



## A Study on Possibilities and Potentials for SCO Expansion: Iran and Afghanistan

Dr. D. Chandramouli Reddy

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Political Science & Public Administration  
Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuramu, Andhra Pradesh

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**Abstract:** *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has grown in stature and influence in the security landscape of Asia since it was founded in 2001. Moreover, a fifth of the global population lives inside the borders of its six member nations. Its founding members, Russia and China, both have permanent seats on "the UN Security Council." Neither the Forum nor its members are part of any military or political alliance directed towards any other country or region. Over the last decade, its efforts to confront separatism, extremism, and terrorism have grown to encompass military collaboration, information sharing, and counterterrorism training. The Organization's focus in recent years has broadened to include economic concerns, particularly energy security, which is crucial to its members and to the whole area. The accession to full membership of the five observer countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Mongolia, and Iran) has the potential to transform the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from a regional organization into a global one. The present paper focused on SCO expansion and the possibilities of Iran and Afghanistan's chances through the prism of a realistic approach.*

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**Keywords:** *Diplomacy, Economical, Political, Regional Cooperation, Security.*

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### Introduction:

In the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's annals, the summit in Astana in 2017 will go down as a watershed event. At this summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) decided to expand its membership and invite the "Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" to join as permanent members. Because this is the first time in the Organization's history that its membership has been increased, the entrance of the two South Asian countries to the SCO is a momentous occasion that will go down in the annals of SCO history. This expansion has "the potential to make a significant contribution" to the Organization's raising of both its stature and its profile. Likely, this current expansion of the SCO will not be the last. Countries like Iran and Afghanistan, interested in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, have brought up the prospect of the Organization's expansion into the Persian Gulf region.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) now encompasses over 80 per cent of "Eurasia's territory. 44 per cent of the world's population and 24 per cent of the global GDP" thanks to the addition of India and Pakistan. The inclusion of Iran and Afghanistan would have no other effect than inflate these statistics, particularly because the Iranian economy is predominately dependent on oil. If this were to take place, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would become an organization with one of the largest territories, populations, and GDPs. This would unquestionably elevate the SCO's status as a key player in the global arena.

### What exactly is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?

The initial "members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. This organization is a permanent international organization. On June 15, 2001, in Shanghai, its foundation was announced. The Organization's Charter was signed in 2002 and went into effect in 2003. The Shanghai mechanism came before the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Its members were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Shanghai Five was established to enhance confidence building and disarmament in the border regions of the member countries."<sup>[2]</sup> Both the "Treaty on Deepening Military Trusts in Border Regions and the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Region" were signed in 1996 and 1997. The focus of these gatherings shifted from border protection to fostering cooperative relationships among members in "the political, economic, security, and other spheres." When the leaders of state of the members got together once a year, they started talking about more and more things. After Uzbekistan joined in 2001, the Shanghai Five eventually morphed into the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) now has



eight members after granting membership to India and Pakistan. Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia are the four states that hold observer status. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey, and Sri Lanka” are the organizations with which the group chooses to engage in dialogue.

According to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) Charter, “the organization's main goals are to foster effective cooperation among its member states in the areas of trade, politics, the economy, research, and technology, as well as in the fields of energy, transportation, tourism, and the environment, and to protect the environment.”<sup>[3]</sup> Coordination of efforts to preserve and ensure peace, security, and stability in the area, as well as advancements toward constructing a democratic, egalitarian system, are also among the SCO's key priorities. A global economic and political system based on reason and International organization based on the ideals of the Shanghai Five, often known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are also its goals. Its internal policy is based on the following principles: mutual trust and benefit; equality; mutual discussions; tolerance for cultural variety; and a shared ambition for growth. The Organization bases its foreign policy decisions on the three pillars of non-targeting, non-alignment, and openness. In order to carry out the purposes and objectives set forth in the Charter, the SCO has organized working bodies that are part of the organization. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's highest body is the Council of Heads of State, who are responsible for setting the SCO's agenda and outlining the SCO's main objectives. The SCO Heads of Government Council is in charge of setting the Organization's cooperation strategy and priority areas, as well as approving the yearly budget. On an annual basis, these groups convene for meetings. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization also hosts meetings for foreign ministers, agency chiefs, and national coordinators (SCO).<sup>[4]</sup>

The Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure are considered permanent bodies inside the SCO (RATS). The Secretariat's headquarters is in Beijing, and the Secretary-General serves as its leader. It is responsible for providing informational, analytical, legal, organizational, and technical support, in addition to coordinating the actions of the SCO. RATS were established to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Its headquarters are located in Bishkek, the capital city of Uzbekistan. In addition to governmental agencies, the SCO also consists of non-governmental organizations such as the SCO Business Council and the SCO Interbank Consortium. Both Russian and Chinese are recognized as official languages within the Organization.

