

Role of SCO in Countering Non-Traditional Security Threats in SCO Region

Ms. Itrat Zehra

PhD Candidate, The School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University,
Islamabad

itratzahra72@gmail.com

Abstract

The SCO has emerged as a crucial regional forum for promoting cooperation and addressing various security challenges among its member states. As the SCO continues to evolve, it faces a diverse array of traditional and non-traditional security threats that pose significant challenges to its objectives of ensuring regional stability and security. These threats are often rooted in historical grievances and geopolitical rivalries, posing a constant challenge to the organization's efforts to maintain peace and security in the region. This article will examine the role of SCO in countering non-traditional security threats faced by the SCO members, analyzing their origins, implications, and the SCO's responses to these challenges. By understanding these threats, we can gain insights into the evolving security landscape in the SCO region and the organization's role in addressing these pressing security concerns.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Security, Regional Stability, Peace

© 2024 The Authors. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License.

1. Introduction

Deputy Secretary General of SCO Economic Cooperation Department at SCO Secretariat Amb (R) Sohail Khan stated “*the globalized world led by UN is facing chaos in most parts of the world i.e. Russia-Ukraine War, Climate Change, Debt crises situations, refugee issues and negligence of global north dominated international organizations have compelled the developing countries of Global South to find regional solutions to common problems. Global south is emerging to balance its role in emerging world order. In this context, SCO has become more relevant in the wake of inefficacy of UN and other international organization in resolving abovementioned NTSTs in various parts of the world especially global south.*”

1.1 SCO formation

The concept of trade facilitation and economic cooperation first evolved in the 1990s as part of the Shanghai Five framework, but it wasn't until 2001 that the SCO was established and a Secretariat was established that this project gained steam. In that same year, members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization signed a memorandum of understanding focusing on regional economic cooperation, which was followed by the establishment of the Multilateral Trade and Development Program in 2003.

According to Professor Wang, Head of International Relations Department, Shanghai University of Political Science, “*The most effective regional organization in Eurasia is SCO. The SCO member countries share common interests in security, stability, economic and trade cooperation, and the obstacles they face in reaching consensus will not be too many. Since the establishment of the SCO, member countries have reached many consensus or agreements on border area security, disarmament and military mutual trust, combating "Three Evil Forces" (of separatism, extremism and terrorism), conducting economic and trade cooperation, and eradicating poverty.*”

1.2 SCO Conventions, Declaration and Joint Statements on NTS in SCO Region

Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2020 emphasizes the SCO's role in promoting peace, security, and stability in the world. The declaration highlights the SCO's efforts to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and other transnational threats, as well as its commitment to upholding the UN Charter and promoting sustainable development. Overall, the declaration underscores the SCO's role as a key player in shaping a more representative world order based on cooperation and mutual respect among nations. Non-traditional security threats to the SCO are diverse and multifaceted, requiring a comprehensive approach from member states.

- **Terrorism and extremism**, while traditionally seen as security issues, have evolved into complex non-traditional threats that transcend borders. The SCO's cooperation in intelligence sharing, border security and counter-terrorism measures is crucial to address these challenges effectively.
- **Cyber security challenges** have become increasingly prominent, with SCO member states facing cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure and government institutions. Enhanced cooperation in cyber security is essential to protect against these threats and ensure the security of digital infrastructure.
- **Transnational crime, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and money laundering**, poses a significant threat to the security and stability of SCO member states. Collaborative efforts to disrupt criminal networks and strengthen law enforcement cooperation are essential to combat these challenges.
- **Environmental degradation**, such as pollution, deforestation, and natural disasters, has wide-ranging impacts on the security and stability of the SCO region. Sustainable development and environmental conservation efforts are critical to mitigate these risks and ensure long-term security.
- **Pandemics and health security**, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the importance of robust healthcare systems and coordinated responses to health emergencies. Strengthening disease surveillance and improving coordination among SCO member states are essential to address these threats effectively.
- **Economic and financial risks**, including economic crises and trade disputes, can undermine the stability of the SCO region. Cooperation in promoting economic growth, trade, and investment is crucial to mitigate these risks and ensure economic stability.
- **Energy security** is another critical non-traditional security concern for the SCO, given the region's reliance on energy resources. Ensuring stable and reliable energy supplies through cooperation among member states is essential to mitigate the risk of energy-related conflicts.
- **Climate change** poses a significant non-traditional security threat, leading to environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and natural disasters. SCO member states need to work together to mitigate the impacts of climate change and promote sustainable development practices to ensure long-term security and stability.

