



THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION: STATE OF AFFAIRS

The anniversary summit of the SCO Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) chaired by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon was held in Dushanbe on September 17, 2020. Attended by the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan as member states, and Belarus, Iran as SCO observer states, the summit was remotely joined by heads of member states China, India, and Russia and Mongolia as an observer. The President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov participated in the summit as an invited guest. Despite the plans to widely celebrate the twentieth anniversary, recent developments in Afghanistan and the subsequent absence of key members changed the agenda.

The absence of key leaders of the SCO member countries like Russia and China meanwhile, was interpreted as an attempt to mitigate contradictions caused due to the inability to find a common solution to the situation in Afghanistan. According to speeches, The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon had the toughest position on the Taliban government, stating that "ignoring the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan" and imposing "tough medieval Sharia law" will not lead to anything good, whereas presidents of Russia, China and Pakistan were more positive towards Taliban. The President of Pakistan Imran Khan believes that the Taliban should not be demonized, whilst presidents Putin and Xi Jinping considered the Taliban's rise to power "bloodless" and a "fait accompli". President Putin even proposed to negotiate with the Taliban government within the SCO Contact Group. To maintain regional security, the President of Tajikistan Rahmon called to create a security belt around Afghanistan. His decisive stance on Afghanistan was also dictated by an attempt to gain the support of Pakistan in coercing militant groups in Afghanistan. China, frightened of possible Uyghur's connections with Afghanistan militants, and India, similarly afraid of its north-western border regions, are interested in pressing militant groups.

An urgent need for humanitarian assistance along with a need to form an inclusive government of Afghanistan was stressed by all

leaders. In order to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the President of Kazakhstan Kassym Jomart Tokayev proposed to establish a humanitarian hub for international assistance to Afghanistan in Almaty, whilst the President of Uzbekistan Shevket Mirziyoyev is ready to host the SCO-Afghanistan summit in Tashkent if needed.

By and large, the Dushanbe Declaration, although underlining the developments in Afghanistan, failed to provide any constructive and collective suggestions. It proves widespread concerns of SCO's enlargement that despite its immense geographical coverage, it is hardly possible to achieve any collective solutions on regional security issues due to contradictory visions of member states. Another important function of the SCO – to provide a platform for face-to-face negotiations of regional leaders also failed expectations ahead of the anniversary summit.

The summit members meanwhile agreed to further expand the organization by initiating the procedure of admitting Iran as a full-fledged member state, as well as granted Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia the status of dialogue partners. It should be remembered that the previous enlargement took place in 2017 with the acceptance of India and Pakistan as full members.

Within the twenty years, SCO had several stages of development. Launching with the pre-SCO phase, that of the Shanghai Five, which maintained borders between China and Russia and Central Asian states based on the agreements of 1996 and 1997, the institutionalization of the SCO emerged during 2001-2004. Accepting Uzbekistan as a member state; signing the Shanghai convention on the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism; the establishment of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), along with the establishment of the secretariat of the SCO all were developments of the formative phase of SCO. Enlargement of membership by accepting Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia as observer states, development of energy cooperation and fight against opium smuggling from Afghanistan have featured another stage of the SCO (2005-2015). The decision to first develop vertically, and only then horizontally which postponed the bid of India for fully-

fledged membership also happened during this period. The accession of India and Pakistan as member states in 2017 ushered the new enlargement stage of SCO, which now includes the procedure of Iran's inclusion that might take up to two years. Noteworthy, Iran's bid for membership in the SCO was delayed for 15 years due to sanctions and contradictions with the Tajik government that claimed the alleged support of the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan by the Iranian government.

With the acceptance of Iran as the eighth full member, SCO as a Eurasian bloc heightens its capacity. The US's withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent reduction of the presence of the US government in the region is expected to revive regional cooperation also within the SCO mechanisms. SCO, on the other hand, is considered by some experts as having reached a tacit consensus, where Russia ensures the security of the region, including through the structures of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while China provides the economic component of cooperation. Proposed SCO Development Bank and SCO Free Trade Area, the establishment of the China-SCO Development Zone in Qingdao in 2020, along with the wide promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative all underpins China's efforts in strengthening its economic component. However, the establishment of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) by China that brings together Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan to combat terrorism is also seen as an institutionalization of Chinese efforts in regional security. Russia sees the SCO as an anti-western bloc that promotes Russia's interests, in addition to other member states that are equally critical to a various extent.

