

## Review of goals and hurdles in the way of convergence of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

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### Introduction

A government in the current era is interpreted as a juridical body that possesses the powers to control internal and foreign attacks on its sovereignty. Geographically, it defines a land within borders; and socially, it chalks up a collection of society members. Separation of internal and foreign policy domains from other issues remains a cardinal function – a traditional description of the concept of a national government has units in economic, political, administrative and social realms, each divided by specific circumstances and conditions that segregate them institutionally. Such a divergence in the international arena according to most political researchers however, is not acceptable.

For peace and convergence in a region, two solutions have been tabled historically. The first, more radical idea aims to achieve its goals through the sword, using fear and intimidation over lands in order to unite neighbouring countries in a region – this for instance served the hegemonic purpose of rulers such as Adolf Hitler, who endeavoured to unite some states in Germany. History shows that this strategy has no permanence. However, a modern form of convergence is achievable without war, especially with neighbours. This second solution sees as essential for regional convergence all areas of government be it economic, political or cultural partnerships under the banner of cooperation.

This second, more modern process of convergence has seen some regional countries such as Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan negotiate and implement mutual accords and create a powerful international bloc through combined efforts. This was done through the creation of an organization by the name of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which aimed to achieve regional convergence. Although the word 'cooperation' appears in the name, the founders of SCO claimed 'convergence' as the driving vehicle since they wanted to introduce it in the international system with a modern approach. In this analytical study we will examine whether the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in its present capacity is capable of convergence as was its initial aim.

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## **Introduction of SCO member states and their aims**

SCO was originally founded in the year 1990 between the former USSR and China to decrease military presence and undertake trust building measures in border areas for which five phases of talks were held in Shanghai. Indeed this organization explicitly took account of the politics of security and while economic goals have also been pursued in its more modern framework since 2001, political security goals still remain a priority. At the beginning however, in 1996, the heads of the Russian Republic, China, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan met for first time in Shanghai to decide upon trust building measures in administrative issues as well as border conflicts.

In June 2001, Uzbekistan was approved as a member state of SCO along with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan and it was officially inaugurated. In its inaugural statement, the goals of SCO were clearly defined – these are summarized below:

1. Strengthening of reciprocal trust building and friendship measures, with an emphasis on UN principles.
2. Establishing peace and stability in the region and combating separatism and extremism.
3. Organizational findings to develop commercial and economic cooperation among member states.
4. Providing a stable global strategy to correct the imbalances in international power dynamics.

## **Structure of decision making in the SCO**

Organizational decisions are taken on the basis of agreement and consensus and no voting procedures are carried out. Acceptance from confirmed members leads to decisions being made. The Council of Heads of State is the most elevated decision making body and meets once a year. In addition, the Foreign Ministers Committee is also part of the decision making process as had been established in the organizational structure.

## **Aims of member states**

Studying the aims of the six member states will provide us with an opportunity to compare micro goals of foreign policy and its reasons for affiliation to the organization.

**(a) China**

China, being a founder and inaugurator of the SCO finds its interests fulfilled through the organization in three spheres - national, international and regional. For China, instability along its borders with Central Asian states – especially those in the Xingjian province – is a great concern as inhabitants on both sides create numerous problems for the country. Possessing one-fourth of all mineral reserves in the country, Xingjian is a vital province but Islamic separatist groups based there threaten national security. Moreover, in the event of state action, these Muslim extremists have hideouts across the border in Tajikistan and Kirghizstan. Indeed the nature of these groups is not exaggerated since their ties with the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been established.

China's aim in this context is to restrain the movement of extremists and militants with the help of Central Asian states for the securitisation of its borders. Other than security issues, cooperation with SCO member-states ensures economic benefits for China and gives it adequate energy assurances.

From an international perspective, a uni-polar global system is not in China's interest; in fact imperialistic expansion is seen as a threat to its security. Consequently China is trying to create a substitute to US influence, and the SCO provides a platform for member countries, especially China and Russia, to form a powerful bloc against US hegemony and balance global power dynamics.

**(b) Russia**

"This organization is a new model for prosperous international cooperation." This short statement delivered by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during the 2006 Shanghai Summit indicates Russia's interests in the SCO. Russia is struggling to show Europe and NATO countries that this organization is capable of performing in the international arena. By strengthening the organization, both Russia and China aim to pose resistance to US powers specifically in the face of unilateral policies that go against SCO countries.

From a national perspective, the SCO is important for Russia since most of the threats to its national security come from southern borders. And being one of the two major powers in the SCO along with China, Russian national interests are brought into the jurisdiction of the organization.

