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**Challenges to the SCO's Counterterrorism
Mechanism and the Way Forward**

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Abstract

The importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO's) counterterrorism mechanism has increased manifold in the wake of the recent terrorism surge following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, a concerted effort from the SCO platform in response to emerging threats has not been envisaged primarily because of consensus issues between the member states. This paper attempts to respond to one central question: why the SCO is failing to develop consensus on counterterrorism strategy in the contemporary situation? Through a descriptive analysis of the existing literature on the subject, the paper finds that interstate rivalries and narrow-minded approaches are overshadowing SCO's collective security mechanism. To make SCO's counterterrorism mechanism more effective, the paper suggests that China and Russia, being the founding member have to go the extra mile in dealing with the consensus issue which is grave and increasing. Other member states such as India and Pakistan need to shun their narrow-minded security approaches to allow the

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organization to work in a more collective and collaborative way to fight the recent terrorism wave in the region.

Keywords: *SCO, RATS, counterterrorism, terrorism, US withdrawal, ISKP, TTP, Taliban*

Introduction

The terrorism landscape in South Asia has changed significantly after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Regional countries are now contending with renewed terrorist threats in the region. It is beyond doubt that security vacuum created in the post-withdrawal era provided ample opportunities for several dormant militant groups to regain their lost space. De-grouping and re-grouping of different terrorist organizations have become a new normal. For instance, the splinter groups of Al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have the luxury to either form a distinct group or join the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), Islamic State of Pakistan Province (ISPP), or Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) and vice versa. More importantly, the increased outreach of militant groups to the nationalist forces in the region has opened a new front for regional countries.

Pakistan right now is grappling with the renewed TTP challenge. The group's attacks against the security forces have increased significantly in the recent past and their network within Pakistan and Afghanistan has also expanded.¹ China is also worried about the possible expansion of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which has long been a security threat not only to the Xinjiang region but also the Chinese government officials working in Pakistan and Afghanistan. While India faces a renewed threat of anti-India terrorist groups like AQIS,² Iran is wary of the

ISK's resurgence and several anti-Shia groups within Afghanistan and beyond. The Central Asian states found new security threats in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as well.

Similar kinds of threats have also been highlighted in the recent seventeenth report of the UN Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security that was published on 12 August 2023. The report claims that the "situation in Afghanistan is growing progressively complex, with fears of weapons and ammunition falling into the hands of terrorists now materializing."³ The report mentioned that the ETIM had developed links in Afghanistan with ISK and elements of AQIS were ready to either join or collaborate with the ISK.⁴ Recent years have also seen an increase in the presence of terrorist organizations on social media platforms, threatening the expansion of such outfits.⁵ So the region, right now, is in the grip of multidimensional terrorist threats emanating from the continuing expansion of the militant outfits. The fear of Afghanistan becoming a breeding ground for terrorism has heightened.

Given the deteriorating security situation in the region, a concerted response from the regional countries is highly required. In the absence of such a response, the paper argues that the threat of terrorism is bound to increase manifold in the years to come as several militant groups within Afghanistan and beyond have joined hands and providing shelter, training and weapons to each other. So, in the present circumstances, the importance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has increased significantly as the organization played a decisive role in a similar situation back in the early 2000s. The global war against terrorism

was the period when the security situation in Afghanistan and the region around was extremely volatile and the SCO was able to withstand rising terrorism threats with support from its member states. Likewise, the given situation has necessitated a renewed understanding within the SCO to cope with the post-US withdrawal terrorism challenge. The presence of all stakeholders (after the inclusion of Pakistan, India, and Iran) in the SCO has empowered the organization not only to deliberate on the issue of terrorism but also to evolve consensus between member states on counterterrorism strategy.

Being a powerful regional organization with a vision to fight earnestly against the three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the SCO can play a crucial role in the current regional security situation. However, the fate of renewed and emboldened role of the SCO depends on circumventing interstate disputes. Although, the inclusion of Pakistan, India and Iran, has broadened the horizon of cooperation of the SCO, it widened its fault lines within. A careful look at the proceedings and summits in the post-inclusion time implies that the SCO, like the other regional organization, namely, the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has bogged down with conflicting interstate relationships, and the divergent security mindsets of the member states. Furthermore, China and Russia's selected cooperation approach within the SCO has negatively impacted the central role of fighting the three evils mentioned above.

