noi, 2012).

In the article “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran: A powerful Union” the author Matthew Brummer is of the view that there may not be more suitable forum for Iran than SCO. It may become a matter of relief for Iran if SCO admits Iran as permanent member of SCO. Iran has been lobbying on high diplomatic levels so that the organization may take early decision about the permanent membership. Moreover, if Iran becomes the permanent member, Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran may compile a strong platform which will be alarming for USA as it is also keeping eyes on the expansion of SCO.(Brummer, 2007).

In the article “Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian Foreign Policy, the writer Shahram Akberzedah is of the view that to seek permanent membership of SCO may take Iran away from its ideology of working for the rights and interests of the Muslims. China and Russia are leading the SCO. These countries are emerging economies and also have a lot of potentials for the other states. But in these states, the minorities, especially Muslims are not living the life of ease. They are deprived of many rights and are forced to live according to forced laws.(Akbarzadeh, 2015).

In an article “Iran’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization Membership Remains Elusive” Sabena Siddiqui writes that China, apparently supports Iran for the permanent membership in SCO. But when to enter Iran in SCO, remain unclear. China, and most of the SCO states have good ties, but when the Iran’s request comes to Social the states adopt the policy of wait and watch. It is also clear that if China will take the decision of Iran as a permanent member, rest of the states will follow Iran including Russia. China is well aware of its interest beyond its boundaries and so is the matter of Iran. It is China who will finally support Iran as a permanent member of SCO.(Siddique, 2020).

Jack Magenn is of the view that the permanent membership in SCO may lift Iran by all means. Iran’s strong wish of SCO membership is the thirst for a powerful dimension of opportunities for Tehran. Iran is keeping close eye on the regional changes including the Arab spillover in the region. Iran considers it a threat to the state which may be averted by having strong ties with the regional powers Russia and China including other SCO member states.(Magenn, 2018).

In an interview with the researcher, Dr. Fluton is of the view that China always prefer safe and secure perspectives of any future planning in another state. Iran has many issues with US and allied countries. China is assessing the situation very closely to grant permanent membership to Iran. Somehow, Tehran will get the desired position in SCO sooner or later. (Fluton, 2021).

## **Iran and SCO**

Situated at the ideal strategic location, loaded with natural resource of oil and securing important state status of the region, Iran has much to be an attractive state for the region and world. Facing economic and humanitarian based crises like situation due to sanctions have provoked Iranian administrating to sail out for new directions (Katzman, 2022).Putting its request twice at SCO to grant permanent membership at SCO, Iran has now new reinforcement in terms of to be seated permanently at SCO. Iran, badly jolted by the US and allied countries sanctions, with damaged economy and social structure, still remains in the domain of striking state for the world and regional powers. Iran has the huge oil reserves in the country. The strategic importance cannot be ignored of Iran as it shares its border with many important states and locations. It connects the Middle East, to Central Asia and Southwest Asia. Being situated at the significant Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, it is the

neighboring state of Pakistan which also has permanent membership of SCO. As GDP growth, oil exports, trade, inflation, exchange rates, public spending, institutional quality, banking system and household welfare all are interlinked with the economy of the country, so Iran is seeking a stage to fix all these issues. (Mohammad Reza Farzanegan, 2021). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization seems to be the new important forum for Iran as new horizon of opportunities might support Tehran to bring isolation of Iran to an end. Iran may use SCO as a bridge to landlocked Central Asian states and from there to beyond to Europe and rest of the world. Getting permanent status in 2021 does not indicate few months' work to achieve this success. The Ex-Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit in early 2021 to the Central Asian states was one of the steps in this regard. There have been certain projects on which Iran wants to work on warfare bases. Iran is ready to initiate the Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan corridor, which connects cities like Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat directly to Iran's Chabahar port. This port, situated at the strategically ideal location for many states, and has Chinese attention as well. (Siddique, 2020), (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018)

