

REGIONAL POLICY

SCO ACTIVITIES AT THE PRESENT STAGE AND THE INTERESTS OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes in detail the emergence and evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an effective structure of the regional security system in Central Asia, its development potential, and its capacity to address possible threats and challenges.

The authors examine the security-building process in the region, provide an expert forecast of the SCO's further development in the context of the accession of India and Pakistan, and propose measures to increase its effectiveness in ensuring regional security and stability.

KEYWORDS: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Central Asia, regional security, international cooperation, SCO expansion, Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan.*

Introduction

Given the radical change in the geopolitical situation in Central Asia and the fast-growing “internal knot” of problems after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states in the region had to select optimal strategies for further development and mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation and for ensuring national security and territorial integrity.

Hence the primary objectives of the Central Asian countries: to lay the groundwork for ensuring sustainable and secure development; to create a favorable economic and political climate; and to establish mutually beneficial international cooperation.

Various organizations that could actually support the efforts to ensure regional security and stability were created in a relatively short period.¹ This includes the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The SCO as an International Cooperation Mechanism

In the first few years of the SCO, a consolidating factor for its member states was an increased risk of destabilization in the Central Asian region. At that stage, the Organization anticipated a possible increase in the activity of extra-regional players and destabilizing events in the development of Central Asian countries. It is precisely for fear of encountering such a scenario that the SCO states included in the 2005 Astana Declaration a provision recommending that the United States set a deadline for the presence of its military contingents in the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.²

The increasingly complex situation in the region provided additional incentives to develop the SCO and led to changes in its priorities. One of the most urgent tasks now was to develop an optimal and effective mechanism for eliminating threats to the security of the Organization’s member states. As was evident from events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, threats can be not only terrorist. In this context, the SCO was faced with the need to agree on practical ways to counter unconventional threats. This helped to significantly expand the SCO’s functions and areas of responsibility.

The SCO’s priorities in ensuring regional security and stability were listed as follows:

- (a) combating terrorism, separatism, extremism, illicit trafficking in drugs, arms, ammunition and explosives, nuclear and radioactive materials, as well as other components of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and transnational organized crime;
- (b) ensuring international information security;

¹ See: A. Iskandarov, “Security and Integration in Central Asia: The CSTO and SCO,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 2013.

² See: *Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, 5 July, 2005*, Official Website of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, available at [<http://eng.sectsco.org/documents/>], 14 March, 2020.

- (c) strengthening border security; and
- (d) fighting illegal migration, human trafficking, money laundering, economic crimes, and corruption.

The member states decided to regularly exchange information on these issues and undertake a joint analysis of the situation in the region, as well as to organize, with the participation of competent authorities, training sessions and workshops on a bilateral and multilateral basis.³

Today, the SCO has a significant impact on the security architecture of the whole of Central Asia and is a powerful political tool. The Organization's high prestige is also due to the fact that among its founding members are Russia and China, which makes it possible to check many negative processes in the region.

Moreover, given the global transformation of the world system of international relations, the significant decline in the credibility and effectiveness of most of the existing international organizations, primarily the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as the crisis of the entire system of international law, the SCO is becoming increasingly influential not only at the regional, but also at the global level. There are several reasons for this.

- *First*, in contrast to international organizations functioning as military-political alliances (blocs), the SCO countries have created an international mechanism that provides for the non-use of force or threat of force. For the SCO, its non-interference in the internal political affairs of its member states is a matter of principle.

The SCO is an example of how non-bloc associations can build an international security system. It is not a military-political alliance and has no intention of becoming one, while cooperation in the military field is developing exclusively for anti-terrorism purposes.

- *Second*, the SCO seeks to build a democratic and fair architecture of international relations based on multilateral, cooperative approaches and equally taking into account the interests and opinions of all its members. The SCO's activities are not directed against third countries, and it rejects confrontational approaches to resolving current problems of international and regional development.

At the present stage, no other international structure, except the SCO, can provide an opportunity for its member countries to build a more adequate model of interaction with each other and with the main extra-regional centers of power in order to ensure security and development.

- And *third*, the SCO is seen by Central Asian and other countries as the preferred international cooperation mechanism, because it creates the conditions for ensuring military-political security in the controlled area, a favorable and constructive economic climate, and a stable political situation in the member states.

Development of SCO Activities at the Present Stage

Since its establishment, the SCO has significantly evolved and expanded its sphere of influence.

