



Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Ensuring Regional Security Cooperation

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Asia is the most complicated geostrategic region of the world and the Asian countries have numerous security, economic, and political issues to resolve. Even though various international and regional organizations have been approached by the Asian states, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has managed to emerge as the most successful institution.

The combined efforts of Russia and China to promote regional peace, security, and stability led to the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In 1996, the Heads of States and their delegates from Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan came together to promote trust among the member states, disarmament of border regions, and facilitate regional peace and cooperation through the platform of “Shanghai Five” . The regional and global developments and the widening scope led to the evolution of Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the year 2001.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established in the year 2001 and ever since it has become an active regional player by attaining significance in the overall strategic and security architecture of Asia. Eradication of Extremism, Separatism, and Terrorism is one of the fundamental goals of the SCO. With the changing strategic and security trends, Russia and China are now more focused on the prevailing security issues and energy potentials.

Presently, SCO has eight permanent members which include China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India. It also has four observer states.



They are Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia. While Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey, and Sri Lanka are the six dialogue partners.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization & Enhanced Regional Security

The continuous efforts have been made by SCO to counter the common security threats and challenges, promote dialogue, enhance security by combating terrorism, separatism, extremism, and even cyberterrorism. SCO has also actively worked for the enhancement of international information security.

Recognizing the increased number of terrorist attacks in the world, SCO plans to use advanced methods to combat terrorism and extremism related activities. Moreover, SCO encourages its member states to join forces in their mutual fight against terrorism and the international community to collaborate for an anti-terrorist coalition to counter this global threat.

In this regard, **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)**, a permanent organ of SCO, has been established to maintain and promote cooperation among the member states against the three fundamental evils that are Separatism, Extremism, and Terrorism. Furthermore, it focused on collecting and exchanging information regarding terrorist activities, counter-terrorism policy drafting, and to maintain cooperative relations between the SCO member states and the institutions working towards similar objectives. RATS, under SCO, proved to be effective in achieving its core objectives. Due to the efficient coordination by RATS, the relevant authorities of the member states successfully managed to prevent 20 terrorist attacks between the years 2011-2015. They also managed to deter 650 crimes of extremism, and 440 terrorist training camps and 1700 members of international terrorist organizations were neutralized.

The core objective of RATS i.e. eradication of Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism makes it especially relevant in the case of Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares its border with four of the SCO member states (China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan). Hence, the instability and poor security



situation of Afghanistan have direct effects on the region mainly South Asia and Central Asia.

Instability and Radicalization in Afghanistan have often been discussed in SCO summits. In the year 2013, the leaders from the SCO member states emphasized the

idea of a stable Afghanistan. As the peace and security of South Asia and Central Asia depended on how the situation unfolds in Afghanistan.

To cater to the Afghan issue, certain measures have been taken by the SCO. In Astana (the year 2005), a protocol on the creation of the Afghanistan-SCO contact group was adopted by SCO. It mainly aimed at increasing the cooperation between the two parties on issues of mutual interest. Moreover, a conference on Afghanistan was organized by SCO in Moscow. The conference mainly focused on the areas of mutual interest between SCO and Afghanistan. In another SCO summit in Astana 2011, the political instability and the unresolved situation of Afghanistan were seen as the fundamental threat to the peace and security of Central Asia. The leaders of SCO member states further agreed that the Afghan crisis could not be resolved through military means. The socio-economic situation of Afghanistan needs to be improved to facilitate peace and stability in the country. Providing economic and development opportunities will eventually support the stabilization of Afghanistan.

For this purpose, initiatives have been taken by the Central Asian states. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan enterprises have facilitated in providing electricity to Afghanistan. Afghanistan has also been included in a major energy project i.e. TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India). Under this project, India and Pakistan will be provided Turkmen gas via Afghanistan.

An Afghanistan Action Plan has also been designed by SCO which was announced at a special Afghanistan Conference organized by SCO. The plan intended to align its

objectives with the broader strategy formulated and adopted by the US-NATO. The Afghanistan Action Plan by SCO focused on joint counter-terrorism operations, combating drug trafficking, and other related organized crimes. It further called for Afghanistan to be involved (in a phased manner) in SCO collaborations, and invited Afghan State institutions to participate in law-enforcement exercises planned and conducted by SCO. The training of drug agencies, combating drug money laundering, and enhancing border security were also focused.

The fact that Afghanistan is yet not politically stabilized faces trans-border threats such as terrorism, Islamic militancy, drug trafficking, etc. and lacks the required forces to maintain internal peace and stability of the country poses serious threats and challenges for the entire region which is likely to experience the spillover effects.

The entire situation simultaneously provided an opportunity for SCO to place the Afghanistan issue on its scope area. Despite being eager to play an active role in stabilizing Afghanistan, SCO needed US-NATO cooperation as the space available for SCO to play its role in Afghanistan was limited due to US-NATO presence there.

Besides, certain organizational limitations also limited SCO's role. The accession of new members to the organization proves to be beneficial in certain situations but it also has its adverse effects. In the case of the Afghan issue, incorporating new members proved to be beneficial as various regional countries have varying interests in the stabilized Afghanistan. Hence, enhancing the organization's capability to deal with the issue

more effectively. On the other hand, it can at times lead to a clash of interest between the new members and the core members of the organization.

India and Pakistan were the latest addition to the SCO. The two rivals became the permanent members of the SCO summit in the year 2017. Accepting of India and Pakistan as the permanent members in SCO has broadened the scope of the organization, both in geographic and thematic terms. Their entry into the organization will be providing an opportunity for SCO to encompass the long-standing Kashmir issue.

Despite being successful in resolving several disputes among the newly independent (former USSR) states, SCO could not play the role of a dispute resolving body in case of India-Pakistan dispute. India and Pakistan, being arch-rivals, have a long history of disputes and conflicts. One of them being the Kashmir issue.

In August 2019, after India imposed curfew in Kashmir, the tensions between India and Pakistan escalated and both the states reached the brink of war. With both states having nuclear weapons, not only the two states were at risk but the stability and security of the entire region were in danger. Even though SCO's Charter Clause 2 mentions the responsibility of the organization to resolve any dispute that arises between the member states, yet it is viewed that SCO may review its non-binding model, so as to play a more assertive role for complex dispute resolutions.

Pakistan viewed SCO as the most successful platform in the Eurasian region that is likely to bring and maintain peace and stability in the South Asian region. The inclusion of

India and Pakistan has resulted in the expansion of SCO by covering Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. This expansion will also support linkage and connectivity between the SCO and BRICS states.



SCO, NATO, & UN: Collaboration or Competition in Ensuring Security?

Complying with the well-known norms of the International Law and the Principles of the United Nations, SCO firmly believes in Diplomacy being the most effective tool of conflict resolution. SCO in collaboration with the United Nations has initiated several projects which aim at the enhancement of international cooperation against mutual security threats. A few of the notable events include “The United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Jointly Countering Challenges and Threats” organized in the year 2016 in New York, and “The United Nations and Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Fight Against Drugs: Common Threats and Joint Actions” held in March 2017 in Vienna.

The world sees SCO as the future role model and key geostrategic power player among the international community. The SCO secretariat under the guidance of His Excellency Vladimir Norov, Secretary-General of SCO, is striving hard to achieve the desired goals. The present Secretary-General has reached out to all the member states and is likely to take SCO to new heights.