Addressing these non-traditional security threats requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach among SCO member states. By enhancing cooperation in these areas, the SCO can contribute to promoting regional security, stability, and prosperity.

Bishkek Declaration of 2007, underscores the SCO's commitment to addressing economic, environmental, energy, and information security issues, as well as protecting populations and territories from emergencies. It emphasizes promoting a stable global economy, reducing poverty,

and achieving social and economic development. In international relations, the SCO member states aim to cooperate in UN reform and advocate for strategic stability and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The declaration stresses preventing the deployment of weapons in outer space and promoting international information security. The SCO also plays a crucial role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia through regional and international cooperation. The declaration appreciates the SCO Regional Antiterrorist Structure's activities and calls for enhanced anti-drug cooperation within the organization.

Astana Declaration of 2011, issued on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), underscores the strategic significance of the SCO's founding as a historic step towards deepening good-neighborly, friendly, and partner relations in the region. The declaration acknowledges the SCO's evolution into a prestigious multilateral association that actively promotes peace and development while efficiently addressing modern challenges and threats. This recognition reflects the SCO member states' commitment to strengthening regional cooperation and stability.

One of the key achievements highlighted in the declaration is the establishment of effective mechanisms for security cooperation within the SCO. This includes the organization's efforts in combating terrorism, separatism, extremism, and transnational organized crime. Economically, the SCO has adopted long-term trade and economic programs aimed at ensuring the socioeconomic development of its member states. This includes cooperation in external economic and trade relations, transport, agriculture, finance, and banking. The declaration recognizes the importance of these initiatives in promoting mutual prosperity and economic growth among member states.

Culturally and humanitarily, the SCO has made strides in strengthening cooperation, promoting spiritual rapprochement, and fostering intercultural dialogue among member states. This includes collaboration in culture, healthcare, science, technology, and sports. The declaration acknowledges the significance of these efforts in building closer ties and understanding among SCO member states.

Internationally, the SCO member states advocate for strict compliance with international treaties, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, to ensure global security and peace. The declaration reaffirms the SCO's commitment to supporting the United Nations in addressing new challenges and threats, as well as in the field of economic, social, humanitarian, and cultural development.

Beijing Declaration of 2012 emphasizes the promotion of peaceful coexistence and dialogue between civilizations, respect for national traditions and cultural values, and adherence to international law. The member states are committed to promoting a new approach to security based on mutual trust, cooperation, and the creation of an indivisible security space. In terms of regional issues, the member states emphasize the importance of addressing them through consultations among regional countries and international organizations. They support efforts to combat terrorism, separatism, extremism, illicit trafficking, and other transnational crimes.

The SCO also supports Afghanistan's development as an independent, neutral, peaceful, and prosperous nation, and calls for peaceful solutions to conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Economically, the member states aim to enhance their economic potential through modernized and innovative growth, promoting balanced and fair trade relations. They also support efforts to mitigate the impact of the global economic and financial crisis and achieve sustainable growth. The SCO member states prioritize developing transport infrastructure, promoting energy security, and protecting the social and economic rights of citizens residing within their borders. The declaration underscores the importance of world peace, security, and stability for the successful

development of the SCO region. The member states reaffirm their support for the United Nations and its role in maintaining international peace and security. They also emphasize the importance of developing friendly relations and productive cooperation with observer states, dialogue partners, and other international and regional organizations.

Bishkek Declaration of 2019 emphasizes the SCO's support for peace and security, advocating for the peaceful resolution of international and regional conflicts, and respecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs. Non-traditional security threats, which are often transnational in nature, have become increasingly prominent in developing and post-communist regions, particularly in Greater Central Asia. Among these threats, the trade in illicit drugs is considered one of the most significant, as it carries profound societal, political, and economic consequences. The drug trade threatens the fabric of societies through addiction, crime, and disease. It also exacerbates corruption in already weak states, impairing their economic and political functioning. Additionally, due to links with insurgency and terrorism, the drug trade poses a growing threat to regional and international security in a traditional military sense, affecting both "hard" and "soft" security.

