



### CROSS BORDER TERRORISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: LESSONS FOR SCO

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Shanghai Corporation Organisation (SCO) members are seriously concerned over the emergence of the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the future of Afghanistan. Both these issues impede positive development across the region. Since all SCO member states have interests in Afghanistan and support different groups in the country, it is vital that using the SCO platform, these states develop a joint strategy to address the Afghanistan problem and ISIS threat.

Currently, three categories of security challenge affect the region, with varying degrees of cross border implications. First and potentially most serious is the threat posed by Islamist/ jihadi militant groups with ties across the wider region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. All attacks have been sporadic, separate incidents and none has marked the start of a sustained campaign. Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) appear to be the main leading group. According to *The News International*, Pakistani intelligence agencies mounted clandestine raids for hunting militants of the ETIM as part of an operation in the border region of Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. Hundreds of the members of the ETIM, a militant group behind attacks in China's Xinjiang province capital Urumqi from 1992 bombings to 2014 knife attacks, joined ultra extremist Islamic State in recent years, but they are now returning to Pakistan and Afghanistan after a near fall of Abu Baker al-Baghdadi-led group in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zahid Gishkori, Pakistan mounts secret raids in hunt for Chinese militants, *The News*, April 3, 2018

ETIM militants can attempt to sabotage the CPEC project by attacking Chinese companies in Pakistan through Afghanistan. In 1999, its militants crossed from their bases in Afghanistan and Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan's Batken province, took Japanese hostages, and clashed with Kyrgyz troops before launching attacks on Uzbekistan. In 2002, bomb explosions took place at the Osh market in Kyrgyzstan, and in March and July 2004 in Tashkent and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, followed by shoot-outs with the police. In the Uzbek case, suicide bombers have been used, and the July 2004 attacks targeted the US and Israeli embassies.<sup>2</sup> More attacks occurred in border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Ferghana Valley in 2006 and 2007. Other notable Islamist protagonists include Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose relationship to terrorism is disputed.

Given this recent history of ideological conflicts and militant violence, as well as the active Islamist groups in Central Asian states with varying degrees of engagement and support by extra-regional terrorists, the SCO needs to recognize this as a serious issue of concern. As a result, as a regional organization, it needs to learn from the experiences of member states, and in fact, provide a platform from which they can together come up with regional policies and approaches to tackle the menace of terrorism.

This is easier said than done, but an important first step. And it has become all the more important given Pakistan and India's inclusion in the SCO as full members. An important question is whether Pakistan and India will find another venue for cooperation in the SCO. Will New Delhi and Islamabad be able to act maturely and adopt the SCO's spirit of regionalism?

For that to happen, the SCO itself first needs to come up with effective regional policies for tackling issues such as terrorism, intelligence sharing among member states to counter and contain terrorism and make it a priority. Efforts for this purpose have been undertaken by member states, for example joint military exercises between Russia and Pakistan have now become a regular feature in terms of exchange of their counter terrorism expertise. In a recent meeting of the defense ministers of the SCO countries in Beijing on April 29, 2018, it was decided that member states will carry out a joint counter terrorism military exercise in Russia in 2018, with the idea that this will help enhance military cooperation between member states. Pakistan and India, the two new SCO members, also attended this meeting and both countries have expressed their willingness to actively participate in

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Matveena, Antonio Giustozzi, 'The SCO: a regional organisation in the making.' *Crisis States Research Centre*, LSE, September 2008  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csric-working-papers-phase-two/wp39.2-sco-a-regional-organisation-in-the-making.pdf>  
<http://www.ipripak.org/sco-and-regional-security-2/>  
<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13496-pakistan-in-the-sco-challenges-and-prospects.html>

the defense and security cooperation exercise within the SCO framework. It remains to be seen how effective this will be – if at all – to improve bilateral ties between these two countries under the umbrella of SCO.