The World HandCOV'd: SCO: navigating between regional integration and diverging national interests in Eurasia

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Key takeaways

- Growing great power rivalry and competing concepts for regional order will enforce attempts by China and Russia to bring SCO member states on their side. Yet, given the diversity inside the SCO, existing conflicts and the self-proclaimed idea of not intervening in domestic affairs, the SCO will not serve an institutional framework to overcome fundamental differences among the member states.
- Instead, the SCO will remain a forum focusing on joint efforts in tackling non-traditional security issues.
- As a lesson learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, establishing stronger coordination mechanisms in disease prevention is likely to become a priority.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) emerged in 2001 from the Shanghai Five group as a means of bringing together Russia, China and the Central Asian countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Initial focus was set to establish an institutionalized collaboration mechanism in the Eurasian region to jointly cope with challenges for the autocratic systems emanating from insurgencies and growing Islamic fundamentalism. The extension of the organization during the past few years with India and Pakistan as additional members and Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus and Mongolia as observer states has enlarged the scope of the organization and its geographical reach.

> With Russia and China in the driver's seat of the SCO, divergences between the two powers on the overall agenda of the SCO has increased complexity to define the purpose and main role of the organization.

China has sought to advance an agenda combining economic and security interests in line with its Belt and Road Initiative, whereas Russia has set focus on developing the SCO as a forum for closer military cooperation, also understood to develop a stronger security alliance to "prevent coloured revolutions" from within the societies and to "counter influence from the West."

The membership of India and Pakistan illustrates the transformation process the organization has been through, with countries defining each other as strong rivals and even enemies rather than neighbours with a strong sense to enhance regional cooperation. Additionally, the role China and Russia play in the region has been increasingly characterized by different interests, aspirations and tactical approaches. This is the case in complex security hot spots, such as Afghanistan, or the ongoing competition about creating own railroad connections via the South Caucasus (Russia) or Central Asia and Iran (China).

> While the overall tone in official statements has stressed commitment by the governments for the multilateral approach to regional order, contradictory signals have been sent out due to competing regional and geopolitical interests of the member states.

The Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative both seek to strengthen each side's sphere of influence in the region.

Effects of Covid-19 on the SCO

During the first weeks of the pandemic, the SCO member states reacted quite differently in terms of their response to the outbreak in neighbouring China. Russia and Mongolia immediately closed their borders to China; India implemented health screening mechanisms in early January at main traffic junctions. Statements released by the SCO stressed solidarity and support between the neighbouring countries, but, despite its strong focus on non-traditional security cooperation, no closer coordination between member countries took place to combat the spread of Covid-19. Although the SCO lists "the spread of infectious diseases" in its Bishkek declaration of 2019 as a common security threat and cross-border challenge, joint measures to tackle health crises such as pandemics had not been on the agenda of the organization. In recent weeks this has

changed and a meeting of the member states' health ministers is being prepared. This comes along with fast growing numbers of Covid-19 cases in India and Pakistan and new outbreaks in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Structural challenges for the SCO and bilateral tensions

Key to success in tackling a health crisis of such an extent is access to valid information.

> The SCO's self-proclaimed principle of *non-interference in domestic affairs* has set the *modus operandi* within the organization and clear limits on the operability of the SCO.

For instance, throughout the pandemic, there has been no channel to obtain data other than the official information the Chinese government provides to the WHO. Now, as of mid-July 2020, even six months after the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, the Chinese government still tries to strictly control the international narrative on its crisis management. This has, *inter alia*, included coercive threats towards countries asking for an independent investigation of the virus outbreak. This was followed by disinformation campaigns targeted to re-direct the focus of international discussions.

Both China and Russia have been facing growing domestic pressure and reacted with strict censorship of domestic press and social media accounts. In light of the growing antagonism between the West on the one side and China and Russia on the other side, the SCO is likely to be increasingly shaped by the two powers and clustered as a counterweight to US-led alliances. On international security matters, such as the Iran nuclear issue or the recent U.N. Security Council discussions about extending humanitarian aid deliveries from Turkey to Syria only via one crossing point, Russia and China have taken strong positions together.

Bilateral frictions and alienation between societies

At the same time, increasing potential for escalating conflicts between member states of the SCO has been there long before the pandemic. Since the past few years, China has been eager to pursue its territorial claims more assertively. In the Galwan Valley in Kashmir, recent border clashes between Chinese and Indian troops led to fatalities on both sides.Growing nationalist sentiments in both countries even accelerate existing tensions and have led to first steps of technological decoupling between both countries to reduce dependency on each other.

China's mass detention of the Uighurs and other Muslim minorities with links to the Central Asian neighbour countries, as well as the brutal enforcement of "re-education measures" have evoked strong responses from the international community. Even though the governments in the Central Asian neighbour countries mostly remained silent, frustration among societies in Central Asia is growing, in addition to the gradually felt economic dependency on China and its political effects.

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