

REGIONAL POLITICS

**THE ROLE OF THE SCO
IN FORMING THE CENTRAL ASIAN
SECURITY ENVIRONMENT:
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Of course it would be too declamatory to maintain that the Central Asian countries are acquiring a special significance in the international relations system, but we cannot deny the increased attention the global actors are focusing on them, mainly due to the geostrategic and economic potential of the region. The situation is complicated by the spasmodic development of certain processes in some of the region's countries, the roots of which can be found in political and economic problems, as well as in the abrupt changes

that have been occurring in the Central Asian states since the day they acquired their independence. Along with this, a few particularly obvious trends should be noted, including the growing impact of security threats and challenges, which could lead to a dramatic reduction in security in the region and its transformation into what we could call the Asian Balkans. The main reasons for this are the military-political situation in Afghanistan, the aggravated political processes, and the socioeconomic tension in several Central Asian republics.

Among the threats which have already become traditional, we will note international terrorism, drug trafficking, destabilization, the spread of hostilities to contiguous territories, illegal migration, and the problem of refugees, the spread of religious extremism, and the possible establishment of military-dictatorial pro-Islamist regimes in the Central Asian states. Along with these, new threats to regional stability and security were manifested in the events of 2005 which drew the increased attention both of the region's countries and of foreign players—the change in power in Kyrgyzstan and the situation in Andijan. Of course, these events did not cause the situation in Central Asia to spiral out of control, but they were a warning sign to its states and neighbors, giving them reason to think seriously about how to deal with the growing snowball of regional problems.

The revved-up integration processes in Central Asia were a reaction to all these threats, with the emphasis on military-political cooperation and ensuring security. After all, due to the transnational nature of these threats and the low level of independence of each of the Central Asian republics,

the region's problems cannot be resolved in isolation. Of course, thanks to the multilateral initiatives of recent years, a regional security system is beginning to form which to some degree is making it possible to overcome certain problems. However, it cannot be said that these processes are yielding effective results.

Against this background, we should single out the significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is taking unusual approaches toward resolving the problems of the Central Asian countries, including in regional security. According to the SCO member states, the current threats in this sphere come from the five evils: extremism, terrorism, separatism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration of the population. The SCO's integration efforts are primarily aimed at jointly combating these threats. But at the same time, economic cooperation is gradually beginning to develop within the framework of the Organization.¹

¹ See: V. Galiamova, "ShOS kak instrument obespecheniia bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noi Azii: perspektivy organizatsii v svete rezul'tatov sammita," *Analytic*, No. 4, 2005, p. 12.

Outcome of the SCO Summit in Astana and Geopolitics of the Region's States

On the whole, the evolution of the SCO is characterized by relatively high development rates, as well as a high level of mutual understanding and solidarity among its participants. Taking into account the fact that, until recently, China was conducting an isolationist foreign policy, and all the Central Asian republics, including the Organization's member states, were closed off from the outside world by the Iron Curtain, their ability to reach a stable level of trust in each other is impressive. This is shown in particular by the joint military exercises carried out for the first time in history with the PRC, which, along with other factors, makes it possible to consider the SCO an unusual formation.²

The Republic of Kazakhstan was interested in creating a similar structure with the participation of Russia and the PRC, since this meets its interests in building a multi-vector foreign policy and maintaining the balance of power in the region. In its foreign policy strategy, the Republic of Kazakhstan is striving to assume the position of a Central Asian integrator, and as practice shows, our SCO

² See: V. Galiamova, "ShOS i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentral'noi Azii" [www.kisi.kz/expol/sco07-05-05.pdf].

partners are responding positively to many of our republic's initiatives. An example of this is the summit of its member states which was held on 4 July, 2005 in Astana and which opened a new stage in the Organization's development. The positive outcome of the July meeting, as many experts emphasize, was ensured not only by increased cooperation in the fight against terrorism, but also by the first practical steps toward trade and economic cooperation. In our opinion, it is interaction in the development of the national economies and social sector that will create the real foundation in the fight against terrorism. For it, as we know, is propitiously developing under conditions of progressing poverty.

