

IS THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION AN EFFECTIVE SECURITY ACTOR?

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Abstract *The article examines whether the SCO is an effective regional organization in maintaining the security of its member states. First established as a mechanism for resolving border issues among its members in 1996, it evolved into a regional organization focused on security issues, particularly the fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism, in 2001. Starting in 2005, the SCO made efforts to solve problems in Afghanistan by establishing the Contact Group SCO-Afghanistan and inviting its President to each summit of the heads of state members. We will analyze whether it is a successful security actor or not in fighting three evils, supporting Afghanistan, and maintaining security among its members.*

Keywords: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, security issues, terrorism, border issues, Afghanistan.*

I. Introduction

The SCO comprises a total of 26 countries, 10 of which are full members: Belarus, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. These countries cover a territory of approximately 36 million square kilometers and a population of over 3.4 billion people. Two observer states: Afghanistan and Mongolia. And 14 Dialogue partners: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Maldives, Myanmar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait (Secretariat of SCO, n.d.).

"The SCO was born primarily for security reasons." (Xinhua, 2024a). SCO's primary focus is security, and most importantly, it emphasizes counterterrorism. However, it is not a military organization and does not possess a military unit (Maduz, 2018). However, the main goals of the SCO are not only about security but also about strengthening mutual trust, encouraging beneficial cooperation in different fields, including economic, and promoting economic growth and social and cultural development in its members (Secretariat of the SCO, 2015). Since the inception of



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the SCO, security cooperation has yielded significant results and fostered mutual trust among member states. "Significant progress has been made in combating the three forces of terrorism, separatism, and extremism" (Chang, Xinwei, 2021).

The goal of the article is to investigate whether the SCO is an effective regional organization in securing its members. Our research question is: How compelling is SCO in maintaining security in its member states? What security issues has the SCO addressed since its creation?

We employ qualitative methods to address our research questions, including a content analysis of the existing literature on this topic, which is published in various languages and regions. Our analysis encompasses data from the inception of the SCO to the present day, covering the SCO's activities in the security sphere from 1996 to 2025.

Our article is composed of the following parts. First, we begin with the Shanghai Five and its activities in resolving border issues among the participating states and enhancing confidence in the borders. Second, we will analyze how the SCO was or was not efficient in resolving problems linked to three evils – terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Thirdly, we will examine how SCO contributed to resolving the Afghan crisis and its related issues. Lastly, we will analyze whether SCO is an effective actor in maintaining security in its member states.

II. Shanghai Five and Border Issues

Initially, the Shanghai Five was effective in helping to resolve border issues between China and the former Soviet countries (Umarov, 2024). In 1996 and 1997, the heads of the five states signed the "Agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Field in Border Areas" and the "Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in Border Areas" at meetings in Shanghai and Moscow, which were effective in raising confidence by reducing armed forces in border areas (TRT Avaz, 2022).

However, the Shanghai Five served China uniquely by resolving border issues only between China and the former Soviet Union countries (Nicharapova, 2014). For many years, Central Asian countries have struggled to resolve border issues among themselves, sometimes accompanied by military clashes. Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan

bilaterally resolved their border issues later, without the participation of the SCO or the Shanghai Five. The Kyrgyz-Tajik border issue was finally resolved recently when the two presidents signed the Agreement on the Borders between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Tajikistan on March 13, 2025 (24.kg, 2025b).

The border between the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan is 1,113 kilometers in length. The Agreement on the delimitation was signed on December 15, 2001, in Astana. In 2008, it was ratified by the Zhogorku Kenesh, the Kyrgyz Parliament. In 2022, an agreement was signed between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan regarding certain sections of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek state border, and another agreement was signed between the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the joint management of the water resources of the Kempir-Abad reservoir. The total length of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border is 1,684 kilometers, of which 519.9 kilometers were clarified before 2011 and 486.94 kilometers were clarified over the past three years. Conflicts have erupted along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in border areas, often involving not only military personnel but also residents (24.kg, 2025a). Between 2012 and 2022, 144 different conflicts occurred in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with more than 200 victims on both sides (Azattyk, 2022).