As we know, the SCO was originally set up for the express purpose of maintaining regional security. The Organization successfully achieved its initial goals: settlement of territorial disputes,

³ See: *Business Club of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, InfoSCO Information Portal, available in Russian at [<http://www.infosco.biz/en/>], 15 March, 2020.

mutual inspection of state borders, and creation of border infrastructure. Subsequently, the SCO set the following goals in the field of regional security:

- (a) to strengthen mutual trust and neighborliness between member states and to maintain and strengthen peace, security, and stability in the region;
- (b) to step up joint efforts to counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism; and
- (c) to fight illicit drug and arms trafficking, other kinds of transnational crime, and illegal migration.⁴

When India and Pakistan joined the SCO as full members, the Organization entered a qualitatively new stage of development.

Today, the SCO covers 60% of the territory of Eurasia and about 45% of the world's population (3.5 billion people) and accounts for more than 20% of global GDP. It includes four nuclear powers.

In the current conditions, the SCO's most important task is to maintain international peace and security at both the regional and global levels. In order to create an indivisible security space, arrange interaction between international and regional organizations and forums, and coordinate their efforts in addressing current challenges and threats, the member states have coordinated their positions, advocating the need to ensure common, comprehensive, and sustainable security based on equal cooperation.

A whole set of tools and mechanisms for controlling security processes in the region have been developed, with priority given to fighting the "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, and separatism).⁵

Special attention here is paid to improving the mechanism for a rapid response to emerging threats and challenges.

- *First*, in order to strengthen cooperation in the field of security, the SCO seeks to involve its observer states and dialog partners in joint work in this field, as well as to intensify contacts with other interested countries and international organizations.
- *Second*, the SCO has been developing special cooperation programs that include a set of measures designed to prevent, detect, and suppress terrorism, separatism, and extremism, conduct joint operational-search activities, and provide mutual technical and material assistance.

The member states intend to develop the activities of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in the fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

- *Third*, special attention is paid to cooperation in countering the activities of international terrorist organizations aimed to recruit citizens of member countries into terrorist, separatist, and extremist groups, in establishing contacts with appropriate international organizations and regional associations to detect and block the routes by which terrorist trainees enter other countries to take part in armed conflicts in their territory, and in identifying such persons upon their return to SCO countries.
- *Fourth*, work is underway to fine-tune the algorithms for combating the spread of extremist and separatist ideas, primarily among the young, and for preventing religious extremism, aggressive nationalism, ethnic and racial intolerance, xenophobia, and fascist and chauvinistic ideas.

⁴ See: *Bishkek Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Heads of State Council, 14 June, 2019*, available at [<http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>], 15 March, 2020.

⁵ See: G.M. Kakenova, "Initsiativy Respubliki Kazakhstan po problemam borby protiv noveishikh ugroz mezhdunarodnoi bezopasnosti," *Vestnik EAGI*, No. 3, 2015, pp. 50-55.

At a summit in Astana in June 2017, the SCO heads of state signed the SCO Convention on Countering Extremism. Along with coordination between law enforcement agencies, it pays special attention to joint efforts in the sphere of mass media, educational and research institutions, religious associations, and non-governmental organizations.⁶

- *Fifth*, measures are taken to strengthen cooperation in drug control.

The SCO summit in Qingdao (China) in June 2018 approved the SCO Anti-Drug Strategy for 2018-2023 and the Program of Action for its implementation, whose purpose is to enhance the effectiveness of joint efforts in combating the threat of drugs in the SCO area.⁷

These documents focus on activities in conducting joint operations to suppress illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and their precursors, retraining law enforcement officers, providing material, technical, and organizational assistance, deepening cooperation to reduce demand for drugs, holding training sessions and workshops on methods and technologies for monitoring and eradicating illicit drug crops, and conducting educational activities to combat drug addiction.

- *Sixth*, an important area of SCO activities is the fight against the laundering of criminal proceeds. The Organization seeks to intensify cooperation with international structures that combat money laundering and financing of terrorism.
- And *seventh*, the SCO member states pay increasing attention to creating an effective joint mechanism for ensuring information security in order to prevent and counter threats to the political, economic, and public security of the member states.

With this aim in view, work is underway to improve the cooperation mechanism in combating the use of information and communication technologies for terrorist purposes and countering cyber threats to the security of SCO member states. Steps are also taken to strengthen cooperation in the area of Internet control so as to counter the use of the Internet for activities that undermine security and stability in the region.

In the interests of a prompt and adequate response to emerging threats and challenges to regional and global security, the SCO member states are expanding cooperation with interested countries and international organizations.