With Afghanistan experiencing a surge in opium production and increased trafficking of heroin through post-Soviet Central Asia to markets in Russia, China, and Europe, the adverse impact of the drug trade on the wider region is increasingly apparent. However, systematic research into this phenomenon has been relatively limited. Moreover, environmental, water, economic, and other security threats in the region have not received adequate attention, overshadowed by the focus on the terrorist threat and its implications. This is concerning, as the lack of economic development in the region has likely contributed more to terrorist recruitment and strengthened illegal economic activity.

2. Non-Traditional Security Threats and SCO's response

2.1 Terrorism and Extremism

The SCO has labeled terrorism as one of the 'three evils' since its establishment, emphasizing the fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism in its agenda. The organization adopted the "Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism" just two months before the 9/11 attacks. Prior to 9/11, SCO member states were already dealing with various extremist groups, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ul-Tahrir, the Islamic Renaissance Party, the United Islamic Jihad Union, Tajik Opposition Group, and the Taliban, all active in the region.

2001 Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure between the Member States of the SCO establishes the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) as a permanent body aimed at assisting in the coordination and collaboration of the Parties' competent agencies in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Through RATS, the SCO plays a significant role in addressing these threats to international peace and security. RATS is tasked with developing proposals and recommendations to strengthen cooperation in combating these issues, assisting the competent agencies of the Parties, collecting and analyzing information, and maintaining a databank on relevant organizations and individuals. Additionally, RATS provides information upon request, assists in exercises and operational activities, and participates in the development of international legal instruments related to combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The SCO, through RATS, is committed to promoting regional security and stability in accordance with the principles of the United Nations and the SCO's Declaration and Charter.

2009 Convention of the SCO against Terrorism underscores the SCO's commitment to enhancing anti-terrorist cooperation among its Member States. The Convention, which complements earlier

agreements, aims to address the escalating global threat of terrorism by defining and criminalizing terrorist acts, organizations, and financing, and by outlining measures for cooperation and coordination among the Parties. It emphasizes the importance of preventive measures, including promoting dialogue among different cultures and religions, involving non-governmental organizations, and implementing national-level anti-terrorism measures based on democratic values and human rights. The SCO's role, as outlined in the Convention, includes establishing competent authorities for cooperation, sharing information and resources, and adopting legislative measures to prevent terrorist financing and hold legal entities liable for involvement in terrorism-related offenses. Through this Convention, the SCO seeks to strengthen regional security and stability while upholding international law and sovereignty.

The SCO condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, advocating for strict adherence to the UN Charter and international law. The SCO calls for the implementation of relevant UN resolutions and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The organization reaffirms its commitment to fighting terrorist and extremist organizations within its member states' territories and stresses the importance of international cooperation in combating terrorism. The SCO also supports the Astana Process for resolving the Syrian crisis and calls for collective measures to counteract the dissemination of terrorist ideology and recruitment, as well as measures to cut channels for terrorist funding.

Under SCO conventions, the line between terrorism and separatism is blurred: opposition members and members of minority communities, such as China's Uyghurs, are routinely accused of the "crime" of separatism. Furthermore, according to a number of SCO papers, an individual who is suspected of being a member of a terrorist organization by a SCO Member State must likewise be recognized as such by other SCO governments. As a result, such a person will be unable to seek asylum in neighboring SCO states. When SCO governments request an individual's expulsion and extradition on terrorism charges or suspicion of terrorism, recipient Member States shall unconditionally comply. Such unconditional deportation and extradition, according to former UN Special Rapporteur Martin Scheinin, violate international rules requiring double criminality in extradition proceedings.

Though the regional dynamics varies region to region, the core objective of any regional organization mainly remains the same. For instance, African Union has different challenges compared to European Union. However, their core interests are same to promote regional integration and ensure the security and stability of the region. Similarly, SAARC is also serving as an important regional organization and has similar mandate with the ASEAN. These organizations are established to secure the regional interest apart from the political differences between the member states and to provide them the platform to ensure the optimistic environment for conflict resolution.

