

The Role of the Sco in Countering the Terrorism in the Countries of Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism is one of the main threats to human security in the modern world. Increased activity of terrorist underground in Central Asian countries and deteriorating situation in Afghanistan raises the problem of terrorism to a new level and calls for assistance of international and regional organisations in addressing this issue. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the new political leadership coming to power in the country in 2021, extremely pessimistic scenarios are emerging. There is a high probability of aggravation of regional challenges and threats in the form of terrorism, drug smuggling, illegal migration and humanitarian catastrophe.

The SCO, being an important element of the Eurasian security architecture, has a good potential to counter these threats. Over the years of the SCO's existence, the organisation has developed a solid legislative framework and established coordination mechanisms to counter regional threats. The national interests and security of the SCO member states are directly related to the situation in Afghanistan. The central goal of the SCO is directly related to countering and combating the "three evils": terrorism, separatism and extremism. The relevance of this paper is connected with the growth of radicalisation in the Central Asian region, so the proposed article analyses the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in countering terrorism in the countries of the Central Asian region, examines the history of the origin and emergence of terrorism in the region, and details the key areas of the organisation. The aim of the article is to assess the potential of the SCO in terms of responding to new security challenges of the member states, primarily in the Central Asian space. To achieve the goal, the following research methods were used: theoretical and methodological analysis, descriptive method and content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

At present, the SCO is a reputable international organisation, the role of which is growing every year in both regional and global political processes. Initially, the SCO in the form of the "Shanghai Five" (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) was created to solve border problems between China and the post-Soviet states, which allowed increasing the level of mutual trust in each other. Later in the process of SCO evolution, the member states expanded the range of strategic objectives of their activities and demonstrated an example of a new model of regional co-operation in the spheres of security, economy and culture. At the present stage, the SCO, being an important element of the Eurasian security architecture, faces the strategic task of preventing destabilisation in Eurasia due to the regime change in Afghanistan in August 2021. In this regard, the SCO, which has broad capabilities, is required to pursue an active policy in the Afghan direction.

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was announced on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai (PRC) by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.¹ Prior to the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, there was a political association "Shanghai Five", whose members were five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and China. "The Shanghai Five was based on the Agreement on Strengthening Confidence-Building in the Military Field in the Border Area (Shanghai, 1996) and the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the Border Area (Moscow, 1997). These two documents laid down a mechanism of mutual confidence-building in the military field in the border areas and contributed to the establishment of truly partnership relations. After Uzbekistan was included in the organisation (2001), the "Five" became the "Six" and was renamed the SCO.

PREREQUISITES AND REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF TERRORISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

At the inception of the Organisation, the main objectives were to stabilise the situation in Central Asia, strengthen friendship and good-neighbourliness between the member states, and develop cooperation in political, economic, scientific and other spheres. However, among the SCO's areas of focus, the most fundamental and important is the collective counteraction of countries against the spread of extremism, terrorism and separatism - the main three "evils" in the Central Asian region. The fight against these challenges remains a priority today.

As the organisation operates and unites the countries of Central Asia, it is useful to consider the general situation of the region, especially with regard to the origins of the problem of terrorism. The countries of Central Asia are secular states that were part of the Soviet Union until 1991. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these countries came under increasing pressure from a range of radical Islamist forces that operated primarily on a cross-border basis. This was influenced by many factors - firstly, the collapse of the USSR and the economic and political problems that followed. Secondly, the geopolitical position of countries in areas of instability and conflict. Thirdly, the activation of the ISIS terrorist group in the region.² Many researchers on the problems of Central Asian countries note that the spread of religious extremism and terrorism in the Central Asian region has a long-term character. In addition to the factors listed above, this is fuelled by a number of complex and complex causes, which can be divided into internal and external factors.

The internal factors include the socio-economic component. In his article, I.A. Seleznev notes that "first of all, the threat of extremism and terrorism in the Central Asian republics is connected with the religious factor, the spread of Muslim radicalism (also called "political Islam", "Islamism", "jihadism"). Radical Islamism, which is in the underground, is ready to rise in case of any political destabilisation and actively uses social problems to discredit secular ruling regimes" [6] Unfortunately, Central Asian countries have all the necessary socio-economic conditions for recruitment: widespread poverty, high levels of corruption, unemployment, social and domestic insecurity among a large part of the population, significant social and property inequality, low efficiency of institutions, which makes them highly vulnerable to any kind of cross-border risks.

External factors include the geopolitical situation of the Central Asian countries. This region is surrounded by such zones of political instability and conflicts as Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, the Middle East and the Middle East. Experts assess the degree of vulnerability of Central Asian countries to radical Islamic forces in different ways.