While Russia is cooperating with the US and NATO forces in Central Asia and Afghanistan in their battle against the Taliban, it is also struggling to balance its relations with US. The same is true for China. And through cooperation with partners in the SCO, both can largely control and regulate political and economic activities in Central Asia. Moreover, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is capable of acting as a bridge for Russia to extend and strengthen its security circle to countries like Armenia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

### **(b) Aims of Central Asian States**

In the Central Asian region there are many economic and security-related problems which cannot be solved through individual policy measures. Extremism, separatism and border conflicts for instance, require cooperation and the SCO provides opportunities to reach mutual decisions. This is possible by, for instance:

- Creating an atmosphere for improved regional cooperation and reduced border conflicts.
- Providing the Central Asian states with a platform of unity and cooperation - relieving individual liabilities and national complexities by converting them into regional issues such as terrorism, separatism, narcotics trade and slow economic progress.
- Reducing dependence on Russia and enhancing trade relations.

### **Aims of the Observers of SCO**

Observer states of the organization include Pakistan, Iran, India and Mongolia. Their aims are as follows:

#### **(a) Mongolia**

Situated between the two powers China and Russia, one of Mongolia's aims for affiliation with the SCO is to get its place in the global system and to sustain its international relations. Its foreign policy priority is to form a trilateral coalition with its two large neighbours and the SCO is seen as a suitable forum for the evolution of this strategy.

#### **(b) Pakistan**

Most of Pakistan's aims from affiliation with the SCO deal with its political and security issues while some are related to its economy. The latter include easing trade, strengthening cooperation in the energy sector, expanding financial and commerce institutions, building a transportation

network with highways, railways, airports and finally increasing cultural exchange and tourism. Political goals include fighting extremism and defusing India's regional influence by interacting with China and Russia.

### **(c) India**

India's real intention in being an observer of the SCO is to reduce Pakistan's influence and to prevent a possible organizational stance against its own interests. In terms of security concerns, India's stance in the SCO is similar to China since with a twenty percent Muslim population it sees extremism as a menace to deal with. From the economic angle, India wants to gain energy and transportation assurances through the SCO which is vital given its economic growth and the energy reserves of SCO member states.

### **(d) Iran**

After its successful Islamic Revolution and the disintegration of the USSR, Iran took a stand against uni-polar and bi-polar structures imposed over an established international system. It could be said that a change in the global system then, is one of Iran's main intentions behind affiliation with the SCO. Iran also has close historical and cultural ties with the Central Asian region and strengthening this relationship can in its view balance global power structures. From a security perspective, Iran is also concerned with threats such as narcotic smuggling and extremism. Alliance with the SCO provides a platform for these regional issues to be addressed.

## **Hurdles in way of convergence in the SCO**

Theoretically, one of the mechanisms to achieve convergence among members of an organization or a region is to expand commercial exchange since expansion of trade and investment paves the way for convergence. However, the SCO has been unsuccessful in this regard since the ratio of commercial exchange among member countries is less than expected as compared to the commercial exchange with countries outside. For instance, China and Russia, the two most powerful members, possess their highest ratios of foreign trade with the US and Europe. China's bilateral trade with US in the years 2005 and 2006 was \$201 and \$266 billion respectively. In the last two years, the same situation has persisted. Russia's trade relations with the US and Europe are similar to China. However commercial exchange between all the member states of SCO is nominal.

Secondly, the volume of US trade in SCO member states cannot be underestimated. Aid from the US as well as financial and technical support to SCO countries not only prevents convergence in the organization, it also goes against one of its goals i.e. to create a balance of power in the uni-polar global system. On the contrary, the situation is such that far from convergence, it is mutual differences, hostile political and economic behaviours among members of SCO that are coming to the forefront. Border conflicts, differences over water sharing among the Central Asian countries and regional and international issues such as those between observer members India and Pakistan are just some of the reasons which have slowed down the process of convergence in the SCO.

## **Conclusions**

The SCO lacks essential prerequisites for convergence in the region. However this does not prevent defined goals from being met through cooperation. Indeed an absence of prerequisites for convergence does not mean that the organization should be disintegrated. Rather cooperation must continue for collective benefit.

Member states have to a certain extent achieved their political and economic goals through cooperation in combating narcotic smuggling, money laundering, and human trafficking. Institutionalized cooperation to fight terrorism, extremism and separatism is the achievement of an unwritten goal - challenging US influence in the region.