Either way, the SCO summit reaffirmed a vision to further enlarge the scope of the organization by entering new members in order to reinforce the Eurasian bloc. Despite the predictions that SCO might become more ceremonial and less viable as an organization, the potential of gathering regional players to discuss Asian affairs is undeniable. Regional security and Afghanistan more than ever need a decisive reaction of SCO members.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- According to the Russian President's special envoy for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization affairs Bekhtiyor Khakimov, Russia welcomes the expansion of the organization. Khakimov noted that Russia considered Iran's entry into the SCO to be a very useful decision as Iran was a natural part of the SCO space, as well as Afghanistan. He also noted that Russia supported Turkmenistan's potential membership to the SCO. It should be noted that Turkmenistan's President participated in the recent September summit of the SCO (Orient, 24.09.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan Ruslan Kazakbaev held a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. The Ministers discussed infrastructural projects, including the Iran - Turkmenistan - Uzbekistan - Kyrgyzstan railway corridor. The parties also considered the situation in Afghanistan. According to Amir-Abdollahian, Iran will provide Kyrgyzstan with a land plot in the port of Bandar Abbas for the transit and delivery of goods to/from Kyrgyzstan (Kabar, 25.09.2021).
- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev delivered his speech at the UN Food Systems Summit. The President mentioned the increasing importance of creating conditions for sustainable development of food markets as food systems affect all aspects of human beings. The Head of State noted that Kazakhstan was committed to greener agriculture and its sustainable development. The country is among the top 10 producers of wheat and flour, exporting up to 7 million tons of wheat a year (Kazinform, 24.09.2021).
- The Azerbaijan Center for the Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) organized a conference entitled "Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran Relations". The event was attended by the heads of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the three countries, diplomats, representatives of different organizations and scholars. Discussing the issues of mutual interest, the sides noted that the three countries face similar challenges in the current global system and that more intense cooperation would help overcome them (Anadolu Agency, 22.09.2021).
- Ukraine — Allied and partner service members from 15 nations started an annual Rapid Trident 21 military exercise with NATO. About 300 U.S. Soldiers will work tactically alongside 6,000 multinational troops under the banner of Partnership for Peace, a cooperative program for NATO and Euro-Atlantic partner countries. The exercise aims to increase combat readiness, defense capabilities and interoperability between the participating armies. Rapid Trident 21 continues for more than 25 years of partnership between the U.S. and Ukraine (Army.mil, 21.09.2021).
- The Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine took part in a meeting of the Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development - GUAM. The meeting was held on the sidelines of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly. The parties discussed political and sectoral cooperation within the organization between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in various fields. The participants also outlined certain economic steps and projects for developing trade and international logistics through the GUAM countries (Guam-organization.org, 22.09.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Askar Mamin reported on the harvest work in the country. He mentioned that the completeness of the harvest work was 95%. The Prime Minister added that the situation with the grain harvest was difficult and unfavorable due to weather conditions that led to the decline in yields. However, Kazakhstan plans to harvest 18 million tons of grains and oilseeds. The Prime Minister ensured that the domestic demand for wheat will be fully met (Qazaq TV, 21.09.2021).
- Uzbekistan strengthens its cooperation with international financial institutions. The country plans to develop its rural areas using the funds of the Islamic Development Bank and the OPEC Fund for International Development, which will correspondingly allocate loans worth \$200 million and \$75 million for 20 years. Uzbekistan's contribution to the projects will amount to \$60 million. The projects will aim at updating the architectural appearance of rural settlements and the development of transport infrastructure (UzReport, 21.09.2021).
- According to the Head of the Russian nuclear corporation Rosatom Alexey Likhachev, the country plans to increase the number of nuclear power units at most of its operational nuclear power plants. Likhachev explained that Russia would gradually decommission Soviet units and replace them with 15 units by 2035. All new units will be generation 3+ with a capacity of 1200 MW. Russia constructs a flotilla of small nuclear power plants to develop its ore and gold deposits (TASS, 20.09.2021).
- Kyrgyzstan experienced a substantial decline in crop harvest. According to the country's Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Regional Development Azamat Mukashev, the harvest decreased by 30%. He added that farmers harvested more than 448 thousand hectares of grain crops or almost 95% of the total area. As a result, the total harvest of the country amounted to 370-380 thousand tons of crops. Mukashev explained that dry weather conditions caused a decline in the harvest (Kabar, 24.09.2021).
- Azerbaijan's State Agency for Public Services and Social Innovations announced that Azerbaijan and Turkey would launch a joint innovation and technology research center. State Agency Chairman Ulvi Mehdiyev and Baykar Makina CEO Haluk Bayraktar signed a memorandum about the establishment of the Bilim Baku center, which would provide a range of training programs in technology, artificial intelligence, and many others. It will produce and improve innovative technological products and equipment and commercialize them in industry and other fields (AzerNews, 23.09.2021).
- In the first quarter of 2021, the Eurasian Economic Union attracted \$7.1 billion of foreign investments. During the reported period, the net inflow of mutual direct investments in the union totaled \$663.2 million or 93% as against the same period last year. The share of mutual investments in the total figure rose to 9%. Belarus remains a top destination country for mutual investments, followed by Kazakhstan. The countries correspondingly attracted \$501 million and \$137 million (BelTA, 22.09.2021).