#### **The Process That Is Followed When New Members Are Accepted Into the SCO:**

In Article 13 of the SCO Charter, there is a section that discusses membership in the SCO. According to the Charter, participation in the organization would be available to countries from the Euro-Asian region that expressed interest in doing so. They must agree that they will abide by the SCO Charter's aims and principles and the international treaties and documents that the organization has approved. It is essential for countries interested in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to maintain diplomatic ties with all its members and achieve the status of observer or conversation partner inside the organization. An interesting nation must “maintain active trade, economic, and humanitarian relations” with members of the Organization to meet the requirements to become a member. “Additionally, an interesting nation's international security commitments must align with relevant international treaties and instruments adopted by the Organization.”<sup>[5]</sup> Any country hoping to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) must first demonstrate that it is not currently engaged in any armed conflict with any other state, has not been subject to any sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, and is fully committed to the principles and values enshrined in the UN Charter.

The SCO Council of Heads of State (CHS) and Government shall be formally petitioned for membership. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Foreign Ministers' Council would then be notified of this request. Following endorsement by the CMFA, the document would be sent to the CNC and the Secretariat. With assistance from the Secretariat, the CNC would compose an opinion indicating the degree to which the prospective state satisfies the membership requirements, which would then be sent to the CMFA for consideration. The CMFA's decision will determine whether or not the admissions process can begin after the application has been submitted.

The Applications of Iran and Afghanistan for Membership were made. In 2005, Iran joined India and Pakistan in becoming an observer of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It applied for full membership in 2008, but this was not approved because one of the requirements for joining the Organization is that the country in question must not be subject to any sanctions imposed by the United Nations. Iran was not qualified for membership since it was subject to sanctions from the United Nations. As a result of the conclusion of the Iran Nuclear deal, which was signed between Iran and the P5+1 countries (the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France, Russia, and China, in addition to Germany), the sanctions that were imposed on Iran have been lifted. As a result, Iran is now eligible for membership. Iran has publicly proclaimed its ambitions to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and it reapplied for full membership in 2015.<sup>[6]</sup>



At the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Beijing in 2012, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was given observer status. “Afghanistan submitted a formal application for permanent membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2015 at the SCO Summit in Ufa,” not long after receiving observer status in the organization. Afghanistan sits in a strategically important location, making it necessary to maintain peace in the surrounding areas. Afghanistan is attempting to become “a regional hub and economic roundabout through 'trade, transit, and investment' in the Heart of Asia. Office of the Chief Executive, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,” is being mired in armed conflicts. These efforts are being carried out with the assistance of neighboring nations and international allies and through various regional forums such as the Heart of Asia- Istanbul process, SCO, and RECCA. The country, however, remains mired. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of Governments Summit, H.E. Dr Abdullah made the statement as “Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah, met with SCO Secretary General Rashid Alimov on the margins of the SCO Summit in Sochi, Russia, and reiterated Afghanistan's commitment to becoming an active member of the organization. According to the Chief Executive, “regional cooperation and economic convergence” is the primary emphasis of Afghanistan's foreign and economic policy. The Chief Executive also emphasized that the active involvement of Afghanistan in the SCO would be a way to accomplish this aim.

### **Possibilities of Iran Gaining Membership in the Organization:**

The entrance of India and Pakistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017 made it possible for the Organization to grow even larger in the future. As a result of the fact that decisions inside the SCO are arrived at through the process of consensus, every nation that wants to join the SCO is required to receive the approval of each permanent member state.

The most significant backing for Iran's entry into the organization has come from Russia. Since the sanctions imposed on Iran were lifted, Russia has presented itself as the primary promoter of Iran's entrance to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, which led to Russia's isolation, Russia's support for Iran also has to do with Russia's emphasis on creating and maintaining regional ties. This has pushed Russia to assist Iran. Because of its isolation, Russia has been forced to strengthen multilateral organizations and cultivate relationships with major regional parties to respond effectively to the pressure placed on it by the West.

