

EURASIA AT THE TIMES OF GEOECONOMIC SHIFTS

Existing Mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Their Problems Dealing With Non-traditional Security Challenges

X. Fan

Xuesong Fan – PhD in Political Science, Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics; bldg. 2, 17 Malaya Ordynka Ulitsa, Moscow, Russian Federation; E-mail: xfan@hse.ru

Abstract

Central Asia is extremely important for the security of Russia, China, and the Eurasian region, both historically and at present. Unconventional security challenges, led by terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which in the official Chinese rhetoric and official documents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are designated as the ‘three forces of evil,’ pose a serious challenge to the security of China, Russia, the countries of Central Asia and Eurasia in general. Over the 20 years of the SCO’s history, proceeding from their ‘Shanghai spirit,’ the participating countries have created unique legislative and organizational mechanisms for a joint strike against the ‘three forces of evil,’ as well as mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral antiterrorist exercises. The most important of these is the Peace Mission joint exercise, which has been regularly held since 2005. These mechanisms of cooperation within the SCO embody the spirit of solidarity, mutual trust, and cooperation, reflect the ability of the members of the organization to jointly counter the ‘three forces of evil’ and respond to related problems, and symbolize the SCO’s determination to protect stability in the region and peace in the world. The organization has made a significant contribution to ensuring security in the region. Nevertheless, in the face of existing problems and new challenges such as potential competition and disagreements within the organization, problems with new members after the expansion of the membership, and also the ineffective functioning of some of the SCO’s security instruments, all SCO members need to strengthen their cooperation and open new ways for organizing the SCO to fulfil well its unique role to ensure security in the territory of SCO states and in Eurasia as a whole. The new model of relations – ‘Russian-Chinese relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction entering a new era’ – that underlies the SCO gives the organization greater stability. The SCO is a unique organization on the territory of Eurasia and has both implemented an important innovation in the theory and practice of international relations and opened a new model of regional cooperation. Therefore, it can be stated with a high degree of confidence that multilateral cooperation in the field of security will gradually deepen.

Key words: SCO; unconventional security challenges; “three forces of evil”; terrorism; antiterrorism exercises; regional security; Russian-Chinese cooperation; Central Asia

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Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), despite the variety of its declared goals and objectives, was formed primarily as a mechanism for ensuring mutual trust in the military-political sphere and strengthening regional security. These goals are reflected in the extensive legal framework of the SCO, the gradual expansion of which testifies, on the one hand, to the accumulation of experience of interaction between its members, and on the other hand, speaks of the insufficiency of the global legal framework in the field of security. Consequently, the terminology developed within the SCO can serve as a support for the possible creation of international agreements, for example, within the United Nations (UN).

The Charter of the SCO, adopted on 7 June 2002 in St. Petersburg, specifies the main goals and objectives of this international regional mechanism: “development of multifaceted cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region and promotion of a new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order,” and “jointly combating terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking and other types of transnational criminal activity, and also illegal migration” [President of Russia, 2002].

Terrorism, extremism and separatism in official Chinese rhetoric are denoted by the term “three forces” (Chinese “三股势力”). These are the three main forces that, as unconventional threats, pose a serious challenge to the security of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the countries of Central Asia, Russia and also Eurasia as a whole. In this regard, it seems that the related mention of the three forces in the Charter of the SCO is not accidental and at the level of legal documents reflects the unity in understanding the security challenges both by individual countries and the organization as a whole.

The central role of security problems in the activities of the SCO is regularly emphasized by the leaders of SCO states. As the head of China, Xi Jinping, said, it is necessary to “firmly adhere to the priority of security, to strengthen the foundation of the Organisation’s development” [Xinhua, 2016].

During the existence of the SCO, within the framework of the organization, practical mechanisms have been formed for the effective implementation of joint cooperation to maintain regional security.

Legislative and Organizational Mechanisms for a Joint Strike Against the Three Forces

All members of the organization are of the opinion that “terrorism, separatism and extremism constitute a threat to international peace and security, development of friendly relations between states, and implementation of the primary rights and freedoms of people,” and that these phenomena “seriously threaten the territorial integrity and security of the Parties, and their political, economic and social stability” [President of Russia, 2001]. To effectively counter the three forces, legal agreements were signed, including the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, which gave a legal definition of these concepts. In addition, this convention identified specific areas of information exchange and cooperation between law enforcement agencies of SCO members [Ibid.].

