

# CULTURAL AND CIVILIZATIONAL ASPECTS OF STRENGTHENING TOLERANCE IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SCO MEMBER STATES

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## ANNOTATION

*The article summarizes the results of official meetings and summits, also shows the role of Uzbekistan in the SCO, as a full member of this organization since its inception. Today, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization plays an important role in building confidence, good neighborly relations, mutual respect, as well as in developing trade, economic and tourism relations between the participating countries. The modern system of international relations is in a state of imbalance. It is going through a stage of deep transformations and painful evolutionary development. Uzbekistan, being the chairman of the SCO last year, makes a great contribution to its development, strengthening the legal framework and expanding its authority in the world. Uzbekistan, together with other SCO countries, has done significant large-scale work to further strengthen the Organization's potential in solving global and regional problems, strengthen coordination and cooperation and increase its role on the world stage over the past period.*

**KEYWORDS:** SCO, cooperation, security, cultural and civilizational aspects of strengthening, struggle against the "three evils", development, tolerance in relations between member states

The formation of the SCO took place under the influence of cardinal changes in international relations at the end of the 20th century. Among them are the end of the Cold War and the change in the balance of power in the world, the emergence of a new geopolitical situation in Eurasia and the formation of new regional centers of power, the processes of globalization and regionalism, the change in the attitude of the world community to traditional threats - the intensification of terrorism, extremism and separatist movements<sup>1</sup>.

During that difficult period, the need for institutionalized regional cooperation of the young independent states of Central Asia in counteracting multifaceted, largely unfamiliar threats and problems was quite understandable. In this context, the emergence of the SCO was a direct result of efforts to ensure stability and security in Central Asia. Four of the five young republics of the former USSR - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - became members of a multilateral structure that includes such major powers as Russia and China.

## REGIONAL DIMENSION OF THE SCO

Over the past period, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, despite certain gaps in its activities, has managed to transform into a full-fledged regional organization, having established practical cooperation in the field of security, in particular in the field of combating terrorism, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking. We can say that the work of the SCO in this area is highly institutionalized. Since 2004, the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO has been successfully functioning in Tashkent.

The role of the Organization in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia is assessed by foreign experts in different ways. While some call it a "guarantor of stability in Central Asia," others, mostly Western experts, believe it has failed to develop into an effective regional security organization. In particular, they point to the fact that the SCO failed to prove itself in crisis situations in the region.

However, these discussions overlook the fact that the SCO, although seriously oriented and continues to be oriented towards security issues, is by no means a "military-political" structure. In our opinion, the contribution of the SCO to strategic stability and security in Central Asia requires a broader analysis.

First, stability and security are broad concepts that cover not only issues of ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also issues of sustainable development and social stability. It is this approach that makes it possible to fully and objectively reveal the stabilizing role of the SCO. That is, contrary to the popular belief that the SCO is more of an organization in the field of security, the range of its activities is wider.

Secondly, many foreign analysts overlook the fact that the main founding documents of the organization - the Shanghai Declaration and the Charter - define it as a structure aimed at "strengthening cooperation in the political, economic, cultural, humanitarian and other spheres." That is, the founding states did not initially plan to create the SCO as a collective security organization or a military-political union in its classical sense. Rather, it represents a new type of regional organization—a new type of universal agenda, as described by former SCO Secretary General Rashid Alimov<sup>4</sup>.

Thirdly, critics of the SCO do not pay due attention to the deep essence of the "Shanghai spirit" concept and its place in the life of the Organization. "Shanghai spirit" includes the following principles: "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the pursuit of common development." That is, despite the size of the political, military and economic power of the member states of the Organization, they are all equal.

The principle of making all decisions within the framework of the SCO on the basis of consensus also serves to bring the "Shanghai spirit" to life. This allows the "medium" and "small" members of the Organization, along with China and Russia, to actively participate in determining the priorities of the SCO. Therefore, there are no grounds for the arguments that the SCO is a "handy organization" of large members - China and Russia.

