

Uzbekistan and the SCO: Prospects for Multifaceted Cooperation



Over the course of twenty-four years, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has undergone a significant process of formation and development, becoming an integral component of the modern international relations system. Today, the SCO stands as one of the most authoritative and influential international organizations, making a substantial contribution to the stable and progressive development of the Eurasian continent.

Since its establishment, the Organization's membership has increased fourfold, from 6 to 26 (10 member states, 2 observers, and 14 dialogue partners). Moreover, the number of countries willing to join SCO activities continues to grow each year.



The international community regards the SCO as a center of attraction without dividing lines, capable of actively promoting a more secure and prosperous world.

In our view, the SCO's current successes, its growing potential, and international authority are largely due to several key factors:

First, the member states strictly adhere to the fundamental principles of the "Shanghai Spirit" – mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a commitment to common development. In other words, the SCO's activities are based on dialogue and mutual trust, with all decisions made by consensus and compromise.

Second, the Organization's international legal appeal is based on its non-bloc status, openness, non-confrontational nature, and respect for the sovereignty of all participants. These characteristics have prevented the SCO from becoming a "club of major powers" and instead turned it into an open association, ready to cooperate with various countries and international organizations.

Third, despite the Organization's expansion, Central Asia remains the "geographic core" of the SCO, a crucial link connecting all member states and ensuring the Organization remains focused and efficient.

As a founding member, the Republic of Uzbekistan has made a significant contribution to the development of the SCO. Our country has chaired the SCO four times: in 2003-2004, 2009-2010, 2015-2016, and

2021-2022. During its chairmanships, Uzbekistan focused not only on strengthening the legal and institutional foundation of the SCO, but also on expanding cooperation among member states across a wide range of areas.

Since 2017, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has pursued an active and initiative-driven approach to cooperation within the SCO. Over the past eight years, the President has proposed more than 100 significant and relevant initiatives at SCO summits aimed at enhancing collaboration in areas such as security, industrial and technological cooperation, transport and logistics connectivity, innovation, digital and green development, tourism, education, and more.

Today, these initiatives are being systematically implemented through adopted SCO strategic and programmatic documents, as well as through the creation of new mechanisms for multilateral cooperation.

Uzbekistan maintains that the SCO must remain an inclusive platform, open to broad international cooperation, and should avoid political confrontation and rivalries. It must continue to be guided by the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit”.

Our country remains committed to unlocking the full potential of the SCO by strengthening practical cooperation in the following promising areas that meet the pressing interests of all SCO member states:

First, ensuring security and stability across the SCO space.

Current international relations are marked by rising tensions and diminishing trust among countries. Various regions of the world continue to experience conflict hotspots accompanied by armed confrontations. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, there are currently 56 active armed conflicts globally, of which 7 directly or indirectly affect SCO member states.

Additionally, there is a high risk of activity from international terrorist organizations located in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East, seeking to destabilize the SCO region.

Effective mechanisms already in place within the SCO include regular meetings of the Security Council Secretaries, ministers of defense, interior, and public security, as well as expert forums. These platforms allow for coordinated responses to the most pressing security issues.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO also plays a critical role, facilitating cooperation among competent agencies in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The results are tangible: over the past two years, the special services of SCO countries have prevented 69 terrorist attacks, uncovered 73 cells of international terrorist organizations, and identified more than 13,000 channels for terrorist financing.

However, in light of evolving threats, all SCO members must improve the efficiency of their counterterrorism structures by adopting advanced technologies and methods to detect and neutralize threats more quickly and to foster closer cooperation among intelligence agencies.

It is also essential to build capacity for countering the use of digital technologies for terrorist purposes. In this context, it is advisable to accelerate the adoption of the Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Crimes in the Field of Information Technologies and the Joint Program to Counter Extremist Ideology within the SCO.

Uzbekistan attaches particular importance to the ongoing complex situation in Afghanistan, as ensuring peace and stability in that country is crucial for the overall stability and economic prosperity of the SCO region.

Afghanistan is currently facing an unprecedented humanitarian and socio-economic crisis caused by decades of armed conflict, poverty, climate shocks, and other challenges. According to the UNDP, approximately 85% of Afghans live below the poverty line, and 93% of households suffer from food

insecurity.

In this context, SCO member states, as Afghanistan's closest neighbors, can play a critical role in stabilizing the situation. Reviving the joint work and consultations of the SCO – Afghanistan Contact Group, as well as creating a dedicated SCO humanitarian support fund for Afghanistan, could be important steps.

Second, achieving a strategic breakthrough in economic cooperation and transport-logistics connectivity.

The SCO's economic value lies in the self-sufficiency of its space, home to some of the world's most dynamic economies leading in industrial and innovation development, with vast natural and human resources.

