

UPCOMING ASTANA SUMMIT 2024: CHARTING A NEW COURSE FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Amidst the changing global strategic dynamics, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members continue their efforts to forge closer ties and boost collaboration within the framework of the organization. The intent is to expand the horizons, thus establishing stronger relevance of the organization in the realm of multilateral global institutions. Considering the ongoing conflicts and increasing non-traditional security threats, the member states aim to ensure peace and development across Central Asia, Eurasia, and the larger region encompassing all member states.

It is important to note that SCO is not a military alliance as contended by some critics; rather it seeks to address major security threats in the region and establish a peaceful environment that boosts trade and cooperation among the member states.¹ In this context, the upcoming Astana Summit on July 3-4, 2024, offers an opportunity to deliberate on the pressing energy, trade, and economy issues and take steps towards desired outcomes. Moreover, the summit aims to strengthen the existing SCO mechanisms while addressing global issues such as food security, climate change, and counter-terrorism.²

1 Nikola Mikovic, "Why the SCO Summit in Astana Matters," CGTN, June 29, 2024, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-06-29/Why-the-SCO-summit-in-Astana-matters-1uPmads3cPK/p.html>.
2 ByISSI Web Administrator, By, and ISSI Web Administrator, "Issi Web Administrator," Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 21, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/press-release-issi-hosts-roundtable-on-astana-summit2024-solidifying-scops-partnerships/>.

Currently, SCO's member states encompass nearly 45% of the world's population. Additionally, in terms of geography, SCO member states occupy almost a quarter of the global landmass and its total GDP exceeds \$23 trillion which illustrates the organization's relevance in the current global geo-political and geo-economic dynamics.³ As such, SCO is becoming the center of interest for multiple states and its membership is constantly expanding. Iran became the newest member of SCO last year; Belarus is expected to be given full member status this year.⁴

The organization is engaged in ensuring diverse cooperation among member states in a variety of focus areas such as regional security, countering terrorism and other threats, economic development, promotion of good neighborliness and mutual trust. In this regard, in addition to the member states, the leaders of Observer states and Dialogue Partners are expected to participate in the Astana Summit. In the year 2023, Bahrain, Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar and United Arab Emirates joined SCO as dialogue partners. This shows the diversification of SCO's horizon by including these states, which hail from multiple regions.⁵

Kazakhstan assumed the chairmanship of SCO in July 2023. The tenure of Kazakhstan is almost concluded as of June 2024.⁶ At the assumption of the SCO Chair, President of Kazakhstan H.E. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev presented the country's priorities. President Tokayev noted that as a part of its chairmanship, Kazakhstan will present the document on the initiative titled "One world unity for a just peace and harmony". He added that this document would lay down the principles of maintaining security and stability, and strengthening of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) among the member states. He also noted that the most important task for Kazakhstan is to prevent any geopolitical faultlines between the East and West.⁷ Additionally, Kazakhstan proposed an initiative to declare the year 2024 as the "Year of Ecology", supported unanimously by all member states. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has coordinated over 180 events spanning diverse sectors. Throughout its chairmanship, Kazakhstan prioritized economic, investment, transportation, culture,

³ Arman Aisultan, "SCO: Astana Summit Agenda and New Member Country," en.inform.kz, June 30, 2024, <https://en.inform.kz/news/sco-astana-summit-agenda-and-new-member-country-8eaac8/>.

⁴ Riyaz ul Khaliq and Aamir Latif, "Iran Becomes Full Member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Anadolu Ajansı, July 4, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-becomes-full-member-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization/2936909#:~:text=Iran%20on%20Tuesday%20gained%20full,member%20of%20the%20regional%20bloc>

⁵ UAE MOFA, "UAE Granted Dialogue Partner Status in Shanghai Cooperation Organization," UAE Granted Dialogue Partner Status in Shanghai Cooperation Organization, May 5, 2023, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2023/5/6/06-05-2023-uae>.

⁶ Aruzhan Ualikhanova, "Kazakhstan Assumes SCO Chairmanship to Enhance Regional Cooperation," The Astana Times, August 16, 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/07/kazakhstan-assumes-sco-chairmanship-to-enhance-regional-cooperation/>.