Even China which had previously rejected Iran's membership application, has come around and is now backing the country's inclusion in the club. The Chinese ambassador in Tehran, Pang Sen, has stated that Western media created the news of Chinese resistance to Iran's membership, which has also been reported in Iranian media. The Western media initially reported the news of Chinese opposition to Iran's membership. Due to China's meteoric rise, relations with the United States have become increasingly tense on many contentious issues. It seeks a multipolar international order to counterbalance the influence of the United States by expanding regional cooperation. The participation of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would unquestionably constitute a step in that direction. China is eager to leverage Iran's transportation network in favour of its Belt and Road Initiative, so maintaining positive relations with Iran would be to China's advantage. Even though Russia and China hold a majority of the voting power in the SCO, decisions are reached through consensus. To succeed, Iran would need to win the backing of the four Central Asian member countries.<sup>[8]</sup> According to the Russian news agency Tass, President Putin's special envoy to the SCO, Bakhtiyer Khakimov, has stated that even though Russia fully supports Iran's membership, some other partners have a different stance on the matter, and a consensus is needed to reach a decision. Bakhtiyer Khakimov “was quoted as saying this by the Russian news agency Tass. President Almazbek Atambaev of Kyrgyzstan has stated that his nation endorses Iran's candidacy for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCC), according to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The government in Bishkek backs Iran's bid to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.”

According to statements made by the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs during the SCO Ministerial Conference in 2017, Kazakhstan is also prepared to give its approval for Iran to become a member of the organization. During his meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on the sidelines of the first Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit on science and technology in Astana in September 2017, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated that Tashkent supports Iran's full membership application. Mirziyoyev also stated that Tashkent supports Iran's application for permanent membership.

Tajikistan appears to be the source of most resistance to Iran's participation. Iran and Tajikistan are the two countries in Central Asia that have the most things in common with one another. Both nations are of the Persian cultural and linguistic group and have traditionally had very steady contact with one another. The Islamic Revival Party's head, Muhiddin Kabiri, travelled to Tehran in December 2015 to participate in a meeting there, which resulted in a significant deterioration of relations between the



two countries. The Tajik government outlaws the Islamic Revival Party and Iran's decision to extend an invitation to the party's leader caused outrage in the Central Asian state. As a result, relations between Tajikistan and Iran have become increasingly strained in recent years. Before the plenary meeting of heads of state in 2017, Tajikistan is said to have stated that this was the reason for its resistance to Iran's entrance, and it seems likely that this was the case.

There is a low probability that Iran's eventual membership will be hampered in any way by the two new members, India and Pakistan. India and Iran have friendly relations, and the two countries collaborate on various initiatives, including constructing the Chabahar port. As a result of the three nations' participation in the North-South transit corridor, there has been a noticeable improvement in the economic ties between India, Iran, and Pakistan. Including Iran as a member of the SCO will be a significant step toward resolving the crisis in Afghanistan. Because every nation that shares a border with Afghanistan, except for Turkmenistan, and every nation that has interests in Afghanistan, is a member of the SCO, choices connected to solving the situation and coming to an agreement might potentially resolve the issue.<sup>[9]</sup>

Additionally, Iran would give the SCO access to the Middle Eastern market. On the other hand, this might also drag the Shanghai Cooperation Organization into the muck of wars in the Middle East. The tense nature of Iran's relations with both its Arab and non-Arab neighbors' presents a potential barrier to progress in this area. Iran has become embroiled in a wide variety of crises in the area and is currently playing a part in the wars that are taking place in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Other important regional actors, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, have been made uneasy due to this development. It could be considered disingenuous for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to welcome Iran into its ranks, given that non-intervention is one of its objectives. As a result of Iran's interference in the internal affairs of other states, it could potentially stir up hostility against the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The hostility between Iran and the United States may also cause problems for the members of the SCO. As a result of President Trump's statement that the United States will withdraw from the Iran Nuclear Deal, there is a good chance that hostilities will increase.