At a meeting of the Council of Heads of the Organization's countries, a Declaration of the Heads of SCO Member States and a Conception of Cooperation in the Fight against Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism were adopted.³ What is more, priority tasks were confirmed at the summit, including the development of relations with other political and trade actors, as well as the main areas of activity of the law enforcement bodies and defense ministries. Questions were also discussed of the further development of mechanisms and measures necessary for having an adequate response to situations posing a threat to peace and security.

The adopted conception notes that the SCO member states will hinder the preparation and carrying out of terrorist acts on their territory, including those aimed against the interests of other states. This, as well as the agreement on the procedure for organizing and implementing joint antiterrorist measures in the member states, will give the activity of the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) a clearer and more targeted focus.

Another extremely important topic of the summit was the deployment of the U.S. and NATO military contingent in the Central Asian republics, which could essentially be characterized as an event of geopolitical proportion. It should be noted that the statement made on this problem was probably initiated by Moscow and Beijing, two regional nations primarily interested in the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO armed subdivisions from the region. After all, after 9/11, when Washington began to carry out its plans to deploy military units in certain Central Asian republics, the SCO was still not strong enough to fill the geopolitical vacuum and act as a guarantor of security for the entire region. In other words, taking into account the subsequent development of events, it was a little late in its organizational formation. And since this structure as a mechanism for ensuring the secure development of the Central Asian countries, in close cooperation with the Russian Federation and PRC, was essentially formed after the U.S.'s entry into the region, it is now primarily trying to catch up.

When analyzing the results of the Organization's summits, as well as statements made in the format of bilateral meetings of the member state leaders, the following program theses can be seen in them: the absence of any intention to build another military bloc; the striving to reduce unilateralism in international relations; the rejection of a hegemonic policy; and non-acceptance of unipolarity.

It is understood that this scope of activity in the SCO is inherent only in Russia and the PRC. At bilateral meetings, their leaders repeatedly emphasized that they do not accept the superpower syndrome and interference in the affairs of other countries under the guise of human rights and humanitarian efforts, and they are also against imposing the standards of certain countries on others. There is no doubt that in this context, the finger is primarily being pointed at the United States, as well as at the stances of the Russian Federation and PRC. It stands to reason that these two regional nations have no burning desire to see, if not military adversaries, at least geopolitical rivals in the form of the U.S. and NATO so close at hand.

³ See: S. Nesterenko, "ShOS: novy masshtab global'noi otvetstvennosti," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 6 July, 2005.

We will remind you that at the first stage, Beijing and Moscow supported the Washington-led antiterrorist campaign of 2001. But the U.S.'s subsequent geopolitical campaigns in Eurasia—the long-term deployment of military bases in Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, and the military campaign in Iraq, assessed today as intervention—have aroused the concern of both China and Russia, as well as of other countries in this vast area. Beijing and Moscow are united by long-term goals ensuing from their interest in ensuring stability in the vast expanse of Central Eurasia. Against this background, the manifestation of unilateralism in Washington's actions will be “quietly” blocked by carrying out a strategy of geopolitical pluralism. And from this viewpoint, the SCO's future as an international player may appear ambiguous.⁴

Naturally, the Russian Federation and the PRC do not want relations with the United States to deteriorate, but at the same time, without making any rash moves, Moscow and Beijing are trying wherever possible to clamp down on Washington's military-political presence in the region, and in the future to diplomatically push the U.S. bases out of its countries. A logical extension of Russian-Chinese policy in this area (by means of the SCO) was the July summit in Astana. For example, the third section of the declaration adopted at it notes in particular that the SCO supports and will continue to support the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan. Based on these goals, several of the Organization's countries offered their land-based infrastructure for temporary deployment of the military contingents of the coalition states. But in its next item, the declaration points to the desire of certain SCO countries to have these military bases removed from Central Asia.

