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## INVESTIGATING THE IMPACTS OF IRAN'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE THEORY OF NEO-LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Amir Mohsen BAKHSHAYESH ARDESTANI

Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran.

### ABSTRACT

*Regional unions and coalitions are created in a situation where the formations of power in the international politics are brought about by some changes, the political and international orientation of the countries are transformed and new goals are created in the political, economic and security priorities of the countries. Under the new conditions that Iran has in its international isolation, having the capacity for the regional cooperation is indispensable. For the first time since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's participation and demand for membership in the Shanghai Organization as a security organization was a turning point in Iran's presence and participation in the multilateral security agreements and treaties, or more robust security alliances with the other blocs of global power; so regarding the specific circumstances of Iran's foreign policy and the America's unilateralism, it puts a major positive psychological burden on Iran's interests. Therefore, due to the importance of the SCO for the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the present research's main question was whether Iran's admission as an observer-member of the SCO could increase national security of the country from the point of view of regional cooperation. The initial and temporary answer to this question was that, due to the presence of the United States in its first security orbit, it aimed at creating homogeneous and targeted actions in the framework of regional cooperation to increase national security and balance its regional and international relations, so the Islamic Republic of Iran was in need of some mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Observer, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Regional Cooperation, National Security.*

### INTRODUCTION

As the history shows, in the face of permanent confrontation with foreign armies from the west and south, an Iranian government is seeking technology and security from the north and east of the country. In 649, during the Sassanid era, Yazdgerd III, after centuries of confrontation with the Byzantine empires, looked at Central Asia to strengthen his country, and his sons sought the help of the Chinese military units to protect the security of their territories. It is now in 2018, that the Islamic Republic is facing a determined attempt by the Western powers (stimulated by the United States) to limit its nuclear-technological development capacity. Apparently, under the constant threat of an imminent assault of the president of the United States, who views Iran as the most important ideological challenge, the Islamic Republic again views the East (China and Russia), where an intergovernmental regional organization is being formed and this can free Iran from the threat of the West forever. The organization is Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which quickly became a potentially powerful regional security

organization within eight years after 2001. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a multilateral group initially comprised of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It was founded in 2001 and enlarged in 2017 to include India and Pakistan<sup>15</sup>. The two main pillars of the organization are Russia and China as always powerful countries. Central Asian republics after the Soviet Union (with the exception of Turkmenistan) are its full members and a number of countries around them (including Iran, which was warmly welcomed at the 2005 summit and seems to become in a foreseeable future its full member) are the observers of this organization. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of the ideological quarrels of the past few centuries in the international community, especially Europe, the geopolitics and regionalism have regained their real status in the international system. Prior to the doctrine being developed, the term 'international' was invented by the liberal philosopher and pamphleteer Jeremy Bentham<sup>13</sup>. This new word was designed to capture the body of legal rules needed to promote peace and equality. Political geography and regionalism were an important and precise factor for future global blocking and demarcating borders, and the extremist ideologies of the great powers replaced the national and regional interests of the countries. Countries have gone out of the umbrella of the ideologies of the great powers, and each called for planning and activities in accordance with their regional and national goals and interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception in this regard. The decision to join the organization is considered one of the most important foreign policy decisions of Iran since the Islamic Revolution. The organization could be an important component of the redefinition and expansion of strategic alliances, which is the culmination of the end of the post-Cold War monopolar era. Therefore, in this research, the impact of Iran's acceptance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer (in the future as a permanent member) and as an independent variable on the future of Iran's national security as a dependent variable has been examined. It is hoped that by doing this research, a small step could be taken to address the uncertainties in the minds of scholars and to better explain the issue.

### ***Neoliberal institutionalism***

Neoliberal institutionalism emerged from the two theories of interdependence and the theory of international regimes, and gained credibility in the mid-1980s as a coherent theoretical school. The main question of neo-liberal institutionalism is how "institutions affect the stimuli for governments." (Tritriev et al., 2004) Fundamentally, the neo-liberal institutionalists assume the government as representing society, and some of them consider the state of the other actors to be state-dependent. They also recognize the structural situation of the lack of central authority in the international system, but in their view, the lack of central authority does not mean the inability of cooperation between the states, but the increasing international regimes confirm this. Neo-liberal institutionalism believes that the convergence is increasing at the regional and global levels. Also, based on this approach, the states tend to develop their cooperation with others, even if they feel that another state benefits from this interaction and cooperation.

