

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Shanghai Cooperation Organization Challenging the West

Kashif Ehtisham, LTC, Pakistan Army CSAG/CCJ5

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1. **Subject.** Is SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) **building up to challenge the US lead West?**
2. **Purpose.** After the recent extraordinary gathering of 14 x states at Uzbekistan under the ambit of SCO and its expansion with full membership of Iran, critics labeled the SCO as ‘NATO of East’ and assessed it as an emerging politico-military bloc. This paper will **analyze the SCO expansion** and **offer recommendations for CENTCOM.**



3. **BLUF**
 - a. The Samarkand summit comes in an exceptional geo-political circumstance, influenced by ‘Strategic Competition’, Russian invasion of Ukraine, US-Chinese clash over Taiwan, energy and food crises and JCPOA impasse.
 - b. The SCO expansion fully demonstrates that the organization is not an exclusive ‘small clique’ but expanding as an open and inclusive ‘big family’; Arab Countries are also embraced in the SCO to expand and diversify the organization’s influence.
 - c. The SCO holds tremendous future potential in the realm of international relations and particularly in the economic domain.
 - d. The SCO has gained greater significance with the hostilities in Ukraine, where an economically weaker Russia is turning to the East in general, and China in particular.



4. **Significant Conclusions**
 - a. The Western dominated world order is challenged by a ‘strategic alliance of convenience’ between China and Russia against the US; positioning the SCO as an alternative to Western multilateral groups and shows signs of resistance to the existing world order.
 - b. SCO expands to the Eurasian heartland; Mackinder¹ said ‘whosoever has access to the Eurasian region leads the world.’
 - c. Through the SCO platform, both China & Russia demonstrates to the world the inefficacy of western sanctions and a counter to the intended isolation and international criticism.



¹ Sir Halford John Mackinder (15 February 1861 – 6 March 1947) was an English geographer, academic and politician, who is regarded as one of the founding fathers of both geopolitics and geo-strategy

² https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xiatbricssco/2015-07/11/content_21252355.htm

- d. The SCO accounts for 1/3 of global GDP which is more than US \$23 trillion, about 40 % of the world's population and nearly 2/3 of the Eurasian landmass.
- e. The SCO may not end in a critical security alliance like NATO until its member countries have resolved border disputes such as India and Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The existing Organization's security structures, such as RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure), have yet to prove their utility.
- f. SCO offers an opportunity to Iran, aligning towards China & Russia as the chances of reviving JCPOA appear bleak; Iran's membership is balanced by inviting Arab countries, such as KSA & Egypt, to become dialogue partners.
- g. Emerging countries like India, an avowed 'strategic partner of the US' is also more aligned with the bloc, which is detrimental to US interests.

Figure 1 - Potential of SCO.²

5. **Analysis**

a. **Russia**

- (1) Through SCO, it exhibits to the US and the West that their attempts to isolate and sanction Russia have not worked; they may utilize the platform to seek new energy customers.
- (2) Russia is aiding China through the SCO to strengthen the 'Anti-Western alliance' by corroborating on Chinese initiatives; however, Chinese initiatives also alarm Russian strategists who see China encroaching on Moscow's Central Asian interests.
- (3) Implicit criticism by Xi and Modi underscored that Putin now faces perhaps his most challenging moment of recent months; may force Putin to decide the conclusion of its so called 'special military operations' against Ukraine.

b. **China**

- (1) Through the SCO, China is bolstering its influence with CAS (especially Kazakhstan) bordering Xinjiang, and securing its backyard.
- (2) Xi's trip to Kazakhstan was intended to signal confidence in his third term and reinforce his desire to be seen as leading an anti-Western alliance.
- (3) Xi's visit to a region historically dominated by Russia also highlights that Beijing may be becoming the most important partner in the relationship.
- (4) The SCO platform provides China the opportunity to complete Xi's flagship foreign policy project, the BRI.
- (5) China continues to dominate the SCO's economic agenda, including negotiations on the establishment of a Free Trade Area (FTA), an SCO development bank, and Beijing offering \$10 billion in loans to member states.

c. **Iran**

- (1) Iran is looking to escape diplomatic and economic isolation and outmaneuver sanctions, as the SCO membership will benefit it from streamlined economic, commercial and energy cooperation with China and Russia.
- (2) Before the UN General Assembly session, Iran using the SCO participation to show the West that it has options in this multipolar world order.
- (3) SCO membership will provide Iran with an insurance policy in case of a showdown at the UN Security Council over the talks – Moscow and Beijing to thwart attempts to new sanctions.

- (4) With the impasse at the JCPOA, Iran demonstrates that it is not beholden to a deal with the US, but can cooperate more intensely with China & Russia to build immunity from Western sanctions and pressures.

d. **Türkiye**

- (1) Türkiye is the first NATO member to have formal relation with the SCO, which is often portrayed as the Eastern "anti-NATO."
- (2) Türkiye, by joining the SCO, may be messaging the EU, which it has been trying to join for decades.
- (3) Through the SCO, Türkiye optimally strengthens its present role as mediator in resolving the Ukrainian war and ensuring food security.
- (4) Owing to its peculiar geographic advantageous position, Türkiye is balancing its relations with strategic powers in the East and the West; endorsing the multipolar world.
- (5) Facing economic upheaval, President Erdogan seeks to strengthen bilateral relations and deepen ties with China and Russia.

e. **India**

- (1) India is adopting a more autonomous role in the geopolitical chessboard, realizing the importance of the region and engaging with both China and Russia.
- (2) Modi met with Putin and assured India's strategic alliance with Russia besides the Western restrictions, securing India's energy interests at the cost of being seen as a US core ally.
- (3) Modi met with the Turkish President to influence Erdogan on his stance on Kashmir.
- (4) India has traditionally relied on Russia to pursue its objectives in the Eurasian region. While Russia's hold on the region becomes shaky and dependence on China is growing, India is pursuing new approaches to the region.

f. **CAS**

- (1) CAS would use SCO to strengthen the scope, utility, potential and importance of the China and Central Asian 'C+C5 format' and the success of the BRI in the region.
- (2) The SCO affords the opportunity to fully unlock the transit potential of the Central Asian region with access to world markets.

6. **Recommendations**

- a. As SCO includes many AOR countries, CENTCOM to continuously engage with partner countries towards the 'common goals & mutual interests' through 'renewed partnership strategy' to counter Chinese and Russian influence.
- b. Optimal engagement approach through 'people, partners & innovation' may keep the AOR states inclined towards the US.
- c. AOR countries are 'natural historical allies' of the US; with in the contested 'Strategic Competition' (both in the economic and military domains), so a comprehensive commitment is essential.
- d. Instead of erstwhile security related engagements, the use of PGII platform, to invest in 'signature infrastructure projects', aimed at diversifying the partnership may be more effective.