Declaration of the Tenth Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2010 emphasized the importance of implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and the SCO Counter-Terrorism Convention. The member states recognized the need to address the root causes of terrorism, including combating terrorism and extremist ideologies through promoting dialogue between civilizations and cultures. This approach highlights the SCO's recognition that effective counter-terrorism measures require not just security measures but also efforts to address the underlying ideologies that fuel terrorism. The declaration reiterated the SCO's commitment to mutual support for state sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The member states opposed interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, highlighting the importance of

resolving disagreements through political and diplomatic means. The SCO member states also emphasized the importance of strengthening coordination of joint measures to recover from the world financial and economic crisis. They aimed to modernize national economies, channel them into the path of innovations, and involve all concerned countries equally in the international decision-making process.

2022 Samarkand Declaration of the Heads of State Council of the SCO highlights the organization's commitment to promoting peace, security, and stability in the region amidst global challenges. It emphasizes the importance of creating a more representative and multipolar world order based on international law, multilateralism, and equal cooperation. The declaration underscores the SCO's role in strengthening trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian ties among member states and its commitment to combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

2023 New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO highlights the organization's focus on countering terrorism through various measures. One key aspect is the emphasis on joint efforts by the international community to combat terrorist, separatist, and extremist activities. The declaration stresses the importance of coordinated actions to disrupt terror financing channels, suppress recruitment activities, and prevent the cross-border movement of terrorists. This approach reflects the SCO's commitment to addressing the root causes of terrorism and extremism. The declaration highlights the unified approach which is aimed at facilitating more effective cooperation among member states in countering these threats. The declaration also emphasizes the SCO's opposition to interference in the internal affairs of states under the pretext of countering terrorism and extremism, highlighting the organization's commitment to respecting the sovereignty and independence of its member states. The declaration underscores the SCO's commitment to preventing the spread of extremist ideologies, including religious intolerance, aggressive nationalism, and xenophobia. By promoting dialogue between civilizations and cultures, the SCO aims to counter terrorist and extremist ideologies and promote mutual understanding and respect among peoples.

2.2 Transnational Crimes

Astana Declaration of 2005 reaffirms the organization's commitment to enhancing regional cooperation and security. The declaration highlights economic cooperation through the SCO Business Council and emphasizes joint efforts to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Overall, it reaffirms the SCO's role in promoting cooperation, stability, and institutional development in the region.

Dushanbe Declaration of 2008 stresses conflict resolution through dialogue, rejects reliance on force, and commits to preventing terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The declaration supports the UN's role in conflict prevention, upholds international law, and opposes a global missile defense system. It also addresses regional issues like South Ossetia, emphasizes human rights, sustainable development, and environmental protection, and expresses willingness to cooperate with other organizations. Overall, it asserts the SCO's importance in promoting regional security, peaceful conflict resolution, and adherence to international norms.

2010 Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Crime between the Governments of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization underscores the SCO's commitment to addressing various forms of crime, including organized crime, terrorism, corruption, and illicit trafficking. The agreement reflects the Parties' recognition of the need for international cooperation to combat crime and protect human rights and freedoms. It builds upon existing international agreements and conventions related to combating crime and terrorism, highlighting the Parties' commitment to upholding the principles and norms of international law.

The scope of this agreement is vital, which covers a wide range of criminal activities, including crimes against human life, health, freedom, honor, and dignity, as well as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The agreement also addresses economic crimes, corruption, cybercrime, and crimes related to illegal immigration, among others. This broad scope reflects the complex nature of modern crime and the need for comprehensive measures to address it.

Dushanbe Declaration of 2014 highlights the role of the SCO in promoting regional cooperation, stability, and development. The declaration emphasizes the SCO member states' commitment to strengthening international relations based on the principles of mutual respect, sovereignty, equality, and non-interference in internal affairs. It underscores the importance of the United Nations in maintaining peace and security, supporting its central coordinating role in international affairs, and advocating for reform to enhance representation, particularly for developing countries. The declaration reaffirms the member states' dedication to ensuring regional security and stability, fostering good neighborly relations, and addressing global challenges such as terrorism, separatism, and transnational crime through cooperation. The SCO's focus on economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and humanitarian efforts is also highlighted, aiming to create a region of peace, friendship, and prosperity.

