

Anti-Terrorism Cooperation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Abstract

In the 13 years since its founding, the SCO has always focused on counter-terrorism, both for its own organizational role and for the reasons of its member states. The SCO has always achieved remarkable results in counter-terrorism work, which has shown the world its strength. However, as the organization continues to expand, the SCO also faces significant challenges in counter-terrorism cooperation due to inherent problems among its members and the identification of specific concepts.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, antiterrorism, Islamic

1. Introduction to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental international organization established by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Federation of Russia, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, China. The predecessor of the organization was the "Shanghai Five", which was established in 1996, and was officially renamed the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" with the accession of Uzbekistan in 2001.

In 2002, the SCO Charter was signed at the SCO summit in St. Petersburg, which entered into force on 19 September 2003. It is a constitutional document that sets out the purpose and principles of the organization, the organizational structure, and the main direction of activities. The purpose of the SCO is to promote mutual benefit and good-neighborliness among the member states; It promotes effective cooperation among countries in the political, economic, scientific, cultural, educational, energy, transport, tourism, environmental and other fields; The two sides work together to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; Promote the establishment of a democratic, just, and rational new international political and economic order. Internally, the SCO adheres to the "Shanghai Spirit" of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and common development", and externally adheres to the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting of other countries and regions, and openness. The SCO has two permanent bodies: the SCO Secretariat in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent. The Secretary-General of the SCO and the Executive Director of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) are appointed by the Council of Heads of State for a term of three years. Since 1 January 2022, Zhang Ming (Chinese) and Mirzaei (Uzbekistan) have been the Secretary-General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), respectively.

The working languages of the SCO are Chinese and Russian. It currently includes nine member States, three observer states and 14 dialogue partners. As a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), counter-terrorism cooperation between China and the four Central Asian countries and Russia is carried

out more through the SCO platform, and these six countries are also the main forces of the SCO's counter-terrorism cooperation.

2. The Common Security Concerns of the SCO Member States

A study of the security concerns of the member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization cannot but mention Islamic terrorism in Central Asia. Islamic terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Central Asia, a common security concern of the SCO member states, dating back to the 70s of the 20th century, when Soviet-dominated ideology was losing its charm in Central Asia. In the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, many Islamic clerics and groups funded by Arab countries and some Western countries established branches in the region to spread Islamic extremism through underground activities. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the advancement of the nation-state building process in Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, the influence of many Islamic groups (including extremist groups) in Central Asia has been expanding. At the same time, Islamic Jihad's defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan left a legacy of trans-Islamic networks in Central Asia (Samuel Huntington, 1997). Against this background, many Islamic extremist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Liberation Party, began to infiltrate Central Asia and provoke Islamic revolutions in Central Asian countries.

Afghanistan under the Taliban is an important base for Islamic extremism in Central Asia, and many Islamic extremists and terrorists are trained in Afghanistan. Some Islamic extremists and terrorists in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have also received training and supplies from al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to incomplete statistics, over the past 30 years, "separatist, terrorist, and extremist forces have committed thousands of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, killing a large number of innocent people and hundreds of policemen, and causing incalculable property losses." (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019) More specifically, between 1990 and 2001, Uyghur extremists and terrorists carried out more than 200 terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, killing 162 people and injuring more than 400. (Global Times, 2002) Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, set up training camps in Afghanistan to provide terrorist attacks to terrorists. Afghanistan, dominated by Chinese Islamic extremists and the Taliban, has become a major external threat to social stability and security in Xinjiang (Brynjar Lia, 2007). Some Uyghur extremists and terrorists have also infiltrated Central Asian countries and Russia to join local terrorist organizations.

After the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, many Central Asian Islamic extremists fought alongside the Taliban against the United States-led military forces. Some of the Central Asian Islamic extremists fled to Pakistan and entered the local Pashtun tribes to pledge allegiance (David Witter, 2011). After the Arab Spring, especially the outbreak of the Syria civil war in 2011, thousands of Islamic extremists traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups, some of them from Central Asia and China. Some Islamic extremists and terrorists have also pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamist groups, and have established their own branches in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These extremists have also built a network of Islamic extremists in Central and Southeast Asia. Reports that ISIS recruiters in Hong Kong are approaching Indonesia and using Malaysia as a hub for gathering potential militants have further alarmed China as more Uighurs join ISIS. In July 2013, the Global Times revealed that Uyghur Islamic terrorists had been trained and supported by rebel groups in Syria and Turkey (Global Times, 2018). In August 2015, the threat of Uyghur extremists became apparent when several Uyghur Islamic terrorists killed more than two dozen people in a terrorist campaign in Bangkok, Thailand.