Today, the combined GDP of SCO countries amounts to about 25% of global GDP (\$23 trillion), and projections indicate this may rise to 35-40% by 2030. The SCO region is home to over 3.2 billion people, more than 40% of the global population. The region also holds around 22% of global oil reserves (345 billion barrels) and 35% of global natural gas reserves (90 trillion cubic meters).

To enhance economic engagement, a number of key documents have been adopted and implemented in recent years, including the "Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation Program of SCO Countries Until 2035", the "Joint Action Plan for the Development of Intra-Regional Trade", the "Program to Promote Industrial Cooperation Among SCO Business Circles", and the "SCO Economic Development Strategy to 2030".

In this regard, Tashkent's proposals such as the creation of SCO Industrial Cooperation Centers, the SCO Special Economic Zones Alliance, the adoption of a New Economic Dialogue Program among SCO countries, an agreement to simplify trade procedures, and an e-commerce cooperation program can provide additional momentum for deepening trade, investment, and technological cooperation.

Uzbekistan also emphasizes the development of transport and logistics cooperation, advocating for the creation of an inclusive transport system along the East-West and North-South axes and the establishment of multiple transit corridors ensuring access to seaports and external markets.

In this context, the implementation of the "Concept for Connectivity Development and Effective Transport Corridors among SCO Countries", the development of a "Unified Map of Transport Connectivity", and the advancement of strategic railway projects (such as "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan" and "Termez – Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar") are crucial.

Moreover, the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan to establish a UN-affiliated Interregional Connectivity Center in Tashkent will undoubtedly provide a significant boost to trans-regional integrated transport-logistics development.

Third, stepping up joint efforts to combat climate change.

All SCO countries are affected by the adverse consequences of climate change. Central Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions, where environmental degradation, water scarcity, and economic pressures are already being felt.

Over the past 30 years, the temperature in Central Asia has increased by 1.5°C, twice the global average of 0.7°C. This has led to accelerated land degradation, the loss of glaciers (down by 30% over the past 50-60 years), and growing water shortages. According to the World Bank, these factors could reduce agricultural yields in the region by up to 30%.

Uzbekistan plays an active role in advancing climate-related cooperation within the SCO. At the 2019 Bishkek summit, our President proposed the "SCO Green Belt" Program to introduce eco-friendly and resource-saving technologies, as well as a concept for smart agriculture and agro-innovation.

At the 2022 Samarkand summit, the President of Uzbekistan initiated the creation of the SCO Climate

Council, which would bring together politicians, scientists, environmentalists, and the business community to coordinate action on climate adaptation.

At the 2023 New Delhi summit, he proposed a Joint Action Plan under the SCO Green Belt Program to promote regional environmental projects and green technologies, strengthening multilateral cooperation on environmental protection and sustainability.

Fourth, deepening cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

Uzbekistan actively supports expanding cultural and humanitarian ties, which help foster mutual understanding, trust, good neighborliness, and friendship among the peoples of the SCO.

Tashkent supports the organization of festivals, forums, symposia, exhibitions, culture days, and other events to showcase the rich heritage, traditions, and cultures of the SCO's diverse nations.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has launched several initiatives aimed at expanding cooperation in culture, education, tourism, healthcare, sports, and youth exchanges. For example, the proposal to adopt an annual Intensive Cultural Exchange Calendar, including joint exhibitions of historical heritage, concerts, theatrical tours, forums, film festivals, and digital events aims to enhance intercultural dialogue and strengthen public diplomacy among SCO countries.

Tashkent also initiated the development of a youth exchange program titled "SCO – A Space for Creative Ideas and Future Initiatives", recognizing the critical role of youth in the economic and social development of SCO states, where over 55% of the 3.2 billion population are young people.

Special attention is given to developing tourism ties within the SCO, which encompasses over 40% of the global population and represents an enormous but underutilized tourism market. The region's cultural legacy includes 207 UNESCO World Heritage sites. To unlock this potential, SCO countries must jointly develop accessible and attractive regional tourism products by enhancing cooperation among tourism agencies, operators, airlines, and education institutions.

There is also great promise in jointly developing gastronomic, wellness, pilgrimage, eco-, ethno-, and agro-tourism segments that are increasingly popular worldwide.

In sum, Uzbekistan has proven itself a responsible, proactive, and constructive member of the SCO, contributing significantly at all levels, from strengthening regional security and economic connectivity to promoting environmental and humanitarian cooperation. Uzbekistan's engagement in the Organization will continue to uphold the foundational principles of the "Shanghai Spirit", while its proposed initiatives will contribute to the further expansion and deepening of multifaceted partnerships within the SCO space.

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