

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: EXPLORING POTENTIAL SCENARIOS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** This article explores how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has developed since its creation in 2001 and examines the impact of its expansion on the organization's internal balance and agenda. By analyzing current trends and the strategic approaches of its key member states, the article outlines potential scenarios for the SCO's future transformation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has seen significant changes since it was founded in 2001. Originally established by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the SCO aimed to address regional security issues, promote economic cooperation, and build mutual trust among its members. Over the years, the organization has expanded its scope and influence, especially with the addition of India and Pakistan as full members in 2017. This expansion has introduced new dynamics, challenging the internal balance and prompting a reassessment of the SCO's strategic goals.

This article examines the various trends that have shaped the SCO's development, focusing on how the organization has adapted to a changing geopolitical landscape. The inclusion of new members has not only increased the SCO's geopolitical significance but also brought in diverse perspectives and interests, complicating decision-making processes and influencing the organization's agenda.

Looking ahead, the article considers several potential scenarios for the SCO's future. One possibility is that the SCO continues to expand, bringing in more members and enhancing its global influence and ability to address transnational issues. Another scenario envisions internal divisions leading to a more fragmented organization, where differing national interests hinder unified action. A third scenario considers the potential for the SCO to evolve into a more formalized and structured entity, with clearer mechanisms for conflict resolution and cooperation.

By examining the strategic approaches of key member states, particularly China and Russia, the article provides insights into how the SCO might navigate its internal challenges and leverage its strengths to remain a relevant and effective regional organization.

**Keywords:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, transformation, internal balance, expansion, development scenarios, geopolitical significance, regional security, economic cooperation, strategic goals.

**Introduction.** Since its establishment in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has gone through a rapid evolution as a regional organization. Today, it is one of the most influential institutions of multilateral cooperation in Eurasia and hypothetically claims to be one of the possible powerbroker for shaping new world order in the continent.

Over the past period, the SCO has become the largest regional organization with the largest population in the world, huge resource, demographic and economic potential. Geographically, it covers a vast area from South and Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Europe, forming new horizons for promotion broader cooperation and connectivity.

At the same time, the SCO faces new challenges, driven by its' internal dynamic and fundamental changes o the system of international relations, which would accelerate the transformation process of the organization.

**Expansion as a catalyst for changes in the SCO.** Today, the SCO differs significantly from the organization created on the initiative of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan almost a quarter of a century ago. Now, it covers countries with an area of more than 65 percent of the Eurasian continent and a population of over 3.5 billion people, who produce more than a quarter of global GDP. The SCO has been steadily and dynamically developing on the basis of the creative principles of the "Shanghai spirit". The SCO "family" was also growing, which was joined by India and Pakistan in 2017, and Iran in 2023<sup>1</sup>. The Republic of Belarus is expected to be accepted as a full member of the block at the Astana summit on July 3, 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> R.Alimov. 04.03.2024. SHOS: potentsial rasshireniya i uglubljeniya sotrudnichestva na fone globalnogo krizisa // <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/shos-potentsial-rasshireniya-sotrudnichestva/>

At the moment, a total of 26 states with different development models, history, civilizational heritage and foreign policy guidelines participate in the SCO in the status of full members (9), observers (3) and dialogue partners (14). This determines the success and unique character of the SCO as an international organization of a new type.<sup>2</sup>

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has also gone through a serious process of institutionalization. The SCO's permanent bodies, the Secretariat in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, are successfully functioning. In addition, the organization has 35 statutory working bodies, 45 expert mechanisms of multilateral cooperation, as well as a dozen formats of intersectoral and thematic cooperation. Public structures in the member states also contribute to the development and deepening of multilateral cooperation between the SCO countries, including institutions of "public diplomacy" such as the SCO Center for Public Diplomacy in Uzbekistan, the SCO Chinese Committee for Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, the SCO Friendship and Cooperation Center in Tajikistan, the SCO University and others.

