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## **THE EXPANSION OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: VIEW FROM CENTRAL ASIA**

**Abstract:** The article explores the expansion of the SCO in the light of the Central Asian countries' (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) interests. As it reveals, despite the changing regional focus of the SCO, the enlargement of the SCO could bring new opportunities for the Central Asian countries to promote broader cooperation and connectivity policy in Eurasia.

**Key words:** SCO, expansion, transformation, connectivity, geopolitical positioning.

**Introduction.** The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was established in 2001, primarily at the initiative of China and Russia and with the support of four Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - to strengthen security and stability in Central Asia, as well as regional cooperation. In the initial period, none of the founding countries could have foreseen that the SCO would soon expand, as at that time its successful establishment as an organization was still in doubt. However, this project, called as a product of the "geostrategic consensus between Russia and China" soon proved to be generally successful. New countries interested in its activities also appeared. In fact, this was not only the success of the SCO, but also a direct consequence of the transformation processes in international relations that had begun, i.e. the trends that began to shape a multipolar world.

**The SCO's expansion as a catalyst for transformation.** The SCO operated in the format of the "six" from 2001 to 2017. In 2017, Pakistan and India became full members, and at the same time, a new page in the history of the organisation - transformation processes - began as its former essence changed. There are still ongoing discussions among researchers about the impact of India's and Pakistan's membership in the SCO on the internal affairs of the organisation and its prospects in general. They can be divided into two groups - optimists and pessimists. The first group, i.e. optimists, suppose that the "quantitative" potential of the organisation has increased at the expense of two major Asian countries. As former SCO Secretary General Mr. Rashid Alimov noted, after the 2017 expansion, the block has transformed from a "pure" regional body into one of the largest regional organizations with a global agenda. The SCO region, which

occupies a significant part of the Eurasian continent, has created a unique transcontinental corridor connecting the regions of Asia-Pacific, South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. In addition, its members include China, the Russian Federation, Pakistan and India, countries with nuclear weapons and an important status in international relations.<sup>1</sup>

From another point of view, the permanent membership of India in the SCO will strengthen “horizontal” relations within the structure, i.e. equality between the member states. According to Mr. Bordachev, head of the Valdai Club, an analytical and discussion club in Russia, “with India’s accession to the SCO, a situation has arisen where one country (China) or a tandem (Russia-China) can no longer lead”.<sup>2</sup> In our view, this is in the interests of Central Asian countries as well, i.e. it gives them an opportunity to effectively use the competition between the bigger members of the organisation - China, Russia and India - in their own interests.

The membership of Pakistan and India in the organisation could make a positive contribution to solving the Afghan problem and stabilising the situation in South Asia as a whole, despite the fact that the skeptics still high. This is also fully in line with the national interests of the Central Asian countries. Stability in Afghanistan would serve to establish permanent and effective transport and trade relations between Central and South Asia, prosperity and stability of the two regions. Representatives of the optimistic group also believe that India as “the largest democracy in the world” will serve to strengthen the SCO’s positive image. This is especially noteworthy given the high level of negative attitudes towards the SCO in the West. In other words, India is practically destroying the scenario for the SCO to develop as a kind of political or military bloc directed against NATO.<sup>3</sup>

According to the pessimistic experts, who largely prevail among the academicians, the two main rivals – India and Pakistan, could overburden the SCO agenda with their disputes and lead the organisation to the paralysis.<sup>4</sup>

Observation of the SCO and its processes since 2017 shows that the opinions and forecasts of the representatives of both groups are only partially confirmed. The rivalry between India and Pakistan have not yet caused serious crisis situations in the organisation. In particular, the border conflicts that occurred between them in February 2019 were not brought officially on the SCO’s agenda. Especially, Pakistan steadily demonstrates

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<sup>1</sup>R. Alimov. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Global profile in international relations. All World Publishing House, 2018. - 400 c. C.50.