In 2002, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and China signed an agreement, marking the end of the process of delimiting and demarcating their borders. As part of this Agreement, the Kyrgyz Republic transferred several disputed areas to China, including approximately 160 square kilometers of the Khan-Tengri section, as well as the Uzengu-Kush and Boz-Amir-Khudzhent sections (24.kg, 2025a). Pierre Chabal (2019, p. 187), a specialist on Central Asia, in his book, noted, "The fact that just a few years were enough to stabilize 7,000 km of borders from the Altai Mountains to the Wakhan Corridor is not all." He mentioned that the Shanghai Five was efficient in solving not only border issues between neighbors but also contributed to achieving "confidence," "good neighborhood," and "consensus" among its participants (Chabal, 2019).

III. SCO's fight against Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism

SCO was established as a security organization in 1996 to resolve border issues between its participants. Later, in 2001, SCO was directed to fight against three evils: terrorism, extremism, and separatism. In 2002, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established in Tashkent, and according to it, SCO members prevented thousands of terrorist attacks, arresting 650 terrorists and eradicating some extremist organizations, which shows the SCO as an effective security organization. In 2005, the Afghanistan-SCO Contact Group was established to address security challenges in Afghanistan. Since 2007, SCO has organized various types of security activities, including anti-terrorist exercises (Nicharapova, Shukuralieva, 2019). The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure is the most effective SCO organ, "but it does little more than help member states organize military exercises" (Umarov, 2024).

Between 2001 and 2022, the SCO members signed approximately 16 high-level documents related to the fight against terrorism, including declarations, conventions, agreements, and other similar instruments. During this period, SCO members participated in approximately 28 anti-terrorist exercises (Rumyantseva & Rakhimov, 2022). From 2013 to 2017, SCO member states foiled more than 600 terrorist crimes, captured some 2,000 terrorists, and destroyed over 500 terrorist camps. Security mechanisms have improved, and joint drills have extended to cyberspace (Xinhua, 2024a). There is a general list of terrorist and extremist groups banned in the territory of the SCO countries (24.kg, 2025c). Initially, the SCO was an effective regional structure in combating terrorism and extremism. Between 2011 and 2015 under RATS SCO, 20 terrorist attacks were prevented, 650 crimes of terrorists and extremists were averted, 440 terrorist training camps and 1700 members of international terrorist organizations were neutralized, more than 2700 members of illicit armed groups were arrested, 213 people associated with terrorism extradited, 180 suspects were added to wanted list, 600 undercover bases with weapons revealed, more than 3250 explosive devices, 10 000 weapons, 450 000 pieces of

ammunition, and more than 52 tons of explosives were confiscated (Alimov, 2017).

The Program on Combating Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism was signed in 2024 by the heads of state of the SCO for the period 2025-2027 (Tass.ru, 2024). During our communication with Pal Dunay (2024), a specialist in International Relations, he expressed his opinion that terrorism no longer exists in Central Asia, which can inform us about the effectiveness of the existing security organizations in Central Asia, including the SCO. Before, there were terrorist attacks organized in Central Asian countries by different international terrorist organizations. In Kazakhstan, in 2011-2012, there were around eight terrorist attacks in cities like Aktobe, Atyrau, Astana, Almaty, and Taraz. In Tajikistan, there were around seven terrorist attacks organized between 2000 and 2015 in locations like Dushanbe, Khudjant, Khorog, and Vahdat, with around 40 deaths and hundreds wounded. There were nine terrorist attacks organized in Uzbekistan between 1999 and 2009 in places like Khanabad, Andijan, Tashkent, Bukharskaya Oblast, and Bukhara, with more than 250 deaths and hundreds of wounded (Kaktus Media, 2015). In the Kyrgyz Republic, between 2000 and 2023, there were around ten terrorist attacks organized, many terrorist attacks prevented, and terrorists imprisoned or murdered (Kaktus Media, 2024).

IV. SCO and Afghanistan

"The SCO has always been sensitive to security risks emanating from Afghanistan" (Omelicheva, 2021), and it has always paid close attention to Afghanistan, recognizing its importance for the security of SCO members. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group has played an active role in consolidating regional efforts to mediate the Afghan issue, and it is now necessary to reactivate this group (Vecherniy Bishkek, 2024).

The Contact Group SCO-Afghanistan was established in 2005, and from 2005 to 2020, its development was "tortuous." Between 2005 and 2008, a procedure for interaction and agreements was developed on various aspects of cooperation. From 2009 to 2016, the work of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was hindered by a lack of consensus among the parties. Between 2017 and 2020, the SCO member states and Afghanistan attempted to restore peace in Afghanistan with the support of the Contact Group (Yuejie, n.d.). In our opinion, this mechanism was not effective

enough in cooperation with SCO members in solving security issues and drug trafficking in the whole region. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find any statistics on achieved results.