A diplomatically phrased paragraph in the document says: “Taking into account the completion of the active combat phase of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the SCO member states consider it necessary that the relevant members of the antiterrorist coalition take a decision on the deadlines for the temporary use of the above-mentioned infrastructure facilities and military presence on the territory of the SCO member states.”⁵ Despite the careful phrasing, its meaning is obvious—the SCO, primarily Beijing, Moscow, and Tashkent, do not want the U.S. military to stay on in the region. Of course, these sentiments are not intended to trigger off any radical changes in the balance of power in Central Asia. And although this request did not arouse a particular response, negative repercussions of the statement made at the summit were not long in coming, which was most noticeable with respect to Uzbekistan. After the May 2005 events in Andijan, it began to demonstratively distance itself from the West, since the insistent demands of the world community, in particular the EU and U.S., that this event be investigated began to increasingly irritate official Tashkent. And as early as July, it demanded that Washington withdraw its armed forces from the republic within six months.⁶ We will remind you that the U.S. has been using the base in Khanabad since 2001, from the first days of the combat action of the antiterrorist coalition against the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Incidentally, Tashkent's decision was voiced after the U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld received assurances from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that Washington could continue using its military bases in these countries.⁷

The White House promised to withdraw its troops from Uzbekistan within six months, but in the summer, the EU tried to adopt sanctions against Islam Karimov's regime, and it is presumed that these attempts will be intensified. Admittedly, the U.S. has already withdrawn its subdivisions from Uzbekistan, but they have not entirely left the region. In this respect, it can be said that Tashkent essen-

⁴ See: S. Kushkumbaev, “ShOS: popytki strukturirovaniia geopoliticheskogo prostranstva Tsentral'noi Azii,” *Analytic*, No. 4, 2005, p. 18.

⁵ Declaration by the Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 6 July, 2005.

⁶ See: E. Grigorieva, “Tsentral'naia Azia khochet izbavitsia ot chuzhikh voennykh baz,” *Izvestia*, 6 July, 2005.

⁷ Based on RIA Novosti information, 7 July, 2005.

tially did not achieve anything by taking this tough stance, but only demonstrated the indeterminate and instable nature of its foreign policy.

As for Kyrgyzstan, it cannot permit itself such incautious steps today. On the one hand, its military bases are one of the important items of revenue to the state budget—official payments for the use of the Gansi air base located in Manas amount to 50 million dollars a year—and on the other, it is undesirable for Kurmanbek Bakiev's current fragile regime to spoil its relations with the West. In this way, Washington will not leave this base as long as it is needed there. What is more, the mass media have been publishing information that the United States is granting Kyrgyzstan an interest-free loan of 200 million dollars,⁸ and this is essentially equal to 60% of the country's annual budget revenue.

And another thing, Bishkek refused to allow Beijing to deploy subdivisions of the PRC armed forces on its territory, motivating this decision by the fact that it has no intention of turning the country into a military-political testing ground for foreign contingents, that is, it is clearly taking steps toward the West. And Washington's relations with Islam Karimov's regime, on the contrary, are tending toward further aggravation, which could ultimately cause disagreement between two SCO member states, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the relations between which are not distinguished by profundity and trust as it is. It is thought that Bishkek is in danger of being strongly swayed by foreign influences. The current government will only have perfunctory power, while all the domestic processes will be regulated by foreign forces. In our opinion, Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime should conduct a more cautious policy and think about the consequences of its every step.

It appears that Tajikistan will not oppose the U.S. military presence in the region either, which is also due to the significant financial support Washington is rendering it. For example, in 2005, the United States allotted the republic 44.5% of all the funds offered it in the form of foreign aid for financing programs in democracy, reform of the legal system and social sphere, defense of the state border, strengthening of the security structures, and so on.⁹ In this way, Dushanbe is unlikely to protest against the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, at least in the foreseeable future. Admittedly, as Uzbekistan's recent experience shows, an alternative might appear unexpectedly.

Kazakhstan had to support the statement initiated by the SCO at the summit in Astana. Otherwise, all the integrated efforts of our republic would have fallen by the wayside, and this, of course, does not meet its interests. Due to the multi-vector nature of its foreign policy, Kazakhstan is developing military-political cooperation both with the SCO member states and with the West, in particular with NATO. If the country took a hard-line position regarding deployment of U.S. and NATO armed forces in the region, this would contradict Astana's policy with respect to the balance of power. The republic's leadership understands the importance of regulating the situation in Afghanistan and positively evaluates the efforts of the antiterrorist coalition. After all, Afghanistan is a bone of contention and source of threat not only to Kazakhstan's national security, but to all the countries in the region. At the same time, military cooperation with geopolitically polar structures harbors a potential danger for Kazakhstan, since some Central Asian republics may interpret this policy ambiguously. And although this question is still not urgent, taking into account the possible prospects, it should be kept in mind.