Fourth, the SCO is not an economic bloc in its classical sense. The inspirer of the idea of turning the SCO into an economic structure is China. Since 2010, Beijing has been promoting two important initiatives in this direction - the creation of the SCO Development Bank and the SCO Development Fund (Special Account). Beijing also proposes to discuss the idea of forming a free trade area (FTA). All these initiatives still remain unlaunched, although they are not removed from the agenda, as the member states cannot reach a consensus. For example, Russia instead offers measures to interface interaction in the EAEU-OBOR format.

Thus, assessing the role of the SCO in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia by raising the question of whether it is a "collective security" organization or an "integration association" does not fully reveal the constructive role of the Organization in ensuring regional stability.

Unfortunately, Western political and expert circles still retain stereotypical assessments of the nature of the SCO. They take a geopolitical approach<sup>6</sup> and do not take into account the major transformation of the SCO agenda since the formation of the Shanghai Five, the main goal of which was to strengthen confidence building measures in the border areas between China and the former Soviet republics. On this basis, they view the SCO as a "geopolitical deal" between Russia and China in order to establish control over Central Asia. Hence the perception of the SCO as a counterweight to NATO.

### **TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCO: FROM CENTRAL ASIA TO EURASIA?**

The key event in the life of the Organization in recent years has undoubtedly been its expansion in 2017 to include two major Asian countries, India and Pakistan. It is clear that these states are not only "new members", but also competing "geopolitical players" with political weight.

On the one hand, the SCO has become one of the largest trans-regional organizations. The member states collectively wield tremendous power politically, economically, militarily and demographically:

— Four SCO member states (Russia, China, India and Pakistan) have the status of a nuclear power; in addition, Russia and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council;

- Almost half of the world's population lives in the SCO countries;

- The common space of the SCO occupies 60% of the territory of Eurasia;

- The total GDP of the SCO member states is about 23% of world GDP.

On the other hand, after the accession of India and Pakistan, the SCO became more "diverse" from within. In addition to the unresolved bilateral disputes on a wide range of issues between Delhi and Islamabad, tensions in Sino-Indian relations have recently been added, which have been observed since the beginning of 2020, after border clashes.

Moreover, the fundamental changes taking place in the world, including under the influence of the pandemic crisis, pose new challenges and tasks for the SCO.

If the SCO wants to become an influential force in Eurasia, to take part in the formation of a new world order, then it should update its agenda and adapt its institutions to changing realities.

Much also depends on the alignment within the Organization. In this context, one of the fundamental conditions for shaping the future trajectory of the SCO will most likely be the nature of the relationship between its major members - Russia, China and India. Whether the so-called tripartite format RIC (Russia-India-China) is capable of replacing the tandem of Moscow and Beijing, which in the past was seen as the “driving force” of the institutional development of the Organization, time will tell.

### **ON MODERN PRIORITIES OF UZBEKISTAN IN THE SCO**

Uzbekistan, as one of the founding states of the SCO, is interested in the full disclosure of its potential by increasing practical cooperation in those promising areas that meet the vital interests of all participating countries.

With the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in December 2016, cardinal changes took place in the country's foreign policy<sup>8</sup>. The most serious modification has undergone, first of all, the Central Asian direction of Uzbek diplomacy. President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev identified Central Asia as Uzbekistan's top foreign policy priority. Strengthening stability, cooperation, good neighborliness and a positive solution to existing disagreements with neighboring countries have become the main goals of the new regional course of Tashkent<sup>9</sup>.

Changes in Uzbekistan's foreign policy are reflected in its multilateral diplomacy. In recent years, Tashkent has significantly stepped up its participation in international and regional structures. One of the concrete results was, in particular, the election of the country to the UN Human Rights Council in the period from 2021 to 2023<sup>10</sup>. Undoubtedly, this trend also applies to the SCO. “The development of relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will remain an important direction of Uzbekistan's foreign policy,” said President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev in his Address to the Uzbek Parliament in January 2020.

If we analyze the activities of Tashkent in recent years within the framework of the Organization, we can highlight the following new accents.

First, for Uzbekistan, the SCO should continue to be an important multilateral platform, primarily in ensuring stability and broad cooperation in Central Asia. Tashkent is convinced that, despite the expansion of the Organization in 2017 with India and Pakistan, Central Asia must continue to be the "geographical axis" of the SCO<sup>11</sup>.