Along with this, the SCO has expanded its cultural and civilizational platform. It simultaneously features Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, which can provide a basis for equal exchange and cooperation for the sake of peaceful coexistence and all-round development of various ethnic groups, religions, civilizations, and cultures.

Virtually all SCO countries are multi-ethnic and multi-religious. This is why they are interested in ensuring internal ethnic and religious peace, the harmonious coexistence of different nationalities and religions, and the development of dialog between civilizations with the participation of observer states and dialog partners.

Cultural and humanitarian cooperation within the SCO framework is aimed at creating favorable conditions for developing relations in areas such as education, science, culture, healthcare, and tourism, including contacts between public associations and citizens.

The SCO's expanding economic potential and increasing political importance are evidence of its transformation from a regional to a *global platform*.

⁶ See: *Konventsiiya Shankhaiskoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva po protivodeistviyu ekstremizmu (Astana, ot 9 iyunia 2017)*, Information Portal Zakon.kz, available at [<https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/bishkekskaya-deklaraciya-soveta-glav-gosudarstv-chlenov-shanhaiskoi-organizatsii-sotrudnichestva>], 15 March, 2020.

⁷ See: Official Website of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, available at [<http://eng.sectsc.org/>], 15 March, 2020.

Thus, SCO activities are currently focused on three main areas: cooperation for global and regional stability; joint fight against unconventional threats and challenges (terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking); and broad economic integration on a regional basis.

Kazakhstan has recently proposed a number of ambitious projects and ideas in different areas of SCO activity. Its initiatives are mainly concerned with *security* (formation of a global anti-terrorist coalition under the auspices of the United Nations; development of additional measures to ensure cybersecurity and creation of an SCO information security center; establishment of a permanent platform for environmental cooperation jointly with the International Green Technologies and Investment Projects Center in Nur-Sultan; and measures to ensure security in Central Asia, including cooperation in combating illicit drug trafficking in the Central Asian region, assistance to Afghanistan and Syria, and settlement of all disputes regarding the Iranian nuclear program and the DPRK); *economics* (creation of a Eurasian financial advisory mechanism in collaboration with the Astana International Financial Center); *digitalization and innovative communication technologies* (creation of a pool of modern technology parks, organization of a forum for young IT specialists); and *expansion of cooperation* (abandoning the “bloc” mentality, strengthening the foundations for openness and equal cooperation with the EAEU, ASEAN, BRICS, and EU).

However, there are several factors that hold back the practical implementation of Kazakhstan’s initiatives.

1. *Changes in the nature of the SCO’s activity were triggered by its expansion.* In the past, the SCO’s main functions, despite its geographical spread from Eastern Europe to Eastern Asia, were concentrated in Central Asia, whereas the membership of India and Pakistan, according to Russian analysts, will turn the SCO, in political terms, “into a rapidly emerging center of power in a multipolar world” and a key geopolitical instrument that challenges the Western-led world order. The SCO’s expansion has also triggered a reconfiguration of the nature of its activity, both internal and external: as its geography expands and its weight in the international arena increases, the internal mechanism for coordinating the positions of its member states and its overall agenda naturally become more complicated. The new participants have made their own amendments to the Organization’s strategic agenda. Eventually, this will probably make it necessary to revise the SCO’s comprehensive development plan. The accession of new members objectively strengthens the Asian component in the Organization’s activities in the area of security, which creates a potential for joint efforts by the SCO and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) to lay the groundwork for a modern security architecture in Asia.
2. *Priorities of SCO member countries differ.* The SCO summit in Bishkek in June 2019 showed that member states had different views on the development of the Organization. In particular, priority was once again given to interaction at the bilateral level: China and Kyrgyzstan announced agreements worth a total of about \$7 billion, but at the multilateral level there were no such agreements.
3. *China’s attention to the development of the SCO has decreased.* At the present stage, we see that China, the main initiator and driving force of the SCO, tends to pay less attention to the Organization. In recent years, its approaches to the further development of the SCO have changed significantly, primarily in connection with the task of implementing the strategic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, based on the results of the Second Belt and Road Forum in April 2019, Beijing has mainly focused on this area. The same applies to Chinese policy in Central Asia.

In previous years, the Chinese side took an active part in preparing all key documents for SCO summits. Year after year, Beijing tried to promote initiatives such as the SCO Development Bank,

SCO Special Account, SCO Free Trade Zone, etc. But in recent years, it has not presented any new groundbreaking proposals.

Thus, in the near future, the Organization can expect to see a number of changes that will also influence its structure.

