

# Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia: Role in Regional Security

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## *Introduction:*

After the disintegration of USSR, one of the biggest problems, faced by the post-Soviet space nations was to draw their borders.<sup>i</sup> The borders between the nations of post-Soviet space were drawn as early as in 1924 when in month of July, the same year Sredazburo Territorial Commission was appointed by the Soviet government in order to draw borders within the Eurasian region. The territorial commission consisted of sixteen national bureaus like Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Karakalpaks etc that was to determine the boundaries for its future republics. All these national bureaus were interested in maximising their own territory in order to get better economic potentials. Soviet government wanted that kind of borders, which would be convenient for administrative purposes. However, those administrative borders were not drawn taking into consideration the cultural ties. The long lasting border issues have created tensions and have often served as a hindrance in developing wider regional cooperation in different fields. Even today, clear-cut borders are the main reason of conflict between the countries of the region. The artificial borders made for administrative convenience by the Soviet Union was a major mistake, as the historical past was not taken into consideration.

It was on November 1924 when Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khorezm republics were formally dissolved and replaced by Uzbek, Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republics, the Tajdik Autonomous republics, and the Kyrgyz and Kara kalpak Autonomous Oblasts, and their administrative functions were given to “Revolutionary Committees” until the formation of new governments in these republics. These “Revolutionary Committees” seized to function by 1925 and new government by Soviets took over the charge. From then onwards several reorganizations took place till 1936.<sup>ii</sup> Absence of the exact state borderline between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in recent years has led to conflict situations. In

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fact, the situation in recent years had been marked by conflicts on the border of Kyrgyzstan with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.<sup>iii</sup>

During the Soviet presence in Central Asia, China had no direct interaction with the region. Soon after the disintegration of USSR, the Chinese foreign policy makers feared that the collapse of USSR might create a power vacuum in the region and in turn can cause instability in the China's neighbouring Xinjiang province. Subsequently China established relations with these newly emerged republics. Initially its motive was to secure its borders and get support in the Xinjiang region for its policies. China's main concern was to prevent Uyghur separatist Muslims of Turkish origins, from seeking independence. In the second part of 1990s, the regional and geopolitical condition of Central Asia changed. China at the beginning of the decade started looking for the bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the region and initiated "Shanghai Five" in 1996.<sup>iv</sup> China's growing insecurity on its borders, particularly those areas which were yet to be solved and had a great potential to invoke strong nationalistic resurrection. The Central Asian states were also facing domestic political instability after their independence. Both China and Central Asia found common interests in fighting against religious radicalism. China was going through international isolation in the wake of the Tiananmen Square episode and the rising military tension in Taiwan Strait was a matter of serious concern for it.<sup>v</sup>

The Afghan conflicts had created serious issues of security on borders for Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Tajikistan and Afghanistan share a 1,280 km border. Tajikistan was unable to safeguard it and the Russian forces that were stationed in Tajikistan did not withdraw but were allotted the job to protect the Afghan border.<sup>vi</sup> Internally unstable conditions and conflicts could grow between Afghanistan and its neighboring Central Asian territories if mutually acceptable patterns of coexistence were not found.

A number of violent ethnic and regional conflicts among which Chechen problem was most serious followed the disintegration of USSR.<sup>vii</sup> Chechnya unilaterally declared independence in 1991, but the Russian government refused to recognize Chechnya as an independent nation and Russia attempted to bring it under its control (1994 and 1999 wars).

Chechnya continued fight against Russia and the separatist movements in Chechnya threatened the Russian stability there. This threat to Russian power made it to participate in different regional organizations.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Evolution of Shanghai Five:**

At Shanghai, the Presidents of the five states of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan met on 26 April 1996 and concluded 14 agreements on border confidence building measures and reduction of armed forces deployed in the border regions<sup>ix</sup>. Security confidence-building measures in the border areas were developed by these five member nations. More specifically, these nations decided not to engage in any offensive activities within the border areas, not to conduct military exercises against each other, to limit the extent of military exercises in the border areas, stop dangerous military actions in the border areas. While SCO's internal policy is based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual profit, identical rights, respect for each other's cultures and aspiration for common development, its external policy was based on the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting each others.<sup>x</sup>

In 1997, the second meeting of SCO members was held in Moscow and they concluded an "agreement on mutual reduction of armed forces" in border areas. At the same moment the Russian forces were already withdrawing from Afghanistan and the Central Asians were increasingly moving their attention towards fighting against Islamic oppositions.<sup>xi</sup> The Shanghai and Moscow agreements affirmed that the armed forces installed in the border areas work for the defence and it was confirmed that they would not use force against each other.