The basic belief of neo-liberal institutionalism is that the states are atomistic actors who have tried to maximize their individual absolute achievements and are indifferent to the achievements of others. Rationality also means the existence of "systematic integrated



preferences", the power of "calculating profit and loss" and attempting to maximize profits. With increasing gains, the states will benefit more. So if the cooperation makes a more profit, we have to make it. Theoreticians of neo-liberal institutionalism believe that the importance of relative achievements is determined by at least two factors:

- The first is the number of major actors in the system. In the situations where only two states have conflicting interests, the relative profit is very important and the cooperation is very difficult. But in the situations where some small states are equally divided, the states will not be concerned about their relative profits because they have more opportunities to form coalitions in order to protect themselves.
- The second factor is whether or not military affairs are overcome by the assault; when there is little prospect of solving disputes by relying on military force (that is, when defense over attack is over, and thus the danger of war is small) the considerations of relative earnings will not matter much, because the relative profit will not become more military superiority, and therefore, the easier cooperation will take shape (Tritriev et al., 2004).

As a result, for neo-liberal institutionalists, the absolute interests are more important than relative interests. The important thing is not what others are getting, but what matters is the achievement of that country. Neo-liberal institutionalists find the greatest obstacle to cooperation among rational and self-governing states to be the issue of other states' fraud, and believe that the international institutions can overcome this barrier. They say that institutions, in a number of ways, reduce the concerns about the violating of the co-operation and fraud of other states:

- First, the rules increase the volume of information available to the states that are collaborating, making it easier to monitor others' actions, enabling them to take the protective or precautionary measures beforehand (Tritriev et al., 2004).
- Second, the rules usually add to the number of interactions. This institutional repetition will increase the future profit that loses a potential deceptive if it is touched, eliminating cases of abuse, and reducing fear of getting into trouble. Moreover, the repeating interactions reward the states that honestly adhere to agreements and gain reputation, and punish the states that are not so.
- Third, the institutional rules facilitate the interconnection of interactions between states in various fields and reinforce interdependence.
- Finally, the institutions can reduce the cost of interactions in the agreements; that is, if the states provide means to prevent members from violating, less time and effort will be spent on negotiating and monitoring agreements, thereby reducing the cost of co-operation and increasing its benefits (Tritriev et al., 2004).

### *The institutionalist security and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

Since the present research examined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its effects on Iran's national security, and given the values that govern the political structure of the actors in this region, the theory of neo-liberal institutionalism has been considered as the basis of



explanation of the hypothesis. Neoliberal institutionalism emerged from the two theories of interdependence and the theory of international regimes and gained credibility in the mid-1980s as a coherent theoretical school.

- The assumption of the institutionalist security approach (neo-liberal institutionalism) is the chaos in the international system, the actions of states in their own interests, the continuation of insecurity, the existence of the principle of rationality in the behavior of states, the pursuit of absolute profit in the competitive environment by the states and the states not only as the key actors, but also as the principles that the member states of the SCO believe in and dominate the behavior between them. The essence of this approach was that the international institutions and regimes are effective in managing insecurity and preventing war. The neo-liberal institutionalists believe that the role of regional and international institutions and organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in helping to maintain the stability and security of the countries is more than the level that the structural realists (neo-realists) accept, so the membership in these organizations is not just for pursuing some limited and low level of benefits.
- At this historic stage, the security is more a matter of "insecurity management", it does not refer to the security-related positive policies, because in the international relations, there is a kind of insecurity. Its obvious case can be seen in the discussion of the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons. In the insecurity management, it is tried to control the insecurity. It is not possible to do such an important job in the form of single-state policies, but also there are these transnational organizations and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which should provide security for the states through the provision of cooperation, and help manage the insecurity (Eftekhari, 2002).
- One of the main goals of the members of the SCO, especially Russia and China, is to confront America's unilateralism in line with a multipolar world. From the point of view of neoliberal institutionalists, what urges states to follow the process of "balance of power" is, in fact, an excellent goal for creating and maintaining their own security. The balance of power helps to establish stability and security within the system by preventing the creation of a hegemony or safeguarding the status quo. The SCO has the capacity to use all of the above methods. Neoliberal institutionalists argue that the institutionalism is the most effective method of balancing powers in order to increase the security factor, to safeguard national sovereignty, and generally to manage insecurity. The reason for the emphasis on this new mechanism is that the security analysts have understood their "content weakness" by contemplating traditional methods. In the sense that there is a kind of "insecurity" within the prior methods, so they should wait for new insecurities in the future, even if used successfully. For example, we can refer to the method of warfare, which is one of the fastest ways to reach the security of strong states. Nowadays, "the unreliability" of the war has been proven to many analysts. In this sense, the winner of the ongoing battleground is threatened by long-term outcomes of the war, and so victory in the war has two totally opposite meanings: greater current safety, future threats and insecurity. In order to



understand this kind of insecurity, it is enough to go back to history and see how the "conquerors" have been threatened and challenged by the defeated states seeking to compensate for their defeat; or how the conquerors have been called into a new war by other states that have watched their victory and feared that they are attacked by them in the future (Eftekhari, 2002). In short, the use of "force" today is not simple as the previous ages and leads to a "higher risk". A similar claim applies to other methods.