US conflict has left deep imprints over the Iranian economy. (Garver, 2018) The long conflict is still in the continue phase rather it has been creating a further diplomatic chasm between both the ideologically different states. Iran needs regional support to come out of the US sanction impacts on the country. Tehran is expanding its ties with SCO bloc to offer its strategic location to be the corridor of the emerging world powers and Eurasian states for the uplifting of the country's poor graph of development. In 2018, Trump Administration announced the withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA). The agreement brought a great restructuring of the Iranian economy. There were strong indications in the Oil production and exports of Iran after the JCPOA agreement. It was near 27% increase in the overall exports (in US dollar terms) and real GDP growth of 12.5% in 2016/17. (International Monetary Fund, 2020). So as the oil sector gets blooming status, the rest of the Iranian economic fields also spilled over and commercial activities get place rapidly in Iran. Currently, Iran is also wants to use oil as a breakthrough for the fate of the country. The future planning of Iran will surely workout for it and may be out of the nexus of sanction with the regional support. (Fluton, 2021).

### **Strategic and Economic Gains for Iran at SCO**

The apparent interests are transparent as Iran is in need of economy based projects and plans. The infrastructure, link with the outer world and multi-regional cooperation will surely be equipped as Iran has been included in the SCO bloc. Keeping engaged most of the SCO states in talks and mutual ties are the tools by Tehran to remain in the domain of favorite state for rest of the members of SCO. The foremost reason of joining SCO as permanent member by Iran would be the economic gains. Iran with poor economy but with rich resources is in need of outer cooperation to uplift its trade and economy. The sanctions on Iran have been resulted in different negative depressions in the on the horizons of economy. At current, Iran's relations with the world are not exemplary, but may be in a revival of relations phase which may support Iran to work out on the economy. Under the US sanctions for a long period, the Iranian economy has been totally crushed. (Garver, 2018). Although, Rohani administration was resolute as the current regime of Ebrahim Raisi is, to bear the US pressure for more years, but the economy needs quick revival to be restructured as soon as possible for reactive of the state's dead trade and commerce activities. (Ng, 2021). Iran, by all means, wants to get out of the depression circle. The state's stagnant economy cannot survive unless the regional connectivity is supplied to Tehran. Iran's Chabahar sea port, strategic location and business opportunities have the attraction for the world. But these economic gains not only for Iran but for other countries as well are comprehend to the issue of Iran-US conflict. Iran wants to use the source of Oil, the biggest production of the country as to win the world market. The Eurasian states and region is most dynamic for Iran. The US

factor has brought a huge loss to the oil export of Iran which is affecting badly to economy matters of the country (Kermani, 2019).