In addition, to strengthen the action against the three forces, a number of legal documents were approved, for example, the Concept of Cooperation of State Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Fight Against Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2005), the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Detection and Blocking the Channels of Penetration

on the Territory of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States of Persons Involved in Terrorist, Separatist and Extremist Activities (2006), the Agreement on the Procedure for Organizing and Conducting Joint Anti-Terrorist Measures in the Territories of the SCO Member States (2006), the Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation against Terrorism (2009), and the Agreement on the Training of Personnel for Anti-Terrorist Units of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2009), among others.

At the 17th SCO summit in Astana on 9 July 2017, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Convention on Countering Extremism was signed, the initiative for which was put forward by President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping at the Dushanbe SCO summit in 2014 [Xinhua, 2018]. The convention was aimed at creating a legal basis for effective cooperation between the parties to the convention in order to counter the ideology and practice of extremism [President of Russia, 2019].

The convention provided a single legal definition of such concepts as extremism, financing of extremism and extremist organization, and a single list of extremist organizations was attached to it. The SCO Convention on Counteracting Extremism established a valuable international legal precedent: within the SCO, a common understanding of extremism was developed [State Duma, 2019]. It seems that it is too early to talk about the adoption of this approach to extremism at the global level, but it is quite possible to apply it outside the SCO in the Central Asian region. The terminological certainty of extremism within the SCO also seems significant due to the fact that extremism can be the basis for the growth of terrorism and separatism.

There are still different concepts and disputes in the fight against extremism, which negatively affects international antiterrorist cooperation. The UN's attempts, over many years, to work out a unified definition of terrorism, as is known, have not been crowned with success. Thus, the convention has already played an important role in bringing cooperation in the field of security to a new level [Xinhua, 2018].

Thus, the most important international documents – the Charter of the SCO, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism and the SCO Convention on Countering Extremism – constitute an extensive legal basis for effectively countering the three forces within the framework of the SCO and can serve as a prototype and support for future international documents in this area.

In addition to the legal mechanism, an organizational mechanism of cooperation has been formed within the SCO for joint counteraction to the three forces.

An effective format of interaction is the mechanism of regular meetings of the secretaries of the security councils of the member states since 2004 [Consulate General of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Novosibirsk, 2016]. On 7 June 2002, the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (SCO RATS) was established. As a permanent body of the SCO, RATS ensures coordination and strengthening of interaction between the competent authorities of the member states in this area.

In addition, the interaction of the special services of SCO members made it possible to prevent a number of terrorist attacks by persons returning from the conflict zone in Syria and to detain the militants who fought on the side of the terrorists. Positive results have been achieved in expanding the interaction of the SCO RATS with the competent authorities of SCO observer states and partners and specialized international and regional organizations [TASS, 2019].

Recently, the Russian initiative to reform the SCO RATS continued to be worked out in order to create a universal centre for countering terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime, which is designed to increase the security of the southern borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) from threats emanating from Afghanistan, including those associated with the activation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the northern regions of Afghanistan. An important step in the work of RATS was the adoption of the algorithm of joint

actions of the competent authorities of SCO member states to counter ISIS. RATS also constantly participates in various practical activities on regional security.

Joint Antiterrorist Exercises

To effectively protect security and stability in the region, the SCO regularly conducts joint exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats. Joint antiterrorist military exercises have already become a key element of the SCO security cooperation mechanism.

On 10–11 October 2002, the joint antiterrorist military exercises between China and Kyrgyzstan in the border areas of the two countries set a precedent for bilateral joint military exercises within the SCO and laid the foundation for the practice of the participation of the Chinese armed forces in joint training exercises with foreign armed forces [People's Daily, 2007]. Since then, SCO member states have regularly held bilateral and multilateral antiterrorist military exercises (see Table 1). The most important of these are the Peace Mission joint exercises.

