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SCO's Success in Taking Responsibility for Security in Central Asia

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SCO's Success in Taking Responsibility for Security in Central Asia

By PAN Guang

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is now showing a more active posture in safeguarding security and promoting economic-cultural development in the region, caring about the situation in areas around Central Asia like Middle East and South Asia, and demonstrating that this five-year-old young organization has embarked on a new course of pragmatic development,

Achievements in Maintaining Security in the Heart of Eurasia

Since 1996, the process of the "Shanghai Five" - SCO is advancing with remarkable achievements in security cooperation, which mainly displayed in following aspects:

Confidence-building measures were put in place, leading finally to the resolution of the border problems left over from history. Within the frameworks of the "Shanghai Five" - SCO, and due to joint efforts of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, all the disputes regarding the western section of the formally Sino-Soviet border of more than 3,000 kilometers, that had bred instability and conflicts for centuries, were completely solved in 6 years, which is a rare case in the history of international relations.

Close cooperation in the struggle against the trans-border evil forces, which bring big troubles to the region. After the break of the Soviet Union, and when Taliban came on stage in Afghanistan, extremist and terrorist forces started acting rampantly in the Central Asia, causing big troubles to the countries in this region. Facing this critical situation, six states cooperated closely and took a series of measures within the frameworks of the "Shanghai Five" - SCO, establishing the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), a solid step in the struggle against extremism and terrorism.

Advocating the reconciliation and maintaining the stability and security in the Central Asia. The ethnic & religious conflicts and issues that history left to Central Asia are as intricate and complex as the Balkans and the Middle East. Fortunately, the difference is that the Central Asia has established the SCO mechanism, which the Balkans and the Middle East do not have. Within its frameworks, the Central Asian managed to restrain the malignant conflicts like the civil war in Afghanistan from spreading in the region as has appeared in the Balkans and the Middle East, which set up a successful model in the troubled international scene after the end of the cold war. One can say without exaggeration, that if there was no system of the "Shanghai Five"-SCO, the Taliban could have possibly continued marching northwards, and the Afghan conflict could have possibly spread to the neighboring countries as well. In this regard, one can say that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is playing an essential role in maintaining the regional security and stability.

Analyzing deeper, all these abovementioned successes, achieved in the process of the "Shanghai Five"- SCO, have not only a strategic significance for the stability and development of its member states, for the security and development in the Central Asia overall, but also have an important demonstrating significance for the peace

and development in the whole world. The recent facts have proved, that the "Shanghai Spirit" of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for the diversity of cultures and aspiration towards the joint development", which is different than the thinking of the Cold War period, meets the requirements of the epoch, characterized by peace and stability, recognized and accepted by the number of countries.

Response to New Challenges

Since the beginning of 2005, there has been a wave of “election-related turmoil” in Central Asia, with terrorist and extremist forces fishing in the troubled waters. Afghanistan has witnessed the resurgence of Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of a new wave of terrorist attacks following Iraq War. More severely, Hizb-ut-Tahrir (the Islamic Party of Liberation) and other extreme groups is fast winning support in Central Asia, particularly in the poverty-stricken Fergana countryside, bespeaking a remerging grim security situation in the region that poses new challenges to SCO.

The SCO Astana summit in 2005 took the initiative in shouldering a chief responsibility for safeguarding the security in Central Asia. The heads of the states decided to increase significantly the security cooperation on the basis of the achievements made so far, including particularly those following aspects: promoting the close cooperation among the diplomatic, foreign economic, law-enforcing, national defense and special-mission authorities of the member states; working out effective measures and institutions to respond collectively to those developments that threaten the regional peace, security and stability; coordinating the security-ensuring laws and regulations in the member states; cooperating in researching and developing new technologies and equipment for coping with new challenges and threats; establishing new effective structures in mass media to deal with new challenges and threats; combating the smuggling of weapons, ammunitions, explosives as well as drugs, and fighting organized transnational crimes, illegal immigration and mercenary troops activities; giving special attention to the prevention of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction and their launching vehicles; taking precautionary measures against cyber terrorism; and drafting uniform approaches and standards for monitoring the financial flow related with those suspect terrorist individuals and organizations. It was also believed that cooperation on drug trafficking should become a focus as defined by the previous SCO agreement on fighting the illegal trafficking in narcotics and their precursors, and SCO should specifically step up its participation in the international efforts on the formation of anti-narcotic belts around Afghanistan, in formulation and realization of special programs, providing assistance for Afghanistan in order to stabilize its social, economic and humanitarian situation.