A certain level of lingering animosity already marks Russia and China's relationships with the United States. With the current bilateral tensions between the United States and China over North Korea, adding Iran as a member would put forward an intense anti-American front. Additionally, the relationship between the United States and Russia is at an all-time low and has not been this bad since the Cold War. This may not be acceptable to other organization members, such as some countries in Central Asia and India, who just joined the organization recently and whose connections with the United States have been gradually enhanced. Other powerful countries in West Asia are unlikely to welcome the possibility of Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Because Saudi Arabia also has a significant amount of influence in a number of the nations that make up Central Asia, the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia will play a part. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its relationship with Tajikistan due to the conflict between Iran and Tajikistan. It has forged tighter ties with Tajikistan by offering financial support and other forms of economic assistance at the expense of Iran, taking advantage of the economic fragility of Tajikistan and using this to its advantage.<sup>[10]</sup> As a result of the adoption of the consensus-based decision-making method, Iran will be required to make efforts to mend its strained relations with Tajikistan and to forestall any further progress made by that nation toward falling under the influence of its adversary.

Since the beginning, one of the organization's goals has been to accept Iran as a member. The vote to accept Iran into the organization permanently was unsuccessful. There was no discussion on the subject during either the Tashkent Summit in 2016 or the Astana Summit in 2017. Iran's entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would be advantageous for both Iran and the SCO, and the process of Iran's entry appears to be an imminent vent in the ongoing expansion of the SCO. Iran's request is being enthusiastically supported by the SCO's two most powerful members, Russia and China, despite objections from Tajikistan, a member of the SCO. Coercing countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel to rescue us from the negative fallouts of accepting Iran as a member can be one way to avoid the negative fallouts of admitting Iran as a member. The fact that India and Pakistan are now members of the SCO demonstrates that the SCO is not afraid to accept competitors among its ranks, even though the countries that are being listed are commonly regarded as traditional competitors.

#### **Opportunities for Afghanistan to Obtain Membership in the Organization:**

Because of its strategic location, Afghanistan has become an area of interest for major world powers who wish to establish their claim and demonstrate their influence in the surrounding region. Because of its location in what is commonly referred to as "the heart of Asia, the achievement of regional security and peace in the region depends greatly on having an



Afghanistan that is secure and peaceful and is not besieged by war.” Because of the presence of the Taliban and NATO forces commanded by the United States, Afghanistan has been plagued by conflict and bloodshed for quite some time. Afghanistan, despite the heavy fighting for a considerable amount of time now.<sup>[11]</sup> To maintain peace and order throughout the region, initiatives have been conceived to bring peace to the country in question. In 2011, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was established “as a framework for improving conversation and consensus to bring about regional collaboration for the future stability of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. This was one of the initiatives that were taken. During a meeting in Beijing in 2016, the National Security Advisor of Afghanistan, Mohammed Hanif Atmar, and China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, discussed Afghanistan's application for membership and China's support for Afghanistan's accession, which was announced shortly after Afghanistan submitted its application for membership.” In his speech at the Astana Summit in 2017, President Xi Jinping referred to China's assistance in Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process.

In December of 2017, "Rashid Alimov, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretary General," met with the President of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah, during the Sochi Summit. According to Rashid Alimov, Afghanistan is the "heart of Asia and the SCO," and he expressed his entire support for the country's permanent participation in the organization during their talk. Mr. Alimov has noted that for Afghanistan to expedite the admission process, the country must take advantage of the chance to join the contracts and agreements of the SCO, as well as organize cultural events and economic exhibitions in partnership with the members of the SCO. According to statements made by the Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Kabul in February 2017, “Afghanistan has also received full support from Kazakhstan. Astana believes that including Afghanistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would improve security in the country and the Central Asian region and boost regional commercial and transit relations. The support of Kazakhstan for Afghan membership would strengthen ties between the two countries.”<sup>[12]</sup>

As a result of the fact that every nation in the region is a member of “the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that initiatives to foster peace and stability in Afghanistan” must be carried out through international organizations. As a result, it is pleased to announce that Afghanistan has applied to become a permanent member of the organization because it feels that this would make achieving peace in Afghanistan more amenable to cooperation and communication.

It is impossible to deny Afghanistan's significant strategic relevance for the SCO's member states. Maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan is beneficial to maintaining peace and stability throughout the region. Except for Turkmenistan, most of the countries that Afghanistan shares borders with are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),” and Iran is also currently applying to join the organization. As a result, the spillover of the conflict in Afghanistan could have devastating effects on the countries adjacent to Afghanistan. From the very beginning of its existence, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has understood the significance of a secure Afghanistan. Beijing served as the location for the signing of the Protocol for establishing the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005. This agreement was made between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This contact group was established so that recommendations and suggestions could be developed about “the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. It would also help support Kabul with economically rehabilitating its war-torn economy and reconciliation within the country.” Both of these goals would be accomplished via the use of this plan. In October 2017, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was reactivated, following a hiatus that lasted over seven years, with “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation serving as the host.

Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, served as the delegation's leader. “Mr. Karzai reiterated his country's interest in becoming a permanent member of the SCO, and all members unanimously decided that the proposal would be considered.” The countries that make up the SCO place a premium on their relationship with Afghanistan. The country is still trying to recover from the effects of the conflict, which has made it a centre for terrorist activity, fanaticism, and the trafficking of illegal drugs. Its neighbors’ are extremely concerned about the possibility of terror spreading across their borders and into their territories. Giving Afghanistan permanent membership would go a long way toward achieving this goal and establishing positive relations with Afghanistan. It is necessary to gain a foothold to realize their efforts to combat terrorism. This would be necessary to gain a toehold. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization comprises states like China, Pakistan, and India that have vested interests in Afghanistan and are making significant financial contributions to the nation to reconstruct it following the devastation caused by the war. However, for the investments to be profitable, they must be successful in security.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has recently expanded its membership and is now an organization that is composed of huge economies that are expanding rapidly, such as China and India. “Afghanistan must become a part of this



grouping to enjoy the economic benefits of restoring its war-torn economy. The SCO will become the next economic hub, and Afghanistan must become a part of this grouping.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Increased military deployment and diplomatic and economic pressure on Pakistan have been essential tenets of President Donald Trump's "new Afghanistan strategy." Because it would pit the SCO against the United States, which has troops stationed there following a bilateral security arrangement, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has ruled out the idea of military intervention. Its dependence on Afghanistan, and the United States, makes its membership in the SCO more difficult. Despite this, “the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) still has a role to play, and Abdullah, the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, has asked the members of the SCO to use their influence and contacts with armed Afghan insurgents to encourage them to participate in discussions with in Afghanistan.”

Afghanistan's intention to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the expectation that doing so will assist the nation in its fight against terrorism indicates that it is dissatisfied with the United States' efforts in this area. Since the SCO nations are not making a significant military contribution by deploying soldiers to Afghanistan, this merely leaves the door open for the United States to justify its continued presence in Afghanistan to address the problem unfolding in the country. Again, this is a hindrance to the goal that China and Russia have set for themselves, which is to eliminate the influence and presence of the United States in the region that China and Russia regard as their sphere of influence.<sup>[14]</sup>

Afghanistan is a country that is riven with conflict and instability. Even though there will not be a great deal of positive fallout for the organization from admitting such a country, it is still likely to be in the Organization's best interest to do so. Afghanistan must have a strong grasp on its most significant challenges and issues before it can progress toward joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>[15]</sup> The special envoy to the SCO that President Putin appointed claimed in an interview with the Russian newspaper Kommersant Daily that it would be difficult for Afghanistan to become a member of the SCO owing to the current situation in the nation. In addition to this, Mr. Rashid Alimov, “the Secretary General of the Shanghai Collaboration Organization (SCO),” has asked Afghanistan to participate in various SCO events to enhance cooperation and speed up the process of joining the organization.

#### **Conclusion:**

The SCO documents emphasize the importance of members' contributions rather than simply horizontal growth to establish a foothold. The admission of “India and Pakistan” has also enhanced the aspirations of “future expansion, and the entrance of Iran and Afghanistan” will undoubtedly benefit all parties involved in the organization. It would elevate the legitimacy of the SCO by turning the SCO into a genuine regional organization. It would be an excellent addition to the work that Russia and China are doing to create a multi-polar international order in opposition to the uni-polarity of the United States. The “*Shanghai Cooperation Organization*” (SCO) would see an increase in its strength and influence if it expanded its scope beyond Eurasia and Central Asia to include South Asia and the Middle East. The organization’s political weight would expand due to the strategic placement of Iran and Afghanistan, which would facilitate. The international system dominated by the United States and the continued presence of the United States in Afghanistan could be expected to exert less pressure on Iran as a result of their entrance. But the growth of the SCO would only be a good sign if the organization manages to keep its relevance and is not plagued by power struggles among its members. If the current consequences of expanding to encompass India and Pakistan are successful, there is a good chance that further expansion will be possible in the future.

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