¹ History of the SCO // Shanghai Cooperation Organisation URL: <http://rus.sectsco.org/docs/about/faq.html> (ACCEESSED: 06.06.2022).

² An organisation banned in Uzbekistan

The unresolved problems with water supply, as well as conflicts with the division and crossing of borders, which leads to the aggravation of contradictions and instability, and this is used by various extremist groups, have an impact on the situation. But Central Asia's security is most threatened by the situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have seized power and provide large-scale organisational and material support to terrorist groups, in particular the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the radical Tajik opposition and Uighur separatists.

Thus, the emergence of the terrorist threat in Central Asia is driven by internal and external factors that include geopolitical, cross-border and social issues.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM

The integration and co-operation of countries among themselves is inextricably linked to international legal regulation, i.e. the association of states on the basis of signing international legal acts.

Since 2001, SCO members have signed a number of key documents on co-operation in the fight against terrorism. (table №1) With the signing of various important documents and agreements it can be noted that cooperation in the fight against terrorism has been significantly strengthened, underlining mutual trust and openness among the organisation's members.

Table №1 SCO documents on co-operation in combating terrorism³

Date	Place	Name of the document
June 2001	Shanghai, China	"Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism"
June 2002	St.Petersburg, Russia	"SCO Charter"
June 2004	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	"Tashkent Declaration of the Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation"
June 2006	Shanghai, China	"Declaration of the Five-Year Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation"
June 2007	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	"Bishkek Declaration"
August 2008	Dushanbe, Tajikistan	"Dushanbe Declaration"
March 2009	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	"Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation against Terrorism"
August 2010	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	"Agreement on Cooperation between the Governments of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Combating Crime"
June 2011	Astana, Kazakhstan	"Astana Declaration of the Decade of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation"
June 2012	Beijing, China	"Declaration of the Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States on Building a Region of Long-term Peace and Co-Prosperty"
June 2017	Astana, Kazakhstan	"Statement of the Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States on Joint Counteraction to International Terrorism"
May 2019	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	"Bishkek Declaration of the Council of Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States"
November	Moscow,	("Statement of the Council of Heads of State of the

³ Compiled by the author on the basis of the official website SCO (<http://rus.sectsco.org/documents/>)

2020	Russia	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States on countering the spread of terrorist, separatist and extremist ideology, including on the Internet
September 2021	Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Dushanbe Declaration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the SCO"
September 2022	Samarkand, Uzbekistan	Samarkand Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States"
July 2023	New Delhi, India	"New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States"

In a short time, the SCO has managed to form an effective structure, a legal framework attractive to new participants and become one of the leading players not only in the Central Asian region, but also in world politics. It should be noted that the distinctive features of the normative basis of counter-terrorism in the framework of SCO integration are the specific nature of legal provisions - this is due to the fact that the adopted documents do not have vague formulations, and one can also note the focus on a predominantly forceful method of combating terrorism, in the case of the SCO, peaceful missions and anti-terrorist exercises. The importance of the international legal framework for countering terrorism at the SCO level can hardly be overestimated, as all member states are interested in co-operation. Moreover, the countries are interested in further developing and expanding such co-operation. The international legal framework of the SCO allows us to talk about the normative provision of stable and at the same time intensively developing relations between Russia and the states of Central Asia and China. Moreover, from the Russian Federation's point of view, such a normative framework meets its national interests.

THE SCO'S SECURITY ACTIVITIES

Since the SCO member states are located in a large-scale "arc of instability" that starts in North Africa and the Middle East and passes through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to Central and South Asia, one of the key areas of the organisation's activities is the maintenance of regional stability and security. In this matter, the SCO has already managed to do a lot [7]: firstly, it has developed a solid regulatory and contractual framework to counter traditional challenges and threats, which is constantly being improved; secondly, joint anti-terrorist exercises are held; regular meetings of the heads of relevant ministries and agencies are organised. One of the main achievements of the SCO was the establishment of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in 2002, headquartered in Tashkent. RATS has become a coordinating centre in the fight against the "three forces of evil" at the regional and global levels.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the wave of "colour revolutions" that swept through the post-Soviet countries made the SCO particularly interested in regional security issues. Against the backdrop of Western attempts to overthrow unwanted political regimes, the SCO member states made an important decision to assume responsibility for maintaining regional stability and security. Thus, on 5 July 2005, at the SCO summit in Astana, the SCO member states called on the United States to decide on the timing of the withdrawal of its bases from Central Asian countries [8].