Table 1. Antiterrorist Military Exercises Within the SCO

Name of Exercise	Date	Location	Note
Exercise-01	10–11 October 2002	Border area between China and Kyrgyzstan	The first joint antiterrorist exercises within the SCO, as well as the first joint practical exercises of the Chinese army with the armed forces of another country [People's Daily, 2007]
Union-2003	6–12 June 2003	Border territories of Kazakhstan and China	The first multilateral antiterrorist exercises within the SCO, in which China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan took part [People's Daily, 2007]
Rubezh-2004	3–6 August 2004	On the territory of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan [RATS SCO, 2004]	
Peace Mission 2005	18–25 August 2005	Vladivostok (Russia), Shandong (China)	Joint military exercises for the first time in the history of bilateral relations between China and Russia [People's Daily, 2005]
Vostok-antiterror 2006	2–5 March 2006	Tashkent region, Uzbekistan [REGNUM, 2006]	
Tian Shan-1	24–26 August 2006	Alma-Ata region (Kazakhstan), Inin (XUAR, PRC)	The first joint antiterrorist military exercises between China and Kazakhstan [People's Daily, 2006a]
Interaction-2006	22–23 September 2006	Kulyab, Tajikistan	The first joint antiterrorist military exercises between China and Tajikistan, and also the first time Chinese troops participated in exercises abroad with their weapons [People's Daily, 2006b]

Name of Exercise	Date	Location	Note
Issyk-Kul-Antiterror-2007	28–31 May 2007	Kyrgyzstan [RATS SCO, 2007]	
Peace Mission 2007	9–17 August 2007	Urumqi (XUAR China), Chelyabinsk region (Russia)	Large-scale and first joint exercises with the participation of the armed forces of all six members of the SCO, also observed the exercises of the head of six countries [Xinhua, 2007]
Volgograd-Antiterror-2008	2–4 September 2008	Volgograd region, Russia	
Norak-Antiterror-2009	17–19 April 2009	Fakhrabad firing field, Tajikistan [RATS SCO, 2009]	
Peace Mission 2009	22–26 July 2009	Taonan firing field, Shenyang Military District, China	The second joint military exercises of Russia and China
Saratov-Antiterror-2010	24–27 August 2010	Saratov, Russia [RATS SCO, 2010]	
Peace Mission 2010	9–25 September 2010	Matybulak firing field, Zhambyl region, Kazakhstan	
Tian Shan-2-2011	5–8 May 2011	District of Kashgar, XUAR, China [RATS SCO, 2011]	
Vostok-Antiterror-2012	2–5 June 2012	Combined-arms mountain range Forish of the Jizzakh region of the Republic of Uzbekistan [RATS SCO, 2012]	
Peace Mission 2012	8–14 June 2012	Chorukh-Dayron firing field, Sughd Region, Tajikistan [Xinhua, 2012]	
Kazygurt-Antiterror-2013	13 June 2013	South of Kazakhstan [RATS SCO, 2013a]	
Peace Mission 2013	27 July–15 August 2013	Chelyabinsk region, Russia	
Joint Border Activities-2013	11 August 2013	On the border area of Kyrgyzstan and China [RATS SCO, 2013b]	
Vostok-Antiterror-2014	27 March 2014	Uzbekistan [RATS SCO, 2014a]	
Vostok-2014	1 May–31 October 2014	Sino-Russian border [RATS SCO, 2014b]	
Peace Mission 2014	24–29 August 2014	Zhurihe training base, Inner Mongolia, China	
CenterAsia-Antiterror-2015	16 September 2015	Kyrgyzstan [RATS SCO, 2015]	
Peace Mission 2016	15–21 September 2016	Balykchy, Kyrgyzstan [People's Daily, 2016]	

Name of Exercise	Date	Location	Note
Cooperation-2016	19 October 2016	Tajikistan [RATS SCO, 2016]	
Tian Shan-III-2017	27 June 2017	Artush, XUAR, China [RATS SCO, 2017b]	
Yaroslavl-Antiterror-2017	10 August 2017	Yaroslavl, Russia [RATS SCO, 2017a]	
Peace Mission 2018	22–29 August 2018	Chelyabinsk region, Russia	India and Pakistan for the first time took part in the exercises in the framework of the SCO [Valkhanskaya, 2018]
Sary-Arka-Anti-Terror-2019	27 June 2019	Spassk Polygon in the Karaganda region of the Republic of Kazakhstan [RATS SCO, 2019]	

The example of joint exercises can be traced to the deepening of bilateral cooperation between Russia and China in the field of security. Thus, the Peace Mission 2005 exercises became a historically significant event for Russian-Chinese cooperation. These were the first ever joint military exercises of the two countries. On them, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for the first time, together with foreign armed forces, worked out the amphibious assault on the Chinese coast. It should be noted that the Russian armed forces are still the only ones with whom China has conducted such exercises.