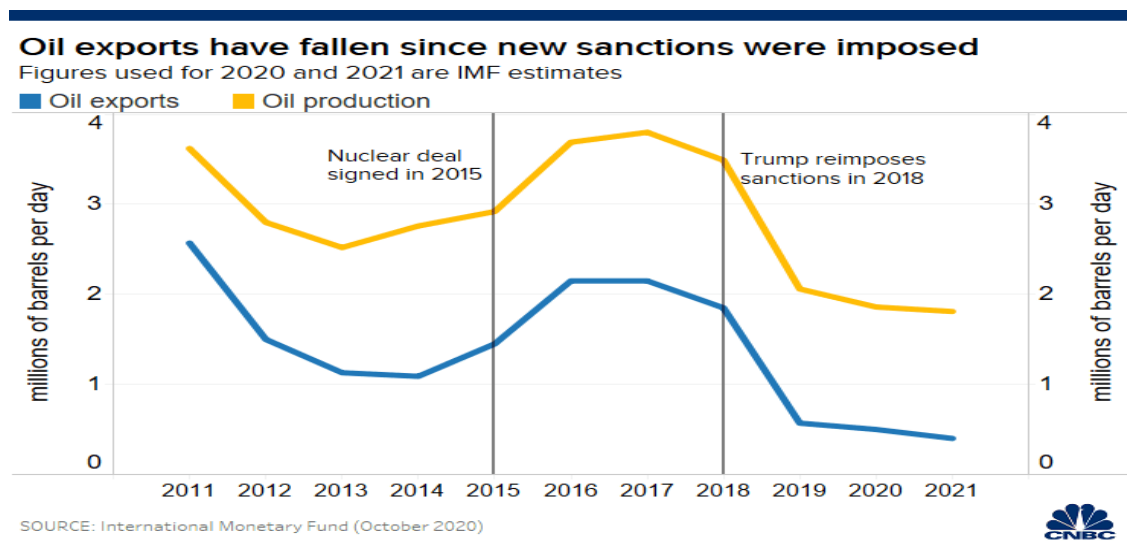


Figure 1: Source: (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

The weak economy, less jobs for the public, inflation rise and many other economy based problems are being worsened with the passage of time. According to the IMF sources, in 2021 and onwards, if the sanctions remain in practice by US, nearly 13% public of total population will be without jobs in Iran. In a country with rich oil production, this figure is alarming which ultimately create further problems for the country. In the same way, the expenditures of the Iran are more than the earning of the country. The fiscal cycle is in negative circle for many years. This depression is not allowing Iran's economy to be stable and grow gradually. The National budget of Iran shows the pitiful condition of Iran almost at the start of every year. Iran needs a strong currency to deal with the outer world. But current status of the Iran's currency does not suitable for the revival of the economy of the state. The low currency rate, at the time of crucial social standard of life of the common people, further damaging the already crushed matters of livelihood. These ground realities have forced Iran to search of new friends and opportunities in the region. SCO ,having emerging strong regional powers China, Russia and other member states, may be the best platform for Iran to rebuild itself after being damaged badly by the sanctions.(Siddique, 2020)The permanent membership of SCO will surely enable Iran to revitalize its state's economy with the help of SCO bloc. The Iran's inclinations towards SCO presents a genuine agenda of the state where the Iran's interests are transparent almost in every state. Economic gains are the ultimate goals for Iran by joining SCO. (Sentyurin, 2020). Some of the key takeaways by becoming permanent member of the SCO are:

1. Increase in export of oil to the member states.
2. Promotion of Chahbahar sea port as a gateway for the landlocked members.
3. Cooperation from the SCO member states in resolving the issues of extremism and terrorism.
4. Support at the International scenario against the sanctions by the US.

### Support of Emerging SCO Bloc

Apart from economic gains which has made the country isolated and limited in diplomatic ties with different regional and world states, Iran would certainly has the strong

desire to keep warm relations with all the regional powers to regain strategic goals. Even during the strong sanction period, both Iran and China have been keeping themselves engaged in importing and exporting specially oil and other items despite Western concerns (Green, 2021). Iran thinks that by joining different world forum as SCO and others, would, along with economic aids, the ties will be improved with member states of these organizations. To address the US and Western pressure, Iran's best strategy would be the engagement with SCO and its member states. As a permanent state, will be a huge support for Iran to revitalize its economy. The regional support for Iran will bring an international attention towards the country. The Chinese and Russian led SCO has been established itself as an important forum of the Eurasian region. Including India and Pakistan, the Asian rivals, the gradual expand of SCO has made it attractive for the regional and International fame (Fluton, 2021). Iran, making wise decision, has entered the forum as permanent member of the organization at much needed time. This forum can be a best way to defame the imprint of the US sanctions blames regarding Tehran's involvement in different antistatic matters in the region. SCO has a good list of states including China, Russia, India with whom Iran has been very close diplomatically and Pakistan which are important not only in the region but their say in the world may be helpful for Iran at different levels. Within the framework of Moscow's Eurasia foreign policy, Iran gains a advantaged position as an embankment, as Russia keeps the anti- Western infringement, Moscow considers Tehran having the same tendencies and takes it a security partner against the imposition of liberal norms and external standards of legitimacy. (Grajewski, 2020). Iran wants to get support of the regional powers at UN and against US as well. To undo the resolutions at UN, Iran is lobbying in the region to stand with the regional powers. To be a permanent member of Scummy also be a tactic in this regard. In the past, China has kept Iran in close ties by inking many of projects in Iran and by increasing imports and exports between both the states. (Lim, 2021).