As China's vice minister of public security, Meng Hongwei, warned, China's biggest concern is the possible mass return of Uyghur Islamic militants. Despite the fact that the large-scale return of trained militants to the countries of Central Asia is less likely, the influx of such militants will still pose a serious threat to the Central Asian region in the long term. On the one hand, they believe that Islamic extremism is being used by many extremists to incite dissatisfaction and hatred among the public. On the other hand, Islamic extremists are trying to brainwash people with the narrow concept of "jihad" and incite them to participate in violent terrorist activities against innocent civilians. "All this is a negation of modern civilization, a sabotage of human progress, and a gross violation of the human rights of citizens." Religious terrorism has become a common threat facing China and Central Asian countries, which requires close cooperation between China and Central Asian countries and, if necessary, the joint efforts of the international community.

3. Results of the SCO's Anti-Terrorist Cooperation

The history of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be traced back to the early 90s of the 20th century, when China established a set of bilateral and multilateral border monitoring and confidence-building mechanisms with its Central Asian neighbors. As mentioned earlier, the "Shanghai Five" was established in 1996 with the signing of the "Agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Field in the Border Areas" in Shanghai. At the 2001 Shanghai Summit, the leaders of the "Shanghai Five" agreed to admit Uzbekistan to join,

and the “Shanghai Five” was upgraded to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The founding values of the SCO, the founding values of the SCO, the “Shanghai Spirit” of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for the diversity of civilizations and the pursuit of common development have continuously promoted the development of the SCO, not only for the benefit of its members, but also for regional peace and stability.

In order to meet the challenges of the expansion of the “three forces” in Central Asia and Xinjiang, China, as the leading country of the SCO, needs to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation within the organization. According to my incomplete statistics, since 2001 and up to 2018, the SCO member states have signed a number of important documents on counter-terrorism cooperation (Table 1).

Table 1. SCO Documents on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

Issue Date	Place	Name of Document
June 2001	Shanghai, China	Shanghai Convention of Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism
June 2002	St. Petersburg, Russia	Chapter of Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Agreement over Counter-Terrorism
June 2004	Toshkent, Uzbekistan	Agreement over Counter-Terrorism Database
June 2006	Shanghai, China	Cooperation Guideline of Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, 2007–2009
June 2007	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	Agreement over Military Exercise
August 2008	Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Agreement over Counter-Terrorism Exercise; Agreement over Cracking Down Smuggling Weapons, Explosives and Ammunition
March 2009	Toshkent, Uzbekistan	Agreement Between Afghanistan and SCO member states over Cracking Down Drugs Smuggling, Terrorism and Organized Crimes;
August 2010	Toshkent, Uzbekistan	Declaration of Toshkent
June 2011	Astana, Kazakhstan	Declaration of Astana
June 2012	Beijing, China	Cooperation Guideline of Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, 2013–2015
June 2017	Astana, Kazakhstan	Statement by the Heads of the SCO on Joint Counteraction to International Terrorism

With the signing of important documents and agreements, the SCO’s counter-terrorism cooperation has been significantly strengthened, deepening mutual trust and openness among the SCO members. Most importantly, China and other SCO member states have clearly defined key concepts such as “terrorism”, “terrorist organizations”, “state separatism” and “extremism”. In accordance with the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, signed in 2001, and the SCO Convention on Combating Terrorism, signed in 2009, all SCO member states recognize that “terrorism, separatism and extremism pose a threat to international peace and security, the development of friendly relations between states and the realization of fundamental human rights and freedoms; Considers that the above-mentioned phenomenon poses a serious threat to the territorial integrity and national security of the parties, as well as to political, economic and social stability”¹.

At the same time, the SCO’s counter-terrorism cooperation has been extended to other areas in order to curb economic sources of access to terrorists in the region. For example, in view of the fact that drug trafficking is the main source of financing for Islamic extremists and terrorists in Central Asia, the SCO signed in Tashkent in 2004 the Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Traffic of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursors between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “on the basis of concern about the increasing use of the territory of the Parties to this Agreement for smuggling and illegal transit trafficking in narcotic drugs and their precursors, and taking into account that it is in the interests of the peoples of the SCO member States to strengthen cooperation in combating illicit trafficking and abuse of narcotic

¹ Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai Convention of Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, Article 1(2); and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization against Terrorism, Article 1(3).

drugs”¹. We call on States to endeavor to “promote bilateral and multilateral international cooperation in the field of illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs, their precursors and in the fight against drug abuse”.