These considerations in general, lead us to the idea of a balance of powers based on the central role of institutionalism as the most efficient behavioral pattern for ensuring security in the global age. Of these institutions and organizations in a regional sense, one can refer to NATO and in the future, the SCO and in the international level, the United Nations.

#### *Developments, goals and strategies in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

In recent decades, the political observers have witnessed major changes in the political, security and economic system on the international scene. Complex study of legal issues in international tenders is available. Part of the problem of determining relations with transnational corporations are represented in the economics<sup>14</sup>. One of the most important of these changes is the emergence of regional convergence as an independent international element. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be defined in this framework. In the years since its establishment, the organization has gained considerable expansion both in terms of activities and in terms of structure. In order to provide a more accurate picture of the developments of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the most important changes of the organization from the beginning till now can be mentioned.

Since the 1990s, Chinese policies on multilateral security have indicated greater acceptance of the need for regional-level problem solving. This view supports Russia's concerns about maintaining security in its 'near abroad', especially among the still-fragile states in Central Asia<sup>16</sup>. The Shanghai Group Five was formed on April 26, 1996. At that time, the top five nations of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Shanghai, China. This gathering was considered the first meeting of the Shanghai Group Five (Fritsche, 1996). The leaders of the Shanghai Group Five member states held a meeting each year between 1996 and 2001.

Uzbekistan became the sixth member of the group in 2001, announcing the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the basis of the agreements reached at the last sessions. The statement emphasized on the establishment of the SCO that has been done simultaneously through the promotion of the process of multipolarity and the democratization of international relations. In this way, on the fifth year of its birth, the group became a multilateral regional organization. The Shanghai Convention on Combating International Terrorism, separatism and extremism has also been signed (Lukin and Macholsky, 2005).

At the Sixth session in Shanghai on June 14 and 15, 2001, the discussions were held on the existing structure and development, important regional and international issues and economic and security cooperation, and some important documents were signed. One of the most important signed documents, was the agreement on the fight against international terrorism, religious extremism and the trafficking of drugs and weapons. In the session, Uzbekistan was approved by the agreement of the five countries as the sixth member of the Shanghai Forum



Five. The relative performance and success of the Shanghai Contract Five have led it to become a regional organization and the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was officially announced in 2001. At this stage, security issues in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were of great importance, so that some considered it as a security organization. Security organizations are often formed and based on the definition of a common threat, but this concept does not fully apply to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In an interview after the 2001 session, Putin announced that the slogan of the new organization is "Security through partnership". The researchers of the study tried to solve security issues in this framework. It is hoped that with the development of cooperation in the region in the cultural, educational, scientific and economic fields, conditions could be created that could affect security issues (Lukin and Macholsky, 2005).

Following the September 11 incident and the US invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the concern about the proliferation of elements of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Central Asia, the importance of this region increased for the West, especially the United States; taking advantage of the opportunity, this country embarked upon consolidating its presence and the creation of military bases. The member states of the Shanghai Organization also worried about the situation, so these developments became the main topic of discussion among the members of the organization at several meetings. But it's important to note that the view of the Shanghai organization on extremism and terrorism was fundamentally different from the United States' view on this issue; it is why this common concern did not cause joint approaches by the organization and the United States even at the height of the struggle with terrorism. While the United States viewed the issue of Islamism as the most important threat to liberal democracy's hegemony, it placed this as a pretext for achieving its hegemonic goals through the establishment of a link between terrorism and the Islamism, the member states of the Shanghai Organization regarded the issue of terrorism or the extreme Islamist movement solely from the point of view of domestic security.

Although members of the Shanghai organization at most of the meetings of the organization have focused on the regional issues, the presence of the two major powers of China and Russia does not allow the organization to remain at the regional level. For this reason, the transnational statements of the leaders of China and Russia on the sidelines of the meetings of the organization are often taken into account as the organization's informal positions. Of course, it is undeniable that Shanghai organization is gradually being turned from a regional organization to an intergovernmental organization, whether it is voluntarily or unwittingly. This is approved by the eight-page statement published by the Chinese and Russian leaders, before the Organization Session in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, which strongly criticized the unilateral efforts of the United States to manage international crises. The Shanghai Session in July 2005 requested the United States to schedule a departure from Central Asian military bases. According to this request, US forces left Uzbekistan Khanabad military base at the end of 2005. Western media saw this change as a new power in the region (Zhao, 2002). In order to strengthen and expand the organization's activities, the three countries of Iran, India and Pakistan were admitted as observers. The acceptance of the membership of the three countries of Iran, India and Pakistan as observers in the Shanghai Organization enhanced greatly, from the point of view of regional cooperation, the capabilities and competences of this



organization. These developments reveal the start of the Shanghai International Organization's future engagement.