2.2.1 Drug Trafficking

2004 Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Traffic of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursors between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) outlines a comprehensive approach to addressing drug trafficking within the SCO region. The agreement emphasizes the need for cooperation among member states to combat the proliferation of illicit trafficking and abuse of narcotics, recognizing the serious threat it poses to the health and welfare of the people in the region. One of the key provisions of the agreement is the formulation of agreed strategies and joint measures to combat illicit trafficking of narcotics and precursors. This includes coordinating activities within the framework of the SCO and mobilizing government bodies, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and mass media to prevent drug use and trafficking.

The agreement underscores basic principles such as controlling all forms of activities involving the circulation of narcotics and precursors, ensuring punishment for offenses related to illicit trafficking, prioritizing prevention measures, and supporting research for new treatments and rehabilitation of drug addicts. It also outlines various aspects of cooperation, including analyzing crime related to illicit trafficking, establishing strict control over the circulation of narcotics and precursors, and organizing cooperation between competent authorities. Furthermore, the agreement outlines various forms of cooperation, including exchanging information, carrying out investigations, cooperating in combating illicit trafficking, exchanging experience, providing logistical and consulting assistance, and conducting joint research. It also emphasizes the importance of confidentiality, ensuring that information and documents received are treated with confidentiality if they are restricted or considered undesirable for disclosure by the transmitting party.

Through Moscow Declaration 2020, SCO emphasizes the importance of maintaining and strengthening the existing international system of drug enforcement based on the UN drug control conventions. The member states express their resolve to work together against the promotion of drug abuse and attempts to legalize the non-medical use of narcotic drugs. They also aim to build an effective framework for combining their efforts to fight the drug threat, including through the drafting of a concept for the establishment of an SCO anti-drug center in Dushanbe. The member states advocate constructive dialogue and joint events with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime

(UNODC), coordinating their positions within the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and other relevant international multilateral forums. This collaboration reflects the SCO's commitment to international cooperation in combating drug trafficking and promoting global drug control efforts.

The Taliban's strong influence in certain areas of Afghanistan, where an estimated 85% of opium is cultivated, has contributed significantly to the drug trade. The drug trade not only impacts Afghanistan's internal security but also affects neighboring countries and the wider region. Militant groups like Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar derive significant financing from the heroin industry to secure their positions, recruit fighters, and purchase weapons. The heroin industry has created an alternative economy that does not contribute to the country's official economic indicators, with profits largely deposited abroad. This has led to food shortages as land is used for poppy cultivation instead of food crops.

As a form of transnational crime, drug trafficking requires cooperation from affected countries, but achieving this is complex. Within the SCO, China's approach appears to align mainly with Neo-Classical Realism, with some Liberal and Institutionalist aspects. Cooperation against drug trafficking in the SCO has been challenging, depending on each country's willingness to engage and influenced by domestic and systemic factors. Despite aiming for regional stability, this cooperation has not been entirely successful. While China has not withdrawn from cooperation, it has had to adapt its approach due to various factors.

Drug trafficking cooperation within the SCO is less developed compared to regions like Southeast Asia and organizations like ASEAN. The SCO, while an interesting framework, may be losing momentum, with internal struggles between China and Russia affecting its operational effectiveness. China, despite showing willingness to cooperate regionally, faces challenges due to its realist tendencies and national interests. China's role in the SCO suggests a pragmatic approach, engaging selectively in cooperation based on its strategic interests. The SCO was initially seen as a promising alternative to existing cooperation mechanisms, but after 18 years, its ambitious goals remain largely unimplemented, leading to criticism of its effectiveness.

2.2.2 Border Security Measures

The organization promotes cooperation in managing migration flows, enhancing border security measures, and improving information sharing to address issues related to illegal migration. Additionally, the SCO focuses on combating illicit trafficking in weapons, ammunition, explosives, narcotics, and other contraband goods, which often cross borders illegally.