- *First*, SCO activities in the short term will be focused on adapting to the new realities. After the end of the transition period designed to resolve technical issues related to enlargement, the accession of India and Pakistan will sooner or later raise the question of revising the SCO's internal rules. This applies not only to the principles of work (allocation of quotas to India and Pakistan in forming executive bodies, nomination of their candidates for the highest post in the SCO bureaucracy, etc.), but also to ensuring equality of rights and opportunities between the SCO's new members and its founding states. Ultimately, the Organization's agenda will be transformed in one way or another.
- *Second*, in the context of the SCO's near future, an important question is about reaching a consensus in the decision-making process as one of the basic principles of its activity. Clearly, consensus in the expanded SCO will be difficult to achieve, and this principle may to some extent disrupt the Organization's work or lead to delays in decision making on controversial issues for an indefinite time, until a consensus is finally reached.
- And *third*, China's focus on implementing BRI projects may lead to less emphasis on the SCO in Beijing's regional policy. Under this scenario, SCO activity will gradually decrease. At present, China is not prepared to give up the SCO altogether, because this would cause a loss of face. In the medium and long term, however, China's participation in the SCO may become less active.

These changes generate two contradictory trends in the Organization's development and activity. On the one hand, with its expansion the SCO aspires to become a unique system integrator in Eurasia within whose framework the key players will coordinate their efforts. On the other hand, the SCO's institutional weaknesses caused by erosion of the Organization's core carry the risk that it could turn into a very amorphous structure.

In this context, it is now more important than ever for the SCO to abide by the principles of its non-bloc status. It is necessary to take into account the competition and activity in Eurasia of many organizations and projects, such as NATO, EU, OSCE, Central Asia Plus Japan dialog, Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, CIS, CSTO, EAEU, Greater Eurasian Partnership, CICA, and others. All of them have different geopolitical objectives and roles, which makes the SCO's external environment more complicated. In these conditions, it is important for the Central Asian countries to prevent the Organization from turning into an anti-Western instrument in the hands of regional powers.

Since the SCO is an optimal dialog platform for resolving regional issues and clarifying the positions of all parties⁸, it is in need of conceptual and organizational renewal. The current concept of its development does not fully reflect the new realities, as well as various aspects of the new risks and opportunities it faces after its expansion.

It would make sense for the member countries to renew the SCO economic platform taking into account the following points:

- the purpose of the renewed platform should be to strengthen coordination between regional associations and economic initiatives that already exist in the SCO area (EAEU, BRI,

⁸ See: R.R. Chukalova, "Vliianie vneshnikh i vnutrennikh faktorov na obespecheniye regionalnoi bezopasnosti v Tsentralno-Aziatskom regione," *Global Science and Innovations 2018: Materials of the International Scientific Conference*, Eger, 2018, pp. 460-464.

BRICS). Such coordination will allow the SCO member states to use the synergies of different regional integration processes and to reap real dividends in trade and investment;

—at the new stage of the SCO's development, after the accession of India and Pakistan, it would be advisable to revisit the issue of creating financial institutions within the Organization: the SCO Development Bank and the SCO Development Fund. It is important to promote the idea of establishing such a bank so as to give a boost to the Organization.

The economic component of relations makes it possible to balance all structures of the SCO and enhances its consolidating power. The following factors could be important in ensuring fruitful multilateral cooperation at every stage of economic integration within the SCO:

- first, agreed measures to inventory and improve existing trade and economic cooperation mechanisms so as to increase their effectiveness and coordination;
- second, establishment of a multilateral advisory and consultative mechanism within the framework of the SCO Forum; and
- third, use of the joint intellectual potential of SCO member countries, with more intensive exchange of scientific, technological, economic, and analytical information.

In the expert community, there is much talk about the need to strengthen the research component of the SCO. In this context, it might be useful to consider the possibility of setting up a specialized research institution, a kind of think tank of the SCO.

This would make it possible to exchange opinions on a regular basis and formulate appropriate decisions for the development of the Organization, as well to better understand the positions of other members at the expert level.

Conclusion

Overall, the need to find new vectors for strengthening the SCO make it necessary to step up its activity associated not only with the solution of security problems, but also with the intensive development of its trade and economic component, as well as with cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

Coordinated action by SCO countries could enrich the practice of interstate relations with a number of innovations determined by the cultural and civilizational diversity specific to the SCO as an organization that makes a concrete contribution to ensuring internal ethnic and religious peace, to the harmonious coexistence of different nationalities and religions, and to the development of dialog between civilizations on the Eurasian continent.