### *National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

At a Glance, the national components of the Islamic Republic can be examined at three levels of national, regional, and global. Some of these components have been mentioned in the following.

#### - *National level*

- The political dimension includes the safeguarding of: nationality, republicanism, Islam, system legitimacy, national cohesion and unity, political capacity, political independence and national sovereignty, constitution, territorial integrity, etc.
- Economic dimension includes: achieving economic self-sufficiency, promoting balanced and indigenous development, meeting basic needs, reducing poverty and class distances, improving welfare and public services, enhancing technical capabilities, increasing investment security, creating employment, etc.
- Social dimension includes: promoting social justice and reducing discrimination, strengthening solidarity, strengthening people's hopes for their future, society and the system, promoting the level of health and the physical and mental health of the society, strengthening the sense of belonging to the society etc.
- Cultural dimension includes: safeguarding national and religious identity, promoting national and Islamic patterns in society, strengthening the culture of legality and civil participation, protecting genuine cultural values and norms, confronting hunger and invasion of Western culture, strengthening the foundations of society's beliefs, coping with atheism propagation, secularism, sectarianism and strengthening the bond between the younger generation and the national and Islamic culture (Zhao, 2002).

#### - *Regional level*

- Achieving a desirable position in the regional equations, the establishment of a comprehensive collective security system, without interference to the trans-regional factors in order to secure, maintain and enhance security in the region.
- Increase in strategic depth.
- Organizing a peaceful relationship based on cooperation with neighbors and other countries in the region.
- Maintaining and expanding the political reputation and credibility of the country among the region's nations. Promoting the values and ideals of the system in the societies of the region.
- Resolving the Middle East crisis with an initiative based on the guarantee of the legitimate rights of all the Palestinian people.

#### - *International level*

- Strengthening the religion of Islam and Shiism in the world.
- Supporting the oppressed and deprived nations of the world, especially Muslims.



- Expansion of Iran's relations with the countries and the most influential political and economic centers of the world.
- Expanding international cooperation and international obligations through active participation in the international organizations and associations such as the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.
- Correcting and enhancing the international image of Iran and trying to provide a successful image of the Islamic Republic.
- Defending global power distribution and strengthening the multipolar world.

Also, the most important issues that have been considered in recent years in the national security index are:

- The occurrence of war in the neighboring East and West, how to engage with post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq, and the development of US and Israeli influence in neighboring countries.
- Efforts to achieve peaceful nuclear energy technology.
- Differences of border rights with neighboring countries (Triple Islands, Caspian Sea, Arvand River and Hirmand).
- Psychological and propaganda war against Iran with charges such as supporting international terrorism, violating democracy and human rights, seeking the weapons of mass destruction and interfering in the affairs of neighbors ...
- Formation and strengthening of military and security unions in the region on the initiative of the United States and the Zionist regime, such as the Caucasus security arrangements (Zhao, 2002).

### *The status of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Islamic Republic of Iran's national security relations*

- *Understanding the nature of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Iran, as an observer member seeking full membership in the organization, naturally seeks to better manage its benefits using this tool, while reducing its vulnerability. Obviously, in this way, recognizing the organization and matching the needs and desires with the goals and missions of the organization is very important. The factors that affect this are:

#### *- Setting aside the Cold War mentality*

The most important thing to know about the organization, its goals and principles, as well as speculation about its future that must be taken into account, is to leave the Cold War mentality. This mentality has a strong tendency to analyze relations between countries on the basis of conflict and contradiction. Within the framework of this mentality, when the countries engage in close cooperation, such as the formation of organizations or the development of strategic relations, they will certainly seek to form a pole, block or military alliance against a number of other countries. Despite the passing of years since the end of the Cold War, the transformation of the international system and, consequently, the creation of major changes in international security, some are still used to analyze the international order and its processes based on the

past pattern. The era of this mentality is running out. For this reason, after September 11<sup>th</sup> incident that the United States attempted to use its Cold War instruments for its own purposes, it was faced with a sharp reaction from the world's public opinion and many powers.

This mentality has deep roots in Iran and among intellectuals especially as a tool. Looking at the Shanghai organization from this perspective is one of the manifestations of this mentality. Meanwhile, the transformation of international order has made the countries' relations to enter into a complex phase of "co-operation and competition from the "alliance with one and opposition to the other" in the Cold War period." The example of this situation can be seen in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which means that in spite of close cooperation between China and Russia, the two compete in some areas, including influence in Central Asia. On the other hand, despite the intense competition between China and India and their extensive efforts to become Asia's top power, China agrees with the presence of India in this organization. Therefore, the correction of the "cold war mentality" is essential in pursuing the goals of Iran in this organization (Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2005).

