

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Can it Stabilise 'Greater Central Asia'?



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The Declaration of Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) mentions as its main goals "strengthening mutual trust, friendship and good neighbourliness between the member states; encouraging effective cooperation between them in the political, trade, economic, scientific, technical, cultural, educational, energy, transport, environmental and other fields; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region and establishing new, democratic, just and rational international political and economic order."

A Few Preliminary Remarks

This analysis will concentrate on some issues related to the maintenance of security and stability. However, before analysing the potential of the SCO, a few preliminary remarks are necessary.

Established in 2001 by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the SCO was enlarged in 2017 with the inclusion of India and Pakistan as full members. Four other states – Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Belarus – have observer status. With some reservations, 'Greater Central Asia' will be utilised to refer to the SCO area. The SCO member states interact more successfully on the bilateral, than on the multilateral level. Four SCO members – Russia, China, India, and Pakistan – belong to the world's 'Nuclear Club'. Iran is in the process of building its nuclear capacities. China and Russia (India is not yet very active in this structure), based upon their own strategic goals, prefer to consider the so-called 'Greater Central Asia' area exclusively as a platform for cooperation. This approach provides to them more economic benefits and allows to minimise existing contradictions. However, it does not exclude their competition in order to acquire more economic and political influence, and to

Photo: Kremlin



International High-Level Delegates at the 2015 Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

strengthen their strategic positions in this area.

The differences across member states in terms of their territory, population, economic potential, and military might, are significant. The most powerful members of the SCO – China and Russia – act aggressively, using also their military might, in those cases where they perceive direct threats to their national security interests. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and China's permanent demonstration and exercise of its military power in the Asia-Pacific region serve as vivid examples. However, their modes operandi in the 'Greater Central Asia' are different: both implement successfully their 'soft powers' by managing inherited bilateral territorial disputes with each other and with the core group of Central Asian states.

The SCO member states possess different levels and parameters of internal and external (in)security. The SCO Declaration of Establishment emphasises that the Organisation "attaches priority to regional security and...takes all necessary efforts to maintain it."

Ethno-Political and Religious Conflicts

Among the first important documents of the SCO is the 'Shanghai Convention on Combatting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism' adopted in June 2001. Against a background of growing nationalism, the ethno-political and religious conflicts in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious states have tended to become dominant inside the affected

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areas of the given states. Under certain circumstances, they can morph into international conflicts involving several SCO member states. Emphasising that “separatism and extremism, as defined in this Convention, regardless their motives, cannot be justified under any circumstances,” the signatory states minimised their involvement in these types of conflicts on each other's territories. They recognise the danger, that these conflicts, in case of the intervention of a third party, may spread. Thus, they prefer to consider them as exclusively internal affairs.

This approach proved to be effective in managing conflicts between the SCO Central Asian members Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The possibility of an overt conflict between these states is low. They do not pose security threats to each other, nor do they position themselves as rivals. There were several overt conflicts after 1991 that, however, did not transform into international ones and remained within the internationally recognised borders of the given states. In 2010, the clashes between the Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority in the Osh and Jalal-Abad areas of Kyrgyzstan erupted. Uzbekistan preferred not to intervene, and limited its role by providing temporary shelters to Uzbek refugees.

The most recent ethnic clashes in the Jambyl region of Kazakhstan between Kazakhs and the Dungan minority group on 8 February 2020 ended up with 11 deaths and more than 100 wounded. Several thousand residents of the villages, attacked by Kazakhs, fled to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. This event was interpreted by the Kazakhstan authorities as a domestic dispute rather than as an ethnic conflict.

Ethnic and religious separatism is a very sensitive issue for China and India. Within the SCO area there are two major ‘hot spots’: the Xinyang Uyghur province in China, which borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, and Jammu and Kashmir region in India, which is the subject of a long lasting dispute between India and Pakistan. Within the framework of this analysis, most interesting are the motivations and approaches of the SCO member states to these complicated and multilevel ethnic and religious conflicts.

