

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION AND PROSPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE EURASIA REGION

The authors outline the recent evolution and current framework of the SCO, stating that it is not an antagonistic security alliance as some in the West perceive it to be. Instead, they argue, it should be seen as a vehicle for increasing economic and social prosperity in the region. It is pointed out that the rhetoric of human rights preached by Europe and the U.S. backfires in the region, heightening a sense of threat. That the SCO can play a central role in stabilizing Afghanistan is emphasized.

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) engages the Central Asian nations with Russia and China in the region and also countries like Afghanistan, Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran which are ‘observer’ countries. This consortium makes the SCO a key player in accelerating regional integration and cooperation. Looking beyond the geo-political rhetoric, the SCO does not appear necessarily postured against the United States, Europe or Japan. Its aim seems to be more multi-faceted than simply to move towards balancing power or securing the region. The SCO is also focusing on economic and social integration of the region and has gone to great lengths to create confidence in its desire to promote prosperity and cooperation.

In 1996 and 1997 Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed a document that established the ‘Shanghai Five’ to deal with border delimitation and fostering trust and good neighborly relations between the five countries. In June 2001 Uzbekistan joined the ‘Shanghai Five’ and the six countries then signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. More recently Afghanistan, Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran were included as ‘observer’ countries. The SCO continues to evolve into a stable representative unit which has broadened its remit to cooperating on social, economic and security considerations. The latest meeting of the SCO held in August 2007 in Kyrgyzstan was attended by the newly elected Turkmen leader for the very first time. This bodes well for further cooperation that includes all the countries in Central Asia.

Initially when the SCO was formed countries in Central Asia were still trying to establish themselves as independent countries in the immediate region and on a more global level – Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia were all interested in leveraging their position and thus countries such as Uzbekistan didn’t want to get bogged down by regional groupings like the SCO (that may explain the ineffectiveness of most of the organizations that were formed at that time). Now, the situation is changing on the global and the regional front. On the regional front it has been over fifteen years since the Central Asian countries became independent. Since then, they have developed clearer ideas about their sovereignty and shown a preference for a multi-vector approach in their international policies. With the United States more active in the region, Russia and China realize the importance of cooperating on a broad set of issues.

The make up of the SCO sheds some light on the way that the SCO is going about broadening its scope in terms on who it wants to cooperate with on the global scene. The presence of Russia and China along with smaller Central Asian countries shows the importance of regional cooperation that is essential to the growth and development of the region. The inclusion of observer countries like India, Pakistan and Iran show that the SCO wants to encourage cooperative relations and provide a voice to the Eurasian region. The sustainability of the SCO is questioned frequently because of the security situation in the member countries. It is helpful in this case to consider the SCO in light of the evolution of

the European Union (EU). The success of the EU lies in the fact that it has been able to bring European countries together especially in the economic sphere. The SCO has extended its remit to include issues that help in fostering economic and social prosperity in the region.

Though the U.S. and countries in Europe think the SCO is a political tool which its members are using as an antagonistic political tool – and have accordingly labeled it as ‘a new club of dictators’- the future of the SCO lies more and more in the realm of economic and social issues. Nevertheless it is essential to understand that the SCO takes into account the politics of its member countries. Its pluralistic stance can be contextualized by considering that it has accepted Iran, Afghanistan and India as observer countries. Iran has primarily an antagonistic interaction with the US, while Afghanistan and India have a strongly favorable relationship with the US. Thus, the SCO should not be seen as taking sides.

The SCO is often criticized on issues of human rights and democracy. In the region there is a common perception that this rhetoric is an intrusion and threat to the sovereignty of the states. The situation is worsened by the language used which is seen as a heavy handed reproach by powerful countries reprimanding smaller nations especially in the case of Central Asian nations. The emphasis on the universality of these principles shows a lack of understanding of local processes at work in the member countries of SCO. The demands and ultimatums towards the countries of the ‘East’ reveal the power equation at work and ignore the ground realities and historical traditions of the countries while imposing a seemingly ‘foreign’ system on them. It is interesting that despite this the SCO has not retaliated with a consolidated ‘Eastern’ position which rejects ‘Western’ ideas of human rights, democratic principles and forms of government. The SCO has kept the future of a dialogue open and has not positioned itself as an organization that is unwilling to interact on ideological grounds.