The third summit of Shanghai Five took place in Almaty in 1998. The issues of Taliban taking over of power in Kabul and its impact on Central Asia were discussed there and a joint declaration was adopted stating that any form of national separatism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism is intolerable.<sup>xii</sup> A joint announcement of the five countries was issued and since then, the meetings of the five countries were changed from bilateral to multilateral.<sup>xiii</sup>

In August 1999, another summit was held in Bishkek, which resulted into an agreement on fighting terrorism, and accordingly in, June 2001 summit, an agreement for setting up of an anti-terrorist centre in Bishkek was concluded.

In 2000 Dushanbe Summit, the member states agreed to rename Shanghai Five to Shanghai Forum so that the limit for membership of other countries will get finished. In this summit, a new republic Uzbekistan participated as an observer. It hesitated to join the organization and was hopeful for keeping good connections with US. However, the issue of Islamic militants threatened it, and on priority, bases joined the organization.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Shanghai Five to Shanghai Cooperation Organization.**

After Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five on June 15, 2001 it was jointly declared to rename it into Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This had since functioned as an inter-governmental forum for multi-level consultations in regular intervals. In the same meeting, the SCO members also adopted the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism that established mechanisms for intelligence sharing.<sup>xv</sup>

In 2002, SCO Charter and lists of numerous basic principles of international law as the fundamentals for the organization were adopted. In addition to this, the sovereign equality of states and the refusal of hegemony and force in international affairs were accepted. It also affirmed that SCO was not against other States and international organizations.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Regional Security Issues in Central Asia:** Central Asia as a region faced many common security threats which hindered their development.

#### **Internal threats:**

**Conflict and Instability:** Throughout the past, Central Asia has witnessed many periods of conflict and instability. After the independence of five Central Asian republics, the issues leftover by cold war and the conflicts between different nations and different religions put them under serious security problems.<sup>xvii</sup>

The authoritarian regimes, crime, corruption, terrorism, and ethnic and civil tensions posed a serious threat to the security and independence of all new Central Asian states.

Kazakhstan faced the potential of separatism from dominant ethnic Russians on its northern side. Economic mismanagement weakened Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, northern and southern regional interests fought for influencing the central political and economic decision-making. Clan and widespread poverty in Turkmenistan created instability. A large ethnic Tajik population whom President Islam Karimov labeled as Islamic extremists, made Uzbekistan to face escalating civil discontent and violence. The ethnic clashes in the Fergana Valley between Uzbek and Kyrgyz people in 1990 resulted into the division of this fertile valley into Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>xviii</sup>

**Drug trafficking:** It is one of the serious security problems confronted by the Central Asian republics. In 1990s Afghanistan tremendously cultivated opium numbering to the world's largest opium producer and then used Central Asia as a route for the trafficking of drugs to the CIS and Europe which resulted in the direct sale of drugs and narcotics in the Central Asian region. This created an atmosphere of crime in the region and increased the level of corruption which caused harm to the authority of law organs.<sup>xix</sup> Drug trading is one of the most organized crimes among all other crimes. Drug cultivation also took place in Central Asia.

After Taliban's take over in Afghanistan (1996), some kind of ban was imposed on the opium cultivation but was not successful in real terms. It was only after NATO operations against drug traffickers that some kind of success was achieved. In 15<sup>th</sup> July 2001, on Afghan-Tajik borders, 2 tons of raw opium and other drugs were seized. According to one report, the processing of opium into heroin is taking place in Tajikistan (Pamir mountains) which shows the criticalness of Tajikistan about drug trafficking. Poverty and unemployment are the main reasons that people are being attracted towards drug trafficking.<sup>xx</sup>

**Military Challenges:** Rapid corruption and economic hardships distressed the role of army.<sup>xxi</sup> Being a part of Russian federation, the Central Asian republics could not setup their own local armies and thus failed to protect themselves from external aggression. Government recruited Russians in army. 35% among the army men recruited were non-Slavs and amongst whom Turkic origin soldiers were just two-thirds. The non-Russian

military officers were only 10%. So the lack of local trained officers added to the problem of not having their own national armies.<sup>xxii</sup>

