

On the 8th June the Global Strategy Forum hosted the above lecture given by Dr Shirin Akiner. Outlined below are some of the key points from that lecture.

Overview

The origins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can be traced to the end of the Cold War. For much of the Cold War era relations between China and the Soviet Union were characterised by antagonism and suspicion. The heavily guarded Sino-Soviet border, for example, was fiercely contested territory prone to sporadic outbursts of conflict. However, in the early 1990s China embarked on a diplomatic initiative to change the status quo.

In April 1996, the presidents of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan gathered in Shanghai to sign the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in the Border Regions. The Treaty paved the way for other confidence-building measures such as the delimitation of China's western border and annual presidential and ministerial summits. Such initiatives culminated in 2001 with the signing of the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The following year the SCO charter was agreed, which officially established the Organisation in international law.

Since then the SCO has consolidated its international standing. In 2004 it acquired observer status in the United Nations General Assembly. At the UN's 60th anniversary World Summit the SCO Secretary gave its maiden speech to a UN audience. By 2010 the SCO had signed cooperation and partnership agreements with a range of international organisations that include ASEAN and EurAsEC. This diverse range of partnerships reflects the SCO's 'civilisational' approach to enhancing regional peace, security and stability.

Otherwise known as the 'Shanghai Spirit' the SCO's interaction with the international system places an emphasis on respect for cultural variety, good neighbourliness and mutual trust as a means to safeguarding global security. The 'Shanghai Spirit' also seeks to foster peace and stability through a fluid and multifarious network of linkages forged outside established international organisations. This has allowed the SCO to designate a number of states as Observers. In 2004 Mongolia was the first state to achieve Observer status, followed by India, Iran and Pakistan. In 2009 Belarus and Sri Lanka were designated the new status of Dialogue Partner.

Theoretically the combined SCO 'family' represents a formidable geopolitical bloc. Territorially, it covers the entire Eurasian landmass and has a population close three billion. The region is also home to significant reserves of hydrocarbons and mineral reserves. The SCO family also comprises of four declared nuclear states. Yet despite such prowess the SCO also has enormous differences in historical experience, political and economic conditions and military strength. Each 'family' state also has a unique relationship with another based on a range of past historical experiences.

As these inter-state relations are also fluid – and indeed interact with other relationships within the 'family' – the SCO does not seek to harmonise the political outlook of its member states. Instead the SCO seeks to capitalise upon the fluidity of the organisation by widening opportunities for positive voluntary cooperation. To assist, the SCO relegates discord between states to the margins of the organisation. In doing so the SCO hopes to create an environment where cooperative relationships can help overcome contentious geopolitical issues.

Aims and capabilities

The aims outlined within the SCO Charter cover such issues as security, defence, environmental protection, energy, transport and finance. Rather than being understood as components of an organisation-wide action plan, the aims are instead elements through which cooperation can occur. However large or small a contribution a member state makes it is still regarded as a positive contribution to peace and stability.

Trade, transport corridors and energy supplies

Economic development and trade are main priorities for the SCO. The founding charter specifies 'support for, and promotion of regional economic cooperation.' The aim is to foster an environment that encourages a free-flow of goods, capital, services and technologies. To assist, the SCO advocates improvements to transport links, communication infrastructures and the development of energy systems. In 2003 the Programme of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation was adopted. This was followed by the creation of working groups seeking to harmonise such issues as customs regulations.

As a result of cooperation a range of transport networks are being developed that span the entire SCO region. These routes are crucial to land-locked member states as they give them access to sea-ports. Routes include motorways from China to the Persian Gulf and from Russia to India. Finance is provided by China, the SCO Inter-Bank Consortium and financial institutions that include the Asian Development Bank.

Cooperation in the energy sector has also experienced rapid expansion. The chief player again is China, whose energy needs continue to grow. In 2005 a Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline was completed and a gas pipeline is under construction. The Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan—Kazakhstan-China pipeline was also launched in 2009. Russia is also involved within the Central Asian energy sector. Current projects include the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Russia network of gas pipelines and the East Siberia-Pacific oil pipeline.

Security and Defence

Prior to the formation of the SCO the signatory states regularly discussed measures to improve regional cooperation in combating illegal trafficking and the three 'evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism. Alongside the founding of the SCO, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism was also signed. This resulted in the establishment of a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Based in Tashkent, RATS carries

out the collection and dissemination of intelligence on terrorist groups and associated analytical work. Whilst counter-terrorism and anti-narcotics operations remain central to its work, since 2006 RATS has also addressed cyber-sabotage.

SCO states are adamant that their actions, military or otherwise, are not directed against any other states. The SCO's position is unaltered by instances of human rights abuse and poor governance. No attempts have been made to establish a joint military command. Joint military exercises have remained relatively low-key and initially focussed on anti-terrorist and cross-border activities. However the 2005 Sino-Russian 'Peace Mission' involved 10,000 troops in ground, air and naval manoeuvres. The rationale of the exercises remained focussed upon addressing 'terrorism, separatism and extremism.'