The Peace Mission exercises are held annually or once every two years in a bilateral (China and Russia) or multilateral format, but only once, in 2007, did all SCO member states take part.

The last Peace Mission exercise took place in 2018, in Russia. In addition to Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, for the first time, India and Pakistan, which both officially joined the SCO in 2017, sent their troops to participate in SCO military exercises.

At the same time, the unequal interest of SCO members in participating in joint exercises is noticeable. Since the beginning of the Peace Mission exercise, the armed forces of Uzbekistan, for example, have taken part only once, while China and Russia have not missed a single important event, in most cases acting as organizers.

Throughout the entire period of the Peace Mission exercises, they have caused concern among a number of countries, especially among potential geopolitical rivals of Russia and China, the states that pay the greatest attention to the exercises.

Even during Peace Mission 2005, western media and commentators noted that the scale and content of the exercises with the use of strategic aviation, navy and 10,000 service people did not fully correspond to their declared antiterrorist orientation. Terrorists or separatists do not operate with such large-scale units, the fight against which Russian-Chinese troops practiced in the exercises. According to the western media, Russia and China were practicing a joint amphibious assault operation, potentially directed against one of the U.S. allies in the region, for example, Taiwan [Lenta.ru, 2005]. Similar statements, as well as assumptions about the creation of a full-fledged military-political bloc, were made in 2007 [Bavyrin, 2007].

Indeed, Peace Mission exercise scenarios look much more like traditional mechanized warfare rather than strikes against terrorist groups that lack heavy military equipment. However, the growing power of ISIS, banned in the Russian Federation, has largely changed the previous views on antiterrorist organizations. ISIS militants make extensive use of heavy military equipment similar to that used by regular armies [KM.RU, 2014]. It can be said that the organizers of the Peace Mission exercises in the 2000s and early 2010s anticipated the future growth of the

terrorist threat, preparing for combined arms operations against well-armed and numerous illegal armed groups.

Cooperation Problems

Over the years of its existence, taking into account the coinciding interests and thanks to the joint efforts of the member states, the SCO has already achieved excellent results in this area, but problems for future development are also observed in this most effective and efficient branch of the organization.

First, with regard to the activities of the SCO as a whole, there is a disagreement among the members on the positioning of the SCO, including between Russia and China. The SCO has experienced 20 years of development, and the member states have gradually established relatively close cooperation in the field of security, economic and trade relations. However, if they are not handled properly, they may cause individual countries to have a certain degree of suspicion about existing cooperation, which will affect normal relations between countries. As Chinese scholars comment, unlike ordinary regional international organizations, the SCO states lack a uniform political system, the scale of development and the orientation of values; cooperation between members is based on a specific goal. This makes cooperation between members to reach a certain value consensus with a certain person difficult [Zhang, Dai, 2019, p. 29]. Therefore, determining how to build strategic mutual trust within the organization is critical for the future development of the SCO.

Second, the expansion of the SCO will bring a fundamental change. In terms of security cooperation, the simultaneous participation of the hostile nuclear powers of India and Pakistan could pose enormous risks to the organization's work.

Indian views can be considered a good example of the issue of mutual trust and organizational positioning. India's perception of the SCO is relatively passive. For example, former Indian ambassador and scholar Phunchok Stobdan stated that India's participation in the SCO is mainly based on considerations of geostrategic competition, and that antiterrorism and other requirements are not so urgent [National Bureau of Asian Research, 2015]. India primarily views the SCO as a China-led regional cooperation organization and considers it to be fragile in nature [India Writes Network, 2015]. Indian academics and media believe that "joining SCO may not be as beneficial to Indian interests as was thought when India applied to be a member a few years back" [Pant, 2017]. Some fear that China and Pakistan will join forces against India within the organization, and that the Sino-Russian alliance will also harm India [Mohan, 2017].

India has stated that it will not bring bilateral conflicts between itself and Pakistan to the SCO and will not use third-party platforms to coordinate conflicts between India and Pakistan [Sajjanhar, 2016]; however, according to Chinese scholars, it is a fact that India and Pakistan will still more or less bring their conflicts to the SCO after accession [Li, 2017, p. 9]. India and Pakistan have different views on terrorism and terrorist identification standards, and so far there has been no consensus that will bring possible future challenges for security cooperation within the SCO.