After the collapse of Soviet Union, it was the Red Army which became the first target and thousands of its soldiers were demobbed when the CIS army was established. In 1992, there were substantial forces of CIS who were present in Central Asia. They were commanded by Russia and by the particular nations where they stationed. Division of Central Asian armed forces in 1992 was like:<sup>xxiii</sup>

Country Name	No. of Troops
Tajikistan	6000
Kyrgyzstan	8000
Uzbekistan	16000
Turkmenistan	34000
Kazakhstan	63000

**Border conflicts:** Border is a significant facet of conflict in the Central Asian region. The borders drawn in 1920s and 1930s under the Russian empire were an attempt to colonize the region (Stalinist borders). The borders drawn had nothing common those borders which were drawn, keeping in view the nature and culture of the areas. On a political level, the Central Asian states have had a number of border conflicts and they had to confront sizeable security challenges. The dangers they faced were not conventional ones. Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan have acknowledged the boundaries that were issued from the USSR. China also signed border delimitation treaties and demilitarization agreements with the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik governments. In 2003 the border delimitation was nearly finished between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. But the problem was not resolved.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Uzbek-Tajik, Uzbek-Kyrgyz and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border issues have been the most difficult problems to be resolved.<sup>xxv</sup>

The problem in the Ferghana Valley is another challenge for the region. This particular valley is shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. These three republics have a major issue over this valley. In the absence of well demarcated borders, Uzbekistan

had mined its own borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Border conflicts in this region have terrorized the most significant trade route connecting these three republics.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Tajik-Afghan border posed real threat to the Central Asian security. There was a grave danger of Afghanization to the new Central Asian states. It could bring the challenges of ethnic conflicts to Central Asia, as was happening in Afghanistan.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**Ethnicity:** Central Asia as a region consists of more than 100 ethnic identities.<sup>xxviii</sup> After the disintegration of the USSR, Central Asia had to face serious challenges of inter-ethnic relations. These challenges became severe constraints between the republics in developing friendly and mutual relationship. It also became a threat to the political stability of the region.

Before independence, the bloody ethnic clashes (1989-1991) destabilized the life in various parts of the region. The rise of inter-ethnic conflicts was so high that it made a threat of slipping of the government control. The situation was further worsened by appearance of separatist tendencies in the republics.<sup>xxix</sup> Fergana Valley from the side of Uzbekistan faced various ethnic tensions.<sup>xxx</sup>

**External factors:** The independence of the Central Asian republics gave them a chance to become the members of global community. Breakdown of USSR created power vacuum in this region and as Halford Mackinder said in his 'Heartland' theory that this region is the heart of the entire world and in order to gain control over the world one needs to realize the strategic importance of this region. The region's importance is mainly due to its strategic location and energy resources in the Caspian region. These factors are enough to make the world powers compete in this region. The number of powers like US, Russia, China, Turkey and India sought to pursue their political, economic, and cultural interests in this region. Every player achieved some definite interests in this region. Turkey, Iran and Pakistan were successful in achieving the cultural and economic links, but failed in their political roles except Turkey. The aim of influence was lost after disintegration. US took keen interest in this region as its decades old rival had broken down due to losing this region. China developed successful economic and political

relations with Central Asia. This particular region has a lot of importance for all the major powers of world.<sup>xxxix</sup>

With the breakdown of USSR, a new speculation got emerged that various conflicts would explode inside the region. But this turned to be wrong except one instance of Tajik-civil war which lasted from 1992 to 1997. Tajik war caused death of 100,000 people, and 1.2 million refugees and internally displaced persons were created.<sup>xxxix</sup> The conflict was well summarized by Barnett Rubin thusly:<sup>xxxix</sup>

“The attempt by political forces excluded from the communist system of power to democratize this weak state soon degenerated into an inchoate, brutal civil war. As institutions broke down, an insecure population increasingly fell back on whatever resources it could find for collective action and self-defense, namely armed struggle based on ethnic and clan affiliations and aid from whatever external sources were willing to give it. The resulting disorder resembled Afghanistan, Somalia, Bosnia, or Liberia, and the human disaster it produced rivaled any of them.”

