

NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCO AMIDST GREAT POWER RIVALRY

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is fast emerging as an influential organization bringing the powers of Eurasia to one table for regional cooperation, peace, and security. Founded by Beijing and Moscow, the Organization also stands as a symbol of the Sino-Russo partnership in the region. In the ongoing Great Power rivalry, particularly after the release of the US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022¹, many questions arise: How SCO is going to respond to the escalating US-China tensions and US-Russia power tussle? What direction it is going to take in the days ahead?

The answers to these questions lie in the Samarkand Declaration and various other agreements that the SCO leaders adopted and signed in its Heads of the State Summit 2022, held in Uzbekistan from September 15 to 16, 2022.² It comprises 21 articles covering all the issues ranging from security, economy, climate change, education, health, cultural diplomacy, and women empowerment.³ The choice of words highlights the intent and sets the future direction for the Eurasian leaders amidst Great Power rivalry.

1 Reyan Neuhard, "The New US National Security Strategy: Four Takeaways for Asia Policy", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/10/the-new-us-national-security-strategy-four-takeaways-for-asia-policy/>

2 "Samarkand Summit: What China Has Proposed to Boost SCO Unity, Cooperation", *CGTN*, September 17, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-09-16/Xi-Jinping-delivers-speech-at-SCO-summit-in-Samarkand-1dnrViKtBks/index.html>

3 "The Samarkand Declaration", *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>

Firstly, it clearly mentions that the main theme of the meeting was “Security” which fits well in the prevailing tense environment in the international and regional arenas.⁴ By signaling out security as its main theme, it is very likely that the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO is going to assume a more proactive role in the region.

Secondly, both China and Russia are viewed as dissatisfied states of the international system. Time and again, they have voiced their resentments against the overwhelming dominance of the US, its unilateral policies in global affairs, and its utter lack of respect for the values and issues of the non-western world. In this milieu, when the Samarkand Declaration emphasized the “need for acknowledging the current processes of stronger multi-polarity, interconnectedness, and accelerated pace of informatization, and digitization,”⁵ it assumed special importance.

Earlier, the SCO focused on the economic domain and deliberately avoided such mentions. However now, with this agreement, it is clear that the SCO intends to be acknowledged for its increasing share in the above-mentioned global processes. The world is not ‘unipolar’ anymore and the SCO wants to be acknowledged. It also highlights that the Member states should adhere to a ‘common approach’ ruling out any scheme of bloc politics at the regional and international level.

Connected with this is another article of the Declaration that urged the member state to adopt new approaches “to promote more equitable and effective international cooperation and sustainable economic development.”⁶ What those approaches could be and how SCO is going to ensure ‘equitable’ and ‘effective’ international cooperation is the path that it needs to pave. Having said that, it is clear that the direction for international cooperation has been set which is towards ‘equitable’ and ‘effective’ international cooperation.

These are some articles of the Declaration that hint at the paradigm shift in the SCO club. Earlier, the organization shied from commenting on open confrontation and raising the issues of emerging powers and the consequent implication such as urging the international community to urge and adjust to the prevailing trends of multi-polarity. The member states agreed to take new initiatives for building a ‘new type of international relations’ for forming a common vision of creating a ‘community of shared destiny’ for humanity. The Declaration notes that consistent implementation

⁴ “The Samarkand Declaration”

⁵ “The Samarkand Declaration”

⁶ “The Samarkand Declaration”

of the Shanghai Spirit contributes to a “new regional modal of cooperation.”⁷ Since the inception of SCO, the Chinese have been promoting this concept which was coined by President Xi Jinping.

In a way, this can be interpreted as a paradigm shift in the documents of SCO because, unlike the previous Summits, it urges the member states to strive for building a new international order, hinting at promoting a Chinese international order.

When viewed along with the two more agreements adopted in the Council, it comes to light that SCO surely is moving towards forming a solid foundation for Eurasian partnership – but, at slow pace. The members, in order to remain aligned and synchronized on strategic, economic, and cultural fronts, also signed an agreement on “Action Plan (2023-2027) for Implementation of Long-Term Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation.” The second was the “Roadmap on Gradual Increase in the Share of National Currencies in Mutual Supplement of the SCO Member States.”⁸

All these efforts hint at a new turn that the Eurasian powers are taking at this moment. Among them, China and Russia are leading this venture and stand among the biggest critic and affectees of the US-architected international order. The recent US-China tensions especially after Nancy Pelosi’s visit and Russia’s consistent confrontational mode with the US and its partners led to these groundbreaking multilateral agreements. The agreement on increasing the share of national currencies was Russian initiative and this is how, a hard-pressed Moscow by US sanction, can navigate the economic crunch it could hit as an aftermath of the Ukraine war.

However, there are many challenges to the fast-evolving construct of SCO moving an anti-western alliance. The biggest challenge is the non-binding nature of these agreements. The second important one is the strategic dilemma that small and middle powers are facing: Who to choose? China or the US? Pakistan is one example. It finds itself grappling with a catch-22 like situation when it is faced with the question of who to choose between Beijing and Washington. India’s position is shakier as it is not only a part of Eurasian partnerships but also a member of US alliance such as QUAD and other Indo-Pacific geostrategic constructs. The dilemma of Central Asian states is also no different. In short, SCO is surely going to resist the US hegemonic constructs overall but, evolving into a full-fledge regional organization of socio-economic and politico-security cooperation will take its time.

⁷ “The Samarkand Declaration”

⁸ “Meeting of the Heads of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Samarkand, 15-16 September 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan (Islamabad), <https://mofa.gov.pk/meeting-of-the-council-of-heads-of-state-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-samarkand-15-16-september-2022/>