- *The necessity of coalition*

States, as the main actors in the international scene, have commonalities, differences and conflicts in their own interests. This has led countries to gradually shift towards coalitions and has led institutions to benefit from commonalities and overcome conflicts. The examples of these coalitions are increasing in different parts of the world. Institutions such as the European Union and NATO have already been able to define common areas for cooperation and take substantive steps towards their goals, despite differences of opinion and rivalries.

From this perspective, Asia suffers from some kind of backwardness, because in spite of the existence of a large population, the huge potential and common interests of its actors on the one hand, and disputes, conflicts and historical rivalries on the other hand, has weakened the formation of institutions in it. With the knowledge of this weakness, Asian countries have begun their movement towards the formation of institutions; ASEAN and Shanghai are two instances of this movement, including many actors in the east and west of this continent. Based on this, the understanding of Shanghai's political position and capabilities in the form of a symbol for "better management of interests and conflict resolution" is closer to the reality of the organization and its goals. By looking at the SCO from the viewpoint of political institution for better management of interests and conflict resolution, as well as using its existing economic potential, Iran can make it an instrument for stabilizing its security environment (Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2005).

- *Reasons of the importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

✓ *Islamic Republic of Iran and American Unilateralism*

America's aim and motive in combating terrorism, countering the countries of the axis of evil, preventing ruthless proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as combating political Islamism and preserving Israel's security have made possible the US military action against Iran. This encounter has begun by the United States through the process of proposing the Islamic Republic of Iran as a security risk; (proposing as a Security Risk is a process in which the security actor defines a subject that embraces existential threats and involves strategies,



tools, and common political practices that cannot be managed and eliminated). Hence, accusing the Islamic Republic of protecting terrorism, producing nuclear weapons, disrupting the Middle East peace process and violating human rights is part of proposing Iran as security risk by the United States (Benjamin Barber, 2003).

- *Iran and America; ideological opposition*

It should be acknowledged that much of the disagreement between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is an ideological challenge that results from the ideologies legitimating the states and their political systems, namely political liberalism and political Islam. The characteristics of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, not only at the domestic level, have led to enormous changes, but also at the regional and global levels, had great implications for the international system. Like any other ideological revolution, the Islamic revolution sought to change the traditional order and establish a new order. Revolutionary orientations in domestic politics, including the complete transformation of domestic economic, political, and cultural systems, and attempts to formulate new directions in the field of foreign policy, including the theory of the issuance of revolution, the policy of not eastern, not western, Islamic republic, which are mainly based on changing the status quo and the presentation of a new model changed the species and the nature of Iran-US relations. As a result, Iran became one of the most important enemy of the West and the United States in the region (Barzegar, 2006).

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the advent of political Islam, the United States, as the leader of liberalism, tried to undermine and eliminate political Islam, which threatened the interests of the ideology of liberalism. According to the United States, first, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the origin of revolutionary Islam, or in their interpretation, fundamentalism and Islamic extremism. Second, because of opposition to the Middle East peace process and the defense of the Palestinian people, it supports groups and movements that they are terrorists. Third, US leaders and policymakers believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran is seeking weapons of mass destruction. In the fourth place, George W. Bush has placed the Islamic Republic of Iran as a devilish axis, which is a complete example of the rebellious governments. Finally, it should be said that the greater concern is the danger of accepting the Iranian model from the Central Asian republics and others Middle Eastern countries (Dehghani, 2004). Beyond the roots of the historic and ideological rivalry between Iran and the United States, the events of September 11, 2001 are a turning point in the continuation of hostile relations between the two countries, because for the first time a serious confrontation and an opposed definition of the direct threat of either side of each other has entered a critical phase. In the current conditions, the new dimensions of the conflict between Iran and the United States are based on an increasing struggle to increase the role and opportunity in various economic, political, security and cultural areas at the regional level. Among the countries of the Middle East region, Iran is undoubtedly of particular importance due to the inherent bases of power, its specific characteristics, its own system and its policies. These factors have made this country an important and influential actor on the regional level (Barzegar, 2006).

- *Iran and America; political challenges*

The spread and promotion of liberal democracy by the United States in the Middle East threatens and weakens Iran's political security in several ways and in several respects:



- First, the process of democratizing the region and defining liberal democracy as the only legitimate political system and a desirable regime of governance changes and destabilizes the organization, structure and institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Because, many of the Iranian government organizations and institutions that shape its political structure have a structural and institutional pattern distinct from the liberal democracy. Institutions such as Velayat-e Faqih, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, which the Western world especially the United States calls them "appointed institutions", are not matched with the liberal democracy. These institutions emerge from the Islamic ideology, not the political liberalism based on which liberal democracies are based (Dehghani, 2004).
- The second political consequence is the challenge, undermining and threatening the political ideology of legitimizing the Islamic Republic system, namely political Islam. Islam means a set of ideas about social political order and practice and how they are implemented in the realm of social life; it shapes the identity and essence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and guarantees its legitimacy. The political assumptions of Islam in the context of the social political behavior and system are different from the intellectual and political system of liberalism and do not correspond to each other. In addition, one of the most important US goals in the region is the fight against Islamism.
- The third consequence of the political security of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be the existential threat of the principle of the political system through destabilization, making it illegitimate and ineffective. Since the ineffectiveness reduces the legitimacy of the institutions and political ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran and gradually decreases its legitimacy and acceptability, so the necessary preconditions for its replacement with the political system of liberal democracy are provided. In the opinion of the United States, the tip of political Islamism is against this country and its inspiration in the region is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which will also be destroyed by the transformation, change or collapse of those threats. In this battle, the purpose is to weaken and destroy Islamic ideology through its ineffective demonstration in the political and economic life of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, with the failure of political Islam, the ground for its replacement with the ideology of political economic liberalism is provided (Dehghani, 2004).



- *Iran and America; nuclear program*

Iran's nuclear program has generated widespread concern that Tehran is pursuing nuclear weapons. Tehran's construction of gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facilities has been the main source of proliferation concern<sup>12</sup>. From the perspective of the United States, Iran's nuclear program is a serious threat to international peace and security, and therefore the United States exerts all its efforts, whether through international pressure or through military threats, to dissuade Iran from pursuing its peaceful nuclear program. The American argument is that, in the first place, Iran is not in line with the international system's policies, and thus Iran's increasing power can threaten global peace and security. Secondly, a nuclear Iran pulls the trigger of nuclear rivalry in the region, and thus the whole region enters an arms race that does not benefit the regional security system. Thirdly, the nuclear program of Iran represents a

threat to Israel as a strategic alliance of the United States and disturbs the balance of power across the region (Barzegar, 2006).

✓ *The Geopolitical Importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for the Islamic Republic of Iran*

➤ *Iran as an important actress in Central Asia*

With the start of the 21st century, especially after the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, another great game has started in the Central Asian region. In the new game, there are three main actors (America, Russia and China) and few major actors (countries of Central Asia, Turkey, Iran and even European countries) attend appropriately to the conditions ahead that they should determine their friends or enemies. Russia and China, with their membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, have expressed their tendency to bring their own aspirations towards Central Asia closer together. The United States has also taken part in the military opportunity in the region after the 9/11 events. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided a new vital space on the north for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Membership in the important regional arrangements on the north, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, will provide a more diverse range of power rings for the Islamic Republic of Iran and will make it possible to play as an important regional actor (Vaezi, 2006).

➤ *Security node*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, another ring was added to the regional interconnected circles of Iran. Since then, Iran (at least in its northern part) has been affected by the issues, concerns and conflicts of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Also, any model of bilateral or multilateral security cooperation between Central Asian countries or some of them with other major or peripheral or trans-regional powers will affect the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some regional security theories consider the condition of the stability of regional institutions, especially in the field of security, to be the presence of all the great powers in the region, and their tendency to the stability of that institution. Now, if we assume that Iran's security at least in the northern part is geographically tied to the security of Central Asia, then the SCO is the most appropriate regional institution, in which Russia and China have been placed as the great powers of the region, with the theory. Therefore, Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization reduces the volume of regional threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran (Vaezi, 2006).

➤ *Geopolitical requirements*

Iran's attention to the north is an inevitable process of the conditions arising from the collapse of the Soviet Union. This consideration should be defined within the framework of its geopolitical requirements. Iran is now neighboring with more countries in the north. The ethnic similarities of the tribal peoples on both sides of the region have created opportunities and threats that should be attended desirably. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will be effective in expanding opportunities and reducing threats at the geopolitical level. Also, Iran's geopolitical position has made it very attractive for the interlocking ring between Central Asia and Europe. Any regional framework that can facilitate this, can be considered in line with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The organization can also be considered in this context.



➤ *More use of geo-economic status of Iran*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the importance of geo-economic Iran (energy, transportation) has been increased to accelerate the integration of a number of Central Asian countries into the global capitalist system. The Islamic Republic of Iran is able to provide favorable opportunities for the Central Asian economy to transport goods and energy. To realize the benefits of this importance, the patterns of collective collaboration or similar patterns can be considered. The geo-economic capacities of the Islamic Republic of Iran are in line with the Shanghai Economic Cooperation Organization's outlook (creating a free trade area by 2020).