As many experts believe, the SCO's statement was called upon to show that the Organization's members, which differ in the nature of their regimes, have the same negative approach to the presence of U.S. and NATO military bases in Central Asia. But, in our opinion, it is premature and rather dangerous to make such equivocal assessments, and this statement has another meaning. The SCO's propos-

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ See: "SshA beskorystno pomogaiut Tadzhikistanu v 10 raz bol'she, chem Rossia" [www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1137790800], 21 January, 2006.

al to the states of the antiterrorist coalition, the basis of which is formed by the U.S. and NATO, is probably more an expression of its own geopolitical significance, comprehension of the Organization's power and influence in the region, which is giving it grounds for taking independent action in resolving its problems, including in fending off the threats to its security. Its accumulated political-legal and military-political experience is making it possible for the SCO to counteract these threats under its own steam, therefore the presence of foreign contingents in the region simply does not make sense.

It seems to us that at this stage, the Central Asian countries are already quite capable of independently resolving the security problems in the region. They already have the necessary potential, but most important, a clear understanding and comprehensive desire. And the ill-considered and frequently uncoordinated entry into their territory of foreign forces is arousing a natural reaction in these states to protect their own interests. In this respect, we believe that trends are currently being considered in the SCO toward strengthening the military component, that is, the Organization is acquiring the appearance of an unofficial military bloc. This is shown by the joint military exercises of the member states which became more frequent in 2005. The first Russian-Sino Peace Mission-2005 exercises, which took place between 18 and 25 August in the Far Eastern Military District of the Russian Federation and in the PRC, became a kind of demonstration of their own might and confidence within the SCO framework.¹⁰ This indicates that regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism, organized crime, and the drug business is moving to a higher level. Washington has refrained from making loud comments about these exercises, but its hints were unequivocally understood.

Russia's armed forces are continuing to resolve questions relating to raising tactical interoperability with the Uzbekistan army. This is confirmed in particular by the first joint exercises in the history of Russian-Uzbek relations held on 21-23 September, 2005 at the Forish test ground, during which tactics were improved for destroying subversive groups of international terrorists. It is obvious that this hint was addressed to Washington, stressing that the region's countries are quite capable of independently protecting themselves against terrorism.

In October, Moscow continued its military-exercise tour of the Asian region, but this time headed for India, which has obtained the status of observer in the SCO. The main goal of the Indra-2005 exercises held between 10 and 20 October was to carry out tasks aimed at organizing and increasing the efficiency of joint actions when carrying antiterrorist campaigns on land and at sea by the corresponding subdivisions of both countries, to improve cooperation in carrying out peacekeeping tasks, and to maintain stability in the region. All of these efforts by the Russian Federation can be evaluated as diversification of its military cooperation. What is more, it is trying to assume the role of a regional leader capable of taking responsibility in ensuring security.

In this way, regional processes are developing actively and gradually moving to a military level. Moscow, in all likelihood, is again trying to become the initiator of a so-called Big Game in Central Asia, gradually returning its states to the orbit of its influence, for which Russia has objective reasons. First, the White House, the Kremlin's main rival in the region, after becoming bogged down in Iraq and striving to implant democracy in it by military force, will continue to focus its main attention in this area in the foreseeable future. For example, in his speech on the U.S. budget for 2006, George Bush placed the emphasis on the military sphere and the country's security, where Iraq occupies a priority place. This is giving Moscow the chance to take advantage of the current situation to reinforce its foothold, which it is in fact doing by activating its military-political cooperation within the SCO and CSTO. But it would be unwise to underestimate the situation, since Washington always has

¹⁰ Based on RIA Novosti information, 18 August, 2005.

an effective tool of geopolitical leverage up its sleeve—the North Atlantic Alliance, which is also represented in the region. Second, on 14 November, 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov signed a military treaty, thus forming an alliance which confirms Moscow's influence in a republic that was a U.S. ally prior to the events in Andijan. At the same time, Vladimir Putin noted that “an alliance is the most trusting level of relations for sovereign states,” adding that it “brings our relations to a qualitatively new level and makes them as close as they can be.”¹¹ What is more, the Treaty on Strategic Partnership between Russia and Uzbekistan legally justifies the creation in the republic of a Russian military air base, which will technically be considered a CSTO base. But Uzbekistan is not currently part of this structure.