China's Xinjiang Uyghur province is a crucial knot in the implementation of its 'Belt and Road' Initiative. China needs, first, to prevent any instability in this area well-known for its long lasting ethno-religious conflict between the Muslim –Turkic ma-



Photo: SCO

Using the slogan 'Travel to the Pearl of the Great Silk Road', the SCO organises cultural venues like the 'Days of Uzbekistan Culture in Beijing' on 25 December 2019.

majority and the Chinese minority and, second, to secure the support of those SCO member states, the population of which is dominantly Muslim and Turkic: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

A low intensity tension arises between China and Kazakhstan in connection with the situation in Xinjiang. International organisations view China's 'Uyghur policy' as one of the worst human rights abuses in several decades based on ethnic-religious identity issues. China presents its policy in this province as a fight against terrorism, and completely ignores the international community's condemnation and concerns regarding a detention of more than 1.1 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and representatives of other Muslim minorities. More than 2 million are subjected to 'reeducation' and are forced to undergo indoctrination in 'educational' camps.

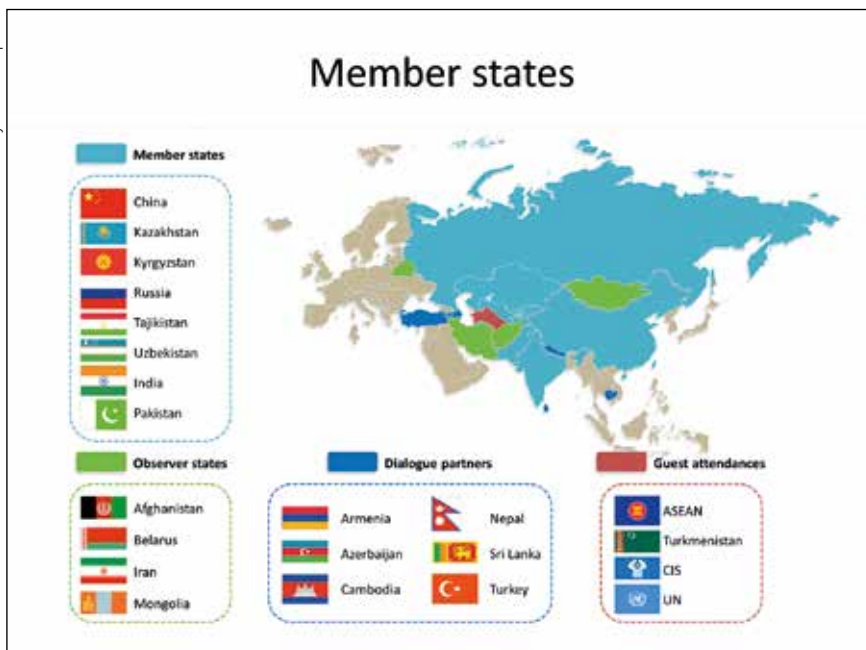
However, neither Kazakhstan nor Kyrgyzstan, to say nothing about Uzbekistan, are ready to challenge their strategic partnership with China because of the violation of the human rights of their co-ethnic group by Chinese authorities. China silences its potential critics inside the SCO by providing substantial infrastructure loans to all interested parties. In parallel with a toughening of its policy in Xinjiang, since January 2019, China allows some representatives of Turkic-Muslim minority groups (Kazakh, in particular) to abandon their Chinese citizenship and to leave the country. A combination of mutual economic benefits, together with China's 'goodwill' gestures and the activity of diplomats, permit all parties indirectly involved with the situation in Xinjiang to avoid discussions on human rights violation within the SCO.

The full membership of India and Pakistan in the SCO, at first glance, brought into this international structure the Jammu and Kashmir problem. Three major insecurity components are the Indo-Pakistani territorial dispute, the Indian-Pakistani ethnic conflict and the Hindu-Muslim religious conflict. This ongoing interstate issue is still far from resolution.

The strategic strength and solidity of the SCO was tested in 2019. In February, a terrorist attack by the Pakistani militant group 'Jaish-e-Mohammad' on an Indian paramilitary convoy killed at least 40 soldiers. It was followed by India's air strikes inside Pakistan territory. A new round of dangerous escalation began in August after India unilaterally revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, thereby factually annexing Kashmir, and violating broadly the rights of its Muslim population.

The SCO did not intervene and did not offer any mediation. Russia and China acted in their capacity as permanent members of the UN Security Council. Although they silently supported opposite parties to the conflict (Russia was mainly in line with India's decision and China supported its long-term partner, Pakistan), both powers were encouraging the conflicting parties to find a solution through bilateral compromises and agreements. In turn, neither India nor Pakistan viewed the SCO as a body capable of resolving this ongoing conflict. In particular, at the Davos Economic Forum, on 22 January 2020, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan called upon the US to mediate the Kashmir crisis. In the meantime, recognising the limits of the SCO, the parties to the conflict are not excluding

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possible bilateral contacts on the margins of the SCO Summit scheduled in New Delhi later this year.