The SCO's increased attention to security issues was evidenced by the SCO Development Strategy until 2025, which was adopted at the summit in Ufa in July 2015. The document noted that the organisation's priorities in ensuring regional security and stability will remain the issues of countering terrorism, separatism, extremism, illicit trafficking in drugs, weapons, ammunition and explosives, nuclear and radioactive materials, etc. [9]

In 2018, the SCO treaty and legal framework was enriched with new documents in the field of security: first, the Programme of Cooperation of the SCO Member States in Countering Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2019-2021 was adopted; second, the Anti-Drug

Strategy of the SCO Member States for 2018-2023 was approved. [10].

Within the SCO, anti-terrorist exercises have become one of the main mechanisms in the sphere of ensuring regional security. Three types of such exercises can be distinguished [10]: exercises of special services and law enforcement agencies under the auspices of the SCO RATS; joint border operations (JBOs); joint anti-terrorist exercises of the armed forces "Peace Mission". In March 2021, the 36th meeting of the SCO RATS approved a draft programme of cooperation in countering terrorism, separatism and extremism for 2022-2024. Also at the meeting, representatives of special services of the SCO member states agreed on the issues of holding in 2021 the next joint anti-terrorist exercise of the SCO countries "Pabbi Antiterror 2021", the eighth meeting of the heads of border services of the SCO member states and the eighth international scientific-practical conference of the SCO RATS [11].

More than five and a half thousand servicemen and several thousand units of military equipment from 8 SCO member states took part in the "Peace Mission - 2021" held from 20 to 24 September 2021 at the Donguz training range in the Orenburg region [12]. Against the backdrop of the unstable situation in Afghanistan, when the threat of destabilisation of the regional situation has increased significantly, the Peace Mission 2021 manoeuvres will make it possible to train the SCO military to respond promptly to possible terrorist attacks. [12]

THE AFGHANISTAN ISSUE WITHIN THE SCO AND THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Afghan issue occupies one of the central places in the collective work of the SCO, as the situation in this country is characterised by permanent instability and directly affects the national interests of the SCO member states. Back in 2005, in order to prevent negative developments in Afghanistan, it was decided to establish the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, which became a platform for joint consultations. An unprecedented event took place in 2012 at the next summit of the organization, when it was decided to grant Afghanistan observer status, bypassing the status of a dialogue partner [13].

The regime changes in Afghanistan in August 2021 directly put forward the SCO's task to intensify its work in this area. At present, the SCO member states are required to pay great attention to such aggravated problems as drug trafficking, the flow of refugees, and the spread of radical Islamism. The problem of providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan is acutely on the agenda. The US decision to freeze the financial assets of the former Afghan government in the amount of \$9.5 billion puts the new Afghan authorities in an extremely difficult situation. [14].

However, the SCO member countries have different approaches to resolving the Afghan issue. For example, the position of Tajikistan sharply differs from the positions of other members of the organisation. The President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon spoke out against recognising the Taliban (banned in Russia) as a legitimate force in Afghanistan and believes that an inclusive government with the participation of representatives of all ethnic groups should be established in the country as soon as possible [15]. Afghanistan is home to 46% of ethnic Tajiks, whose representatives, according to E. Rakhmon, should be involved in the government [16]. Meanwhile, Tajikistan is connected with Afghanistan by a number of strategically important transport and communication projects, among which the transport corridor Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran and the railway Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan should be mentioned. Successful implementation of these projects will allow Tajikistan to move onto the path of sustainable economic development. Consequently, the Tajik authorities will strive to stabilise the internal political situation in Afghanistan as soon as possible.

At the official level, the Kyrgyz leadership did not recognize the new Afghan authorities, but stressed the need to maintain dialogue with the Taliban[17]. Meanwhile, in September 2021, on

the initiative of the President of Kyrgyzstan S. Zhaparov, a mission to Afghanistan was sent to Afghanistan. Zhaparov, a delegation headed by Taalatbek Masadykov, Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz Security Council, was sent to Afghanistan in September 2021. The delegation's task was to hand over the humanitarian cargo to the Afghan authorities and hold diplomatic talks with them. During the meeting, the parties discussed the internal political situation in Afghanistan and exchanged views on ways to ensure regional security.

The leadership of Uzbekistan has also demonstrated a willingness to negotiate with the new Afghan authorities and expressed hope for the implementation of joint bilateral projects once the financial situation in the country stabilises and assets are unfrozen. At the summit in Dushanbe on 17 September 2021, Uzbek President Sh. Mirziyoyev proposed unfreezing Afghanistan's state assets in foreign banks in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the country [19]. In Uzbekistan, great hopes are pinned on the project of the trans-Afghan corridor (Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar), the implementation of which can be continued only after the stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan. However, at this stage it seems that transport and logistics projects lobbied by Uzbekistan through the territory of Afghanistan are unlikely to be implemented in the near future.

Kazakhstan adheres to a cautious position and is ready to establish contacts with the new Afghan authorities to solve acute humanitarian problems [20].

