

COOPERATION OR CONNECTIVITY: HOW WILL THE SCO FUNCTION FROM NOW?

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With the inclusion of India and Pakistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the summit meeting on 9 June 2017, there is much uncertainty surrounding the future of the organization’s ability to maintain stability and cohesiveness. This is the first time the SCO has grown to include new nations since its establishment in 2001, and once the two countries are formally admitted the eight-member bloc will not only cover nearly half of the world’s population and 3/5 of the Eurasian continent bordering three oceans (the Indian, the Pacific and the Arctic Oceans), but also include four nuclear powers-Russia, China, India and Pakistan. With their inclusion, it is one of the largest regional organizations in the world, however, it is unclear if India and Pakistan will complicate the organization’s efficiency and affect the SCO’s ability to promote regional stability and prosperity.

Those who tend to believe in “the Thucydides Trap”, or recognize the differences among the “Big Three”-Russia, China and India, find it difficult to look at this merger optimistically, especially because of the long contentious history between India and Pakistan. According to some analysts, while the increase in SCO members will bring diversity to its

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voice, it also has the potential to affect the current equilibrium among the original six states. On June 9, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy held the forum “Shanghai Cooperation Organization at Crossroads”. The keynote speakers provided their insightful views from Russia, the United States, and India, but it seemed to omit the Chinese opinions on the summit meeting of the SCO in Astana.

Like any international or multilateral organization, it is essential for both new and old SCO member states to ensure the organization continues to maintain the necessary cohesion among them. Theoretically, the forces that bring states together and drive them apart will affect the security of individual states by determining both how large a threat they face and how much help they can expect. Therefore, the factors that determine how states choose alliance or “strategic partners”, as China asserts, will shape the evolution of the SCO as an international organization. Therefore, the central issue that remains is how these states will respond to “threats” and the likelihood of working together to combat threatening ‘forces’.

China affirmed that since it was founded 16 years ago, the SCO has become a significant platform and reliable support for the member countries to enhance mutual trust, deepen public diplomacy, expand practical cooperation, and jointly safeguard regional security and stability. Yet, with the increasing uncertainties and instabilities in the current international and regional situation, the member states agreed to be more cooperative within the SCO framework. As a rising power and the dual core founders of the SCO, it is highly expected China will assume its usual role. During one SCO summit, Chinese President Xi Jin-ping called for all member states to work jointly in safeguarding regional peace and building a community of shared future, which then resulted in an SCO convention on combating terrorism and extremism. China is considering hosting another similar convention and promised to take the primary share of the budget for the Secretariat of the SCO to facilitate its work as scheduled. In addition, given the recent deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, the SCO reached a consensus that “without security, there will be no development to speak of. And it called upon all parties to support the war-worn government in Kabul to reinforce the fight against all sorts of the acts of terrorism and religious extremism which remain a long and arduous task”. It deserves noting that

China made the compromise to take the term of separatism out of the “three evil forces”-terrorism, separatism and extremism, which have been the key words of the Chinese discourse with international terrorism.

Secondly, although China has quite a wide range of disagreements with member states such as India, it highlighted the year of 2017 as the SCO’s 15th anniversary and the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty on Long-Term Good-neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. In Astana, Xi lost no time to reiterate the “Shanghai Spirit” mainly embodied in the two documents, which have become more cohesive in the face of the vicissitudes of the region and the world as a whole. At the moment of the accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO on June 9, Chinese leader first congratulated India on being a full member of the SCO, adding that the two parties would work together for more high-level interaction, strategic dialogues and policy alignment within the SCO framework. As a regional bloc in which Sino-India cooperation can extend to other issues in the region, the SCO is also able to provide a new angle for bilateral ties between Beijing and New Delhi. As Indian scholar Raja Mohan put it, the deepening strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing and a transformed India-United States relationship have fundamentally altered the context of India’s interest in the SCO. As China’s rise has begun to constrict India’s room for maneuver in the subcontinent of Asia and the Indian Ocean, unlike in the past, Moscow may not be willing to help New Delhi balance Beijing. However, being a full member of the SCO does provide India with much more strategic capacity. At the least, Prime Minister Modi has taken the utility of the SCO to deal with two of India’s immediate security issues: counter-terrorism and connectivity.

China certainly welcomes the fruitful outcomes gained at the Astana Summit, which includes the expansion of the SCO for the first time. The leaders in Beijing are also content with the deepening cooperation between old and new members in terms of the “Shanghai Spirit”. Perhaps more significant is that because of wide support of the “Belt and Road Initiative” and SCO development strategies during the summit, China seems to be more confident than ever to seek the glory it claims on the world stage. In the meantime, China appeals to all members to adhere to inclusiveness and openness in order to have dialogues with other countries or international

and regional organizations. For the SCO overlaps with many key areas of the Belt and Road Initiative, it also serves as a security complement to the ambitious economic-focused BRI. But just as the BRI is leading China to become more entangled in regional geopolitical security challenges, the SCO's two new members, India and Pakistan, will likely complicate the organization's normal function.

In closing, China has perceived the SCO as a first testing ground for promoting common interests through a multilateral platform in which China is the strongest, but not the only strong player. It was also viewed as a first step toward a Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia, in which Beijing and Moscow could create a regional order to benefit both powers and could be accepted by the countries of the region. In order to get there, China was promoting the creation of the SCO's free trade area (FTA) and a joint development bank. Yet, Beijing soon discovered that Moscow was worried that China would use the SCO FTA and the development bank to promote its own agenda and to buy influence in Central Asia at Russia's expense. Because the SCO headquarters are located in Beijing - and the organization has Shanghai in its name - it is seen as a big enough symbolic trophy to keep China pleased.

As a matter of fact, in Henry Kissinger's opinion, the contemporary Asian order includes outside powers as an integral feature: the United States whose role as an Asia-Pacific power was explicitly affirmed in joint statements by the two governments in 2013; and Russia, geographically an Asian power and one co-founder of Asian groupings such as the SCO, has forged the highest-level strategic partnership with China of the day. Therefore, the leaders of China are well aware that given the rivalry between India and China and the continuing enmity between India and Pakistan, they do represent major challenges to the future function of the SCO. The key to the challenge is that if Moscow rises to the occasion, it can create a useful platform for managing international order across Greater Eurasia. If it fails to do so, the SCO will be dysfunctional, with the rivalries and enmities on the continent running unchecked. The picture seems not so rosy, but it is the reality faced from now by all member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.