- *3.5. Changing the strategic position of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

- ✓ *Bargaining power towards the West*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, inevitably, the front line of the Western military strategy has moved from Iran to countries outside Russia. In the same vein, the strategy of NATO expansion to the east aims to control Russia and possibly China. In such a situation, gradually the quantity and quality of military cooperation between the countries of the region and the West will be increased, and their integration with the Western security system. The result of this situation is the decline of Iran's importance in the Western macro strategies. This will lead to a vacuum of security and in the future to a pressure on Iran over the regional powers (Adami, 2008, pp.124-124). Evidence suggests that the domestic conditions of our country do not have a low-risk digestive capacity for a quick and steady move toward the West, and the Western organizations are not, in principle, embracing the immediate adoption of the Islamic Republic of Iran within them. Now, if the Islamic Republic of Iran wants to improve its relations with the West in all circumstances, one of the measures is to approach the main regional powers in the form of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is an important tool for bargaining (Talebi Far, JafariPasquaybi and Shanghai, 2008).

- ✓ *A means of withdrawing internationally imposed isolation*

The urgency of the US threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran is directly linked to the fragility of the internal environment and the international isolation of Iran. Membership in the Shanghai Organization provides conditions that can significantly reduce Iran's international isolation.

- ✓ *Compliance with International Norms*

Contributing to regional cooperation in non-traditional security areas (such as terrorism, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and organized crimes) are in line with international norms. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is also seeking to enhance the security of its member states in the areas of international utility. The membership of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while reducing regional threats, has contributed to the volume of regional cooperation in the fields of Security (terrorism, drugs, arms smuggling, organized crimes) and economy (cross-border goods and energy); it will be fully in line with national (economic-political-cultural security) interests and increase its national strength.

- *Reducing the degree of vulnerability*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran is among the five conflicting geopolitical circles, including the Gulf rings in the south, Central Asia in the northeast, the Caucasus in the northwest, the Middle East in the west and South Asia in the east. The whole



ring, in the last decade, has been high or very high conflict point. For some of these conflicts there is no predictable end. Under these circumstances, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not bound by any supportive or overlapping security or regional security mechanisms in the peripheral and international threats of strategic, military, separatist nature. This has increased the degree of vulnerability of the Islamic Republic of Iran from peripheral and international threats. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will address some of these threats and will provide it with a degree of multilateral support and overlapping (Talebi Far, JafariPasquaybi and Shanghai, 2008).

### *Perspective of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Organization*

If we consider the membership of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at the strategic level to be positive, then realism requires that, at the beginning of the membership, the perspective of this cooperation be taken into account from the point of view of its capabilities, competences or limitations. Specifically, the Islamic Republic of Iran has two options in terms of the level of cooperation with the Shanghai organization:

- First, the continuation of the current observer and semi-active membership with the aim of knowing the organization's decisions and participating in areas that are likely to be in line with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Second, the effort to complete membership and presence in the organization with the aim of enhancing its regional and international role, in the field of regional economic cooperation and international political stances.<sup>1</sup>

The advantage of the first option is that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as an observer member, without committing to the implementation of all decisions of the organization or participating in all positions of the organization, can affect limitedly the decisions of the organization and may in some cases benefit from positions and collective actions.

Regarding Iran's second option in the organization, although it provides a new opportunity for Iran's political and economic activities and will increase the role of Iran in terms of promoting the role of the organization at the regional and international level, this will require the adoption of decisions and positions of the Organization. At the moment, there are still ambiguities about the organization's long-term and macro goals and orientations, and there is no definite definition for concepts such as dealing with extreme Islamism. Over the past years, given the position of Russia and China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the organization has largely focused on the objectives and intentions of the two countries. The Chinese may have a long look at the organization both from the perspective of both economic interests and security concerns (Vaezi, 2006). Therefore, the full membership of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has a significant degree of risk.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to investigate the effects of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the framework of the

<sup>1</sup>"Developments of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and membership of Iran", listed at: center.aspx / www.csr.ir.



theory of neo-liberal institutionalism, the current research was conducted and the following cases were deduced:

- It should be acknowledged that much of the disagreement between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is an ideological challenge that arises from the ideology legitimating the states and their political systems, namely political liberalism and political Islam. According to the United States of America, first of all, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the origin of revolutionary Islam or, in their words, fundamentalism and Islamic extremism. Second, because of the opposition to the Middle East peace process and the defense of the Palestinian people, it supports groups and movements that, in the eyes of the United States, are terrorists. Third, US leaders and policymakers believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran is seeking the weapons of mass destruction. In the fourth place, George W. Bush has placed the Islamic Republic of Iran as a devilish axis, which is a complete example of the rebellious governments. Finally, it should be said that the greater concern is the danger of accepting the Iranian model by the Central Asian republics and Middle Eastern other countries. This kind of US look at Iran has created a permanent threat of this country against Iran.
- From the outset of NATO's eastward expansion plan, Iran announced its concerns about the plan and listed NATO's Peace Partnership as a colonial plan for US-led Western domination. The expansion of NATO into the East, as one of the means of American hegemony by bringing many of the neighboring countries of Iran into its spheres of influence, has led to a more political and especially economic isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran due to Iran's economic and financial sanctions by Western powers, especially the United States.
- Part of the threats to the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran is due to the dangers of separatism, extremism and terrorism. Currently, due to the domestic problems and the weakening and political collapse of the neighboring countries of Iran, this threat is more serious than past, examples of which are the crisis in Afghanistan and Iraq and its costs for Iran.