A pronounced “regional focus” can also be seen in Uzbekistan's desire to increase the SCO's attention to the Afghan issue in the context of more active involvement of the IRA in regional processes<sup>12</sup>. In other words, the "regionalism" of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy is clearly expressed in its updated "SCO course".

Secondly, there is a significant strengthening of constructivism in Tashkent's approaches to the SCO. Obviously a change to those thematic areas from which the country has previously distanced itself. Thus, recently representatives of the republic have been taking full part in joint anti-terrorist and military exercises of the SCO. Uzbekistan acceded to the Agreement on the procedure for organizing and conducting joint counter-terrorism exercises of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization of August 28, 2008 and the Agreement on conducting joint military exercises of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, signed on June 27, 2007.

Thirdly, initiative and pragmatism are becoming pronounced elements of Uzbekistan's multilateral diplomacy, including within the framework of the SCO. The proposals put forward by Tashkent to expand multilateral cooperation, meeting the national interests of the country, are in line with the priorities of strengthening stability and cooperation in the region.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has initiated the launch of new cooperation platforms within the framework of the SCO, including the SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent, the mechanism of the Meeting of Heads of Railway Administrations, the Silk Road International Tourism Institute in Samarkand, etc.

In total, over the past four years, the Uzbek side has put forward more than 30 initiatives. This is a very serious and significant indicator.

Fourthly, Uzbekistan, recognizing the many achievements in the development of the Organization, stands for the effective use of the huge potential of multilateral cooperation at its disposal.

The motto of Tashkent is: “The SCO is strong only when each of us is strong,” as President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev during the SCO summit on November 10, 2020.

Consequently, Uzbekistan stands for constructive and fruitful interaction within the SCO, and is ready to support the initiatives of other parties that meet the interests of "joint development", as provided for in the SCO Charter.

It is important to fill the activities of the Shanghai G8 with new content, expand its agenda through such promising areas as the creation of interregional transport and transit corridors, innovative and digital development, the search for new points of economic growth, and the consolidation of the efforts of member states in the fight against climate and environmental threats .

Uzbekistan is interested and ready to make its constructive contribution to the formation of a new SCO agenda in order to increase its practical relevance and international prestige.

**Table 1. Content analysis of the narrative of the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: main conclusions**

Problems	Problem level	Problem type	Hierarchy by frequency	Sources of problems	Way to solve the problem
Terrorism, separatism, extremism	international	security issue	37		Creation of an international legal framework for anti-terrorist activities; elimination of poverty, creation of a regional anti-terrorist structure
Distribution of drugs and weapons	international	security issue	17	Poverty, a source of terrorist financing	Intensification of multilateral cooperation to counter the drug threat emanating from Afghanistan
Nuclear nonproliferation	international	security issue	15	Lack of Equal Security Mechanism	The early accession of all countries to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, as well as the signing and ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty by those States that have not yet done so
Preservation of cultural diversity	regional	humanitarian problem	8	Purposeful export of specific models of social development	Increasing cooperation
Compliance with international law	international	security issue	8		Strengthening the role of the UN in international affairs, further enhancing the effectiveness and authority of the UN Security Council
Violation of sovereignty	international	security issue	7	Application of "double standards" in matters of	Building a regional security system

				human rights, resolution of internal conflicts	
The emergence of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional and other conflicts	regional	security issue	7		Creation within the framework of the SCO of a mechanism for preventing regional conflicts
Bad ecology	regional	Ecological problem	7		cooperation in the field of environmental protection, ensuring environmental safety, rational use of natural resources
Economic sustainability	regional	economic problem	6		Implementation of the Program of Multilateral Trades for Economic Cooperation in the SCO, regional projects in priority areas of the economy, transition to the free movement of goods, capital, services and technologies.
Man-made disasters	regional	Ecological problem	6		Monitoring, exchange of analytical information
Information vulnerability	regional	security issue	5	Use of ICT to the detriment of international security	Projects of multilateral cooperation in the field of information technology
Illegal migration	regional	security issue	5		Projects of multilateral cooperation in the field of economy
Violation of an individual's rights	international	humanitarian problem	5		Creation of a legal framework
Energy security	regional	security issue	3	Vulnerability of transportation corridors	Pipeline projects
Leveling the levels of socio- economic development	regional	economic problem	3		Projects of multilateral cooperation in the field of economy
Spread of infectious diseases	regional	humanitarian problem	3		Health cooperation projects