There are several reasons why the SCO was not efficient in cooperating with Afghanistan. The first reason is the absence of a standard policy due to the contradictions between Russia and China regarding the SCO, as well as the inactivity of Central Asian countries. The second reason is the inefficiency of internal institutions, decision-making processes, and the dominance of bilateral cooperation within the SCO. The third reason is the "selfishness" of its members (Nicharapova, 2016).

V. Role of the SCO in guaranteeing security in its member states

The SCO was never active when issues arose in its member countries. The non-interventionism in resolving the Sino-Indian clashes in June 2020 and the Kyrgyz-Tajik clashes in April 2021, as well as its lack of a strategy towards the situation in Afghanistan, demonstrate the inefficiency of the SCO as a security organization among its member states (Legiec, 2021). In addition to the internal revolts in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2005, 2010, and 2020, the Osh interethnic clash in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2010, and the January events in Kazakhstan that occurred in 2022, the SCO also overlooked these events. The border issues among Central Asian countries were also ignored by the SCO, which stated that they were internal affairs and that the Central Asian countries should address them independently. Concerning the Russian-Ukrainian War, some members of the SCO expressed their concern during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on September 15–16, 2022, during which President Xi Jinping met President Putin and said that "China views the Russian invasion of Ukraine with great concern" and India expressed its concern as well (Andersen, 2022, p. 4). The India-Pakistan conflict also highlights the ineffectiveness of the SCO, as evidenced by the fact that during the entire period of conflict, "there was not a single call from the SCO Secretariat to them to calm down" (Orlov, 2025). Concerning the Iran-Israel clash in 2025, on June 14, 2025, the SCO published its statement regarding the military strike on Iran and expressed its concerns, condemning these attacks and offering condolences to the people of Iran (Secretariat, 2025).

As we see, "When a major terrorist attack takes place in a member state, all that can be found on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure's website are press releases expressing condolences" (Umarov, 2024). In the beginning, SCO was an essential mechanism for cooperation among its members, "but later, due to the increase in members, the organization lost its ability to react to regional conflicts and security challenges" (Legiec, 2021).

However, we cannot consider the SCO as an entirely inefficient structure in maintaining security. Ruslan Mirzayev, the director of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, informed that over the last year, in 2023, the SCO countries suppressed the activities of 73 secret cells of international terrorist organizations, prevented 69 terrorist attacks, blocked 24,536 information resources promoting terrorism and extremism on the web, identified 507, detained 447, convicted 54, and neutralized 182 leaders, members, and accomplices of terrorist groups through information exchange among members (Assaniyaz, 2024) which show that the SCO is an effective organization in maintaining security in its members.

VI. Conclusion

In our article, we have analyzed the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the security sphere since its inception to the present day. In 1996, the Shanghai Five was established by China and four other former Soviet Republics – Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan- to resolve border issues among them and enhance confidence in their borders by reducing military presence. Later, in 2001, the Shanghai Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation when Uzbekistan joined it. From 2001 to the present, the SCO has been established as an organization dedicated to maintaining security in its member countries. However, SCO is not only a security organization but is active in all other possible sectors, including economic, cultural, and social cooperation. The activities of the SCO in the security sphere are always criticized as not being compelling enough. SCO is seen as a declarative organization.

We have some findings. First of all, the mechanism of the Shanghai Five was considered an effective one; however, it is accused of serving China primarily rather than the smaller members of the Shanghai Five. Second, SCO is seen as a declarative and unproductive structure in the security sphere. However, we see some statistics in our article on how many

terrorist attacks were prevented and terrorists detained in the territories of the SCO members. The fact that in recent years, there have not been big terrorist attacks occurring in the regions of its members can also tell us about the effective internal organs and activities of the SCO. The statistics on preventing and fighting against terrorism and extremism are impressive. Third, we cannot consider the SCO to have been successful in cooperating with Afghanistan. The activities and usefulness of the Contact Group SCO-Afghanistan are seen ambiguously. Fourth, SCO is criticized for being inactive when major security issues occur in its member countries. As examples, we have analyzed the Osh events in 2010, the January events in 2022, the Kyrgyz internal revolts of 2005, 2010, and 2020, the clash on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, and many others when the SCO released statements and published them on its website, expressing condolences and concerns. However, the SCO is not a military structure, and it does not possess a common armed force; the SCO never intended to solve internal issues in its members, reminding us of the impossibility of interference in the internal affairs of independent countries.

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