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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Rebirth and Regeneration?

Will the decisions made at the recent Dushanbe Summit help deepen the military and security capabilities of SCO members? Richard Weitz has his doubts. This supposedly formidable collection of states has limited resources, obvious internal divisions, and suffers from 'a crowded institutional space'.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) like to boast that their organization is special. The Chinese, for example, [refer](#) to the SCO's "Shanghai Spirit" and the "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diversified civilizations and pursuit of common development" that it has created. Russian officials like to contrast the organization with NATO and other US-led alliances. As Moscow sees it, the SCO is neither anti-Western nor anyone else, and does not try to force its members into adhering to common political or economic values. Yet despite being one of the largest regional organizations in the world, with an equally sprawling agenda of security, economic and geopolitical concerns, the SCO has lost momentum over the past few years, and even disappointed its partners with its lack of achievements.

Accordingly, last month's [session of the SCO Council of the Heads of State in Dushanbe](#) was an attempt to inject new momentum into the organization. Beyond the expected criticism of the United States' missile defense plans and tacit support for Russia's peace plan for Ukraine, the member states finally took concrete steps to enlarge the organization, launched an ambitious [Development Strategy](#) and agreed to strengthen anti-terrorist cooperation. It should also be noted that the summit came off the back of [Peace Mission 2014](#), the largest multinational security exercise in the SCO's history.

Yet, while developments like the impending withdrawal of many Western troops from Afghanistan and a recent surge in terrorist activities within member-states have helped to shake the SCO out of its collective malaise, it remains to be seen whether it will finally become a political and security organization with the same reach and influence as the likes of NATO. That's because the organization still faces a number of key challenges that could still derail its bid to become Eurasia's dominant institution. These include capacity shortfalls, internal divisions, and an increasingly crowded institutional space.

Finally on the Same Script?

From the outset, the overall cohesion and effectiveness of the SCO has often been subject to the

diverging interests of its largest member-states. For instance, Chinese policymakers have long seen the SCO as a key component of its commitment to countering the “[three evil forces](#)” of regional terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism. Yet, this was not accompanied by the desire to offer full-member status to observer states like India and Pakistan. By contrast, Russia has traditionally been more open to enlarging the SCO’s membership. However, on the economic front Moscow has opposed Beijing’s efforts to establish an SCO-wide free trade zone or an [SCO Development Bank](#), primarily out of fear that Chinese goods might displace Russian products throughout Central Asia.

Yet, recent developments both within and on the fringes of the SCO have provided opportunities for China and Russia to overcome some of their differences. Over the past few months, Islamist extremists from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have expanded their activities across China, most notably in Beijing. Islamist extremists sympathetic to the Uyghur cause are also regaining strength in Afghanistan and Iraq, where in the case of the former, Uyghur militants have [reportedly](#) been fighting alongside the so-called Islamic State. Consequently, Beijing is now more receptive to the idea of granting India and Pakistan full membership of the SCO and incorporating them more deeply into the organization’s counterterror activities.

China’s apparent volte face is likely to be welcomed by a Russia still struggling to come to terms with deteriorating relations with the West over the Ukraine crisis. With economic sanctions beginning to bite, Moscow is now determined to [expand](#) [RU] its economic ties with fellow SCO member-states. In addition, Russian policymakers have started to persuade their SCO counterparts that the organization needs to redouble its efforts to counter what it perceives to be Western-sponsored [schemes](#) to promote social revolutions and regime change across Eurasia. Indeed, the Dushanbe summit even saw a [rare meeting](#) between the leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who, despite tensions over water access and other issues, see a common threat emanating from neighboring Afghanistan.

As a result of these developments, members of the SCO are as close to reading from the same script as they have been in a long time. India and Pakistan could be elevated from observer to member status as early as next year, while other observer states and Dialogue Partners like Belarus, Mongolia and Turkey are expected to be provided with more opportunities to participate in SCO activities. Additional states might also work with the SCO to counter regional security threats such as transnational terrorism and narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan into neighboring countries. In this respect, the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure has recently redoubled its [efforts](#) to monitor Islamist activities on the Internet and the return of militants from Syria, Iraq and other terrorist hotspots to member-states.