⁷ Arman Aisultan, "SCO: Astana Summit Agenda and New Member Country," en.inform.kz, June 30, 2024, <https://en.inform.kz/news/sco-astana-summit-agenda-and-new-member-country-8eaac8/>.

and humanitarian issues alongside environmental considerations in the wake of drastic impacts of climate change, under the framework of the declared “Year of Ecology”.⁸

The agenda of the Astana Summit has been formulated under the results of multiple meetings including the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) held on 21 May 2024; meeting of National Coordinators of SCO; and several others. During the meeting of CFM with President Tokayev, he expressed gratitude to the participating countries for their continuous support for Kazakhstan’s initiatives and emphasized that the SCO Summit in Astana will be held under the theme “Strengthening multilateral dialogue – the pursuit of sustainable peace and development”.⁹ He added that the main focus of the summit will be Kazakhstan’s proposed SCO initiative “One world unity for a just peace and harmony”, aimed at strengthening the CBMs and maintaining stable development of all countries of the world, regardless of their economic, political or military standings.

In addition to these, the three main documents to be adopted by the SCO during the summit relate to good neighborliness, trust, and partnership. Other statements include those on ensuring the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation, and effective waste management. This shows the member states’ commitment to mitigate the non-traditional security challenges besides handling traditional threats and conflicts among the states. Moreover, the summit will also adopt three strategies: development of the SCO region; anti-drug strategy for 2024-29; and enhancement of energy cooperation among member states. Lastly, there will be two cooperation programs in counter terrorism, separatism and extremism for 2025-27, and the development of programs for specially protected natural areas and ecological systems of SCO region.¹⁰

Pakistan, as a full member, attaches high value to SCO as its charter seamlessly aligns with Pakistan’s key foreign policy objectives. Pakistan assumed the chair of Council of Heads of Government (CHG), the second highest forum within the framework of SCO, in Bishkek last year. This forum is mainly concerned with the socio-economic development and cultural cooperation among member states. Similarly, Pakistan announced a focus on connectivity, poverty alleviation, medicine, and tourism investment during its chairmanship. Under its presidency, Pakistan has made concerted efforts to increase practical cooperation among member states in order to strengthen regional capacity in

⁸ SCO Website, “SCO Secretary-General Zhang Ming’s Remarks at a News Conference Following the SCO Foreign Ministers Council Meeting (Astana, 21 May 2024),” The Shanghai cooperation organisation, May 22, 2024, <https://eng.sectsco.org/20240522/1356437.html>.

⁹ Fatima Kemelova, “Astana Hosts SCO Foreign Ministers Council Meeting,” The Astana Times, May 21, 2024, <https://astanatimes.com/2024/05/astana-hosts-sco-foreign-ministers-council-meeting/>.

¹⁰ “Press Release ISSI hosts Roundtable on “Astana Summit2024: Solidifying SCO’s Partnerships”,” Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 21, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/press-release-issi-hosts-roundtable-on-astana-summit2024-solidifying-scoss-partnerships/>.

these areas of mutual interest. Pakistan observes that the SCO region continues to host the largest population of poor people on the planet and hence it is a collective duty of all member states to pull the people out of the vicious cycle of poverty. In this regard, Pakistan initiated the creation of a special working group on combating poverty and hosted the first inaugural session of this working group titled “Leveraging Digital Technologies to Enhance Social Safety Nets in SCO Member States”.¹¹

On the Astana Summit, Pakistan has closely cooperated with the Kazakh side in the development and approval of all their positive initiatives, including efforts to further increase cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts.

Concluding, the upcoming Astana Summit is expected to produce positive outcomes for the SCO region. The proposed initiatives are in line with the current needs of the international strategic environment, given the increasingly complex trends in the realms of security, climate change, environmental protection, and development of emerging economies. It is also expected that SCO would dilate on accentuating conflicts in the neighboring regions and propose ways of containment and resolution of these conflicts. Moreover, the increase in regional security challenges and a spike in terrorist activities across SCO states, need close attention. It is expected that the Astana Summit will also address these threats and prescribe appropriate steps.

¹¹ APP, “Pakistan to Boost Cooperation in Diverse Areas in SCO Region: Jilani,” Associated Press of Pakistan, October 26, 2023, <https://www.app.com.pk/national/pakistan-to-boost-cooperation-in-diverse-areas-in-sco-region-jilani/>.