A role that the SCO can play in the near future is that of a facilitator in the development of Afghanistan. Steps forward were taken in this regard in the recently held SCO meeting held in Bishkek in August 2007 where the member states pledged increased cooperation especially in Afghanistan. The possibility of regional cooperation through the SCO with other groupings in the region like NATO is wide-ranging and has the capacity to be long-lasting. Afghanistan is a unique opportunity that can be used as a confidence building exercise for the SCO and NATO to work together because major players from both these groups are active in the peacekeeping and rebuilding process.

Increased cooperation between Central Asian nations will lead to easing of transnational issues, for example in the Ferghana Valley which is shared between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The SCO potentially provides a forum for a free trade zone that will help people at the most local level. The border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is heavily mined and the SCO can help in de-mining and fostering an environment of friendship and cooperation. The essential trans-

boundary trade that is suffering can then be made safe and commercially beneficial for people living across borders. Another trans-border issue that requires countries in the region to work together is environment. The protection of water-bodies and biodiversity require inter-state cooperation. An emphasis on a discourse of social development in the region will be beneficial for local households to mitigate economic impoverishment. Many such activities are currently inhibited due to fear from external and internal factors like terrorism. The SCO can bring about a shift in focus by moving away from issues of weak and porous borders to measures that help build confidence so that the member states can increase internal security and direct finances into economic and social programs.

The SCO has great potential to serve as a vehicle for building the economies of the countries of Central Asia and to bring them into the global arena. The July 5-6 2006 SCO summit was held in Kazakhstan and the current Secretary-General, Nurgaliev Kabdylkhamitovich from Kazakhstan, has been elected for 2007-2009. The possibility of using the framework of a collective organization such as the SCO especially in the oil and natural gas sector gives countries like Kazakhstan better leverage than it would have garnered individually in the global oil market. In regards to the energy market there is also scope for the SCO to interact with the Gulf Cooperation Council and learn from its structure and organization. The GCC countries have been able to promote a collective front and cooperate with each other to ensure that all the countries partake in the wealth creation from their natural resources. The SCO can look to the GCC to track the development of new economies highly dependent on hydrocarbon reserves. UAE and other Gulf countries are good examples of oil and gas economies that have found a place in the international economy in trade, banking and commerce. The August 2007 meeting of the SCO was a constructive meeting that gave voice to issues relating to increasing and maintaining good neighborly relations along with creating a 'unified energy market'.

Along with the Gulf-Arab countries and Iran, Turkey with its historical, linguistic and religious affinity with the populations of Central Asia occupies an important position in the region, especially since their independence. Turkey has invested in infrastructure, education and health as well as developed cultural and other links with Central Asia. Turkey is not only an important player in Central Asia but it is also increasingly becoming a strategic partner to Russia. EU-Turkey relations in light of the prospect of Turkey's EU membership make Turkey potentially a key ally for the SCO, both financially and strategically. Furthermore, Turkey quite naturally could complement the presence of Iran in the SCO as an observer country. An impetus toward the development of a mutually beneficial SCO-Turkey relationship could prove to be an interesting space to watch.

With growing cooperation in the region between Russia, China and Central Asia along with an emphasis on cooperation in the wider region with the inclusion of observer countries (India, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) it is important for the present axis of power - the US, Europe and Japan - to forge relations with not just

individual member and observer countries but the SCO as a whole. The goals of the SCO are to encourage trade links, social and political cooperation, find joint solutions to problems of environment, infrastructure, education, and to build scientific and cultural links between member states, the region as a whole and internationally. In its own stated aims the SCO is not an organization that is against any groupings, regions or particular nation-states. It should not be seen as a threat but a vehicle for increasing economic and social prosperity in the region.