The SCO Shanghai summit in 2006 decided to deepen the cooperation in security affairs. It is stressed at the summit: “To comprehensively deepen cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism, extremism and drug trafficking is a priority area for SCO.”¹ So it is deemed highly necessary to continue the construction of the Regional Anti-terrorism Structure, to launch anti-terror joint exercises, and to establish an anti-dugs mechanism. This summit points out for the first time that SCO members prohibit any individual or group to conduct on their territories any kind of activities that would undermine the interests of other members. Following the

¹ Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai, June 15, 2006.

proposition made at the Astana summit to “establish the effective mechanism in the mass media for coping with new challenges and new threats”, this recent summit has witnessed the signing of “the Statement of Heads of Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization On International Information Security” and the decision-making regarding the establishment of a commission of information security experts to lay the ground work for the drafting and implementation of related action plans. In Shanghai, the leaders also instructed the Council of National Coordinators to conduct consultations on concluding a multilateral legal document on long-term neighborly and amicable cooperation within the SCO framework.²

Especially conspicuous has been the following words quoted from Declaration of The SCO Astana summit: “Today we are noticing the positive dynamics of stabilizing internal political situation in Afghanistan. A number of the SCO member states provided their ground infrastructure for temporary stationing of military contingents of some states, members of the coalition, as well as their territory and air space for military transit in the interest of the anti-terrorist cooperation. Considering the completion of the active military stage of antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization consider it necessary, that respective members of the antiterrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use of the above-mentioned objects of infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states.”³ This is the first time that SCO demonstrates its position that it endorses international participation in the anti-terror cooperation in Central Asia, yet at the same time, believes that Central Asian security should be chiefly the responsibility of countries in the region, notably that of SCO countries. Four points should be emphasized here, first, these remarks are not specifically targeted at the US, but more broadly at “respective members of the antiterrorist coalition”, i.e., all those countries and international organizations that use the infrastructure facilities of SCO countries or station their troops in SCO countries; second, SCO has voiced its views and suggestions, while any final arrangements will have to be worked out through multilateral or bilateral consultations between SCO states and those relevant parties; third, issues like the military presence or use of infrastructure facilities by one SCO state in another, for example, the use of the military base in Kyrgyzstan by Russia, may be sorted out through coordination within the framework of SCO or CIS either multilaterally or bilaterally; fourth, as the situation in Afghanistan is still severe, this is not the right time to work out a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Central Asia. Instead, we should step up anti-terror activities in Central Asia and strengthen the anti-terror ties among SCO, US, EU and other parties.

The SCO leaders have recently stressed that security cooperation be put on the basis of comprehensive security. It is pointed out, “Such common efforts should be of comprehensive nature, and be able to assist the member states to protect effectively their territories, citizens, livelihoods and key infrastructure sectors, so that they are free from new challenges and threats, thus creating necessary preconditions for sustainable development and poverty elimination.”⁴ The SCO leaders believed that, in preventing and eliminating those various technical disasters that have become significant components of the new threats, it became increasingly urgent to protect

² Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai, June 15, 2006.

³ Declaration of Heads of Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, July 6, 2005.

⁴ Declaration of Heads of Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, July 6, 2005.

and further develop infrastructure, particularly the transportation infrastructure. They also believed that SCO member countries should construct multilateral structures to monitor possible disasters and their consequences, exchange information and analysis, and create necessary legal and institutional conditions for joint salvaging, including promoting interoperability in terms of personnel training, agents dispatching and equipment deployment. The heads of the SCO states also declared, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization will make constructive contribution to the international efforts to safeguard the land, sea, air and space security.”⁵

Economic & Cultural Development: Solid Basis for Security Cooperation

The SCO leadership has laid more emphasis on promoting economic and cultural cooperation, believing that such cooperation constitutes not only the basis of political and security cooperation, but serves directly the long-term development and interests of future generations in the region.