India supports and actively participates in the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy, trying to force a wedge into the SCO so that India can use external forces (such as the U.S.) to meet its own geostrategic demands. India's recognition of the zero-sum SCO and the requirements of its geostrategic interests could lead to a split in an internal SCO decision, which would weaken the SCO's cohesion, operational capabilities and effectiveness, especially in the area of security cooperation. This problem imposes restrictions on the activities and development of the organization.

Third, in fact, the SCO's security cooperation in the antiterrorism sphere is still at a low level: although the SCO has issued many declarations and legal documents related to security cooperation, its implementation is relatively slow. Many are still on paper or in their infancy. While these declarations and other legal documents emphasize the need to combat the three forces and jointly respond to other security threats, as well as to establish related goals, principles, directions, methods of cooperation and implementation mechanisms, the SCO has a weak response capacity for emergency security incidents. Security cooperation is more formal than substantial. The implementation of cooperation remains largely at the exercise stage, and coordination of actions to combat security problems and the possibility of joint response is limited. Even 10 years ago, the mass disorder in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the reactions of the SCO member states at that time demonstrated this problem for the organization.

After riots erupted in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, SCO members took different views on intervening in the crisis. Since the riots were defined as being a matter of Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs, the SCO as a whole did not offer a clear military response to the riots due to the principle of non-intervention and consideration of the interests of each member. The SCO's non-intervention in response to the unrest in Kyrgyzstan once again raised doubts about its ability to support regional security. It should be recognized that the SCO's response reflected its lack of operational capabilities. Respect for multilateralism, sovereignty and territorial integrity makes the SCO a better coordinator than executor. While the current security situation in Central Asia is bleak, doubts about the SCO's past record of supporting regional security and its practical inability to do so have significantly weakened the expectations of the Central Asian members for the organization. This is one of the important reasons why, apart from regular meetings and military exercises, SCO cooperation in the field of security has not experienced a major breakthrough.

After the events in 2010, a series of security crises unfolded in the territory of the SCO: in the summer of 2017 and 2020, confrontations and conflicts between China and India occurred several times on their disputed border; in the spring of 2019, the first direct armed conflict between India and Pakistan as nuclear states took place; between the SCO dialogue partners Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016 and July 2020, armed border conflicts occurred twice, and in the fall of 2020 there was a large-scale armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh ... Than the OSCE, the CSTO and other organizations, the SCO as "As a non-alliance, a new organization for security cooperation involving multiple stakeholders and neutral parties to conflicts, it must demonstrate its unique strengths and play a critical role in resolving such crises. However, the SCO did not show its existence, did not play an important role in the development and resolution of these security crises, and did not prove itself as a valuable mechanism for ensuring regional security.

The ability of the SCO to meet the interests of its Central Asian members largely determines their attitude and behaviour toward it. When their interests are met, the members in Central Asia seek to strengthen ties with the SCO, actively participate in cooperation activities within it, and contribute to its development. When their interests are not met, they prefer to dilute ties with the SCO and strengthen cooperation with other powers or regional mechanisms. This attitude and behaviour weakens cohesion within the SCO and complicates the development of cooperation in various fields, including in the security sphere. At the moment, the SCO cannot satisfy all the interests of the Central Asian states, and the SCO is often not the preferred choice for the Central Asian members. Consequently, the ability of the SCO, which is not entirely in the interests of the Central Asian members, will often force them to distance themselves from the SCO [Zeng, Li, 2017, p. 127]. The limited participation of some Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan, in antiterrorist exercises and other security events within the SCO is precisely the result of this logic.

In addition, China hopes to make the SCO an exemplary multilateral mechanism for addressing security and economic development in Asia and, at the same time, an important platform for realizing the Belt and Road link between Central Asia and South Asia. It seems that Beijing was disappointed with this SCO situation, and dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of the SCO security instruments on the Afghan problem. This was especially the case because Afghanistan is only an observer of the organization, and Pakistan, as an important player in the Afghan settlement, has only recently become an official member of the organization. As a result, Afghanistan and Pakistan could not participate in multilateral security events within the SCO, and China desperately needs an effective mechanism with the participation of Afghanistan and its common neighbours with China to ensure the security of China from the threat from the Afghan side.

