
Iran moves to join Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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DUSHANBE, March 24 (RIA Novosti) - Iran has lodged a bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that comprises Russia, China and four ex-Soviet Central Asian states, the country's foreign minister said on Monday.

The Islamic Republic, which currently holds an observer status in the regional security group, has long sought to become a full member of the SCO, seen as a counterbalance to U.S. and NATO influence in the region.

"Tajikistan supports us in this issue," Manouchehr Mottaki said after a meeting with the foreign ministers of SCO member Tajikistan and Afghanistan, which is another SCO observer along with India, Pakistan and Mongolia.

The bloc - which primarily addresses security issue but has recently moved to embrace energy projects - has indefinitely postponed accepting new members, but pledged closer cooperation with the observer states.

Speaking at the SCO summit in Kyrgyzstan in August 2007, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Everyone agreed that the moratorium should be preserved for some time yet," adding that the alliance "agreed to involve observer states more actively in practical projects."

Russia and China have been cautious to admit Iran, involved in a long-running dispute over its controversial nuclear program and alleged support for radical groups in Lebanon and other countries with the United States, Israel and major European countries.

Both China and Russia have, however, major commercial interests in Iran. The energy-hungry Asian nation wants Iranian oil and gas and to sell weapons and other goods to the Islamic Republic. Moscow also hopes to sell more weapons and nuclear energy technology to Tehran.

The Kremlin also needs Iran's endorsement for a multinational arrangement to exploit the Caspian Sea's energy resources.