Given the aforementioned context, the paper argues that the consensus challenge within the SCO is huge, and has greater implications for the SCO's counterterrorism efforts in the contemporary situation. The paper presents a detailed overview of

member states' conflicting approaches to regional security as well as their bilateral differences, which have negatively impacted SCO's counterterrorism efforts. Thus, to improve counterterrorism mechanism, the paper suggests that China and Russia, need to go the extra mile to restore the trust and the faith of the member states in the SCO. Second, the SCO needs to enhance financial, technological, and military support to the member states' security forces. Third, the SCO needs to increase its cooperation with other international organizations like the United Nations on counterterrorism. Last but not the least, given the appalling regional security situation, the SCO member states need to shun their narrow-minded security approaches to allow the organization to work in a more collective and collaborative way to fight the recent terrorism wave in the region.

SCO and its Counterterrorism Mechanism

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established in 2001 by the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Uzbekistan, Republic of Kazakhstan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. The organization was primarily created to galvanize intraregional support to deal with regional security issues such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The significance of SCO's founding mission of counterterrorism gained immense importance in the post 9/11 era. In the war against terrorism, the SCO member states were more active in forming and strengthening their political, military, diplomatic, and judicial cooperation to deal with terrorism threats.⁶ The active involvement of the members was not based on imaginary threats. Zhao Xiaodong in his paper titled *The*

Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Counterterrorism Cooperation has listed the following high profile terrorist incidents that took place between 2001 to 2011.

"April 2001 Tajikistan: adviser of the president murdered; September 2001 Tajikistan: culture minister killed; June 2002 Kyrgyzstan: Chinese consul killed; October 2002 Moscow, Russia: hijacking, 90 dead; December 2002 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: market bomb attack; March 2003 Kyrgyzstan: bus hijacked, 20 killed; February 2004 Moscow, Russia: bombs in the metro, 50 dead, 130 wounded; March 2004 Tashkent, Uzbekistan: a series of bomb, 10 dead; May 2004 Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan: bomb attack; May 2004 Chechnya, Russia: stadium blast, 7 dead (including the president of Chechnya), 53 wounded; June 2004 Ingushetia, Russia: militia attack, 90 dead; September 2004 Beslan, Russia: 300 dead, half of them children; May 2005 Andijian, Uzbekistan: riots, 187 killed; October 2005 Nal'chik, Russia: militia attack, 17 dead, 84 wounded; May 2006 Kyrgyzstan: terrorist attack by militants; August 2006 Moscow, Russia: market blast, 10 dead, 55 wounded; August 2007 Russia: train derailment, 60 wounded; November 2007 Dushanbe, Tajikistan: explosion aimed at the president; August 2008 Kashgar, Xinjiang, China: car explosion, 16 dead, 16 wounded; June 2009 Ingushetia, Russia: attack on motorcade, president wounded; July 2009 Urumqi, Xinjiang, China: riots, 200 killed; August 2009 Ingushetia, Russia: attack, 12 dead, 50 wounded; November 2009 Russia: attack, 25 dead, 63 wounded; March 2010 Moscow, Russia: bombers strike, 41 dead; July 2011 Kashgar, Xinjiang, China: terrorist attack: 3 dead, 40 wounded."

Given the deteriorating security situation in the region following the 9/11 incident, the SCO emerged as a potential regional security organization to fight against terrorism. The SCO member states established a dedicated counterterrorism framework under the name of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) back in 2002. Since its inception, RATS, has been focusing on combatting terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which the organization labels as 'three evils'.

RATS, headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, "operates alongside the SCO Charter, the Agreement among the SCO member states on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, the Shanghai Convention on Combatting Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism, as well as documents and decisions adopted in the SCO framework."⁸ The main functions of RATS as mentioned on its official website are as follows:

One, maintaining working relations with competent institutions of the member states and international organisations tackling issues of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism; Two, assistance in interaction among the member states in preparation and staging of counter-terrorism exercises at the request of concerned member states, preparation and conduct of search operations and other activities in the field of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism; Three, joint drafting of international legal documents concerning the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism; Four, gathering and analysis of information coming to the RATS from the member states, formation and filling of RATS data bank; Five, joint formation of a system of effective response to global challenges and threats; And the sixth is the preparation and holding of

scientific conferences and workshops, assistance in sharing experience in the field of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism.⁹

RATS has organized and coordinated several joint exercises of the security forces of the member states since its formal launch. It has also made progress in preventing terrorist funding and money laundering through coordinated efforts.¹⁰ The security drills that involve the counterterrorism cadres of China, Pakistan, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics have become a regular feature of the SCO. These training sessions under the SCO umbrella have resulted in an effective platform of engagement between the member states' security forces. RATS has also coordinated studies of Eurasian terrorist movements, promoted exchange of information regarding terrorist risks, and provided assistance on policies for countering terrorism.¹¹ RATS, being a permanent body of the SCO, makes the SCO's counter-terrorism mechanism more centralized.