A Common Security Threat

Terrorism, spreading mainly from Afghanistan and, in most recent years, also from Syria and Iraq, is the only common security threat for the SCO member states. Because of its extreme complexity, the Afghan problem is beyond the framework of this analysis. However, the very idea of establishing the SCO as a regional coalition was rooted in a widespread demand to stabilise Afghanistan and minimise immediate threats, such as terrorism and drug trafficking, from spreading and influencing the broader regional security. From its initial steps, the SCO has been trying to address the challenges posed by the long lasting multilevel and multidimensional conflict in Afghanistan.

A few months before al Qaida's attacks on US soil, on 15 June 2001, the SCO adopted the above-mentioned 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism'. It was followed by a series of other documents, such as the Agreement on the Database of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the SCO (2004), the Concept of Cooperation between SCO Member States in Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2005), the Convention on Counter Terrorism of the SCO (2009), and the Convention of the SCO on Combating Extremism (2017).

Among the first steps aimed at minimising the threat to all states bordering Afghanistan were the establishment of the SCO

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in June 2002, and the special SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005 (SACG - its activity was suspended in 2009 and resumed in October 2017). In 2012, Afghanistan was granted observer status in this organisation and, in 2015, the Afghan government applied for full membership.

Conversely, SCO member states are trying to avoid full-fledged involvement in the resolution of the intrastate Afghan conflict. Their approach is based on concerns that terrorism, drug trafficking, and extremism will expand across the Afghan borders and spread into the area of Greater Central Asia. Therefore, at least in the medium term, the SCO involvement will be limited by the framework of the SACG.

The SACG meeting in April 2019 in Bishkek was marked by the development of the SCO's Roadmap for Afghanistan. As China's President Xi Jinping confirmed in June 2019: "The SCO firmly supports the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process. We will make full use of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, step up cooperation in various fields and play a constructive role in the early realisation of peace, reconciliation, stability and development in Afghanistan." According to US military sources, the Afghan government controls only 53.8% of districts, "while 12.3% of them [are] under insurgent control or influence, and 33.9% of districts were contested." Therefore, the SCO's hesitation is understandable, and this organisation coordinates its activity with several international organisations – the UN, in particular – to contain a 'familiar' terrorism

threat rooted in the Afghan civil war. In the meantime, its member states are engaged in intensive bilateral relationships with Afghan stakeholders.

However, a new type of terrorist threat demands the immediate full-scale attention of all the states affiliated with the SCO. Instability and insecurity in Afghanistan at large has created a fertile ground for different terrorist Organisations – first of all, al Qaida and later ISIS. In January 2015, the latter announced the establishment of its Khorasan Province with inclusion of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, all states of Central Asia, and some parts of India and Russia.

Currently, losing ground in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS fighters are moving to Afghanistan and to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Antonio Giustozzi, one of the leading experts on Islamist insurgency in the region and author of 'The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad,' estimates that the number of ISIS fighters in Afghanistan is between 5,000 and 14,000, including those of Central Asian origins. Some sources indicate the number of the Central Asians fighters as roughly 7,000. Addressing the SCO Heads of State Council Meeting on 14 June 2019 in President Vladimir Putin stressed that "[the] immediate task now is to ensure the complete elimination of hotbeds of terrorism that remain in Syria, primarily in Idlib, and at the same time to increase the volume of humanitarian aid and assistance to the economic reconstruction of Syria provided by the international community." However, it is quite difficult to fully control and prevent a return of ISIS fighters to the Central Asian states, or to avert their attacks from Afghanistan. The most vulnerable is Tajikistan. It is already under direct assault by ISIS, which took responsibility for the two attacks in 2018 and 2019. In the meantime, some experts have expressed doubt as to ISIS was behind the attack on 6 November 2019.

Concluding Remarks

A growing number of unconventional threats, first and foremost proceeding, in SCO terminology, from 'three evils' – terrorism, separatism, and extremism – have called forth a unity and coordination of efforts and actions from SCO member states. In the meantime, although the (in)security parameters of member states are quite different, none can become involved in a proxy war.