The outside players in the Central Asian region prefer bilateral relations rather than multilateral ones. All this has prevented the regional development and stability.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Afghan civil war also added a lot to the regional instability of Central Asia. All trade routes were blocked and it became a hindrance in the economic co-operation of Central and South Asia. The border issues between People's Republic of China and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstanis the next critical problem which aggravated the security situation of Central Asia.<sup>xxxix</sup>

### **Achievements:**

The SCO passed through two main stages of development. The first stage begins from 1996 and the second stage begins from 2001. In its first stage the basic principles were formulated. After independence the region faced various problems and in its first stage of development, SCO was characterised by normalising the relations among the member states, and preventing likely conflicts which could have grown up among the



participating countries. In the second stage of development, there has been major institutional establishment of the organization.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

### **Stage I: 1996-2001**

Since its establishment in 1996, SCO took various steps to achieve security cooperation in the region by the activities of confidence-building measures in border areas and the disputes in more than 3000 km border areas in the Western section of the former China-Soviet border was solved. The “Shanghai Five” gave a call for collective action against terrorism in the region. During this stage the main focus of this organization was solving the border disputes.

Kazakhstan shares a border of 1,700 km with China, vast North Western province of Xing Jiang. This area was disputed since Soviet times. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1998, China and Kazakhstan signed a treaty, by which an area of 680 square-km near the Baimurz pass and an area of 380 square-km near the Sary-Charndy River was settled. In terms of security cooperation and the combating of Uyghur movement, Kazakhstan is more and more significant for China. The likely conflict sector is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest of China. Many Uyghurs live in those Central Asian countries with which it shares borders. Various separatist movements are going on in this region who wish to reinforce the idea of a creating a separate Uyghur state (East Turkestan).

The border issues between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been at ease. Nevertheless, relations between the states have become tense by occasional firing and common local disputes over border issues. The Turkmen nationals argue that majority in the Khiva and Khorezm regions are of Turkmen origin, and thus Turkmenistan has traditional claims over these regions. On the other hand, Uzbeks claim their rights over the Tashauz (Dashoguz) and Turkmenabad areas in Turkmenistan asserting that the majority of the people living there are Uzbeks. In 2000 a joint Turkmen-Uzbek commission concluded its work of demarcating the frontiers.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

China and Kyrgyzstan also has some disputed area on which an agreement was signed in 1999 and 900km out of 1,100km were settled down. By this treaty, Kyrgyzstan received 70% of the disputed area, and China received 9 square-km of mountainous area of the Uzengi-Kush. Finally, the borders were completely demarcated in 2009.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The main issue of dispute between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been the Ferghana valley. Joint efforts to demarcate the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border began in February 2000, but were very slow. After two years of its work only 209 out of 1,400 kilometres had been jointly demarcated. One of the most serious border issue is the Osh and Batken regions 406 kilometres which are yet to be resolved. The enclaves of Barak and Sokh are also waiting for the resolution.<sup>xxxix</sup>

## **Stage II: 2001-present**

On 15 June 2001, the Shanghai Five along with Uzbekistan transformed itself into a complete organization and its leaders signed the *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*. It was according to this convention that the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) were established in order to fight against the evils of extremism and terrorism in the region. The presence of SCO in the region proved as a shield guard as the Taliban threat could have spilled over into its neighbours and hindered the regional security.<sup>xi</sup>

It was just before 2 months of 9/11 that the SCO's started the struggle against terrorism in much broader terms than that of the US. SCO as an organization has more prospectus for economic cooperation. The SCO Secretariat, jointly with United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Chinese National Bank of Development organized the first Eurasian Economic Forum in China's Xian in November 2005. The SCO established SCO Forum in May 2006 in Moscow for promoting scientific research.<sup>xli</sup>

In order to achieve its objectives, the SCO signed memoranda of understanding with ASEAN, CIS, EEC, CSTO, and UNESCAP. Some scholars consider SCO as a counter part of NATO as it mostly serves the trade and security issues. The former Deputy Assistant

Secretary of State, Evan A. Feigenbaum had said that the goals of SCO are ambitious. But later when he joined the Council of Foreign Relations, he said that SCO's actual achievements were not visible except those of bilateral and non-SCO agreements.