The SCO has adopted various documents and declarations that aid its functioning. RATS with its principled objective of maintaining working relations with the competent institutions of the member states and providing support to them in terms of both training and exercises, has been instrumental in advising the member states on operational training and helping draft international legal documents to combat terrorism. Since 2001, the SCO has issued dozens of joint statements and declarations on counterterrorism. Besides training and counselling, the organization has been successful in preventing several terrorist attacks. According to Rashid Alimov, former Secretary-General of the SCO, "between 2011 and 2015, the SCO member states under

RATS coordination, managed to prevent 20 terrorist attacks while still in the planning stages, averted 650 crimes of terrorist and extremist nature, and neutralized 440 terrorist training camps and 1,700 members of international terrorist organizations.”¹² The success stories of SCO’s counterterrorism strategies has thus provided a faith in this organization to effectively deal with the present day regional security challenges. However, the SCO faces certain inherent challenges like interstate conflicting relations, and the divergent security approaches which are negatively impacting the effectiveness of the SCO in dealing with the issue of terrorism.

Challenges to the SCO’s Counterterrorism Mechanism

One of the primary challenges that the SCO faces is the interstate conflicts that led to the divergent approaches of the member states within the SCO on countering terrorism. For instance, India and Pakistan are not on the same page when it comes to dealing with terrorism since both countries have set certain preconditions before any engagement on counterterrorism. Likewise, the troubled relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have resulted in divided approaches to dealing with the renewed threats in the Pak-Afghan border region. The inconclusive approach of the current government of the Afghan Taliban towards the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has negatively affected the bilateral relations between the two countries. Likewise, China and India face their own set of challenges. The longstanding border dispute between the two states along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has negatively impacted the effectiveness of RATS. Russia and China, on the other hand, prefer selective cooperation as both give importance

to cooperation if it suits their interests in the region. These bilateral contentious issues have been visible in the several SCO summits in the past.

Recently, in a virtually held summit of the SCO on 14 July 2023, Prime Minister Modi's remarks regarding terrorism and affirmation of sovereignty were visibly though not explicitly directed against China and Pakistan. In the New Delhi Declaration, issued at the end of the summit, PM Modi referred to countries using "cross-border terrorism as an instrument of their policies and give shelter to terrorists." And added that "the SCO should not be hesitant to criticize such countries...there should be no double standards on terrorism."¹³ In this veiled reference, he did not only criticize Pakistan but also urged member states of the SCO to follow the same. The same sentiments were expressed by the Indian Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in the concluding session of the SCO's Council for Foreign Ministers meeting in which he called the Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari "a promoter, justifier, and spokesperson of the terrorism industry."¹⁴ He also called out Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism on various occasions.

On its part, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif while asserting that terrorism in any form should be condemned in clear and unambiguous terms criticized India's diplomatic point-scoring on the issue of terrorism. He stated, "The hydra-headed monster of terrorism and extremism – whether committed by individuals, societies, or states – must be fought with full vigour and conviction. Any temptation to use it as a cudgel for diplomatic point-scoring must be avoided under all circumstances."¹⁵ Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, in the same

Council for Foreign Ministers meeting, called out states (veiled reference to India) not to “weaponize terrorism for diplomatic point-scoring.”¹⁶ He also talked about unilateral and illegal measures by states that are contrary to the international law and the United Nations Security Councils (UNSC) resolutions.¹⁷ The statement seemingly pointed towards India’s move of abrogating the Article 370 that ended the special status of Kashmir. This recent episode shows how an inherent negativity and animosity between two states brings bilateral grievances to the SCO’s meetings, where both states continue to dig at each other.

