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By M K Bhadrakumar

[As the US seeks to isolate Iran and pave the way for UN sanctions that would legitimate an attack on Iran, China and Russia have taken important steps to expand their regional organization. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization constitutes the major regional challenge to American power in the Asia Pacific region. The invitation to Iran comes at a time when that nation faces extreme international isolation, and raises the stakes in the US diplomatic and military efforts to pressure Iran to terminating its nuclear program].

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which maintained it had no plans for expansion, is now changing course. Mongolia, Iran, India and Pakistan, which previously had observer status, will become full members. SCO's decision to welcome Iran into its fold constitutes a political statement. Conceivably, SCO would now proceed to adopt a common position on the

Iran nuclear issue at its summit meeting June 15.

Speaking in Beijing as recently as January 17, the organization's secretary general Zhang Deguang had been quoted by Xinhua news agency as saying: "Absorbing new member states needs a

legal basis, yet the SCO has no rules concerning the issue. Therefore, there is no need for some Western countries to worry whether India, Iran or other countries would become new members."

The SCO, an Intergovernmental organization whose working languages are Chinese and Russian, was founded in Shanghai on June 15, 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The SCO's change of heart appears set to involve the organization in Iran's nuclear battle and other ongoing regional issues with the United States.

Visiting Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mohammadi told Itar-TASS in Moscow that the membership expansion "could make the world more fair". And he spoke of building an Iran-Russia "gas-and-oil arc" by

coordinating their activities as energy producing countries. Mohammadi also touched on Iran's intention to raise the issue of his country's nuclear program and its expectations of securing SCO support.



Leaders of the SCO at its founding meeting in Shanghai in 2001

The timing of the SCO decision appears to be significant. By the end of April the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency is expected to report to the United Nations Security Council in New York regarding Iran's compliance with the IAEA resolutions and the Security Council's presidential statement, which stresses the importance of Iran "reestablishing full, sustained suspension of uranium-enrichment activities".

The SCO membership is therefore a lifeline for Iran in political and economic terms. The SCO is not a military bloc but is nonetheless a security organization committed to countering terrorism, religious extremism and separatism. SCO membership would debunk the US propaganda about Iran being part of an "axis of evil".

The SCO secretary general's statement on expansion coincided with several Chinese and Russian commentaries last week voicing disquiet

about the US attempts to impose UN sanctions against Iran. Comparison has been drawn with the Iraq War when the US seized on sanctions as a pretext for invading Iraq.

A People's Daily commentary on April 13 read: "The real intention behind the US fueling the Iran issue is to prompt the UN to impose sanctions against Iran, and to pave the way for a regime change in that country. The US's global strategy and its Iran policy emanate out of its decision to use various means, including military means, to change the Iranian regime. This is the US's set target and is at the root of the Iran nuclear issue."

The commentary suggested Washington seeks a regime change in Iran with a view to establishing American hegemony in the Middle East. Gennady Yefstafiyev, a former general in Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, wrote: "The US's long term goals in Iran are obvious: to engineer the downfall of the current regime; to establish control over Iran's oil and gas; and to use its territory as the shortest route for the transportation of hydrocarbons under US control from the regions of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea bypassing Russia and China. This is not to mention Iran's intrinsic military and strategic significance."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said: "I would not be in a hurry to draw conclusions, because passions are too often being whipped up

around Iran's nuclear program ... I would also advise not to whip up passions."

Sergei Kiriyyenko, head of Russia's nuclear power agency and a former prime minister, said Iran was simply not capable of enriching uranium on an industrial scale. "It has long since been known that Iran has a 'cascade' of only 164 centrifuges, and obtaining low-grade uranium from this 'cascade' was only a matter of time. This did not come as a surprise to us."

Yevgeniy Velikhov, president of Kurchatov Institute, Russia's nuclear research center, told Tier-TASS, "Launching experimental equipment of this type is something any university can do."

By virtue of SCO membership, Iran can partake of the various SCO projects, which in turn means access to technology, increased investment and trade, infrastructure development such as banking, communication, etc. It would also have implications for global energy security.

The SCO was expected to set up a working group of experts ahead of the summit in June with a view to evolving a common "energy strategy" and jointly undertaking pipeline projects, oil exploration and related activities.

A third aspect of the SCO decision to expand its membership involves regional integration processes. Sensing that the SCO was gaining

traction, Washington had sought observer status at its summit meeting last June, but was turned down. This rebuff - along with SCO's timeline for a reduced American military presence in Central Asia, the specter of deepening Russia-China cooperation and the setbacks to US diplomacy in Central Asia as a whole - prompted a policy review in Washington.

Following a Central Asian tour in October by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Washington's new regional policy began surfacing. The re-organization of the US State Department's South Asia Bureau (created in August 1992) to include the Central Asian states, projection of US diplomacy in terms of "Greater Central Asia" and the push for observer status with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) should be seen in perspective.

US diplomacy is working toward getting Central Asian states to orientate toward South Asia - weaning them away from Russia and China. (Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul has also failed to respond to SCO's overtures but has instead sought full membership in SAARC.)

But US diplomacy is not making appreciable progress in Central Asia. Washington pins hopes on Astana (Kazakhstan) being its pivotal partner in Central Asia. The US seeks an expansion of its physical control over Kazakhstan's oil reserves

and formalization of Kazakh oil transportation via Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, apart from carving out a US role in Caspian Sea security.

But Kazakhstan is playing hard to get. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to Moscow on April 3 reaffirmed his continued dependence on Russian oil pipelines.

Meanwhile, Washington's relations with Tashkent (Uzbekistan) remain in a state of deep chill. The US attempt to "isolate" President Islam Karimov is not working. (Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is visiting Tashkent on April 25.) Again, Tajikistan relies heavily on Russia's support. In Kyrgyzstan, despite covert US attempts to create dissensions within the regime, President Burmanbek Bakiyev's alliance with Prime Minister Felix Kulov (which enjoys Russia's backing) is holding.

The Central Asians have also displayed a lack of interest in the idea of "Greater Central Asia". This became apparent during the conference sponsored by Washington recently in Kabul focusing on the theme.

The SCO's enlargement move, in this regional context, would frustrate the entire US strategy. Ironically, the SCO would be expanding into

South Asia and the Gulf region, while "bypassing" Afghanistan.

This at a time when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is stepping up its presence in Afghanistan. (General James L Jones, supreme allied commander Europe, said recently that NATO would assume control of Afghanistan by August.)

So far NATO has ignored SCO. But NATO contingents in Afghanistan would shortly be "surrounded" by SCO member countries. NATO would face a dilemma.

If it recognizes that SCO has a habitation and a name (in Central Asia, South Asia and the Gulf), then, what about NATO's claim as the sole viable global security arbiter in the 21st century? NATO would then be hard-pressed to explain the *raison d'être* of its expansion into the territories of the former Soviet Union.

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