At the same time, in the light of profound changes in the world, the organization faces new challenges that dictate the need for its adaptation to changing geopolitical, economic and technological realities. On the other hand, the expansion of the SCO membership in the absence of modernization of its conceptual and ideological foundations of cooperation makes its agenda very broad, while the practical impact is sufficiently low. The fact is that the organization was originally created to maintain security and cooperation, as well as to form a new regional order in Central Asia, with the participation of China and Russia.<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence, in this regard, that in the declarations of the summits of the block, Central Asia is called the "geographical core of the SCO." However, its subsequent expansion by including new members from other regions (India and Pakistan represent South Asia, Iran – the Middle East), with their inherent political, economic and geopolitical features, objectively leads to a change in the very

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<sup>2</sup> SCO: A New Model for Close, Inclusive International Relations. View of Wang Xiaoquan, Executive deputy director, Secretary General Belt and Road Research Center under Chinese Academy of Social Sciences // [https://russiancouncil.ru/news/eksperty-iz-rossii-i-kitaya-obsudili-rol-shos-v-regionalnom-upravlenii/?sphrase\\_id=73178665#detail](https://russiancouncil.ru/news/eksperty-iz-rossii-i-kitaya-obsudili-rol-shos-v-regionalnom-upravlenii/?sphrase_id=73178665#detail)

<sup>3</sup>D.V.Gordienko. Shanxayskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva kak ploshadka dlya dialoga po voprosam regionalnoy bezopastnosti. // Jurnal Natsionalnie interesi: prioriteti i bezopastnost. № 37 (2015) Str.44-66.

"nature" of the SCO. The balance within the Organization has also changed<sup>4</sup>, especially against the background of India's progressive transformation into a global power, positioning itself as one of the leaders of the "Global South".

At the same time, it is expected that the SCO will continue to expand at the expense of new countries from the Eurasian continent and this will make its transformation inevitable. In our opinion, transformation and expansion will become two key parallel trends that will accompany the SCO for at least the medium term and have a direct impact on its further evolution as an institution of multilateral cooperation.

**Possible scenarios of SCO transformation.** The analysis of the current activities of the SCO as well as of the strategic approaches of the member states, primarily its "big members" (China, Russia and India), allows us to put forward the following possible scenarios of the transformation of the organization.

Our *first scenario* assumes the maintaining of the current "status quo" in the SCO. It means that the current balance within the organization will not change much. The "Chinese-Russian tandem" in the SCO (*as was the case before the expansion of the organization*) will not be restored in its previous forms. As it was noted above, Moscow and Beijing began to adhere to fundamentally polar positions regarding the future of the SCO. In turn, India would restrain all attempts by both China and Russia to reformat the SCO's activities due to their strategies. Thus, none of the three major member states will turn into a clear leader of the organization, which will make its modernization less promising.

According to the *second scenario*, despite the growing differences regarding the SCO, three leading countries would still be able to come to a common consensus on the organization's future role in Eurasia. This scenario is quite pessimistic, since its implementation is possible only under the condition of some radical changes in Eurasia. Such events, for example, may include: (1) a sharp deterioration in India's relations with the West, for example, in the context of further increased criticism in the United States and the EU on India's transformation into an "authoritarian country". This, in turn, could stimulate rapprochement of India, at least with Russia; (2) settlement of principal disagreements between China

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<sup>4</sup>A.Kortunov. SHOS — kamen, otvergnutiy stroitelyami novoy Evrazii? 14 maya 2018 // <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/shos-kamen-otvergnutiy-stroitelyami-novoy-evrazii/>

and India, including border issues as well as tensions around the Chinese initiative «One Belt, One Road»; (3) progress in India-Pakistan relations and etc.

The *third possible scenario* could be the transformation of the SCO into a kind of large transregional political forum on promoting broader dialogue on security, sustainable development and connectivity in Eurasia, without clear integration strategies and strong institutional foundations.

According to our forecasts, among the three hypothetical scenarios, the last one is the most realistic, taking into account the expected trajectory of the SCO evolution in the mid-term perspective. On the one hand, the geographical coverage of the organization is expanding, opening up new opportunities for the promoting broader cooperation, on the other hand, the expansion of the member states “blurs” the SCO agenda due to the different approaches and expectations of these countries from the organization.

**Conclusion.** All of these scenarios are hypothetical. Regardless how the SCO would develop in the mid-term and long-term, serious changes await the organization. These changes, depending on their nature and scale, could both provoke a further aggravation of the SCO's “identity” crisis as well as fuel its transformation into one of the potential participants in the formation of a multipolar world, i.e. as a major political forum for cooperation in Eurasia.