Regarding economic cooperation, the Astana summit meeting made it clear that the main priority for the near future was to put into practice the Action Plan on Fulfillment of the Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation between SCO Member States, thus embarking on a pragmatic course of cooperation in trade, transportation, environmental protection, disaster relief, rational use of natural resources, etc. The prime minister-level council meeting to be held in Moscow last autumn made in-depth discussions and worked out specific measures for executing the implementation plan aside from defining the fiscal and budget policies. The heads of the states also decided that all sides involved would accelerate the establishment of the SCO Development Fund based on consensus, intensify the inter-bank cooperation and strengthen ties between SCO and international financial institutions, all for the purpose of rendering financial support to the regional cooperative endeavors. It was envisioned that all those efforts would lead partly to the organization of the SCO Development Bank. Significantly, Chinese President Hu Jintao promised at the Astana summit, “China attaches great importance to the implementation of the USD 900 million buyer's export credit promised in the Tashkent Summit. China has decided to offer more preferential treatments in terms of the interest rate, the time limit and the guarantee qualifications of the loan, so that the funds can be used as quickly as possible for SCO cooperative projects in the interest of all member countries concerned.”⁶ The Shanghai summit stressed particularly the importance for proceeding with the implementation of certain demonstration programs for economic cooperation. The summit has decided to choose energy, information technology, and transportation as the priority areas of economic cooperation, with particular emphasis to be laid on the implementation of several model projects.⁷ The SCO Mechanism of Inter-bank Cooperation – the first step to the SCO Development Bank to be formally inaugurated before the Shanghai summit is expected to provide a financing platform for the major projects in the region. The official launch of the SCO Business Council during the Shanghai summit will provide a new source for facilitating greater economic cooperation within the SCO framework, while the fulfillment of China’s promise for the USD 900 million of

⁵ Declaration of Heads of Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, July 6, 2005.

⁶ Hu Jintao, “Strengthening Solidarity and Cooperation to Promote Stability and Development: A Speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Astana Summit Meeting”, July 5, 2005.

⁷ Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai, June 15, 2006.

buyer's credit will also promote the economic development of SCO member states and deepening of the SCO economic cooperation.

In the aspect of cultural cooperation, SCO member states have actively cooperated in the SCO framework on education, culture, sports, tourism, and so on. Especially noteworthy is the point mentioned at the Astana summit, "Formulation of coordinated methods and recommendations on conducting prophylactic activities and respective explanatory work among the public in order to confront attempts of exerting a destructive influence on the public opinion is a vital task."⁸ President Hu Jintao remarked in Astana, "We shall, by effective measures, conduct and deepen our cooperation in culture, disaster relief, education, tourism, journalism, etc. Human resources capacity building should be another area of cooperation, and China will set aside a special fund to train 1,500 management and professional talents in different fields for other member states within three years"⁹ It was delighting to see that the first SCO Cultural and Art Festival was held in Astana almost concurrently with the summit meeting. The Shanghai summit emphasized again the need of promoting substantially the people-to-people as well as cultural cooperation. In the short run, the focus of such cooperation is to highlight the spirit of the Silk Road by enhancing the mutual communication and understanding among different civilizations and nations in the region, so as to strengthen the emotional ties among the Chinese, Central Asians and Russians, and also to pave the way for the unfolding comprehensive cooperation within the SCO. The second SCO Cultural and Art Festival held during the Shanghai summit has shown itself as one specific achievement in this field. The document on educational cooperation signed at the summit is another SCO initiative to broaden its people-to-people as well as cultural cooperation, while the formal launch of SCO Forum – an academic mechanism of research and discussion before the Shanghai summit, will provide intellectual support to the further development of the organization.¹⁰

Big Tasks and Long Journey: Prospects of the Future Development

In June 2006 the heads of the SCO member states and observer states gathered in Shanghai to celebrate and review the five-year process following the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the ten-year process following the initiation of the "Shanghai Five". The leaders discussed the new developments in the international arena and in Central Asia, and its impact on the SCO. They have put forward the strategic goal to construct a "harmonious region" of lasting peace and common prosperity, and proposed an ambitious plan for the next-stage development of SCO.

In looking into the future, it is necessary to highlight that SCO still faces several major issues that deserve urgent attention.

Firstly, there should be a prompt achievement of essential breakthrough in the economic cooperation. Several points are extremely important to realize this aim. The first point is to be pragmatic in designing cooperation goals and in implementing the cooperation measures. Empty talks and a lack of specific goals and effective measures will never make it, more so when it comes to economic issues. The

⁸ Declaration of Heads of Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, July 6, 2005.