Russia and China signed the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly cooperation in July 2001. In order to oppose the US National Missile Defense (NMD) program, the SCO supported the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in June 2001 and declared Central Asia as a Nuclear Free Zone. It advocated for a conversation with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional forum in this regard.<sup>xlii</sup>

The SCO's greatest achievement is the confidence-building and stability in Central Asia. China shares three quarters of its total border- 14799 km with the SCO members and observer nations. After the Iraq war (2003) the terrorist belt stretching from the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia to Southeast Asia is the greatest security issue and SCO has launched anti-terror campaign against it. The oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to china has become operational since 2006 and it is going to develop into the SCO's multilateral energy cooperation project along with Russia and other Central Asian nations. This shows the importance of SCO's importance for energy security.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is seen as an important organization because it filled the political vacuum at the crucial time after the disintegration of USSR.<sup>xliii</sup> The SCO in its framework started a cooperative work against both conventional and non conventional security issues in not only Central Asia and South Asia but also in East Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>xliv</sup>

In 2004 and 2005, the successful colour revolutions in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan changed the whole picture and awakened the Central Asian leaders. West was looking for the application of its own market oriented regimes in place of the authoritarian ones. Realizing the defects of multi-directionality, the Central Asian republics moved to strengthen their relations with Russia and China through a regional organization named the SCO. The CARs expected SCO to help in maintaining the political stability in the region including Russia and China and to contain Uzbekistan's

aim of regional hegemony. Secondly, the SCO could offer with better economic cooperation and support the local regimes to survive or preserve the status quo.

One of the major concerns for the Central Asian republics is regional stability, therefore to fight against terrorism and religious extremism became one of the chief goals of the SCO. It was since its formation that SCO has been holding meetings on how to solve regional problems. Finally in 2003 it created the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) with headquarters based in Tashkent. Its main functions were to coordinate among SCO member actions to fight against the three evils, i.e. terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>xlv</sup>

It was in December, 2004 that the SCO was granted observer status in the General Assembly of the United Nations and in April, 2005 it signed the Memorandum of Understanding with ASEAN and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) for establishing a relationship of cooperation.<sup>xlvi</sup>

SCO's joint military exercises began in 2002. A joint anti-terrorism military exercise was conducted in October 10-11, 2002, at the border between China-Kyrgyzstan in the Pamir-Alay Mountain range. It was a joint operation by China and Kyrgyzstan while the other four Member States observed. The operation aimed at implementing the SCO's goal of combating the Three Evils. In this operation hundreds of troops, helicopters, armoured vehicles, and border defence units were involved.

In the Norak Anti-Terror-2009 exercise was held in Fakhrabad training grounds of Tajikistan on April 17-19, 2009. All the five SCO members except Uzbekistan participated in this exercise. It was started to provide defence to the chemical factory in Tajikistan which was under terrorist threat. This exercise made it clear that the SCO was ready to counter the terrorist threats. After this exercise the SCO members agreed to continue the counter-terrorism drills in the future.

SCO-sponsored conference on Afghanistan was held in Moscow on March 2009, which was attended by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Patrick Moon, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mohammad Mehdi

Akhonzadeh, U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, OSCE Secretary General, Mark Perrin de Brichambaut, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Operations, Martin Howard, some representatives from the G8, the EU and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The conference resulted in giving some sort of legitimacy to the organization after it stated that “The participants also noted that the SCO was one of the appropriate forums for a wide dialogue with participation of partners on the Afghanistan-related issues, in the context of joint efforts of the international community and Afghanistan, and for practical interaction between Afghanistan and its neighboring states in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime.” An SCO-Afghanistan Action plan was produced in this conference, and it called SCO to conduct joint operations with relevant Afghan bodies to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. This Action Plan got some success after Russian, U.S., and Afghan forces jointly conducted raid in late October, 2010 against drug labs in Afghanistan.

After conducting security exercises in Afghanistan, the RATS, has broadened its counterterrorism objectives. The SCO has shown a success in countering narcotics issues in Afghanistan. On September 27th, 2010, a Protocol of cooperation was signed by the RATS with the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) to counter drug trafficking, trans-border drug crime, and related issues. As part of the Action Plan on Afghanistan framed in the SCO-sponsored conference in 2009, agreed to think about the establishment of a regional anti-drug training centre. The SCO counter-drug agencies assemble regularly to discuss joint efforts against trafficking and to build five-year anti-drug strategy programs.