<sup>2</sup> "The Future of the SCO: Eurasian Round Table or Ghost Organisation?", held by the Bordachev Valdai Club on 26 January 2020. webinar speech // <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/budushchee-shos-evraziyskiy-kruglyy-stol-ili-organizatsiya-prizrak/>

<sup>3</sup>Naveed Ahmad. India’s and Pakistan’s Memberships Diminishes SCO’s Ability to Compete with NATO. July 18, 2017, the CACI Analyst. Efremenko D.V. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation after expansion: new challenges and prospects. // Bulletin of Moscow University. Series XXV. International relations and international politics. 2019;11(3):128-159.

<sup>4</sup>Alexei Kupriyanov. The SCO and the conflict between India and Pakistan. Expert Speak Raisina Debates. Dec 08, 2020 // <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/sco-conflict-between-india-pakistan>

its willingness to have high level cooperation with the SCO and its member states.<sup>5</sup>

The next event that could accelerate the SCO's transformation is the Islamic Republic of Iran's formal to the organisation in 2023 as a full member state. There are still many, even contradictory, opinions and views around this country's membership. Some analysts note that Iran's membership in the organisation is a direct product of the rapidly growing geopolitical competition for a new world order, i.e. the struggle between the West led by the US and the Sino-Russian tandem. That is, in their opinion, due to the Ukraine crisis, trade wars, sanctions and other conflicts, Moscow and Beijing once again openly demonstrated their will to form an order in Eurasia free from Western influence by admitting Iran into the SCO, which has been considered one of the worst enemies of the United States for decades.<sup>6</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the Iranian factor could allegedly turn the SCO into a political bloc directed against NATO and the West as a whole. Particularly among American and European observers, there is growing concern that by engaging Iran, China could further stimulate the SCO's intention to spread "illiberal values" in Eurasia.<sup>7</sup>

Without completely rejecting such kind of hypothesis', in our view, Iran's membership hardly change the situation in the SCO, as well as its agenda and geopolitical positioning. We can not exclude, that Iran could expect from the organisation the strengthening its ability to confront the US. However, Iran has a very pragmatic foreign policy, and for this reason we believe that its interests in the SCO are not limited to the idea of diminishing Western influence. As part of its "Look to the East" strategy, Tehran sees the SCO also as an opportunity to expand trade and economic relations and transport cooperation with the organisation's member states.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, changing the political nature of the SCO is a very serious issue that requires a lot of reforms. All decisions in the organisation are made on the basis of the consensus principle such reforms are practically impossible. At least India and Central Asian countries are not interested in worsening their relations with the West (that is, even if China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan support the idea of turning the SCO into an anti-Western bloc). On this basis, we believe that Iran's membership in the SCO will not significantly change the situation in the organisation and its geopolitical approaches.

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<sup>5</sup>Press Release – ISSI hosts Roundtable on “SCO: Pakistan’s Policy Priorities and Opportunities”. February 23, 2024 // <https://issi.org.pk/press-release-issi-hosts-roundtable-on-sco-pakistans-policy-priorities-and-opportunities/>

<sup>6</sup>[Hakki Uygur](https://www.irancenter.org/en/the-meaning-of-irans-membership-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization_-en-2398). The Meaning of Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. 15/07/[https://www.irancenter.org/en/the-meaning-of-irans-membership-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization\\_-en-2398](https://www.irancenter.org/en/the-meaning-of-irans-membership-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization_-en-2398)

<sup>7</sup>[Jonathan Fulton](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-sco-china-bri-illiberal-norms/). Iran joining the SCO isn't surprising. But Beijing's promotion of illiberal norms in Eurasia should get more attention. July 13, 2023. *Atlantic Council* // <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-sco-china-bri-illiberal-norms/>

<sup>8</sup>[Aydin Güven](https://www.irancenter.org/en/irans-membership-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-expectations-and-possible-scenarios-589), [Aydin Güven](https://www.irancenter.org/en/irans-membership-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-expectations-and-possible-scenarios-589). Iran's Membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Expectations and Possible Scenarios. 29/09/2021 // <https://www.irancenter.org/en/irans-membership-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-expectations-and-possible-scenarios-589>

Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation does not contradict the strategic interests of the Central Asian countries. Firstly, it serves to expand their co-operation with Iran in the political, security and, most importantly, trade, economic and transport. Iran's importance in the formation of international transport corridors connecting the region with the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf is very important. Secondly, Central Asian countries are now seeking to develop broader relations with the Middle East, especially with the Gulf Arab states. The map of the Middle East clearly shows that it is challenging for Central Asian countries to establish comprehensive relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf without maintaining good relations with Iran. In this sense, the SCO format may become more relevant as an important platform for multilateral cooperation to further accelerate relations between Central Asia and Iran.

