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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Astana: in the shadow of Xi Jinping

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On 3–4 July, the 24th summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was held in Astana. It was attended by the leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, the acting president of Iran and the Foreign Minister of India. During the event, Belarus joined the SCO as the tenth full member state of the organisation. An inauguration meeting (so-called SCO+) was also held with the participation of partner states, including Turkey, Azerbaijan, the Persian Gulf states, and the UN Secretary General among observers. The summit was preceded by Xi Jinping's state-level visit to Kazakhstan and from 4–6 July, he also visited Tajikistan. On the sidelines of the summit, numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings were held. Among the attendees were the PRC leader, Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

In the closing declaration the participants emphasised, among other things, the "proximity or convergence" of their assessment of the tense international situation and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of the organisation's member states. Although the document includes statements calling for a revision of the Western-centric international order, it does not feature any confrontational statements typical of bilateral meetings between Russia and China. Additionally, during the summit, cooperation programmes for the coming years were adopted, including measures to counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism. An anti-drug strategy and a road map for cooperation with partner states and observers have also been approved. A draft plan for SCO's development until 2035 has been forwarded for further review.

Commentary

- The SCO primarily serves as a platform for multilateral cooperation in the spheres of security, the economy, and international politics, often in opposition to or bypassing the West. This dialogue involves Russia, China, the Central Asian states, India, Pakistan, Iran, and, starting from the Astana summit, Belarus. Formally, the SCO's main task involves combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. However, following the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has sought to transform the organisation into an anti-Western political bloc. Beijing, for its part, has made several attempts to transform it into an economic 'union'. However, these attempts failed due to resistance from some states including Russia. At present, the SCO's activity mainly involves minimising tensions between its member states, devising mechanisms to

stabilise the region and establishing political and economic cooperation frameworks which could serve as an alternative to the Western systems. The organisation has failed to establish the necessary structures to make it coherent and effective. Consequently, it is unable to operate as a counterbalance to the Western integration formats. The SCO serves as a forum for China, Russia and some countries of the Global South for boosting their position in their relations or conflicts with the West. For the Central Asian states, which, as the declaration states, are the political and geographical nucleus of this organisation, the SCO is an important instrument for offsetting the pressure exerted initially by Beijing and currently by Moscow.

- Despite certain anti-Western undertones, both the adopted declaration and the remaining documents contain a relatively moderate message. On one hand, they are very extensive; on the other hand, they are dominated by vague statements. They also contain numerous statements indicating that China's political stance has been considered far more frequently than Russia's. The issue of the ongoing war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has been omitted, and the major portion of the documents' content contains calls for peaceful coexistence, non-interference in internal affairs, respect for international law, including the primacy of the role and acts issued by the UN, and the need to enhance economic cooperation within the organisation. Amid various conflicts, including those between Russia and China and the West, and the typical rhetoric of Moscow and Beijing, the SCO summit did not have a confrontational nature. This was in line with the interests of some participants, including Kazakhstan, which hosted the summit. The event was politically dominated by China, as evidenced by the declaration's wording, which mainly reflected Beijing's stance, the number of bilateral meetings attended by the Chinese leader, and by the symbolic setting of President Xi's state-level visit to Kazakhstan. Since the 2022 summit (see *'Against the backdrop of war. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand*'), Beijing has once again positioned itself as a stabilising force in Eurasia, particularly in the Central Asian region. This intention was reflected in the adoption of plans to enhance counter-terrorism cooperation, as well as economic and transport initiatives. These plans were highlighted during bilateral talks between President Xi and the President of Kazakhstan. From China's point of view, the recent summit is intended to enhance the SCO's increasingly Sinocentric nature. China's growing role in the organisation may explain the absence of India's Prime Minister from the summit, as he plans to pay a separate visit to Russia from 8–9 July.
- From the Kremlin's perspective, Putin's participation in the SCO summit was mainly intended to demonstrate the failure of the West's attempts to isolate him diplomatically and politically. This was also the purpose of six bilateral meetings (an unprecedented number) which he attended during a single day of the summit. The most important talks were with China's President Xi and Turkey's President Erdoğan. The meeting with President Erdoğan was combined with declarations highlighting the Kremlin's political will to resolve contentious issues and an announcement of Putin's brief visit to Ankara. Moscow seems to have accepted the SCO's transformation from a joint Russian-Chinese instrument, which served to maintain both states' relatively balanced condominium in Central Asia, into an instrument of China's policy, which seeks to build an effectively anti-Western bloc of the Global South states under Beijing's auspices. This has not changed

even after Belarus's decision to join the organisation, even though Minsk's foreign policy is effectively subordinate to the Russian Federation. Minsk's enhanced status is a noticeable reputational success for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, with Belarus's involvement in the work of the SCO dating back to 2010. The Belarusian leader has also declared his readiness to cooperate with China which has taken over the SCO's presidency from Kazakhstan. In doing so, he has demonstrated his willingness to enhance the eastern vector of Belarus's foreign policy.