Given the overlapping threats and security interests of the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iran's cooperation with this organization could lead to the following results for the national security of our country:

- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is based on the principle of respect for the sovereignty of the countries and the regimes governing them. Relying on this principle constitutes the essential principle of survival for Iran.
- Determining the deadline for the withdrawal of American troops and the dismantling of US military bases in the Central Asian regions and the northern border of Iran has always been a concern and serious security concern of the country during the years after the collapse of the country. From the Arctic to the Indian Ocean and from Kaliningrad to Shanghai, linking its concerns with the border and security challenges of these countries, this union can fulfill its security demand; as a result, the peace is restored to the borders, the political and security stability prevails in the region, and the interference and domination of aliens in the region is stopped.

- With the collapse of the Soviet Union, inevitably, the front line of the Western military strategy has moved from Iran to countries outside Russia. In the same vein, the strategy of NATO expansion to the east aims to control Russia and possibly China. In such a situation, gradually the quantity and quality of military cooperation between the countries of the region and the West will be increased, and their integration with the Western security system. The result of this situation is the decline of Iran's importance in the Western macro strategies. This will lead to a vacuum of security and in the future to a pressure on Iran over the regional powers (Adami, 2008, pp. 124-124). Evidence suggests that the domestic conditions of our country do not have a low-risk digestive capacity for a quick and steady move toward the West, and the Western organizations are not, in principle, embracing the immediate adoption of the Islamic Republic of Iran within them. Now, if the Islamic Republic of Iran wants to improve its relations with the West in all circumstances, one of the measures is to approach the main regional powers in the form of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is an important tool for bargaining.
- In addressing its external border security concerns and preventing Salafist extremists in the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran, by joining as an observer member of the organization, addresses many of the concerns of the international and regional community regarding Iran's role and activity in struggling with terrorism and increases its international prestige. On the other hand, the sharing of interests and strategic interests with this organization and its important support for the membership of the three countries of Iran, India and Pakistan indicate that the interests and objectives of these countries are closer regionally in confronting the rival forces' global challenges of the twenty-first century. Common security concerns and important concerns, including drug trafficking, separatism, extremism and terrorism, and border issues by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the three countries of India, Pakistan and Iran, indicate a consensus among these countries and the completion of convergence rings in the form of a large East Asian union as the military and security and, consequently, economic and political treaties; this makes the Union more effective in dealing with these factors disturbing security.
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran is among the five conflicting geopolitical circles, including the Gulf rings in the south, Central Asia in the northeast, the Caucasus in the northwest, the Middle East in the west and South Asia in the east. The whole ring, in the last decade, has been high or very high conflict point. For some of these conflicts there is no predictable end. Under these circumstances, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not bound by any supportive or overlapping security or regional security mechanisms in the peripheral and international threats of strategic, military, separatist nature. This has increased the degree of vulnerability of the Islamic Republic of Iran from peripheral and international threats. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will address some of these threats and will provide it with a degree of multilateral support and overlapping.
- Using its rich gas and oil resources and possessing geopolitical and geo-economical positions, the Islamic Republic of Iran can benefit from the organization's plans in the



economic sphere, while meeting many of the needs and challenges of foreign investment, increase the exports and strengthen the country's economic growth. Given that Iran has been pressured to attract foreign investment, especially in the energy sector, for various reasons, one of which is US sanctions against foreign investors in Iran, it seems that joining such an organization in the short-term and long-term will remove some major economic concerns of Iran.

- With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the importance of Iran's geo-economic potential (energy, transportation) has been added especially by accelerating the integration of a number of Central Asian countries into the global capitalist system. The Islamic Republic of Iran is able to provide favorable opportunities for the Central Asian economy to transport goods and energy. To realize the benefits of this importance, the patterns of collective collaboration or similar patterns can be considered. The geo-economic capacities of the Islamic Republic of Iran are in line with the Shanghai Economic Cooperation Organization's outlook (creating a free trade area by 2020).
- Joint regional investments, mutual economic cooperation, establishment of necessary legal regulations and facilities for the trade exchange of these countries, establishment of the appropriate financial and commercial mechanisms in the transportation, energy etc. are some programs of the organization to develop and strengthen the economic infrastructures of the member states; this is a prerequisite for the all-encompassing development of Iran in the coming years.

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