It is presumed that Tashkent, due to its latently developing political conflict with Washington and curtailment of financial and military support from the West, has been forced to turn to Moscow for help. Russia is capable of meeting the needs of the Uzbekistan army, as well as rendering Islam Karimov's regime the necessary military and political support. Of course, the mentioned Treaty has not been signed within the framework of the SCO, but both Russia and Uzbekistan are its members, which had an impact on strengthening the Organization's position. What is more, the Treaty expresses the logic of the July 2005 summit in Astana, where the first attempt was made to distance Tashkent from Washington. The U.S. did not comment on the signing of this document, but knowing the special features of American policy, it is not difficult to surmise how the White House reacted.

On the whole, in our opinion, official Moscow's policy is currently aimed at activating military-political cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which could strengthen the prevalence of Russian military standards in Central Asia. And this is very unfavorable for the West. What is more, the countries of the region are most likely ready for this cooperation due to their need to counteract the real threats of terrorism, extremism, the drug business, and transnational crime. At the same time, the danger exists of destructive trends within the SCO itself, which is primarily related to the relative polarization of the positions of its member states regarding the U.S. military presence in the region. Although at this stage, this is not having an effect on the interrelations among the SCO members, it is thought that certain preventive measures should be taken to resolve this problem. Secondly, this is related to the too close relations between certain countries within the SCO. This mainly applies to the intensifying Russian-Uzbek relations, which the other members of the Organization might assess ambiguously. These and other questions must be resolved by means of open coordination and not by hushing them up, which is only leading to aggravation of the situation.

On the whole, the current stage of functioning in the SCO shows that its founders are trying to move away from the traditional patterns of international relations characteristic of the hard-line geopolitical and military-political era. But world practice shows that without military support any strategy seems to have little effect.

As experts note, an important part of the Organization's activity is the fight against non-traditional challenges and threats, the use of gentle methods of collective security, a demonstrative rejection of forming blocs, and support of consultations and talks as a means of resolving mutual problems.¹² But all the same, the SCO will probably be forced to develop and strengthen its military-political potential, possibly as a geopolitical tool in the rivalry with foreign players.

The Organization's prospects largely depend on the foreign policy of the PRC and RF, which is not necessarily related to the Central Asian countries. Due to the fact that at the current stage Russia

¹¹ P. Finn, “Russia-Uzbek Military Pact Allows Mutual Use of Bases,” *The Washington Post*, 15 November, 2005 [www.inosmi.ru/translation/223659.html].

¹² See: S. Kushkumbaev, “‘Shankhaiskii protsess:’ put k kooperativnoi modeli regionalnoi bezopasnosti,” *Saiasat-Policy*, No. 7, July 2005, pp. 65-68.

does not possess sufficient economic resources to maintain its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, Moscow is sharing part of the responsibility for regional stability with Beijing. At the same time, no one wishes to see the SCO transformed into another military tool for realizing the geopolitical ambitions of certain countries—that was not what it was intended for.

Enlargement of the SCO: Problems of Drawing New Players into the Region's Geopolitical Orbit

Another historical event during the meeting in Astana was that three of the largest Asian states—India, Iran, and Pakistan—joined the common efforts of the SCO countries in the struggle against terrorism and in ensuring stability and economic development. At this summit, the noted states joined the SCO as observers. Mongolia received this status in 2004.¹³

Their joining the Organization will hypothetically make it the largest integration structure in the world, which will change the political, economic, military, and cultural architectonics on the European-Asian continent. In other words, an unusual alliance of nation-states and civilizations is being created, and this is the main difference between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other regional formations. But it is still premature to talk about its actual enlargement, since the regulatory-legal base of the SCO has not been entirely formed and the process of consolidating the current member states has not been completed. There are several contradictory questions here, for which it is unfortunately very hard to find answer today.