Several factors allow the SCO to maintain a significant level of stability and security

as a result of a constellation of economic, political, and military measures:

A) Economic cooperation is a strong stabilising factor. Two main economic projects, such as the Chinese BRI, the Russian gas pipeline 'Power of Siberia', and others secure a long-term partnership of all SCO member states.

B) By keeping a low-profile involvement in the internal affairs of each other, the SCO is capable of 'locking' the ethnic and religious conflicts within the territory of a given state, therefore a priori excluding its spread into neighbouring states.

C) SCO member states oppose an external military presence in the area of their common strategic interests. Under the pressure from other member states, namely Russia and China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan required the US government to close its air military bases in Karshi-Khanabad (2005) and Manas (2014), respectively. Both bases were used by the US military in operations against the Taliban after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC. Russia has its military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China has a military base in Tajikistan and currently is considering the establishment of another in Kyrgyzstan.

D) The SCO pays serious attention to military cooperation. To improve the joint capacities to, first of all, combat terrorism, the SCO conducts biannually a series of 'Peace Mission' exercises, which include three phases: strategic consulting, preparation for a "battle," and the implementation of live-fire combat. However, observers have noted that the level of participation of the Central Asian states in the most recent 'Peace Mission - 2018' (2018) remained quite low and did not increase compared to the 2017 drill. Uzbekistan participated in it as an observer. One month later, in September 2018, Russia and China also conducted a joint full-scale military exercise 'Vostok-18'.

It should be noted that security for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is provided mainly by their bilateral military agreements with Russia and their participation in the Russia-led Common Security Treaty Organisation.

E) The SCO considers an extended US military presence and US diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan as a positive contribution to facilitation of the inter-Afghan reconciliation process. The US-Taliban "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," which was signed on 29 February 2020, in presence of leaders from Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, has been cautiously welcomed by the SCO.



In parallel with success stories, the SCO is facing several crucial challenges, some of them must be acknowledged.

- A growing and broadening Chinese economic presence in 'Greater Central Asia' will inevitably be followed by an expansion of its military presence. In the former Soviet republics, the Chinese military component (which includes also the growing arms sales) will complement and strengthen China's 'soft power'. Russia, being excluded from the BRI, uses its energy and arms supplies as a strong counterweight to balance Chinese activity in SCO member states. Sooner or later, however, Russia will view China's strategic partnership with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as a direct threat to its strategic interests in this part of the SCO's geostrategic area.
- There still remain several open questions regarding the common security threats. Answers to them fully depends on the results of, on the one hand, an inter-Afghan dialogue and, on the other hand, the Taliban-ISIS ongoing fight. A high probability exists that those Taliban fighters who disagree with the US-Taliban agreement will join the ranks of ISIS-Khorasan, therefore posing a very serious security threat to SCO member states.

Besides, the expelling of ISIS Chechen and Central Asian fighters from Syria and Iraq, and their penetration into the SCO area together with continuing activity of ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan, can provoke a revitalisation of local Islamist Organisations (Islamic Movement of Tajikistan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and others). It can also promote the further radicalisation of the most vulnerable strata of the population in SCO states, thereby threatening each state and the system of regional security in general. Conversely, it

cannot be excluded that leaders of the Central Asian states may exaggerate, to some degree, the threat from ISIS in order to receive more security guarantees and more resources.

- All SCO member states possess poor human rights records. To a different extent these states are authoritarian or tend toward authoritarianism. According to a Freedom House Index, the only democratic state among them is India. The fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism will undoubtedly affect the human rights situation in the SCO, through toughening of state control over any type of opposition. China, in particular, provides through its 'Digital Silk Road Project' surveillance systems to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

In sum, in dealing with ethno-political and religious conflicts as well as any bilateral tensions, a preferable and mutually acceptable approach within the SCO in long-term perspective will involve conflict management rather than conflict resolution. Meanwhile, the growing danger of terrorism demands from all member states strong involvement and coordination of efforts. Therefore, first, they will inevitably increase their cooperation within the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. Their further participation in 'Peace Mission' drills will also contribute to a strengthening of SCO's military capacities. Second, one can hope that the SCO's Roadmap for Afghanistan and the US-Taliban Agreement contain some common approaches to the resolution of the Afghan problem, which will allow all the parties concerned to coordinate their efforts further. ■