

Against the backdrop of war. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand

Krzysztof Strachota, Katarzyna Chawryło, Michał Bogusz, Marek Menkiszak

On 15–16 September, the 22nd summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO; see Appendix) was held in Samarkand, with the participation of the leaders of its member states – China, Russia, India, Pakistan and all Central Asian countries (though Turkmenistan is not a member of the organisation) – as well as observer or partner states – Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Belarus and others (the Prime Minister of Armenia although he was invited, did not attend). There were numerous bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the summit, which was preceded by a visit to Kazakhstan by the Chinese leader. The main topics of discussion were the consequences brought about by the war in Ukraine, the prospects of economic cooperation and the development of joint transport projects.

Regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine, Russia and China declared their willingness to “share the responsibility and readiness to play a leading role in bringing stability at the global level” and to “strongly support each other on issues concerning the key interests of each side”. However, there were no declarations of increased Chinese support for the Russian Federation. However, President Vladimir Putin indicated that he had “given an answer to the questions and concerns arising from the Chinese side”. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi has publicly stated that “this is not the time for war” and Turkey has been calling for peace talks. Both countries have distanced themselves from the Russian-led hostilities. Regarding the growing tension in Central Asia accompanying Russia’s revisionist policies in the post-Soviet area, Xi Jinping expressed a clear stance in Astana. He declared that “China firmly supports Kazakhstan in protecting its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and supports Kazakhstan’s reform efforts to maintain national stability and development”.

The summit was an opportunity to hold several bilateral talks on economic issues, including particularly significant announcements on extending Russia’s cooperation with Iran, India and Turkey (e.g. confirmation of effective cooperation on a nuclear power plant under construction in Turkey, agreement on partial payment in roubles for Russian gas). A constant theme running through the meetings was the issue of the rapid expansion of transport routes linking China, Central Asia, Iran and Turkey (the so-called Middle Corridor running to the EU), reflecting the search for an alternative to the routes running west through Russia, which are blocked (due to Russian aggression against Ukraine and Western sanctions).

The summit’s final declaration was extensive (121 points) but vague in nature. It reaffirmed, among other things, concern about ongoing global upheavals of various kinds (political,

economic, climate, pandemic, etc.) the disintegration of the global system, and a commitment to multipolarity, multilateralism and the principles of international law, as well as non-interference in internal affairs and the primacy of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Opposition to the use of force in international disputes was also emphasised. The parties criticised 'unilateral' sanctions in a general manner and expressed the need to combat terrorism and radicalism.

A series of other declarations, including on energy security, food security and supply chains, were also signed, reflecting concerns about serious challenges and disruptions in these spheres. In addition, the summit opened the final stage of Iran's bid for full membership of the organisation, recognised Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE and Myanmar as dialogue partners, and announced the start of talks to include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the dialogue. Already after the summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reiterated his country's wish to become a member of the SCO.

Commentary

- The SCO summit in Samarkand took place at a special moment – during the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and the most serious political and economic confrontation between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. For this reason, the ad hoc purpose of Putin's participation in the meeting was to gain support from the other members of the organisation (notably China and India), which is of immense importance to the Kremlin in domestic politics. This support would help strengthen the social legitimacy of the regime the lack of expected success of a brutal and costly war. One additional objective was to subvert the narrative of Kremlin critics who point out Russia's increasing isolation in the world. This was served by covering Putin's extensive schedule of meetings in detail by the Russian media. Moreover, amidst severe sanctions imposed by the West on the Russian economy and limitations of the supply of its energy resources to Europe, Moscow has a keen interest in seeking new markets and redirecting exports to the countries participating in the summit.
- The Samarkand summit can be assessed as a relative failure for Russia. Despite positive declarations about the further development of cooperation and veiled criticism of Western sanctions in the signed documents, Moscow did not receive the unequivocal political support which it had hoped for. The event also publicly exposed the divergence of positions between Kremlin and its key partners (notably India, but partly also China) on the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Statements at the summit clearly suggested their concern about the destabilising consequences the war was having on energy security, food security and trade flows; they also indicated a desire for a swift end to the conflict. In the face of this, Putin refrained from publicly suggesting the possibility of breaking the Istanbul agreement on Ukrainian grain exports. In the economic sphere, the only revealed outcome favourable to Moscow was Turkey's agreement to settle a quarter of bilateral trade turnover in national currencies. A symbol of the Kremlin's fading star was that Putin was made to wait for the commencement of bilateral meetings with the leaders of India, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, in the eyes of foreign observers and Russian elites, the SCO summit became – contrary to the Kremlin's aims – an illustration of the weakening of Russia's position and that of the president himself.