### **Support of Eurasian Region**

Across Eurasia, along with the permanent members of SCO, Iran is working out in converging security interests and concerns about instability in Central Asia. Iran has deep eyes over the issue of the Caspian, the Caucasus and Afghanistan which have provided a fairly durable basis for Russia-Iran co-operation. Tehran's standpoint to keep itself as a co-operative security partner in Eurasia has proved factual scheme in its relations with Russia and the Eurasian region. SCO, China and the Central Asian states have taken the shape of a troika as an important forum for intra-regional cooperation on security issues. Furthermore, becoming a part of SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, Tehran has been involved in the SCO-Afghanistan contact group and has participated as an observer in the "Kanal" joint anti-narcotics operations under the patronage of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since 2004. In the Caspian Sea, Iran has always stood by Russia's various plans for a common regional security alliance. Iran prefers to be a part of the plan, among littoral states, to deal with the movement of terrorists and narcotics from Afghanistan. It is also important for Iran to be benefitted through the rich lands of Eurasian region. For attaining the broader benefits, Iran is managing different tussles and issues which were being proved irritants between Iran and the Russian states. Iran, as a hub of economic activities, wants to spread its business and trade to a great volume with the Eurasian states. The SCO has provided the planned strategy for the Iranian endeavors in the region. Iran has rightly opted SCO to expand its relations with the SCO bloc which is rooted in multiple regions from Eursia to South Asia and beyond. (Fluton, 2021).

### **SCO as Alley to Counter US Policies for Iran**

Another strong factor for Iran is to counter US and Allied as Iran is under the pressure of the US staunch policies and sanctions. Iran thinks that without getting regional

support, it will remain under the pressure of the US for years ahead. Unless managing good relations with China, Russia and India as well, Iran could not get the support of all these states to give a strong reply to US in response to its sanctions and policies. But Tehran has constant vision regarding SCO. Iran is well aware of the benefits of SCO. The isolation of Iran in the region has badly affected the country which has far off effects on the foreign and internal affairs of Iran. (Grajewski, 2020). The country is striving for a rehabilitation of trust, support and confidence of regional states on Iran. For a strong shelter, SCO may be of great forum as Iran has targeted to be close to China and Russia as close allies in the region. India is also having many valuable deals with Iran, with the support of China and Russia, and having cordial relations with other states of SCO, Iran may be stronger to face US policies on the diplomatic level. The frequent visits of Tehran and Chinese and Russian officials show the strong links of all these states at the official level. (N.A).

### **Support of China and Russia**

Iran is bringing new passion in ties with China's by following the Chinese economic policy towards the region. China is supporting Iran and made many trade agreements despite the US sanctions. (Brummer, 2007). In the past, China's stance to abstain from giving permanent membership to Iran was due to US sanctions and China did not be a party in this conflict. On the other side, Russia has been a good supporter of Iran for a long time. The new agreement between China and Iran may be seen out of the context of the US-Iran tussle. China has always focused on the relations with other states on the business note. China wants to spread its means of communication and business across the globe. It never indulges in the matters of a state with other state. SCO also came forward with the keynote not to indulge in the internal matters of any state and region. US strategy in the region, no doubt, is always focused by China and this aspect is well studied in terms of Iranian request for the permanent membership (NA, 2020). As a permanent member of SCO, Iran takes all the member states important due to its own needs. Russia has a clear policy towards all the regional states to work and promote regional connectivity. (Sentyurin, 2020). Iran and Russia have been close allies for years. From joint military exercises to joint business and trade ventures, both the countries stand side by side. As both Russia and China are the key members of SCO, Iran is trying to have close ties with these two states to get maximum support in the region. (Fathi, 2021).

