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Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Risky Search For New Balance?

By Aidar Amrebayev

Synopsis

The recent SCO summit in Tashkent may not only be a turning point in the regional configuration of forces. It could potentially affect the strategic balance in the world order.

Commentary

ON 23-24 June 2016 the Uzbek capital city of Tashkent hosted the summit of leaders from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This was an important event that could not only become a turning point in the regional configuration of forces but also affect world order.

Interestingly, the SCO was formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union to tackle cross-border issues between the new Central Asian Independent States and China in the context of their fight against the so-called "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, and separatism). The SCO is clearly seeking to play a more significant role in today's world. But while the trajectory is one of expansion, its growth is not without risks.

Raising SCO's Global Ambition

The SCO's expansion to include India and Pakistan was the main issue on the Summit's agenda. In past SCO agreements, the leaders of these two countries had committed their support for the SCO. After the ratification, India and Pakistan will become full members of the SCO next year. Additionally, Iran may also join following the lifting of UN sanctions.

At the Tashkent meeting, along with the issues of regional security, the heads of

state discussed Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal to assess the global impact of the interactions of three regional groupings: the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), SCO and ASEAN. China's leader Xi Jinping also tried to promote the SCO as a platform for the implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The summit's adoption of a joint declaration during the 15th anniversary of the founding of the SCO reflected a new perspective on SCO's international positioning.

There is potential tension arising from very difficult relations between India and Pakistan. Until recently, the SCO has only one "main game" - between China and Russia in their tussle for influence over the Central Asia states. Now the internal tensions will be more complex, commensurate with the impending entry of India and Pakistan.

The traditional focus of SCO has been on Central Asia's regional security, economic cooperation, and humanitarian interaction. New members that do not have direct common borders with the region may divert SCO's attention away from Central Asia and increase the number of new influencing factors. In addition, the traditional "non-Western" autocratic political regimes have prevailed in this region. But with the entry of India and Pakistan, the SCO may undergo major changes arising from their democratically-oriented political systems and enduring good relations with the United States.

Voice of the East or West?

For example, several experts agree that India today may be the "voice" of the West, whose opinion as a whole can undermine the current unanimity of the SCO. Formed on the basis of the so-called "Shanghai Spirit", the SCO approaches decision-making by consensus. It is also difficult to expect a clear "consensus" between dynamically developing and competing economies of China and India.

This will significantly reduce the weight of the Central Asian countries in the SCO. They will be even more dependent on the ambitions of the different external forces, which include new members India and Pakistan. Big players will press their own strategies and interests in this project. For example, Russia is seeking to consolidate its status quo in the Central Asia region where its strategic interests lie.

Russia aims to coordinate possible projects of cooperation between the SCO and EEU in alignment with its own oil interests. While China hoped that the SCO will implement the strategy of "One Belt, One Road", with its "Go West" slogan, India and Pakistan want to revive the TAPI project, a gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

It is safe to assume that the SCO will come under the scrutiny of extremist groups from South Asia and the Middle East, resulting in a need for an active relationship with the US and the countries of the Western coalition in Afghanistan.

Other Complexities

The prospect of Iran joining the SCO can add greater complexity to the organisation. Having been recently freed from sanctions and now promoting its interests in

regional affairs, Iran is unlikely to follow the consensus of the "Shanghai Spirit". All the more, Iran has the most direct interests in Central Asia; its entry may trigger conflict with some of the SCO member states.

Another potential risk to the SCO's expansion of its international influence is a retraction of the organisation in the "opposition bloc" vis-a-vis the West. The political-economic strategy of the major players in the SCO - Russia and China - is to oppose, for example, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. They argue that the TPP directly inhibits economic development opportunities in all the SCO space, even though the SCO possesses considerable potential to develop its own trading group.

In a nutshell, the SCO is emerging as a new factor of diplomacy within the established global order. While it has the potential to compete or complement other regional groupings, the SCO in the long run could lead to a new balance in the international order - if it could overcome the attendant risks of expansion.

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