In August 2016, a meeting of the chiefs of general staffs of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan was held in the administrative centre of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of the PRC, Urumqi. Following the meeting, the creation of the first multilateral mechanism of cooperation on security between the armed forces of China and neighbouring countries – the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism by Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan of the Armed Forces/Militaries (Chinese “阿中巴塔”四国军队反恐合作协调机制) – was announced [Huanqiu.com, 2016]. The Chinese are very optimistic that their new mechanism will have a positive impact on the activities and development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the future [Sputnik China, 2016a]. At the same time, Russian media and experts believe that this mechanism, in which the command of the armed forces participated, is a *de facto* military alliance. Some in Russia were particularly worried that this “Chinese NATO in Central Asia” does not provide an entrance ticket for Russia, and there were fears that it could turn into a direct competitor to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) [Baikova, 2016]. It will be interesting in this context to closely monitor the position of Tajikistan, which is also a member of the CSTO, having a Russian military base on its territory and participating in a new quadripartite mechanism, while also being a recipient of significant investments from China [Sputnik Tajikistan, 2016].

At the same time, the Ministry of Defence of the PRC states that this mechanism is not a regional military alliance or Central Asian NATO and is not under the leadership of China but is rather “an open, non-exclusive multilateral mechanism for security cooperation” [Sputnik China, 2016b].

Conclusion

As Xi Jinping said, the SCO’s development “has implemented an important innovation in the theory and practice of international relations, opened a new model of regional cooperation” [Xi, 2018]. A special feature of the SCO is that it is the first truly integrated post-Cold War Eurasian international organization. Since its inception, the SCO has become an important part of the great transformation of the geopolitical and economic structure of Eurasia. Unlike the CIS, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in addition to some CIS countries, the SCO also includes China, the South Asian powers of India and Pakistan, plus observer states and dialogue partners in different corners of Eurasia. Thus, the SCO has much greater representation and should contribute to the peace, stability, development and prosperity of Eurasia in accordance with its status.

Security cooperation problems within the SCO are largely due to the fact that it prefers to sacrifice efficiency in order to preserve the basic principles of justice. The SCO attaches great importance to state sovereignty. The principle of non-interference limits cooperation between

the participating countries on security and objectively represents a deterrent to cooperation in this area. As a new international system, the implied concept of the SCO's development is primarily about coordination, not cooperation, although cooperation is its inevitable goal [Yang, 2019, p. 45]. Because of this, in the face of the actions by terrorist organizations and public security emergencies in member countries, the SCO only provided political and diplomatic support and did not interfere with security practices in those countries. This undoubtedly weakened the effectiveness of the SCO's security cooperation.

From a theoretical point of view, an important means of regulating relations between countries in the international system is to remind countries of common problems and common historical lessons in order to enable them to reap greater benefits from compliance. Under new conditions in a new era, if the SCO wants to be a more effective organization, it must first renew its concept, go beyond the logic of what cannot be done, formulate a specific agenda for what can be done and continue to expand specific cooperation. Ideally, members will be able to clearly see the benefits of adhering to the system and avoid the punishment that can result from failing to do so, thereby creating reliance on the SCO multilateral mechanism and reinforcing certain psychological expectations [Yang, 2019, p. 46].

The SCO still has much work to do to participate in joint counterterrorist operations. To deepen SCO cooperation in the security sphere, it is necessary to do the following: first, continue to adhere to the Shanghai spirit as a norm associated with the fundamental nature of the organization and as a label that distinguishes the SCO from other international organizations. Second, on the basis of adherence to the Shanghai spirit, it is necessary to further clarify the SCO's position and continue to use cooperation in the field of security as the basis and main direction of development. As SCO cooperation in politics, economics and the humanities continues to deepen, it may be tempting to try to achieve significant results in several areas simultaneously. However, the operational capabilities and resources of the SCO are limited, and the over-broad pursuit of success would only be counterproductive. This would violate the original intention of the SCO to maintain regional security and would not contribute to its long-term development. Strengthening technical cooperation and improving security mechanisms is necessary in order.