### **Challenges for Iran in SCO as Permanent Member**

Along with opportunities and benefits, Iran may face challenges on the way forward as permanent member of the organization. Extremism, terrorism and separatism, these key factors are the direction line of SCO member states prefer to work out on these grounds and economy based projects are followed by the basic lines of cooperation. Iran has been questioned for these elements by the western countries and demanding from Iran to stop the cross border violence support. Although SCO does not interfere in the internal matters of any state, but to build strong ties at SCO forum, Iran has to work according to the charter of the organization. There is a long history of Iranian tussle and sanctions by US and bans although Tehran does not name them international sanctions. (Motamedi, 2021). SCO is a platform which has been created mainly to resolve the security and border issues. The economic dimensions came afterwards to SCO and all the states are now working on the economic dimension by supporting each other. Unfortunately, Tehran is still under the impression of a state which involves itself in creating disturbance in the neighboring states. Moreover the atomic issue is another factor which kept Russia and China hesitant to grant permanent membership to Iran for fifteen years. Even after getting the desired status at SCO, Iran still has to be vigilant about its policies with the neighboring states and the issues with the West and the US. Apparently, SCO will surely bring a reboot for Iran to revive its strategic domain. (Yuan, 2021). But US may not allow Tehran to gain much from the organization. US

has targeted Iran in all respects. From nuclear to terrorism, US has blamed Iran to create disturbance in the region. So Iran may face staunch opposition by US while performing masterly at SCO. The organization has been working to cope with the terrorism, separatism and extremism. These factors are to be dealt strictly by the members of the organization. US has been blaming Iran to provide support to the terrorism in the region. This factor also alarming and challenging for Iran at SCO as the forum is fighting this menace and will not allow any state to be involved in such activities. Bring business based activities and high graph of trade for the country may also be a challenge for the Ebrahim Raisi administration. The trust building steps, are being taken by the Iranian officials for the restoration of the economic hustle and bustle in the country. To attract the SCO member states, Iran is working rapidly on the in different sectors along with Chahbahar seaport so that multiple projects be launched with the help of the SCO member states.

## **Conclusion**

Iran has shaped out new version of its policy to create trust among the regional countries for a better outcome to rebuild its economy and social structure. Damaged by sanctions and isolation for multiple reasons, Iran has entered into a new phase of diplomatic relations by grabbing permanent seat at SCO. The slogan "Neither East Nor West" by Iran is being rephrased with prefer to region as Iran has joined a vibrant regional forum of SCO. The permanent members, for a long time, have been sharing and providing best environment for security issues, business and trade. China and Russia are expanding their ventures in the region for rapid growth almost in all the economic directions. Iran put the request for permanent membership and with strong lobbying and campaign, despite the staunch policies of US, China and Russia have approved the permanent seat of Iran. Although it is also being assessed that there is nothing much positive outcomes for Iran at SCO as the President Raisi administration is seeking for. Yet, the forum is itself important for Iran to defame its impression of isolation. Iran is having multiple reasons to be on board in different projects as abundance of oil reserves and Chahbahar sea port. Moreover Iran is situated at an ideal strategic location to facilitate the SCO member states in different projects of communication either through sea or soil. Raisi administration has welcomed warmly the decision of permanent membership at SCO and has claimed to make best use for the revival of the economy of the country. Economic giants, China and Russia, energy rich Eurasian States and Pakistan and India, all these permanent members are being focused by Tehran for upcoming plans, projects and ventures. Iran has finally set some goals in the post permanent membership scenario. Iran vows to bring huge investment and business mechanism from SCO. Tehran is already perusing new dimensions of ties in the SCO bloc and new opportunities to rebuild itself. Iran's desire to take advantage of its ideal strategic position in the region has provided Iran a chance to promote its importance at a stage which is becoming one of the world's most important organizations. Iran's natural resources especially oil, has given extra attention for the world towards Iran. Tehran may be proved as a land of opportunities and business of the Iranian authorities take steps to make some changes in its policies for the region and to defame its impression for which US and Western states are against Iran. Tehran should also improve relations with the neighboring and the regional states. The US concerns about Iran and its policies in the region may create some challenges for Tehran to sit in SCO as permanent member. If Tehran wants to regain its position in the region, it has to make some necessary changes in its state policies. Iran still has the capacity to cope with the current situation created by the sanctions. SCO may be a bridge in this context. The less opportunities may also be enough to generate more benefits for the Iranian economy. Affable relations with the neighboring states, facilitator for the regional cooperation and a balanced state policy for the other states and an active and supportive role at SCO may bring a revolution in Iran's future plans for strategic and economic revival of the country.



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