

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands

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Global Research, July 03, 2016

[Russia Direct](#) 30 June 2016

Region: [China](#), [East Asia](#), [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Defence](#)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will continue dealing mainly with security and economic issues, although there are doubts about how effective it will be once India and Pakistan join in 2017.

The anniversary summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which recently took place in Tashkent last week, celebrated the 15-year history of this organization. The six SCO member states – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – evaluated the successes that this organization has achieved in the past decade and a half, and determined the future format of its work.

For the first 15 years, the SCO has primarily focused on economic and security issues. Going forward, the work of the SCO will continue in an expanded format. India and Pakistan will become full members of the SCO in 2017, a move that was finally decided at the Tashkent Summit. In the summit's final declaration, dedicated to the 15th anniversary of the organization, the participating countries agreed to assist each other during economic crises, and to continue in their joint efforts in fighting terrorism and extremism.

According to experts interviewed by *Russia Direct*, this year's summit turned out to be more of a ritual, in which member countries demonstrated their loyalty to China, rather than working on solving common regional problems. Over the course of the past 15 years, the SCO has become a platform where member countries have continued to discuss bilateral problems, which are not always related to what the SCO was set up for in the first place.

Expanding SCO Membership

The SCO Summit 2016 will go down in history, if only because it was the last one that took place in its traditional format. The summit in 2017 will have more two participants, for a total of eight, after India and Pakistan officially join the organization. In Tashkent, these two countries signed a memorandum of commitment to the SCO – the last documents before becoming full-fledged members.

One year after the summit in Ufa, the Central Asian countries that had previously doubted the wisdom of expanding the SCO with two other countries that are in constant conflict with each other, seemed to have come around to the idea.

The president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, who during last year's summit criticized the expansion of the SCO with two unofficial nuclear powers, seemed more restrained this year. At this summit, which he was hosting in his capital city of Tashkent, Karimov seemed to have accepted the idea that India and Pakistan, which are always at loggerheads with each other, would now join the ranks of the SCO.

After meeting on the sidelines of the summit with the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, President Karimov said, "I will not hide the fact, the talks were difficult, but in the end, we managed to overcome all difficulties and agreed on granting membership to the new countries."

At the summit, he warned the countries from engaging in confrontations with each other, and encouraged maintaining the non-aligned status of the organization.

However, the compromise does not mean that the existing contradictions between New Delhi and Islamabad would not be transferred to the SCO platform. Sanat Kushkumbayev, deputy director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, in an interview told *Russia Direct* that he considers that Uzbekistan's doubts, when it comes to the new SCO members, were well justified.

"The nuclear powers India and Pakistan will change the balance of power within the SCO, where there already are two other nuclear powers - Russia and China. Central Asian countries, which had declared their region a nuclear-free zone, will have a difficult time balancing inside such a composition. It is clear that the expansion of the SCO will now move regional problems into the background," says Kushkumbayev.

The difficult entry procedures, however, had not deterred the two formerly observer countries from seeking membership in the organization. Now enjoying such status in the SCO are Afghanistan, Iran and Mongolia. The greatest chances of joining are given to Iran, whose interests in the organization are actively being promoted by Russia.

Thus, during the Tashkent summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that he sees no obstacles for Iran's full membership in the SCO, after the international community has removed sanctions against the country. Expressing their readiness, together with Moscow, to start dialogue on Iran's joining the organization were Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China.

"We are prepared, in accordance with all legal documents, together with others to carefully consider the applications of Iran and Afghanistan," said Chinese president Xi Jinping. Uzbekistan gave its traditionally restrained response to the initiatives for further expansion voiced by its SCO colleagues, fearing that this would make the organization less manageable.

Tashkent was especially cautious when it came to the idea of membership for Afghanistan, a country where the main security threats and risks in Central Asia originate.

Thus, since the spring of 2015, the threats of penetration of Islamic terrorists from Afghanistan and the Middle East through poorly controlled Afghan borders with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan remain. The attack in the north of Kazakhstan on a military unit, which according to Kazakh authorities was perpetrated by Islamic terrorists, has forced neighboring countries to further strengthen their security measures.

SCO Security Concerns

Two weeks before the SCO Summit, unprecedented security measures were implemented in Tashkent. However, experts interviewed by *Russia Direct* say there is no need to dramatize the situation with terrorism. Andrey Baklitskiy, program director of the PIR-Center think tank, said that Iranian membership in the SCO would, on the contrary, increase the

efficiency of the fight against the “three evils.”

The “three evils” is how the organization refers to terrorism, extremism and separatism. Iran blocks the western border of Afghanistan, and therefore it could become an outpost of the organization on the border with the militant groupings of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Greater Syria (ISIS). In addition, Baklitskiy says that when it comes to Iran, that country, unlike India and Pakistan, has no serious contradictions with other SCO member states.

Daniyar Kosnazarov, deputy director of the Synopsis Center for the Study of China and Central Asia, believes that to successfully fight terrorism, it is not enough to just strengthen security measures. Instead, nations must focus on economic issues within the SCO.

“The attack on the Kazakh city of Aktobe in June was the first warning sign for the authorities in the region – it is important to improve the socio-economic situation in the country, and the region as a whole, including through multilateral formats,” Kosnazarov told *Russia Direct*.

It should be noted that the majority of SCO member states (with the exceptions of China and Uzbekistan), are also part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), where collective efforts are being undertaken to try and solve regional security problems.

According to a source in the state bodies of Uzbekistan, who participated in organizing the summit, a recent trend has appeared in the SCO – on these issues, Russia is trying to win over Central Asian members to its side, just as China is trying to do. This concerns Central Asian countries, and in particular, Uzbekistan, which could be forcing states to return to bilateral cooperation when it comes to security issues.

The Economics of the SCO

Economic development issues were also paramount on the agenda of the Tashkent Summit. SCO leaders have complained that very often, uneven economic development is leading to the slow implementation of joint projects, particularly in trade and construction of transport infrastructure spheres. In connection with this, the countries have pledged to help each other in times of economic crisis, and recorded this commitment in the adopted Tashkent Declaration.

To accelerate the construction of regional transport infrastructure, Putin suggested that SCO countries that are not members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) join the Russian-Chinese cooperation projects involving the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

“Connecting all SCO member states, as well as CIS countries, to these integration processes, would be a prelude to the formation of a large Eurasian Partnership,” said Putin.

However, the experts interviewed by *Russia Direct* do not think much of the potential for economic cooperation within the SCO framework. Independent political analyst from Uzbekistan Rafael Sattarov said that Tashkent has always looked at the SCO platform as a means for establishing bilateral cooperation on security issues, rather than economic ones.

“At the Tashkent Summit, Uzbek diplomacy proved once again that the priority for the country remained bilateral cooperation with other states, but outside the framework of the SCO,” said Sattarov. He added that the most problematic issues for Uzbekistan have always been its relations with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Nevertheless, the bilateral meetings held with the leaders of those two countries have inspired some optimism in the expert community and amongst the officials of Central Asian countries, that the spirit of unity and cooperation still prevails among all SCO countries.

At the SCO summit in Tashkent, they also signed an Action Plan for the implementation of Development Strategies for the SCO until 2025, where participating countries have identified their directions of development in the coming years. These followed the outlines of the development strategies for the SCO that the participating countries adopted at last year's summit in Ufa.

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