

THE SCO COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The SCO Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on July 28-29, this year.¹ The Foreign Ministers discussed the prospects of its expansion and proposed the establishment of the SCO Development Bank along with emphasizing the need to build a consensus on the issues of concern among the member states.² Evaluating the challenges of multilateral cooperation in the economic and strategic spheres of Eurasia, the SCO-CFM deliberated upon removing the barriers to regional integration. The Foreign Ministers' meet, despite securing significant achievements in many areas, echoed the regional and global uncertainties that are dominating the international arena nowadays.

The Council of Foreign Ministers is an essential part of the SCO's functional and structural activities. It mainly takes place to prepare for the Council of Heads of State. It is also meant to consider the documents pertaining to day-to-day activities and prepare various other drafts as well. Besides, it holds discussions among the members on the issues of immediate concern, be it regional or international. This year, too, the Council brought all these agenda items under its discussion.

¹ "Meeting of the SCO Foreign Ministers Council", *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, August 2, 2022, <http://eng.sectsc.org/politics/20220802/907726/Meeting-of-the-SCO-Foreign-Ministers-Council.html>
² Ibid.

Uzbekistan – the current chair of the SCO – gave a year-round assessment and achievements of SCO work, since it assumed the rotating presidency in 2021.³

Since the Council is delegated the responsibility to prepare for the meeting of heads of states, many important documents were considered and reviewed. Tashkent Declaration – the draft document for the coming Council of Heads of State, scheduled to be held in September this year – was finished in the recent CFM.⁴ However, there are two more documents that were discussed in the meeting worth the mention here: The Draft Comprehensive Plan (2023-2027) for Implementation of Treaty on Long-Term Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation among the SCO Member States; and, a draft roadmap for payment among the member states in their national currencies.⁵

The Council also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on granting the status of dialogue partner to Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.⁶ Another MOU was signed on finalizing Iran’s permanent membership in the coming SCO Council of Heads of State. There were sixteen proposals – jointly made by the member states – in the areas of socio-economic cooperation that were signed in the CFM.⁷ Other than this, the members also adopted the Joint Statement on Strengthening the Biological Weapons Conventions.⁸

The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari represented Pakistan in the SCO-CFM and spoke about Islamabad’s contributions to SCO. He shared Pakistan’s vision for future direction and how, as a permanent member, it can add to the momentum of regional connectivity at the heart of Eurasia. He assured Pakistan’s unwavering support for the SCO Charter and its goals, particularly the Shanghai Spirit. Highlighting the precarious humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, he stated that it is a shared responsibility of all the members and common approaches should be devised to help the country with the myriad of socio-economic and humanitarian challenges it is confronted with at the moment.

³ “Press Release on the Results of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meeting”, *The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, July 29, 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1824440/

⁴ “Press Release on the Results of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meeting, Tashkent, 28-29 July, 2022”, *The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/fnapr/7151>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Aseem Assanyiaz, “SCO Remains a Space for Stability and Development, Says Kazakh Foreign Minister in Tashkent”, *The Astana Times*, July 29, 2022, <https://astanatimes.com/2022/07/sco-remains-a-space-for-stability-and-development-says-kazakh-foreign-minister-in-tashkent/>

⁷ “Foreign Minister’s Participation in SCO Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting – 29 July, 2022, Tashkent” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, July 29, 2022, <https://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-ministers-participation-in-sco-council-of-foreign-ministers-meeting-29-july-2022-tashkent/>

⁸ Ibid.

He was appreciative of the recent expansion process of the Organization. Welcoming Iran into the SCO family, he also extended the felicities to new dialogue partners of SCO: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar.

While talking to an Indian media outlet, he explained that, after India's August 5, 2019 act, it had become too difficult for Pakistan to constructively engage with New Delhi.⁹ This is also why, despite being present under one roof with his Indian counterpart, no bilateral meeting could take place. Nonetheless, he held bilateral meetings with his counterparts in SCO. He held bilateral meetings with the Foreign Ministers of China and Central Asian countries. He also briefly interacted with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, on the sidelines of the Council.

The Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi said that the global turbulence and transformations are nurturing the regional and international hotspots.¹⁰ While appreciating the SCO family for promoting cooperation among the members, he proposed to uphold the Shanghai Spirit in the future as well, for further development and progress of the region. The Chinese Minister refrained from talking about Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rather he floated the ideas of economic and strategic cooperation: firstly, Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative.¹¹

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov highlighted the problems that were hindering the process of regional integration and mentioned the need to implement the draft of a comprehensive plan for the implementation of the Treaty of cooperation and settlement of the payments in national currencies. Russia took many initiatives including the Joint Statement on Strengthening the Biological Weapons Conventions, the proposal of granting Belarus permanent membership, and Bahrain, the dialogue partnership.¹²

With regards to the efforts toward creating opportunities for regional integration, the above-mentioned developments are laudable. However, the daunting challenges that the region faces at the moment, the slow pace of regional integration would not serve the purpose. Now that the US-China competition has reached a new high and Russia-Ukraine war is embroiling the world into a cascade of economic crisis while the geo-strategic constraints like Afghanistan still exists, the SCO should broaden its agenda in a more specific and comprehensive manner.

⁹ "Exclusive: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Speaks to WION in Tashkent", *WION*, July 30, 2022, (YouTube Video), 5:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYLPf1Xpwd8>

¹⁰ Huaxia, "Chinese FM Attends SCO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tashkent", *Xinhuanet*, August 30, 2022, <http://english.news.cn/20220730/789b112b79fc4ce59a901a6aca3d3bee/c.html>

¹¹ "Chinese FM Attends SCO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tashkent", *Xinhuanet*.

¹² "Press Release on the Results of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meeting", *The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*.