- First, Iran, India, and Pakistan are showing an increasing interest in economic cooperation with the Central Asian republics, particularly in the sphere of trade, transportation, power engineering, and energy resources. From this viewpoint, the noted states could become incorporated into the SCO structure, which could lead to changes in certain parameters of economic contacts. But in so doing, ground is being tilled for conflictive rivalry among the above-mentioned three countries, on the one hand, and between Russia and China, on the other, which are just as interested in the region's market. This could lead to a breakdown in the Organization's mechanisms.
- Second, South Asia, to which Iran, India, and Pakistan belong, is an even more contradictory region than Central Asia, with its rather acute and complicated differences of opinion and confused and protracted conflicts. Therefore it is very likely that as a result of these states joining the SCO, other accents in the Organization's activity will also shift, with possible distraction of attention toward the problems of South Asia. In this event, the SCO will not be able to make targeted use of its resources, which are rather limited anyway. And this, in turn, could give rise to new conflicts, into which the Central Asian republics will also be drawn.
- Third, India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, and Iran is trying to obtain them, so their entry into the Organization could lead to a breakdown in the balance of its internal structure. And in this context, their integration into the SCO is very problematic. What is more, India has not joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the SCO countries declared that observation of non-proliferation conditions is one of the most important princi-

¹³ See: S. Kushkumbaev, "ShOS: popytki strukturirovaniia geopoliticheskogo prostranstva Tsentral'noi Azii," p. 19.

ples for ensuring peace. The SCO could gain the reputation of a structure gathering nuclear states under its wing: on the one hand, Russia and China, on the other, India and Pakistan. And this will all happen against the background of Iran's attempts to create its own nuclear weapons. In the event this scenario pans out, the SCO could become more of a source of threat itself to international security than a tool for fighting it.

- Fourth, Iran is following its own domestic and foreign political course, which is quite difficult to coordinate with the stances of the Organization's members. What is more, the SCO could be drawn into a geopolitical conflict with the U.S. After all, relations between Tehran and Washington are extremely tense, and in light of the statements made at the summit in Astana, the Organization could assume the stance of an anti-American bloc. In other words, Iran's entry into the SCO could also be complicated by a whole slew of other problems.
- Finally, fifth, a very serious problem is the rather tense relations between India and Pakistan, and Iran and Pakistan. What is more, all these countries are interested in geopolitical domination in Central Asia, which is also aggravating their relations with the region's countries, as well as the Russian Federation and PRC. If we take an objective view of the desire of Islamabad and Delhi to join the SCO, an element of rivalry can also be seen even in this aspect, neither state wants to yield to the other in the political, economic, and military sphere. Before major positive changes appear in the relations between these countries, the SCO could become a victim of their multitude of contradictions and conflicts. What is more, the Central Asian republics, Russia, and China will also be forced in the SCO format to fight against the Islamist forces of Iran and Pakistan, since manifestations of religious extremism in the region are largely associated with these countries.

In this way, taking into account the enormous impact Iran, India, and Pakistan joining the SCO will have, the question arises of whether it is capable of handling this enlargement within its current framework. The organization simply cannot work realistically in this composition. After all, it has taken enormous efforts to normalize relations today and overcome the barrier of mistrust between the PRC, Russia, and the Central Asian republics.

However, if we hypothetically assume that Delhi, Islamabad, and Tehran will expand the format of their participation in the Organization, conditions will arise for reducing the conflict potential in the region, including between potential SCO participants, since they are clearly interested in its transformation into a permanently functioning structure which has an impact on international processes. According to several experts, expanding the geographic framework of the SCO will help to strengthen its economic and military-political potential, which will have a beneficial effect on multilateral cooperation and interaction in the region. But in so doing, a set of other problems might arise which are wider in scope and currently not characteristic of Central Asia. In all likelihood, in the mid-term, the countries with the status of observer in the Organization will not be able to become its permanent members due to the primary importance of the tasks aimed at building up the SCO's internal strength.