Over time, various mechanisms for cooperation between the SCO member states have been established, with the Council of Heads of State (CHS) as the highest decision-making body and the Council of Heads of Government (CHG) as the second highest level body. Every year, the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government hold a summit in one of the capitals of the SCO member states to discuss the main directions of the SCO’s work and major issues. In addition to the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the Council of Heads of Government meet regularly, with the former focusing on the international situation and interaction between the SCO and other international organizations, and the Council of State Coordinators, which coordinates cooperation in multilateral affairs within the framework of the SCO. The SCO Secretariat, based in Beijing, is the main executive body of the SCO and is responsible for implementing the SCO’s decisions and decrees, drafting declarations, agendas and other recommended documents, arranging specific activities within the SCO framework and facilitating information sharing within the SCO. In 2004, the SCO set up a special counter-terrorism office in Tashkent to promote information sharing and intelligence cooperation among member states.

These mechanisms cover various areas such as defense, foreign affairs, law enforcement, cultural dissemination, and economic relations. Meetings and symposia at various levels, such as the SCO Summit, the Council of Prime Ministers, the Council of Speakers of Parliament, the Meeting of Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the Council of Prosecutors General, and the Meeting of Ministers of the Interior/Public Security, are held on a regular basis. Over the past 20 years, the SCO member states have conducted various multilateral counter-terrorism exercises, in which China participated. With the growing cooperation between the SCO member states, drug trafficking networks between Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries have been significantly limited (Ruslan Maksutov, 2006). At the same time, the SCO seeks to tap the combined economic potential of its member states by encouraging trade and economic exchanges, stressing the need to expand trade and investment, support joint ventures and promote trade activities, and create appropriate conditions for the gradual and free flow of goods, capital, services and technologies. The SCO has become an important regional mechanism for promoting communication, mutual understanding and cooperation among member states, curbing the spread of Islamic extremism in Central Asia, and countering the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorists in the region.

4. Challenges Facing the SCO’s Counter-Terrorism Efforts

As of 31 December 2023, the SCO has nine member states, three observer states and 14 dialogue partners. As the SCO expands and its member states deepen cooperation in counter-terrorism, a number of challenges arise.

First of all, mistrust and conflicts among the SCO member states can seriously weaken their willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. For example, since India and Pakistan became members, the SCO has seen more disagreements and disputes on its agenda for action due to old feuds between the two countries, which could also lead to disagreements between China and Russia. While China fully supports Pakistan’s entry into the SCO, Russia tends to have reservations because Islamabad supported the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 80s of the 20th century. At the same time, India is widely seen as Russia’s strategic partner, and many observers see China and India as regional rivals in addition to unresolved territorial disputes.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are also mired in a long-standing territorial dispute, Uzbekistan even suspended gas supplies to Tajikistan in 2013. Uzbekistan also strongly opposes Kyrgyzstan’s plans to build a dam on the Naryn River; Military clashes between the two countries are not uncommon. Numerous empirical studies have shown that territorial disputes are a central factor in the outbreak of wars and conflicts between states, and they seriously hamper the cooperation of the SCO member states in the common cause of counter-terrorism.

Secondly, despite the fact that many documents have been signed in the past on the relevant aspects, with the expansion of the SCO, the definitions of “terrorist” and “terrorist organization” have become vaguer and more sensitive, due to the different definitions and criteria of the member states. For example, while China, India, and Russia have long identified Jaish-e-Mohammed as an Islamic extremist group based in Pakistan, which Pakistan defined as a “terrorist organization” in 2017, it is reluctant to take action against the group because Pakistan opposes this definition. Similarly, counterterrorism measures taken by local security agencies in China’s Xinjiang region have often been criticized by Central Asian countries as “persecution of Muslims.” (Central Asia Program, 2018) In fact, the fact that there are differences in the identity of some Muslim organizations in Central Asia among the SCO member states will be a major challenge for China to strengthen its counter-terrorism

¹ Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Traffic of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursors between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Article 1.

cooperation with Central Asia.

Thirdly, in the long term, there is still a lot of debate and questions about whether the SCO should develop into a paramilitary and political alliance, which may affect counter-terrorism cooperation between the SCO member states, especially with non-member states. In fact, the SCO was created to strengthen regional cooperation, not to compete with United States or the West as a whole. As an issue-oriented regional organization, the establishment and expansion of the SCO was based on the common concerns of its member States about the threat of terrorism. Despite the fact that the SCO member states are much larger in population and area than those of Europe and the United States, and cooperation in various fields has become increasingly close in recent years, the SCO should not be considered an anti-American organization or an anti-Western bloc, because this will harm the interests of all member states that need to cooperate with the West in the fields of trade, investment, education, science and technology.

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