The SCO took an initiative to counter and manage internet related issues or what is called ‘information terrorism’. The SCO in 2009 approved Russian-proposed cyber agreement. It defined ‘Information war’ as an attempt by one nation to weaken another nation’s socio-political and economic systems. Some people regard SCO as a counterpart of NATO because of its similar attributes of bureaucracy, a signed charter, a permanent secretariat, annual summits etc. However there is an important difference between NATO and SCO as it is has not limited itself to the security issues.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Development of SCO can be indicated by its growing military alliance with Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>xlvi</sup> Peace Mission 2009 like Peace Mission 2005 took place in the Far East. It lasted for five days from July 22-26, 2009, in Khabarovsk, Russia and the Shenyang Military Area Command in Taonan Tactical Training Base and Jilin in Northeast China. This mission was a respond to the unstable and changing regional environment. Only China and Russia participated with an equal share of 1,300 troops each.<sup>xlix</sup>

In 2011, the SCO celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Astana, Kazakhstan. In this summit, “Anti-drug Strategy”, Action Plan for 2011-2016 and “Memorandum of Obligations” for the countries seeking its full membership was approved by Council of SCO Heads. SCO and UN signed a Memorandum of Agreement of Drugs and Crime regarding the SCO plan for counter-narcotics and trafficking.<sup>1</sup> The Action Plan planned to help promote the economic growth of the SCO member states. Further growth of trade, economic and investment contacts in the region along with the involvement of the capacity of observer states was the main call of the heads of state.<sup>li</sup>

The Beijing Summit of June 2012 and the Bishkek Summit of September 2013 were held against turmoil in West Asia and North Africa. It showed its serious concerns for the Syrian crisis and about the condition in Afghanistan after 2014 with the expected withdrawal of the US-NATO forces. The SCO in June 2012 opposed the armed interference or forced “regime change” which was the obvious indication to the West that supported the regime change in Syria. SCO was worried about the fall of Assad regime and its harmful impact on the Central Asian region. It also stressed that the resolution of Afghan problem should be Afghan-led and Afghan owned and called the international community to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.<sup>liii</sup> The heads of the state noted that the terrorism and the turmoil in some parts of world are of high concern. They also approved the program of cooperation for combating terrorism and extremism for 2013-2015.<sup>liiii</sup>

A meeting of Secretaries of security councils of SCO member states was held in Bishkek on 29 April 2013. The participants in a friendly manner and constructive spirit discussed a number of issues for strengthening the regional security and maintaining

regional stability. The events of East and North Africa and the rise of new threats in post NATO Afghanistan were the main concerns of this meeting. The central Asian regional security depends much on the settlement of security issues in Afghanistan. The parties asserted to work continuously in order to counter the issues of Terrorism, Extremism, Separatism, and Drug trafficking etc. This meeting was important for its aims of ensuring security and stability in the region.<sup>liv</sup> This meeting highly praised the work of cooperation and preparing of the Plan of Action for the years 2013-2017.<sup>lv</sup>

In the annual summit of Tajikistan, which took place on 11th and 12th September, 2014, SCO made suggestions for some remarkable proposals and enacted them. In this two-day meeting, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and his Chinese and Iranian counterparts, Xi Jinping and Hassan Rouhani and the regional leaders participated. The SCO, in order to expand regional influence, finalized the measures for including in new members, with India, Pakistan, and Iran as its first priority. In fact expansion became its priority. As has been well said by Teng Jianqun from the China Institute of International Studies that *“enlargement has become absolutely necessary”* for the SCO.<sup>lvi</sup>

The participants noted that the global financial crises have not yet been overcome and asserted the aim of ensuring sustainable socio-economic development among the SCO members. The Heads of the Government stressed to create a funding mechanism with an aim of promoting economic growth and increasing trade relations among the members. They also stressed the need for protecting the environment.

After India and Pakistan joined as full members in 2017, SCO extended to South Asia and integrating prospects can be seen between both the regions. India and Pakistan could utilize it as a platform to discuss their bilateral issues, yet certain apprehensions are there, that the bilateral issues might hinder the smooth working of this organization and this organization may meet the same fate as happened with SAARC. In recent years, both India and Pakistan have actively participated in all the activities of the SCO and have effectively used the multilateral platform of SCO for diplomacy.