Problems Ahead

Yet, growing consensus on the need for a collective response to the security challenges mounting along its borders doesn’t necessarily mean that the SCO has returned to full health. For instance, the Dushanbe summit did nothing to address the SCO’s structural weaknesses. Unlike the European Union or other international institutions, the SCO has only a handful of permanent bodies, such as its [Secretariat](#) or the [Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure](#) based in Tashkent. These bodies, like the SCO as a whole, remain chronically underfunded and have limited powers to take decisions independently of their member governments.

And while Peace Mission 2014 was a genuinely multinational security exercise, most so-called “SCO” exercises tend to have only a few active participants. In this respect, China and Russia, which almost always provide the most troops for these drills, have frequently held bilateral military exercises that they claim occur under the SCO’s auspices simply because they invite observers from smaller member-states. It also remains to be seen how India’s and Pakistan’s membership will impact upon

military cooperation. Despite often fraught relations between Islamabad and New Delhi, both states have strong security ties with the United States and the West. Moreover, while Xi Jinping continues to express an interest in improving ties between Beijing and New Delhi, China and India remain [rivals](#) for influence across South Asia.

Indeed, there's no guarantee that a growing convergence on the need to expand the membership of the SCO will result in a higher level of understanding between China and Russia. Notable differences still exist between Moscow and Beijing over how they want the SCO to evolve. China is less than enthusiastic about pursuing regional and security policies that would push the organization in an anti-Western direction. For its part, Russia remains [uneasy](#) about Beijing's diversion of Central Asian oil and gas exports bound for its pipelines into the Chinese marketplace.

A Crowded Neighborhood

It also needs to be remembered that the SCO is by no means the only game in town. While China has always viewed the SCO as "its" organization – not to mention a forum in which it is a rule maker rather than a rule taker – Beijing remains an active participant in transnational governmental organizations like the Nuclear Suppliers Group. More recently, China has also assumed the chairmanship of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA). And while its sprawling size and infrequent meetings have kept this organization on the margins of international relations and security, Beijing nevertheless has [plans](#) to build the CICA's institutions and power, potentially creating a more comprehensive rival to the SCO.

Yet, arguably the most serious threat to the SCO comes from Vladimir Putin's [plan](#) to create a network of Moscow-led institutions to augment Russian power and influence in the post-Soviet space. After encountering years of opposition in Beijing to its proposals to give the SCO a military dimension, the Russian government focused on building a rival Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which unlike the SCO has become a genuine military alliance capable of mobilizing standing multinational forces against terrorist and other threats. The CSTO, which includes all the SCO members with the exception of China, has already assumed a [prominent role](#) in impeding the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan into Central Asia. It could also provide Moscow with the surface legitimacy to intervene militarily in Eurasia with the blessing of a multinational institution even if Beijing should veto the use of the SCO for that purpose, as Chinese opposition appears to have done in the 2008 war with Georgia.

And despite eschewing a security function thus far, Moscow's recently launched Eurasian Union, Putin's 'pet' project since his "reelection" in 2012, has acquired new members over the past year. One of its effects, and likely one of its goals, will be to limit Beijing's economic presence in Central Asia by establishing a Customs Union and external tariff against imports from China and other non-members. The Union could even challenge Xi's project of building a [Silk Road Economic Belt](#) to strengthen economic ties between China and Eurasia. The Eurasian Union is, therefore, a regional organization that might yet help to reinforce how the SCO's leading powers are thought to strategically view the organization. While Beijing sees the SCO as a means to expand its influence in Central Asia with Russia's acceptance, Moscow still values it as a means to monitor and restrain that expansion.

Indeed, Moscow's priorities call into question Putin's comments about Russia's one-year chairmanship of the SCO, which began after the Dushanbe summit. The Russian President told the summit attendees that his government will pursue numerous events and initiatives to strengthen the SCO's security and economic roles, at both the regional and global levels. But while Russia and China together can make the SCO a far more robust and influential institution, any major conflict or disagreement between them will continue to hinder the organization from achieving its full potential.

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