The question is how long they will accept this status, although resolution of this question will not have a significant influence on the development of the SCO. Today, it has entered a latent geopolitical standoff against the West by challenging U.S. interests, and this means that this question will be a hidden bone of contention for quite some time to come in forming the region's geopolitics. In this case, ill-considered enlargement of the Organization, particularly by including states that are polarized to each other, is introducing additional contradictions into its strategy and could lead to a slow-down in the cooperation processes and to the formation within the SCO of internal groups created on the basis of opposite geopolitical and other priorities.

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Nevertheless, the SCO has enormous potential and good chances in the future of creating a regional security system equivalent to current international-political realities and trends, which will become one of the centers of the global security system taking shape, an intermediary link between global and subregional levels. Of course, we will only be able to talk about this with complete confidence in time, since the organization is still in its youth.

What is more, it should be kept in mind that there is a real danger of the Organization transforming into an incompetent structure which only perfunctorily unites its members, which have opposite economic and political goals, and becoming yet one more "paper-and-pencil" association in the world, including in the post-Soviet space.

As we have already noted, today the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is encountering serious challenges, and this is increasing the skepticism of experts regarding its efficiency. On the one hand, the internal trends holding back the strengthening of relations in all the designated areas must be overcome. On the other, the Organization is entering into the difficult process of forming Central Asia's geopolitics, in particular, we should note NATO's firm intention of including the region in a new system of cooperation, in which relations between the Central Asia and the North Atlantic Alliance would be distinguished by a more constructive nature.

The increased U.S. military presence in the region after 9/11 has led to the fact that the SCO is not playing a leading role in Central Asia in ensuring security and in the fight against terrorism. But according to the outcome of the summit in Astana, it can be noted that the Organization is willing to assume responsibility even in light of the geopolitical changes going on around the region.

It is thought that in order to resolve the range of current problems in the near future, the SCO should make a qualitative leap in one of two directions: either toward forming a military-political bloc, which will actually, instead of theoretically, maintain security in Greater Central Asia, or toward creating a full-fledged regional political-economic alliance along the lines of ASEAN. But the SCO is not a military bloc, which is emphasized in every way by all its member states. Here we need to pay attention to the unusual composition of the Organization. Only if it can draw up a specific regional strategy and, most important, put it into practice, without remaining at the level of bureaucratic paperwork, will this regional structure be able to provide answers to the transnational challenges facing its participants and play a dominant role in forming the region's geopolitics.

There is a quite widespread justified opinion in the expert community that today only the SCO and no other international formation is capable of providing the Central Asian states with the opportunity to create the most adequate model of interaction with each other and with the main foreign centers of power for ensuring security and development. The organization is presenting the regional players with the most preferable and attractive mechanism precisely because it is forming conditions for supporting stable political regimes in Central Asia and creating a favorable economic climate and safe environment in the military-political respect.¹⁴

As many observers note, today the SCO is playing a very important role in ensuring regional security in Central Asia. It has launched and is improving a mechanism of interaction among the military departments, is holding meetings of the defense ministers of the member states, is engaging in talks of General Staff delegations, and is carrying out bilateral and multilateral antiterrorist exercises. The summit in Astana clearly demonstrated that today the Organization is assuming the position of a mature alliance confident in its own strength which is already beginning to manifest its political ambitions and diplomatically making complaints against its opponents.

¹⁴ See: V. Galiamova, "ShOS kak instrument obespecheniia bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noi Azii," p. 14.

Participation in the SCO is giving the region's countries the opportunity to strengthen their own security, diversify channels of cooperation with the big regional players, primarily the U.S., China, and Russia, and expand their influence on regional processes. According to official Astana, under the conditions currently existing in Central Asia only an international organization encompassing all the region's countries and aimed at resolving its specific problems can efficiently oppose the above-mentioned threats. Correspondingly, the search for an optimal balance of interests, harmonization of the main areas of foreign, economic, and military policy in Central Asia, and a real assessment of the possibilities of all the members involved in this project should become imperative in the SCO's activity in the region.

The Organization's member states should use their political, economic, and military resources to strengthen national security, state independence, and regional authority. The history of international relations is proving that there is nothing stable and eternal in the world of politics, everything is based on temporary national interests. Proceeding from this, the SCO can become a kind of catalyst for building a platform of constructive cooperation among the countries of the region to meet all the vicissitudes in geopolitical development that come their way.