Turkmenistan, which is not a member of the SCO but shares a geographical border with Afghanistan, plays an important role in maintaining regional stability and security. Thus, attending the SCO summit in Dushanbe on 17 September 2021 as a guest of honour, G. Berdimuhamedov stressed that Turkmenistan is ready for active cooperation with the SCO countries in such areas as combating terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking [21]. Against the background of the complicated domestic political situation in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan's participation in the SCO meetings seems to be extremely significant, as it will make the multilateral fight against regional challenges and threats more effective. Thus, the Turkmen authorities have expressed interest in bilateral talks with the new Afghan leadership. As in the case of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan also hopes for the continuation of joint projects after the stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan. One such project is the TAPI project, a pipeline through which Turkmenistan plans to export gas to South Asian countries. In October 2021, during a meeting between Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister R. Meredov and the new Afghan authorities, the resumption and expansion of bilateral trade were discussed [22].

22] Russia and China, acting together as the main stabilising factor in Eurasia, have also demonstrated their desire to take a very active part in solving the Afghan problem. At the end of August 2021, the political leaders of the two countries, Vladimir V. Putin and Xi Jinping. Putin and Xi Jinping declared their readiness to cooperate in stabilising the situation in Afghanistan and to prevent "the spread of instability to neighbouring regions". [23] The sides also noted the need to maximise the SCO's potential in this issue. Russia and China are willing to increase the level of strategic cooperation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy, provided that the new authorities are able to contain Islamic extremists, who pose a threat to the stability and security of Central Asian countries. At the same time, the leading powers of Eurasia, Russia and China, could be most effective in addressing complex issues through a balanced use of bilateral and multilateral formats of co-operation. The Russian expert A. Kortunov noted that "the multilateral format does not cancel or replace the bilateral format, but is a necessary complement or prerequisite for the latter". [24]

Meanwhile, against the background of distinctive approaches to solving the Afghan issue, a collective position of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan within the SCO has emerged. This position was voiced at the SCO jubilee summit on 17 September 2021, held in Dushanbe. Thus, the final Dushanbe Declaration of the 20th anniversary of the SCO notes that

the Afghan issue, firstly, should be resolved only through political and diplomatic means; secondly, it emphasises the importance of creating an inclusive government in Afghanistan with the participation of representatives of all ethnic, religious and political groups of Afghan society. The summit adopted a three-year Cooperation Programme on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism.

It was also decided to start the process of Iran's accession to the SCO as a full member. This was a significant event for both sides, allowing them to strengthen the potential of this international organisation.

CONCLUSION

At the present stage, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can be called the most influential integration in Central Asia. The main goals and objectives of this organisation correspond to the national interests of each country in the region. The most important challenges to the national security of individual Central Asian states are caused by the influence of a number of reasons, the main of which is the integration of Middle East instability in the region, the political and socio-economic situation of the Central Asian countries, the activation of the terrorist group ISIS in the region, etc. The most important challenges to the national security of individual Central Asian states are caused by the influence of a number of reasons. In this regard, the need to strengthen the SCO's status and enhance its ability to ensure security and stability in the region comes to the fore.

The establishment of a new political regime in Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban in August 2021 has exacerbated regional challenges and threats, the mitigation of which is among the priority tasks of multilateral cooperation formats such as the SCO. Over the years of its existence, the SCO member states have demonstrated not only a heightened level of readiness to confront regional challenges and threats, but have also created a solid legislative framework and functioning mechanisms for countering terrorism. In addressing the Afghan issue

The SCO has always sought to play an active role, trying to prevent possible destructive influence of events in that country on neighbouring states. At present, due to the change of power in Afghanistan, the SCO should use all available political and diplomatic potential and prevent possible destabilisation of the situation in the region.

Stabilisation of the internal political situation in Afghanistan will make it possible to implement a number of promising energy and transport projects in which many Eurasian states are interested.

For example, Central Asian countries attach great importance to Afghanistan's transit potential and seek access to South Asian countries through its territory. The positive development of Eurasian states will largely depend on their ability to resolve the Afghan issue through collective efforts.

Thus, we have considered the legal and regulatory framework of the SCO's anti-terrorist activities, the tasks and objectives of the SCO RATS special structure, and the main anti-terrorist exercises that have been conducted since the organisation was founded. The SCO has developed active and, in many respects, fruitful multilateral work in the relevant areas. The SCO has established mechanisms that can ensure a high level of co-operation among its members in combating terrorism, separatism, extremism and illicit arms and drug trafficking. It is also worth noting that all states are united and ready to cooperate in addressing the "three evils" that have threatened the countries of the Central Asian region for many years. The length of this article does not allow us to fully cover the effective activities of the organisation, however, we have managed to review the main components of the organisation.

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