2015 Agreement on Cooperation and Interaction of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Border Issues highlights the SCO's role in enhancing cooperation and interaction among member states in protecting state borders and ensuring security in border regions. The agreement aims to strengthen coordination and joint efforts in countering threats related to border protection, including terrorism, extremism, separatism, illicit trafficking, and illegal migration. It establishes mechanisms for exchanging information, coordinating border activities, and enhancing the capacity of competent authorities in border protection. Under this agreement, the SCO member states agree to cooperate in various areas, including planning and implementing coordinated border activities, exchanging information, and conducting training for personnel. The agreement emphasizes the importance of cooperation based on national legislation and universally recognized principles and norms of international law.

Agreement on Cooperation and Interaction of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Border Issues highlights the SCO's commitment to addressing border-related challenges through enhanced cooperation and coordination. By working together, member states

aim to strengthen border security, prevent illegal activities, and promote regional stability and prosperity.

2.3 Cyber Security Issues

The 2009 Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) outlines the role of the SCO in promoting international information security. The SCO acknowledges the importance of addressing threats related to information and communication technologies that could jeopardize international security and stability. It emphasizes the need for cooperation among member states to counter threats such as information warfare, cyber terrorism, cybercrime, and the dissemination of harmful information. The agreement aims to create a legal and organizational framework for cooperation in areas such as joint monitoring of threats, development of international law on information security, and promotion of secure global internet governance.

The SCO's role in this agreement is to facilitate cooperation among member states to address key threats to international information security. This includes coordinating joint measures, developing joint monitoring systems, and conducting research and evaluation in the field of information security. The SCO also aims to promote secure and stable operation of the global internet network, ensure information security of critical structures, and develop joint measures of trust to enhance international information security.

2.4 Climate Change

The SCO has emphasized the importance of sustainable development and environmental protection in its declarations and action plans. The Samarkand Declaration of 2022 mentions the need for practical implementation of the 2022-2024 Action Plan for implementing the Concept of Cooperation amongst the SCO member states in environmental protection. This demonstrates the organization's commitment to addressing environmental challenges, including those related to climate change. Furthermore, the SCO has supported initiatives aimed at preserving biodiversity and ensuring sustainable development.

The declaration also supports the proposal to declare 2025 the International Year for the Preservation of Glaciers, highlighting the SCO's concern for the impact of climate change on natural resources. Additionally, the SCO has collaborated with international organizations and stakeholder states on the issues related to climate change. The organization has emphasized the importance of continued development of interaction with the UN in addressing the issues of the Aral Sea basin in connection with the large-scale problems posed by its drying up. This demonstrates the SCO's recognition of the global nature of environmental challenges and the need for international cooperation to address them.

The New Delhi Declaration of the SCO in 2023 addresses the issue of climate change by recognizing it as one of the major challenges facing the world. The declaration acknowledges the consequences of global climate change and the need for new approaches to promote more just and effective international cooperation and sustainable economic development. Specifically, the declaration emphasizes the importance of cooperation in environmental protection, ecological security, and prevention of the negative consequences of climate change. It highlights the significance of developing specially protected nature reserves, promoting eco-tourism, and addressing the environmental impact of economic activities. 2024 is declared as the SCO Year of Environment, indicating a commitment to raising awareness and taking concrete actions to address environmental issues, including climate change. Overall, the declaration reflects the SCO member states' recognition of the urgency of addressing climate change and their commitment to collective action to mitigate its impact.

2.5 Economic and Financial Growth Opportunities

One major trade challenge is the economic disparity among SCO member states. Countries like China and Russia have more advanced economies and greater industrial capacity compared to other members, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This economic gap can hinder trade relations within the organization, as less developed countries may struggle to compete or find markets for their goods and services. Trade barriers, including tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and bureaucratic hurdles, also pose challenges to intra-SCO trade. These barriers can increase the cost and complexity of trade, limiting the ability of member states to fully benefit from economic cooperation within the organization. Efforts to reduce trade barriers, such as through the SCO Free Trade Area agreement, have been slow to materialize, further impeding trade integration. The SCO has taken steps to address these trade challenges through various initiatives and agreements. The organization has established the SCO Business Council and the SCO Interbank Consortium to promote economic cooperation and facilitate trade and investment among member states. Additionally, the SCO has supported the development of transport infrastructure and logistics networks to improve connectivity and facilitate trade within the region.

