

India and Pakistan join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) accepted two new member states, India and Pakistan, during its summit in Astana on 8 June. This has been the organisation's first enlargement since it was established in 2001. The SCO's goals include boosting security, military and economic co-operation. The SCO's member states, along with India and Pakistan, are currently Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Its regulations also provide for other forms of institutional co-operation with the organisation besides membership – Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia are observer states, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey are dialogue partners.

Commentary

- The SCO was established in 2001 as a continuation of the Shanghai Five format (China, Russia and the Central Asian which share a border with China) initiated in the 1990s. Both initiatives were intended at alleviating potential tensions and rivalry between Moscow and Beijing, while securing the interests of Russia (maintaining political control of the region) and China (ensuring security to Xinjiang, a region inhabited predominantly by Uyghurs, and enabling economic co-operation) in the newly established Central Asian countries. The organisation fulfilled its role to this extent, enabling Chinese economic expansion in the region, while maintaining Russia's political and military dominance. Since the beginning of its existence, the SCO has also had a clear anti-Western character, especially in Russian rhetoric. For many years, the main joint goal of China and Russia in Central Asia has been to eliminate the Western (mainly US) military presence in the region linked to the mission in Afghanistan.
- At present, the SCO is de facto merely a platform for inter-state dialogue, and regularly convened summits and working meetings of decision-makers from its member states are the main field of its operation. The other areas of the organisation's functioning, such as military and anti-terrorist exercises with the participation of troops from SCO member states or coordination in combating terrorism and extremism are to a great extent limited to propaganda and have no major impact on boosting co-operation between its member states. This kind of co-operation takes place almost exclusively in the bilateral format, and the organisation plays a marginal role as an integration platform.

- The accession of India and Pakistan to the organisation will additionally strengthen the SCO's role as a meeting platform rather than an integration organisation. These two countries, even though they are engaged to a certain extent in Central Asia, have limited interests in the region. However, these two countries are formally in a state of war and from their point of view the SCO is another convenient channel facilitating contacts between them. As viewed by China (which backs Pakistan), and Russia (which co-operates with India), the accession of these two countries to the organisation boosts its prestige while allowing the balance between Moscow and Beijing to be maintained.
- At the same time, mainly considering the participation of China and Russia in the SCO, integration with this organisation may be appealing for reasons of prestige, regardless of the limited scope of its operation. One example may be the statement by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who in November 2016 laid out a vision of Turkey's membership in the SCO as an alternative for continuing negotiations with the EU. Since India and Pakistan joined the SCO, such tendencies may intensify and may be intentionally used by Russia and pro-Russian circles to present the SCO as an alternative to integration as part of Western, European and Euro-Atlantic organisations.