The SCO in Afghanistan

Despite a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, Afghanistan nevertheless demonstrates that the SCO does not strictly follow a policy of non-engagement. SCO members have long been aware of the dangers posed by instability in Afghanistan. After the 2005 elections an SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established. This has resulted in regular summit-level meetings. In 2009 an SCO conference on Afghanistan attracted the UN Secretary-General, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and representatives from the EU. The Joint Declaration issued at the end of the conference contained two significant statements. Firstly, the event was endorsed as in line with efforts of other major international institutions. The other was the acknowledgement that the SCO was an appropriate forum for dialogue on Afghanistan-related issues.

The SCO has also made a significant contribution to the development of Afghanistan. This has included the construction of roads, communication units, hospitals and schools. Training has also been provided for government personnel, as well as assistance with mine clearing and security-related activities. Private sector ties have also been developing, particularly within the development of Afghanistan's natural resource potential. The most notable venture is a \$3 billion Chinese project to develop one of the world's largest copper deposit mines.

Baluchistan

Stretching from the Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea, this volatile region is a strategic link between Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia. Baluchistan forms a key part of regional transportation schemes. This includes a Chinese-backed plan to develop a multi-modal transit corridor from western China through Baluchistan to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan. The proposed ultra-modern port forms part of China's 'string of pearls' – nodes in sea lines that are vital to supplies of oil and raw materials. The corridor will also provide China and the Central Asian states with direct access to the Persian Gulf.

However such infrastructural projects are tempting targets for terrorist attacks. These developments may also create a situation which could be exploited not only by regional separatists, but external forces with their own agendas – whether destabilising Pakistan or curbing China's ambitions. This could in turn result in Baluchistan becoming the setting for a

proxy war akin to Afghanistan in the 1980s. This could hinder the SCO's aim of creating transcontinental trade and transit routes.

Western reactions

To reflect the fact that many of its members are part of overlapping security structures, the SCO has also expressed a desire to cooperate with NATO. Yet Western opinion of the SCO has ranged from vagueness to more lurid epithets that cast the organisation as 'NATO's evil twin.'

Post 9/11, the SCO's Central Asian states initially supported the U.S.-led intervention into Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan went furthest by allowing temporary U.S. bases on their territory. However as the stated aims of NATO were gradually met Uzbekistan began sending official notes to Washington requesting clarification of the terms and conditions for the presence of U.S. troops on its territory. These notes were ignored. There were also hints that the U.S. wanted to prolong its presence indefinitely.

The U.S. response was criticised by Uzbekistan as exacerbating regional security problems. When SCO heads of state gathered in Astana in July 2005 for the annual summit they were generally supportive of Uzbekistan. Among the declarations that came out of the summit was that in light of the completion of the military stage of anti-terrorist operations, the coalition should set a date for their withdrawal.

This relatively mild statement prompted criticism from the West. Reports suggested that the SCO was demanding an instant withdrawal from the region. With the failure of negotiations between Washington and Tashkent Uzbekistan eventually decided to close its U.S. facilities. However by 2009 the Central Asian States and Russia gave permission for NATO-ISAF non-lethal cargoes to cross their territories into Afghanistan. In 2010 this was expanded to include military ties.

Developments such as these make it hard to substantiate accusations that the SCO is pursuing an anti-Western agenda. Despite renewed cooperation, in 2010 there is also little sign of a desire on the part of the EU, NATO or the OSCE for more formal dialogue with the SCO.

SCO aged nine: an assessment

In less than a decade the prestige of the SCO has risen significantly. There are outstanding applications for full Member status (Iran, Pakistan and India) and continued interest in the category of Dialogue Partner (Nepal and Ukraine). The positive efforts of the SCO in Afghanistan have also been recognised by the international community. China remains the driving force of the SCO, a position which reflects Beijing's post-2001 multilateral foreign policies.

There are three distinct areas in which SCO has made a significant difference to the dynamics of the region. The first is the remarkable improve in regional relations. Direct formal and informal contacts have raised mutual confidence and this is helping to overcome residual

suspicion and old prejudices. The second is the massive boost to economic development. With China as the main investor, the SCO has undertaken a range of region-wide integrated projects. The third area is the political process of being 'in communion' with a rising regional power. Not only are the smaller Central Asian states recipients of aid, they also have a voice in shaping the regional agenda.

Not everyone within the SCO is happy with the rate of progress. Uzbekistan has voiced displeasure at the SCO's lack of focus and dilatory approach to the implementation of decisions. Another complaint is that cultural and language programmes do not reach a wide enough audience. However, as the SCO is still a comparatively new organisation such criticisms are to be expected. As implementation is still piecemeal and experimental all projects remain subject to processes of trial and error.

About the author

Dr Shirin Akiner has long-standing first-hand experience of Central Asia and has written and lectured widely in the region. In 2006 she was awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal by the Royal Society for Asian Affairs for her contribution to Asian studies. In December 2008 she was awarded Honorary Fellowship of the Ancien Association of the NATO Defense College.

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