- The trip to the SCO summit was Chinese President Xi Jinping's first overseas trip since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The meeting took place one month before the start of the 20th CCP Congress, at which Xi Jinping is highly likely to secure a third term as general secretary, unprecedented in recent decades. Therefore, from Beijing's point of view, the key objectives of his trip were to gain – for domestic purposes – the outward recognition from other leaders of both China's role in the region and Xi Jinping's personal leadership, and to win support for China's claims to Taiwan. This was achieved in the form of declarations from the leaders of Central Asian states and Russia during bilateral meetings. Xi Jinping was also met with exceptional honour – he was personally welcomed by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev with full diplomatic ceremonies, unlike the other leaders.
- Internationally, Beijing had three objectives for the SCO summit. Firstly, to give political support to Moscow through Xi Jinping's meeting with Vladimir Putin, while highlighting Russia's growing dependence on China. Secondly, to show unequivocal support for the Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan, which sends a signal to Moscow that while the Sino-Russian alliance is durable and crucial for (among other things) keeping the West out of Central Asia, Beijing does not support the revisionist voices of part of the Russian establishment. Indeed, China recognises Kazakhstan as crucial to the stability of the region and believes that the countries of the region can seek their own path of development – implicitly as long as they maintain their authoritarian character and distance themselves from the West. The third objective was to accelerate work on the Middle Corridor, i.e., a railway line from China running through the Central Asian states, the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus and onto Turkey and Europe, as an alternative to the route through Russia and Belarus, which are affected by sanctions due to the war in Ukraine.
- From the perspective of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the Samarkand summit may be a confirmation of the profound re-evaluation that the region is undergoing in the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The event demonstrated the progressive erosion of Russia's position, as expressed in the distance with which Putin was met at the summit, and even more powerfully by the fact that the meeting took place just after the fierce clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, during which Moscow acted passively despite its allied commitments to Armenia and its aspirations to dominate the region. The summit took place against a backdrop of fierce border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (both countries are allies of Russia). At the same time, the meeting (and Xi's preceding visit to Astana) showed that China cares about the stability of the region (which is not currently guaranteed by Russia); moreover, it has a vested interest in developing de facto alternative transport routes which would be competitive to Russia. On a symbolic level, the presence of the President of Turkey – less a partner than a competitor of the Russian state in the Caucasus and Central Asia – was also clearly marked.
- The 22nd SCO summit confirmed the conservative and evolutionary development of an organisation which, contrary to emerging fears in the West (or, in Russia's interpretation, hopes), nevertheless is not and will not become a coherent and determined anti-Western bloc. The summit's joint communiqué, inadequate in terms of the scale of the overhaul of regional and global security and economics, showed that a community of interests among the participants is only possible in highly vague terms. The organisation remains first and foremost a forum for cooperation in Eurasia and a field for patching emerging

contradictions. The summits, in turn, provide an opportunity for several bilateral talks with strong PR significance (especially for China). This dimension of the attractiveness of the SCO is borne out by the aspirations for participation of internationally marginalised states (e.g. Iran), those widening their field of contacts (Arab states) or those seeking to play an active global role and seeking bargaining chips in relations with the West (Turkey).

APPENDIX. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was established in 2001 on the initiative of Russia and China and with the participation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The organisation has its origins in the 'Shanghai Five,' which in the 1990s dealt, among other things, with border issues. In subsequent years, India and Pakistan joined the SCO and Iran (currently finalising its application for full membership), Afghanistan, Mongolia and Belarus (among others) participate as observers. The organisation's dialogue partners include Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Bahrain, Kuwait and Myanmar (among others) are applying for partner status. The basic premise of the SCO remains the creation of mechanisms to defuse potential tensions between member states (as demonstrated, for example, by the concurrent membership of India and Pakistan, despite them being in conflict with each other).

The programme basis of the SCO is the joint fight against the "three evils": terrorism, separatism and radicalism, all of which symbolise cross-border threats for the original founders of the SCO. Its practical dimensions include the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (since 2001) and joint exercises. Despite the distance of the SCO from the US/West in regional politics and numerous attempts by Russia, the organisation has not succeeded in developing an openly anti-Western character. Over the years of the evolution of the SCO – primarily because of Beijing's actions – the organisation has become increasingly concerned with stimulating economic cooperation (especially in the communications and transport dimensions). With its obvious limitations due to the divergences between the states, the organisation remains an important forum for dialogue and for defusing tensions in Eurasia. It also plays a key role in channelling disagreements between Russia and China in relations with the Central Asian region, while at the same time being one of the pillars of cooperation between the two states.