Society and Culture

- The President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan participated in the official ribbon-cutting ceremony of Turkey's costliest foreign mission to date, Turkevî (Turkish House) in New York City. The new 171-meter building will serve as home to the country's permanent mission to the UN and its consulate general in New York, as well as diplomatic housing. The building overshadows most of its neighboring skyscrapers and contains motifs in its design inspired by the Seljuk era and the tulip, which has an exceptional place in Turkish culture (Asia.nikkei.com, 21.09.2021).
- TURKSOY published a book on the famous Kazak minstrel Jambıl Jabayev translated into Turkish by the Eurasian Authors' Union. The presentation of the book was held at the Saken Seifullin Library and was timed to the 175th anniversary of the birthday of Jambıl Jabayev. The event was attended by the Chairman of the Authors' Union of Kazakhstan Ulugbek Estdault, the Representative of Kazakhstan to TURKSOY Bakıtjan Omarov, the Head of the Department of Administrative Affairs of TURKSOY Sancar Mülazımoğlu and amateurs of literature of Kazakhstan (Turksoy.org, 20.09.2021).
- The Uzbek city of Nukus hosted the Second International Festival of Minstrels of the Turkic World. The event was organized with the help of TURKSOY, the Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan and UNESCO. The festival featured a song competition and an international forum on the Role of the Art of Minstrelship in World Civilization. Some 260 artists, scholars and folklorists from 22 countries participated in the event (Turksoy.org, 21.09.2021).
- The opening ceremony of the monument to the poet, founder of Tajik and Persian classical literature, Abu Abdallah Rudaki was held in Nur-Sultan. The event was attended by Kazakhstan's Senate Speaker Maulen Ashimbayev and Chairman of the Majlisi Milli of Tajikistan Rustami Emomali, who was in Kazakhstan on an official visit. Speakers of the chambers of parliaments of the two countries also took part in the solemn ceremony of laying the first stone at the construction site of the new embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kazinform, 24.09.2021).
- The Makhtumkuli Turkmen State University and Baku State University held a teleconference dedicated to the approaching date of celebrating the 30th anniversary of independence of the two countries. The topic of the current online discussion was "Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan - the strategic nature of bilateral partnership". The participants in the meeting considered and proposed their ideas for bilateral cooperation and the main vectors of further development of mutually beneficial effective partnership between the two states (SNG.Today, 23.09.2021).
- The People's Republic of China transferred humanitarian cargo to Kyrgyzstan. The humanitarian aid included 3 million medical masks, 100 thousand pieces of medical masks N95, 20 thousand sets of protective suits and 1.5 thousand tons of wheat. The Minister of Health of Kyrgyzstan Alymkadyr Beishenaliev, State Secretary of the Ministry of Emergency Situations Azamat Mambetov and Ambassador of China to Kyrgyzstan Du Dewen took part in the official transfer of humanitarian cargo (Kabar, 22.09.2021).