## *Challenges*

Nevertheless SCO achieved success in a small span of time but a large number of challenges are there to create hurdles in its way. There are inherent bilateral tensions between the member nations. China wants its hegemonic position in the region and the Central Asian states want to legitimize their authoritarian governments through this organization. The SCO's failed to resolve the issue of social turmoil which broke out in Kyrgyzstan, apart from expressing its support and concern. China has always looked SCO as an instrument to improve its political influence and maintain strong economic development. Russia's has always taken SCO as a means of cementing bonds with its former union partners. Central Asian members have apprehensions regarding China's huge investments and market potential, as it may increase their economic dependency. SCO signed a protocol of adding new members in 2010, although the actual joining of India and Pakistan was completed in 2017.<sup>lvii</sup> Russia intends to be in the organization only for economic engagements with China. Chinese intention behind the initiation of this organization was to solve the territorial problems with the Central Asian republics in its own favour and to save itself from any kind of challenge over its political control in Xinjiang. China has always used its high-handedness in order to settle the border issues with the newly born republics. For example Kazakhstan solved its border issues with China on the conditions of the China's promise to invest multi-billion dollars in oil sector and a long distance pipeline project for Kazakh oil export to East Asian market and the borders were resolved in China's favour.<sup>lviii</sup>

The security issues in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring can affect Central Asia also. So SCO has to dedicate itself more seriously. The SCO's role has been limited by the lack of adequate funds, competition between China and Russia, internal issues of CARs etc. Presently, organizations like CSTO, SCO, NATO and OSCE are caught in geopolitical competition in this region. So if SCO has to extend its future role in the security of Central Asian region, it has to develop mutual friendly relations with the other active organizations of in the region. SCO is opposed by the other regional countries which are not its members, which is a concern for SCO.<sup>lix</sup> The two super-powers i.e.



Chinese and Russian want for influence over the region has created a big hurdle in the path of development of SCO.<sup>lx</sup>

Chinese high-handedness in this organization is a weakness of this organization. Russia has an apprehension of china getting into the driver's seat of SCO in case of its expansion. This organization is now seen from the perspective of China's idea of counterbalancing NATO. It is said that the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road are intended to enhance the attractiveness of trade with China.<sup>lxi</sup>

Serious challenges for the SCO emerge within the region like the sharing of trans-border Rivers, disputed Fergana Valley and the events for changing the regimes. These issues sometimes take violent ethnic shapes and hinder the peace. Such violent clashes were observed between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2010 which resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands became homeless. Now, when this organization has went on the path of expansion, it is to be seen that how it will tackle such severe challenges and the issue of mistrust among the member states.<sup>lxii</sup>

### **Future Prospects:**

#### ***SCO and Afghanistan***

Although SCO does not have much influence on Afghanistan, but what Afghanistan faces (religious extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking) were the issues of security against which SCO got its existence. The neighbour nations of Afghanistan have the fear that the Afghan instability may spill over the borders. The presence of strong terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and Taliban and the NATO drawdown may increase the security instability in the country. In such conditions, this country should remain a top priority for SCO. However, what we witnessed is the individual role of the SCO member Nations in Afghanistan. China has particularly shown its interest in the country, in order to protect its investments.

NATO forces are gradually leaving Afghanistan and there may be security threats for both east and west from Al-Qaida and Taliban. Russia and China are the main Security stakeholders in the entire region once Western forces leave Afghanistan. In this

environment, SCO has a good opportunity to fill the vacuum. However, SCO lacks the military capability and financial means for conducting security operations in Afghanistan.

The organization has achieved great success in the spheres of security. But in the economic area it lags far behind. The Central Asian region is full of natural resources. The utilisation of those resources is necessary for the development of the region. SCO can provide a platform for such utilization and development.

Development of relations with other regional organizations like Eurasian Union, ECO, and CSTO etc can have a profound impact on the SCO's future. The expansion of SCO membership can affect it both negatively as well as positively. Its expansion can provide best possibilities of development. Membership expansion can negatively affect the internal solidarity among the member states, particularly between China and Russia.<sup>lxiii</sup>

In the near future the SCO has to develop its security cooperation and to avoid the past mistakes; it has to make its organs to concentrate on their respective works. In order to avoid arms race in this region, SCO should take up a program under Central Asian Nuclear-Free Zone (CANFZ) treaty. One of the critical issues in this region is Drug trafficking and SCO should take up the responsibility to make the region free from this problem. SCO can also develop cooperative relations with the other Asian organizations in order to frame joint anti-terror programs and to jointly promote the reconstruction of the Afghanistan. The security issues in East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia can be countered by providing information about terrorists as SCO maintains a list of terrorists through its RATS organ.

