

The Samarkand SCO Summit As A Platform For Dialogue And Fostering Mutual Trust

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On September 15-16 of this year, 14 heads of state are expected to attend the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which will be held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This event will be the first face-to-face meeting of SCO leaders since 2019 and will conclude Uzbekistan's presidency of the organization.

In addition to the leaders of the SCO member states, which include Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the summit will host the presidents of Iran, Belarus, and Mongolia as observers, as well as the heads of Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan as invited guests.

What is the SCO?

Having emerged in 1996 as the Shanghai Five (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), the organization was joined by Uzbekistan in 2001 and was renamed as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the following years, the organization has come to include India and Pakistan as member states, and a number of other countries as observer nations and dialogue partners.

The SCO was initially formed as a platform for building confidence to demilitarize borders, its focus being on security and curbing extremism and terrorism in the region. Since its conception, however, the organization has significantly broadened its agenda to include increased cooperation in areas such

as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, transport and connectivity infrastructure, energy and food security, digital and green economy.

The SCO is a unique organization that has managed to unite countries with different models of development, political, economic and military power. In today's difficult conditions of regional and global development, the SCO acts as a popular platform for open dialogue and broad interregional cooperation. The key to the success of the SCO is its non-bloc status that promotes openness and multilateral cooperation. That is why it attracts partners from various regions of the world – from East Asia to the Middle East.

With the expansion of the SCO, the organization has new opportunities to create a vast space of indivisible security, cooperation and development. It has excellent prospects for transformation and growth, not only through geographic expansion, but also through the discovery of new strategic paths for development that need to be put on the agenda. First of all, these include areas such as transport and interconnectedness, energy, food and environmental security, digital and green economy.

What the SCO is not

There have been discussions regarding the geopolitical status of the SCO. Some view the organization as something created to counter the influence of the West, as an Eastern response to Western NATO, or as an attempt to stem off the spread of the liberal democratic order eastwards following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Here one could recall the famous “Heartland theory” of the British geographer Halford Mackinder that the “heartland” of Eurasia, which includes Central Asia and much of Russia, is crucial for the global balance of power, insofar as the state

that controls the heartland would be in a position to dominate the whole of Eurasia and, consequently, the entire world. When applied to the SCO, Mackinder's theory may suggest that the organization, ostensibly created for enhancing border security and countering extremism in the region, likely has the real intention of curbing Western influence in the heartland of Eurasia.

It is certainly hard to deny the geopolitical significance of Central Asia, the core area of the SCO. As a commentator once remarked, "everything is geopolitical in Central Asia." Nonetheless, the SCO is not an organization created against the West. Neither in its conception, nor in its present manifestation has the organization had a bloc status or aspiration. Its founding principles promote mutual respect, win-win cooperation, and common development, while its current development path suggests a growing economic cooperation and infrastructural integration.

In the run-up to the Samarkand Summit of the SCO, some Russian media outlets, namely, Lenta.ru and Komsomolskaya Pravda, have voiced the view that the SCO is Russia and China's response to NATO. To counter this claim, we should note that the agenda of the Samarkand summit was confirmed by the foreign ministers of the member states on July 29, 2022. The draft resolution, joint documents and, most importantly, the Samarkand Declaration contain no appeals or statements regarding any countries that are not members of the organization. Furthermore, such attempts to 'geopoliticise' the SCO appear to be dismissive of other SCO member states.

We live at a turning point in history, when, obviously, one era ends and another begins. The modern world is experiencing a crisis of confidence at the global level, which gives rise to new challenges and threats to international peace and sustainable development. Obviously, these goals are not achieved by rivalry and

confrontation. Together we must create effective models of cooperation and development for the benefit of all. In this sense, the SCO is needed as a platform for creating an open dialogue and mutual trust between countries in such a difficult time.

SCO and the Afghan problem

Following the hasty withdrawal of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan, the country fell to the Taliban. While the Taliban is trying to adjust to the reality of governing the volatile nation and figuring out their foreign policy, millions of Afghans, according to the United Nations, are going hungry and the healthcare system is very much on the brink of collapse. The ordinary people of Afghanistan need good neighbours more than ever, and the international community faces a moral imperative to help avoid human catastrophe.

The situation in Afghanistan is relevant for the SCO also for reasons of regional security. Peace and stability in this country are consistent with the organization's goal of strengthening security throughout the region. Afghanistan should be regarded as a part of Central Asia, and the fate and concern of the Afghan people is a common problem of the entire region, insofar as it is impossible to talk about a peaceful and secure Central Asia without achieving peace and stability in the neighbouring Afghanistan.

From an economic standpoint, the construction of a transport and trade corridor through Afghanistan will provide Central Asian members of the SCO with access to the ports of the Indian Ocean. The implementation of the Trans-Afghan transport corridor will provide the shortest route to the seaports on the coastline of the Indian Ocean, thus reducing the cost of transportation of imported and exported goods.

Promoting the stability and social and economic recovery of Afghanistan should remain among the key priorities of the SCO. The main challenge for the international community has been working out how to help achieve the goals of social and economic recovery in the country, without assisting the Taliban itself, whose conservative social policies prevent girls and young women from accessing education. In this regard, the SCO could be an effective platform that allows for a more active use of soft and economic power to nudge the Taliban towards more progressive social policies.

Uzbekistan's presidency in the SCO

In a fairly short period of time, the whole of Central Asia has taken a steady course towards eliminating prejudices and policy differences, towards mutual common interests. There is now a growing understanding that Central Asia is one family. This achievement has been exemplified by, and to some extent has been a result of, the open, pragmatic and constructive foreign policy pursued by Uzbekistan over the last six years. The presidency of Uzbekistan in the SCO is a logical continuation of this open foreign policy.

As part of its presidency, Uzbekistan approached the implementation of its duties and functions with special responsibility. During the year of Uzbekistan's chairmanship, the country organised more than eighty meetings and conferences at which a wide range of important issues were discussed – issues ranging from promoting cooperation in the field of security and positioning our organization in the international arena to finding new ways to expand multilateral cooperation within the organization.

The issues of strengthening joint activities against terrorism, extremism and separatism have not lost their relevance. Challenges and threats to security acquire a new dimension in an era of unprecedented development of information

and communication technologies. Only by combining knowledge and capabilities can the organization fully use the advantages of digital development for the benefit of common security and development. Promoting collective action in this area remains a priority for the SCO in the years to come.

The task of navigating the shifting sands of the Eurasian geopolitics may present a challenge to Central Asian states. Neorealist theory of international relations tells us that countries, caught between stronger powers, choose strategies of balancing against or bandwagoning with one of the stronger powers. The SCO, with its emphasis on mutual trust and consensus, offers a unique platform, where instead of balancing or bandwagoning, member states can pursue a multi-dimensional foreign policy with a strong economic undercurrent.