On the other hand, there are some concerns that Iran's membership in the organisation will lead to a decline or loss of importance of Central Asia as the "geographical core" of the SCO.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the geographical expansion of the body and the accession of countries located in other regions with different political systems and models of economic development as well as foreign policy strategies would affect the traditional agenda of the SCO. At the same time, in our view, it is important for Central Asian countries to work together on how to capitalise on the SCO's expansion and to develop appropriate proposals and initiatives. It is in the interests of all of them to jointly develop and promote projects aimed at strengthening Central Asia's transport and economic links with the Middle East, resolving the Afghan problem, and combating the climate crisis within the framework of the SCO. Through such diplomatic initiatives, Central Asian countries can effectively use the SCO in the new geopolitical environment for their strategic interests.

With the admission of Belarus to the SCO in 2024, the number of its full members will reach 10, and for the first time in the history of the organisation there will be a "purely European state" from geographical point of view. In a sense, this is next achievement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. However, we believe that Belarus's membership will have virtually no impact on its transformation. True, Belarus will become Russia's closest "ally" in the organisation, but it will not affect the balance of power within the SCO.

**Way forward.** We suppose that some other countries, such as Azerbaijan and Afghanistan could have interests to become full members of the SCO in the future. Azerbaijan has been a dialogue partner in the SCO since 2016 and officially applied for observer status in 2018. In light of its new foreign policy

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<sup>9</sup>Meray Ozat. The SCO Summit: Iran's Accession and Implications for Central Asia // <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/the-sco-summit-irans-accession-and-implications-for-central-asia>

of turning towards the East, the SCO could become an important platform for multilateral co-operation.

As for Afghanistan's candidacy, the country has had observer status in the organisation since 2012. Currently, due to the non-recognition of the Taliban government, Afghanistan's participation in the SCO is temporarily suspended. But this process may not last too long. Central Asian countries and SCO members in general are interested in the early establishment of stability and peace in Afghanistan and its direct participation in the economic and social processes taking place in the region. If internal stability is fully ensured in Afghanistan in the near future, a strong central Government is formed and it is recognised by the international community, the issue of its full membership to the SCO could soon become relevant. Geographically, Afghanistan should be a "natural part" of the SCO space. Moreover, its geopolitical importance for the region is very high.

Of course, the expansion of the SCO depends largely on many factors. First, on how the SCO will further develop as an multilateral institution. Second, on the strategic positioning of its leading members such as China, Russia, India and partly Iran. Nevertheless, the influence of Central Asian countries on the organisation's activities and internal processes is also important. They can demonstrate their importance as effective "mediators" in mitigating and compromising the conflicting positions of major members on multilateral cooperation.

In conclusion, we believe that the expansion of the SCO would not led to serious fundamental upheavals', including its geopolitical essence.

At the same time, the enlargement of the SCO's geographical space creates new opportunities for promoting multilateral cooperation in the trade, economic and transport, and if this potential realised in the future, they may lead to serious geopolitical and geo-economic changes on the Eurasian continent. Expansion of the organisation may increase the level of effectiveness in practical terms by increasing uncertainty about its future transformation. However, the SCO, which occupies a large geographical space in Eurasia, encompassing important regions of the continent and some 30 countries (members, observers and dialogue partners), continues its evolution as an important political and diplomatic forum and an institution of broader cooperation. From this point of view, further expansion of the SCO will affect the status of Central Asia as the geographical core of the organisation, but will open up new opportunities for international and multilateral cooperation.