⁹ Hu Jintao, "Strengthening Solidarity and Cooperation to Promote Stability and Development: A Speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Astana Summit Meeting", July 5, 2005.

¹⁰ The SCO Bulletin, 2006, Beijing, p.57.

second point is to persist in following market rules like the level playing field, equality and reciprocity, mutual opening, and a combination of both bilateral and multilateral approaches. Only caring about one's own interests will not do, and dissolving cooperation from the market base is even more fallible. Additionally, bilateral cooperation and multilateral cooperation can be mutually enhancing, a case in point being the oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and China, which is now also giving rise to the triangular energy cooperation involving Russia as well. The third point is to get ahead with coordination and priorities for each stage. Front-up investment is certainly necessary, yet caution is needed against excessive expansion and repetitive construction.

Secondly, there is an obvious need to deepen the security cooperation. A joint advantage of the SCO in the near future will still be in the security area. Yet, there must be a deepening of the cooperation in this aspect if the organization is to make headway on the basis of the past achievements. Several practical things seem necessary to take up. For one thing, the Regional Anti-terrorism Structure should be quickly consolidated to work efficiently, and specific cooperation be stepped up in drafting SCO name list of those wanted terrorists and terrorist groups, and in regularizing the joint anti-terror exercises. For another, the proposed Central Asian Nuclear Free-Zone (CANFZ) program should be furthered, so that the region can avoid suffering arms race and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For still another, further campaigns should be launched to crack down on drug-trafficking, and in this regard, active participation in the UN action is called for to establish an "anti-drug belt" around Afghanistan for the peaceful reconstruction of the country. Only until these several practical things are finished can SCO play an indispensable role in maintaining security in the whole Central Asian region as well as in its member states.

Thirdly, cultural cooperation should be pushed forward steadily. The existing bilateral cultural cooperation among the SCO member states should be expanded into multilateral cultural cooperation within the SCO framework, which certainly calls for organizational coordination, financial support, and professional programming. In the near future, the cooperation will specifically unfold on these fronts: exchanging mutual visits by cultural, artistic and sports groups, hosting joint art festivals and exhibitions, dispatching and accepting more exchange students, promoting visits by high-level experts and scholars, mutually assisting in training talents in various fields, increasing cultural exchanges among young people, facilitating culture-oriented tourism along the Silk Road, and so on.

Fourthly, external exchange and augmentation of the organization should be well handled. After Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran and India were accepted as SCO observers, more and more countries have expressed their wish to become SCO observers, join SCO or cooperate with SCO. In face of the growing request, the Shanghai summit has commissioned the SCO Secretariat to monitor the implementation of the documents on cooperation between SCO and other organizations, and facilitate the actual work of cooperation between SCO and its observer states. The heads of state have also entrusted the SCO Council of Member State Coordinators to make suggestions regarding the procedures of the membership enlargement.¹¹ It remains a major challenge for SCO to sort out its relationship with those important players such as the US, EU, and Japan, which are, most likely, not interested in becoming members

¹¹ Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai, June 15, 2006.

or observers of the SCO, but have great potentialities for the cooperation. One way is to establish, aside from the formal members and observers, the model of partner states, modeled after the NATO's Partner for Peace. One country, for example, can become SCO partner for anti-terror or SCO partner for anti-drug. Indeed, Afghanistan has already become a fully active partner of SCO. Whether immediately feasible or not, these moves are worthy of careful considerations in broadening the external exchange and attempting cautious enlargement for the multilateral organization.

Conclusion

In reviewing the successful journey that SCO has covered in safeguarding the security in Central Asia, these several points merit our attention.

Regional cooperation must be further institutionalized, and be guaranteed by relevant international or regional laws and regulations. Of course, the discrepancy in rules and regulations between the domestic and the foreign should be sorted out in a careful manner.

Regional security cooperation must be based on "comprehensive security", and particularly, the handling of conventional security threats should be combined closely with the handling of non-conventional security threats.

The maintenance of regional security and stability is a precondition and a guarantee to the facilitation of regional economic and cultural cooperation, and economic and cultural cooperation can in turn constitute a solid basis for political and security cooperation.

About author :

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