The content analysis of the main documents of the SCO shows that since its inception, the organization has tackled a wide range of problems, the main of which are global security problems. At the same time, many challenges and threats of a global nature are perceived by the members of the organization as regional, requiring concentration of efforts to solve them within a particular region, which indicates that the SCO is an organization of countries seeking to prove that they are able to contribute to solving global problems, relying on their own forces, and at the same time limit the influence of other players in their area of responsibility. The text of the documents repeatedly emphasizes that many problems arise partly from the use of "double standards" in confronting global challenges, namely the promotion of one's own interests under the pretext of helping to resolve, for example, internal conflicts. At the same time, the challenges and threats dealt with by the SCO are perceived differently by members of the organization. For some, some of them pose a greater danger, for someone less. In this regard, it is advisable to conduct another content analysis of speeches, interviews with the main political leaders of the member countries of the organization (31 materials in total), aimed at identifying the priority of a particular threat for each member of the organization. The units of analysis were the same problems as for the previous analysis with the addition of a number of new items. The expansion of the list is

due to the fact that this group of materials reflects the positions, including those of the political leaders of the SCO countries, which go beyond the influence and spread of the SCO as a regional organization.

**Table 2. Content analysis of the problem factors of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

Problems	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Russia	China	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	India	pakistan
I'm a turd non-spread		1						
Violation of sovereignty				1			1	1
Energy security _								1
Distribution of drugs and weapons	6	3	3	4	3		1	1
Terrorism , separatism, extremism	3	3	5	5	4	1		
In the emergence of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional and other conflicts	1							
In leveling the levels of socio-economic development	1		1				1	1
Economic sustainability	10	7	2	1	1	4	2	2
Bad ecology	1	1						
Information vulnerability		2	2				1	
Preservation of cultural diversity	3		2				1	1
Compliance with international law		1						
Fight against poverty	1						1	
Spread of infectious diseases								
Man-made disasters								
Illegal migration	1		1		1			
Violation of an individual's rights						2		
Afghanistan	1	4	6	4		1	1	2

The analysis showed that today the Representatives of Uzbekistan in their speeches focus primarily on security issues such as terrorism, transnational crime and drug trafficking, but an important area of development for them at the very beginning of the functioning of the organization is economic cooperation. The potential threat from Afghanistan and the consequences of the economic crisis are gradually added to the list of problems. Economic projects are similar in essence to others proposed by members of the organization. This is the formation of a common transport and information networks and the improvement of infrastructure. For this reason, in the speeches of the leader of Uzbekistan, the rhetoric of support for the Silk Road Economic Belt is often heard. And here it should be noted that "both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan continue implicit rivalry for regional leadership", which creates additional problems in the framework of resolving certain issues within the SCO. A very interesting suggestion is the need to rethink the problem of radical Islam within the framework of the SCO, namely through the creation of a commission on Islam. However, in addition to this, the most important areas of development that Uzbekistan is considering are all the same economic issues.

Thus, the analysis carried out allows us to demonstrate that this organization is fully ready to assume obligations to solve a number of problems, both regional and global. On a number of problems of modern world politics, such as nuclear non-proliferation, violation of sovereignty, energy security, drug and weapons proliferation, terrorism, separatism, extremism, the emergence of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional and other conflicts, alignment of levels of socio-economic development, economic stability, poor ecology, information vulnerability, preservation of cultural diversity, compliance with international law, the fight against poverty, the spread of infectious diseases, man-made disasters, illegal migration and violation of human rights, the SCO member states express a consolidated official position. Threats are perceived by states in almost the same way and the means to resolve them are also similar, which shows the stability of the organization and the cohesion within it. Interaction within the framework of the SCO is derived from the commonality of political ideas and the similarity of the vision of ways to ensure security by the member states. Their unification is based on general provisions related to the need to form a multipolar system of international relations and recognize the supremacy of state sovereignty. Data for positions should be considered as basic for solving the problems of regional security and rapprochement within the framework of the SCO.

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