



## **Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO): An Overview**

### **KEY POINTS**

- As it nears its fourteenth birthday, the SCO's main achievement arguably lies in its successful role in providing Russia and China with a degree of mutual reassurance in Central Asia.
- There is *theoretical* scope for the SCO to play an enhanced role in future in international co-operation over Afghanistan, especially if, as anticipated, its membership expands.

### **DETAIL**

This paper considers the evolution of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), fourteen years on from its creation.

*What is the SCO, & what purpose does it serve?*

**The SCO is a regional inter-governmental organisation** established with the aim of promoting mutual trust and 'good-neighbourly co-operation' among its member-states on a range of economic and security-related issues. Its membership currently comprises six states: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan<sup>1</sup>. The SCO's origins lie in the signing in 1996 in Shanghai of an agreement on Confidence-Building measures in border regions between China and its four contiguous post-Soviet neighbours (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). This original 'Shanghai Five' was augmented by Uzbekistan's accession upon the SCO's formal establishment as an international organisation in 2001.

**The SCO has established an institutional structure**, comprising a Secretariat in Beijing, a Regional Anti-Terrorism Centre (RATC, Tashkent), a Business Council, and a rolling programme of Ministerial and other high-level meetings. Its activities include periodic military exercises and election monitoring within SCO member-states. The SCO convenes a Heads of State Summit once a year (most recently in Tajikistan in September 2014). Its rotating Chairmanship is currently held by Russia, which will host the next SCO Summit in July 2015 in Ufa (Bashkortostan).

**External views of the SCO's significance have varied considerably over the last decade** – some commentators have portrayed it as a putative 'NATO of the East', whilst others have questioned its relevance altogether. In reality, the SCO serves a

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<sup>1</sup> The SCO also has several observer-states (Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan) and 'partners for dialogue' (Belarus, Sri Lanka, Turkey).

variety of purposes for its different member-states. At the most fundamental level, there are certain basic commonalities that unite the interests of them all, namely:

- A desire to combat perceived common **external security threats**, primarily in the form of instability and drugs trafficking emanating from Afghanistan;
- A desire to combat the **internal threats** of extremism, terrorism and separatism that each state believes it faces; and
- A desire to support the principle of **non-interference in sovereign states' internal affairs** and support the concept of 'multi-polarity' in international relations.

Individual SCO member-states also have interests of their own in being part of the organisation:

- For **Russia & China**, it offers a vehicle via which they can co-ordinate their respective activities in Central Asia.
- For the **Central Asians**, the SCO offers high-level attention from two P5 members and, as they see it, a mechanism via which they can pursue their respective 'multi-vector' policies.

#### *What the SCO isn't*

Contrary to some of the more grandiose predictions in its early years as to the direction in which it would evolve, there are a number of conclusions that can also be drawn as to the type of organisation that the SCO does not represent:

- *It's not an integration body:* There have been no moves towards normative convergence among the SCO's members over e.g. a single economic space.
- *It's not a military alliance:* The SCO's member-states engage in a degree of intelligence-sharing via the RATC, and run an annual 'Peace Mission' military exercise aimed at improving co-ordination in response to terrorist attacks within the SCO area. Beyond these activities, however, development of any 'hard security' role for the SCO has been limited (as illustrated by the absence of any significant SCO role in responding to 2010's mass inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan).
- *It's not (yet) a development body:* Although China regularly uses SCO events as a platform for announcements on new financing for Central Asia, such financing is not currently channelled via the SCO itself.
- *It doesn't do mediation:* The SCO has played no role in mediating solutions to Central Asia's inter-state disputes (e.g. over new hydro-power projects).

#### *Expansion & Future Prospects*

The SCO remains sufficiently attractive for several of its current observer-states – **India, Iran and Pakistan** – to be interested in joining it. Were any of them to do so, this would represent the SCO's first expansion since 2001. Following a moratorium

on expansion for several years, decisions adopted at the 2014 SCO Summit paved the way for new members to be accepted, prompting speculation – so far unconfirmed – that India and Pakistan might formally start the application process to join at this year's Summit (Iran is ineligible whilst international sanctions remain in place against it).

**It's unclear what the implications would be of expanding the SCO's membership in this way.** A positive interpretation would be that adding India and Pakistan (and, ultimately, Iran) ought logically to increase the organisation's focus on promoting stability in Afghanistan as arguably the major common security challenge faced by such an expanded SCO membership.

**The SCO undoubtedly has a role to play in providing mutual reassurance for Russia and China** – although both still devote more attention to their bilateral relationships with the Central Asian states than they do to the SCO itself. Nonetheless, the SCO continues to merit attention for several reasons:

- It offers an important litmus-test regarding the state of Sino-Russian co-operation in general;
- The SCO's Central Asian states themselves take it seriously, regarding the SCO as an important component of their respective 'multi-vector foreign policies';
- There is the *potential* for the SCO in future to contribute even more actively to the solution of problems (CT, counter-narcotics, stabilisation of Afghanistan) in which the West has a strong policy interest.

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