SCO is becoming such an important organization that more and more countries want to become its members or observers like US, EU, Japan and it is now a great challenge in front of SCO to sort out its relationship with such important players.<sup>lxiv</sup> Chinese policy makers are not interested in resolving the issue of extremism but to deal with the Uyghur problem through SCO. These limited moves from Chinese side should be changed into strong ones. Otherwise this organization will meet the same fate of irrelevant end up as was with other organizations of this region.<sup>lxv</sup>

The SCO can achieve its goal of all-round development only if all the members and observer nations will be given opportunities to play their roles. The SCO membership should be expanded and the observers should be given full membership. The failure of west in curbing the issue of terrorism from the region has paved a way to SCO for playing its role in its own area of influence.

The issue of Drug-trafficking is faced by all the Central Asian nations and it is not possible for them to tackle the issue individually. SCO has to play the role of a platform so that all the countries which are members to this organization can curb this great menace. The region is rich in natural resources like natural gas, petroleum etc but lack of cooperation among these regional nations has made them poor. Under the umbrella of SCO these nations can prepare coordinated plans and policies for their development. Russia and China being developed nations can transfer the advanced technologies to the other members of this organization.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Looking at the future of SCO, we can say that there are still many issues within the organization which need urgent solution. The SCO needs to set up goals for economic cooperation and at every new stage of its development these goals must be reviewed and new ones must be framed.<sup>lxvii</sup>

China's motive of investing in Afghanistan after NATO withdrawal needs stability in the country. Afghanistan's security needs serious attention after NATO exit as instability may grow there again. SCO numerous responsibilities will be transferred on the shoulders of SCO to develop and maintain stability in the country. India being one of the major powers of world can play a major role in developing the organization and in curbing terrorism, drug trafficking and extremism. In order to make SCO a successful regional organization, mutual trust must be developed with the similar regional groupings and the bilateral issues must be addressed between member nations.<sup>lxviii</sup>

## Conclusion

Having analysed the security scenario of the Central Asian region, it can be said that SCO has an important role to play in future for maintaining the regional stability. If the terrorist activities continued, they are prone to spill out into next-door countries of Central Asia. In the absence of SCO, the Taliban may constantly march northwards, and the security issues may rise for the whole Central Asia as a region. In this regard, we can say that the SCO has an important role to play in maintaining regional security and stability. SCO has unified the Central Asian countries including the observer countries into one organization to safeguard peace and tranquillity of the region.

Regional integration serves a path to economic development. Asian continent has also seen flourishing cooperation that boosted peace and development, But comparatively less than those in Europe and North America, may be due to uneven development and poor links among the sub-regions of Asia. The New Silk Road will develop connectivity between Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia, and will thus bring Pan-Asian and Eurasian regional cooperation to a new height. The Central Asian nations being economically isolated are heavily dependent on Russia, particularly remittances. Due to Russian economic recession since 2014 it dropped to 15% in 2014. The New Silk Road initiative will provide these Central Asian nations, new opportunity of economic growth. For the United States, the New Silk Road refers to a suite of joint investment projects and regional trade blocs that have the potential to bring economic growth and stability to Central Asia. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline had been a focus of US policy as it thought that this project could offer major economic dividends to Afghanistan. TAPI, which is presently under construction, will also allow Turkmenistan (home to the world's second largest natural gas deposit) to diversify its exports to other nations (other than China) like India and Pakistan.

If we assess the importance of SCO in the Central Asian region, the question of Afghanistan's future after the announced NATO exit is also to be analysed. It is not only Afghan government and NATO, but also the Central Asian neighbours that are worried about Afghanistan after NATO withdrawal. Afghanistan could face various problems of

security, economic, political, civil war and foreign intervention would turn out to be more constant. It is assumed that after NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the terrorist groups would be reactivated which could terrorise the peace of the entire Central Asian region by dragging the adjacent countries in the war. Thus, both South and Central Asian security may be endangered by the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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