Increased collaboration among Central Asian nations would result in the settlement of transnational difficulties, such as those in the Ferghana Valley, which is shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The SCO might serve as a platform for a free trade zone, assisting individuals on a local level. The Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border is heavily mined, and the SCO can help by demining it and creating a climate that fosters friendliness and collaboration. Inter-state cooperation is required for the protection and preservation of biodiversity and water bodies. The SCO may move its attention away from porous and weak borders and toward steps that will help establish confidence in order to assist member nations in increasing internal security and directing finances into economic and social platforms.

The SCO has tremendous potential to help Central Asian economies flourish and access the global marketplace. The capacity to deploy a collective organisation structure, such as the SCO, only in the natural gas and oil sector provides states like Kazakhstan more leverage in the global oil market than it would have gathered if it had done so on its own. The SCO has the opportunity to communicate with the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and learn about its organisation and structure in the energy sector.

Central Asia is becoming a part of a new economic and geopolitical order forming in Eurasia and Asia. This trend would be marked by market expansion into Southeast Asia, China, Korea, India, Turkey, and Russia, as well as a slowing (even stagnation) in Europe's economic development, which has traditionally served as a guiding beacon for many CIS and Russian countries. Should Russian and Central Asian integration programs be implemented, strengthening the "Asian" paradigm and cementing Eurasian independence might have far-reaching geopolitical implications. The establishment of a Development Fund and a SCO Business Council demonstrates the member states' desire to strengthen the SCO's economic component.

3. Critique on the Role of SCO and Way Forward

The SCO promptly articulates common positions in its capacity when a member country raises regional or international issues of concern to member states, such as Afghanistan and United Nations reform. The SCO has a well-established organizational operation, and joint military exercises mechanism.

Though SCO has been actively engaging its members, dialogue partners and observer states on issues related to its charter and NTSTs, but officials have often criticized SCO for more paper work and lesser work on ground. A DDG at SCO Secretariat noted “SCO Secretariat only does

paperwork there is no active work. 1880 documents including joint communiqué, declarations and concepts have been adopted by SCO since it was established in 2001. Every year, two or three joint declarations and joint communiques are issued but there is no action on ground.

Another major issue faced by SCO is funding to SCO projects proposed by member states. Annual budget of SCO is \$ 8 million, which is too less to pay salaries of 45 member staff working at SCO Secretariat. There is no SCO Bank, and International Banks cannot sponsor SCO Projects because it cannot give guarantees like individual states. Moreover if Development Banks provide loans to SCO projects, they insist on re-negotiation of projects on their terms and conditions.

3.1 SCO Expansion

In the same spirit of widening its footprint across Eurasia, the SCO has also been deliberating on expanding its membership. After initial founding members, India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, Iran became full member in 2023 and Belarus was granted the status of full members in July 2024. SCO's DDG on International Relations stated that *"the expansion of any organization is the result of its recognition and the constructive role it plays in the region. So expansion of SCO is a positive development. The expansion shows that SCO is a famous regional organization and has a Constructive agenda based on positive inclusive principles equality and consensus based mechanism to work on issues of mutual interest. Initially SCO had five founding members and now after 23 years, SCO have ten members, it has expanded manifold."*

He added that *"International relations department has memorandum with six UN special agencies and eight international/ regional organizations. In order to implement these memorandums IR department is developing roadmaps. All SCO members are working on same guidelines and there is no competition but cooperation among SCO members."*

The UFA Declaration of 2015 emphasizes SCO's role as a platform for enhancing mutual understanding, dialogue, trust, and equal partnership among member states, contributing significantly to regional security and stability. The declaration recognizes the SCO's importance in addressing growing security challenges and threats in a globalized, multi-polar world, including terrorism and extremism. It also emphasizes SCO's commitment to admitting new members and deepening cooperation with observer states and dialogue partners. The declaration underscores the importance of preventing the militarization of outer space, ensuring global security, and promoting comprehensive security measures. It calls for joint efforts to counter traditional and non-traditional security challenges and emphasizes cooperation with interested countries and organizations. Overall, the Ufa Declaration reflects SCO's commitment to addressing geopolitical challenges and promoting peace, stability, and cooperation in Central Asia and beyond.