The SCO must improve the response capabilities of the Central Asian member states to crises, as they remain weak in the face of internal and external challenges. Within these countries, there are many latent fears that threaten political and social stability and may cause internal or regional upheavals; these internal threats make the countries of Central Asia extremely vulnerable to external factors. Intervention by major powers, the deteriorating international economic situation and the infiltration of terrorism all pose a threat to these states, which are direct victims of the non-traditional security challenges facing the SCO. To effectively suppress the emergence and spread of security threats in Central Asia, the SCO should seek to help those states to strengthen their security systems and improve their ability to respond to crises. In addition, China and Russia should actively strengthen relations with the Central Asian members through the alignment of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative and the EAEU, contribute to the optimization and modernization of their economic structures, support the transformation of economic development methods and the improvement of people's living standards, and accelerate the industrialization of their economies. This will strengthen and develop the Central Asian economy as a foundation for security, and allow Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China and Russia to reach greater unanimity.

In the foreseeable future, the problem of fighting the three forces will remain relevant for all SCO members and observers. It seems that the backbone of the SCO is Russian-Chinese cooperation in the security sphere, which is now seriously different from the alliances of the Cold War and from such modern multilateral defence formats as NATO and the CSTO. The

Russian-Chinese Relations of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Entering a New Era model allows for a flexible approach to cooperation, within which the parties are able to overcome differences arising between them, as well as combine cooperation and competition. Strategic interaction between China and Russia will play an important role in the fostering unity and mutual trust among SCO members.

This model of relations, which underlies the SCO, makes the organization more stable. Therefore, we can state with a high degree of confidence that multilateral security cooperation in Central Asia will gradually deepen. At the same time, Russian-Chinese bilateral cooperation in the field of security will develop. Differences between Russia and China, or even potential rivalry, will be limited to a level that is acceptable to all parties.

The strategic engagement between China and Russia is an important driving force for reconciliation between India and Pakistan. Russia has worked hard to build a new coordination mechanism between China, Russia and India. Today, mutual political trust between China and Russia has reached the highest level in history. Russia and India are linked by traditionally friendly relations, while China and Pakistan enjoy an all-weather strategic cooperation and partnership. China and Russia should use their advantages to promote reconciliation between India and Pakistan. China should coordinate the actions of Pakistan and Russia to establish mutual political trust and develop bilateral relations of strategic cooperation, and Russia is also actively developing cooperation with Pakistan and gradually eliminating India's hostility to Pakistan.

With regard to specific mechanisms and measures in the field of security, despite the regular Peace Mission exercises, their frequency seems insufficient. Not all members of the organization participate in them, and other participants do not observe such activity as the initiators: Russia and China. In this regard, in order to increase the effectiveness of the exercises, large-scale joint exercises should be held once every two years and regular joint practical tactical training of special forces units and troops of the organization's member countries should be held annually. Also, as an alternative, an annual joint computer simulation at the headquarters level with all members of the organization could be held.

In addition, numerous bilateral Russian-Chinese military exercises and military competitions could have the status of SCO events, so that there are more opportunities to exchange experiences in antiterrorist activities, as well as strengthen the status of the SCO as an effective and promising organization in the future.

The SCO, as an effective international regional security organization, should continue to strengthen its function. The antiterrorist Peace Mission exercises and other military activities within the SCO should become permanent, and their conduct should be directly aimed at preparing for joint counterterrorism operations.

In connection with the current security situation, as well as the high activity of international terrorists in the territories of the SCO members and in neighbouring regions in Eurasia, it is advisable to plan and implement real joint antiterrorist military operations with the participation of units of the SCO members under the auspices of the organization.

With the help of these joint antiterrorist operations, Russia, China and other SCO states will be able to effectively improve the security situation in the region, strengthening strategic cooperation, partnership and friendship between countries. Currently, the conduct of such operations faces a number of restrictions, among them, the position of individual members of the organization, as well as a number of powers that are not part of it. Therefore, the practical interaction of the armed forces may at first be limited to humanitarian and information operations, demining, post-war reconstruction, and so on. Separate programmes for cooperation along the military line could be launched now, against the background of the crisis caused by the corona-

virus pandemic. It makes sense for the SCO to create a mechanism for expert consultations to identify promising areas for such cooperation.

In 2020, the world entered a new era. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only triggered a serious crisis in health systems and economies around the world but also an expected rise in terrorism and extremism. New, serious security challenges may arise for the SCO members as a result. The deterioration of the situation in the hottest security spots in Eurasia, such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, will greatly affect the security environment for the SCO countries. Against this background, cooperation between interested countries in the field of security on the SCO platform is extremely relevant and necessary.

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