The Moscow declaration of 2020 further emphasizes the preservation and consolidation of global stability and arms control mechanisms, expressing concern over unilateral actions that undermine these mechanisms. The member states advocate for keeping outer space free of weapons, emphasizing the need for a legally binding international document to prevent an arms race in space. They also emphasize the importance of existing agreements such as the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological and Toxin Weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear program. In terms of the SCO's role in addressing these issues, the declaration signifies the organization's commitment to promoting regional stability and security through cooperation on disarmament, non-proliferation, and combating chemical and biological terrorism. The SCO serves as a platform for member states to coordinate their efforts in addressing these challenges, highlighting the organization's role in enhancing regional security and stability.

5. Conclusion

The SCO faces a diverse array of challenges that involve traditional and non-traditional security threats. The organization's role in maintaining regional stability and security are often rooted in historical grievances and geopolitical rivalries, posing a constant challenge to the organization's efforts to maintain peace and security in the region. Its multilevel arrangement and organizational setup is working for the resolution of these crucial issues and can prove to generate more affective response to the evolving threats. Its ability to bring different regional partners to the coordinating tables, engagements through dialogue and proposals to enhance regional security is ensuring affective arrangements for cooperation.

Bibliography

- Akin, B. (2009). *Security regionalism in Central Asia* (Master's thesis, Bilkent University).
- Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, opened for signature June 15, 2001, 2001 U.N.T.S. 45, entered into force September 11, 2001.
- Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Crime between the Governments of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 11, 2010.
- Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Traffic of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursors between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, opened for signature June 7, 2004, 2006 U.N.T.S. 45, entered into force September 11, 2004.
- Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, opened for signature June 16, 2009, 2009 U.N.T.S. 45, entered into force September 11, 2009.
- Alimov, Rashid. (2017) "The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in counteracting threats to peace and security." *UN chronicle* 54, no. 3.
- Akbarzadeh, S. (2015). Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Ideology and realpolitik in Iranian foreign policy. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69(1), 88-103.
- Aris, S. (2009). A new model of Asian regionalism: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation have more potential than ASEAN? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(3)
- Astana Declaration, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2011
- Bishkek Declaration, 16 August 2007.
- Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization against Terrorism, June 16, 2009, Yekaterinburg, Russia.
- Chernesheva, E. (2023, September 26). Interview with Dir Administration and Legal Affairs. Beijing, China.
- Dunay, Pál. et al., (SIPRI, 2007). The Shanghai Co-operation Organization.
- De Haas, M. (2008). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's momentum towards a mature security alliance. *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 36(1).
- Declaration of the Tenth Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." June 11, 2010, Tashkent.
- Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, July 5, 2005.
- Dushanbe Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Dushanbe, August 28, 2008.
- Garbuzarova, E. G. (2021). The role of the SCO in the process of neutralizing regional challenges and threats. *Post-Soviet Issues*, 8(4).

- Interview with Deputy Director General SCO Secretariat Amb (R) Sohail Khan conducted on 25 September 2023, Ritan Road Beijing.
- Interview with Professor Wang, Head of IR Department, SHUPL, Shanghai China, Conducted on 20 September 2023.
- Kakar, F. R. (2021, March 31). The strategic importance of Central Asian states. *Paradigm Shift*.
- Konarovskiy, M. "SCO's Dilemma in Tackling Afghan Drug Trafficking and Its Options." *China Int'l Stud.* 30 (2011).
- Martin, L. L., & Simmons, B. A. (2013). International organizations and institutions. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. A. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of international relations* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, November 10, 2020.
- Placido, L. D. (2007). Origins, development, and consolidation of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization after the Bishkek Summit. *The Quarterly Journal*, 6(3).
- Perskaya, V. V., Khairov, B. G., Revenko, N. S., & Khairova, S. M. (2021). Role of the People's Republic of China in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *East Asia*, 12(2).
- Samarkand Declaration of the Heads of State Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, September 16, 2022, accessed April 23, 2024
- The New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." July 4, 2023.
- Yuan, Jing-Dong. (2010) "China's role in establishing and building the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 67.