Besides Pakistan-India rivalry challenge that SCO is confronting with, India and China’s tense relationship, especially after the Galwan Valley incident, is holding a collective wisdom on counterterrorism in the SCO at bay. India has been very critical of China especially its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which New Delhi calls a ‘debt trap’.¹⁸ Similarly, China views the increasing India-US partnership as an anti-China bloc to counter Beijing’s influence in the region. So, despite having a mutual interest in countering terrorism, member states exploit SCO’s platform to further its aims and interests. Russia, for example, is very much concerned about the threats emanating from the Central Asian Republics (CARs), and more importantly, Moscow perceive the SCO as China-Centric and, thus, gives importance to other organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Both CSTO and EEU are headquartered in Moscow and Beijing is not a member.¹⁹ China, on the other hand, has often used the platform to further its aims regarding its BRI. China also seeks markets in Central Asia to expand its energy and economic resources through the SCO. So,

within the SCO, there remain fundamental differences between Russia and China on the identity of the organization wherein Russia is more interested in hard security whereas China is seeking a stronger role of the SCO in the economic domain.²⁰

The CARs, on the other hand, often see the SCO as a tool for preserving their status quo and consider it important for economic and security issues and for achieving their interests.²¹ There is also a persistent competition in military and economic affairs among the members of the SCO. In the given situation where member states often use the SCO platform to further their bilateral grievances, the consensus over counterterrorism mechanism within the SCO is hard to achieve.

Apart from member states' vested interests in the SCO that are posing an existential threat to the shared vision of the organization, its perception of an anti-Western bloc is also undermining its credibility as a vibrant and trustworthy organization. This perception has resulted in a lacklustre support from its member states to the shared goals of the organization. Other than China and Russia, several members of the SCO do not want to be tagged as anti-West since they have been maintaining good relationship with the Western countries including the United States. Although the SCO believes in effective coordination with the West and prominent international organizations like the UN and the European Union (EU), general perception about it as an anti-West bloc, particularly amidst the Ukraine-Russia crisis, has generated a sense of insecurity among the member states.

In a nutshell, interstate rivalries, and conflicting approaches to countering terrorism coupled with selected cooperation within the SCO have altogether challenged the

existential goal of the SCO. Despite having all the necessary requisites for being an effective counter-terrorism body, the SCO lags in forming a coordinated structure in response to the present-day terrorism challenges. This is obvious in the Afghanistan case. Despite mutual interest in the internal stability of Afghanistan and countering terrorism within the region, the member states have been unable to deliver a collective response. To make SCO an effective organization, especially its counterterrorism mechanism, RATS, the member states have to recalibrate their policies, and approaches towards the SCO in the greater interests of the region.

Conclusion

The continued rivalries among SCO member states and their refusal to engage in a constructive dialogue have seriously undermined the SCO's counterterrorism efforts. Negative perceptions and narrow-minded approaches have made the intra-SCO consensus difficult to achieve. Since the SCO believes in openness and adheres to the principle of not forming an alliance or directing its actions against sovereign entities, the possibility of joint military action like the war on terrorism to be carried out in Afghanistan, Pak-Afghan border areas, or any other areas in the region is out of question. However, the SCO can build a united force for surveillance and rapid response in case a terrorist incident occurs in any of the member states' territory.

Since interstate rivalries are increasingly affecting the SCO, especially its counterterrorism agenda, there is another option of institutionalizing a bilateral counterterrorism framework to circumvent the potential divergences. For instance, China and Russia, cooperating with Pakistan and India, respectively, on

strategizing the counterterrorism mechanism while maintaining harmony at the top. This sounds theoretically plausible but could not be practically materialized because it would be akin to the acknowledgement of intra-SCO subgroupings.

Thus, the only viable option left is to strengthen the existing framework of counterterrorism under RATS that includes improving the anti-structure of member states, increasing intelligence sharing, facilitating extradition, bilateral and multilateral security training/drills, and improving border management to stop transnational crimes such as illegal migration, drugs, weapons and explosives trafficking. For that matter, there is a need to have greater interaction among member states to defuse interstate tensions. A regular 'dialogue' process within the SCO is an absolute need of the hour that can thwart the organization from falling prey to any interstate disputes like the one between India and Pakistan. Looking at NATO, one can argue that the overwhelming success of coordination in NATO was greatly inherent in the mutual trust among its member states. In line with it, the SCO needs to explore avenues of mutual interests and promote the culture of bilateral and multilateral engagements.

For effective implementation of counterterrorism vision, member states need to ensure their actions do not contradict their statements at international forums and do not play at odds with each other. The SCO, as a regional security organization, will never be effective in its actions if its members are involved in skirmishes and border clashes with each other. Conflicts and mistrust cannot let states coordinate their actions. Rather than using the platform to resolve tensions, member states often indulge in implicit

attacks on each other, which in turn, aggravate the fault lines within the SCO.

Since the SCO's charter does not allow discussion over contentious bilateral issues, the member states especially China and Russia need to develop a confidence-building mechanism outside the SCO forum to help reduce tensions between the rival states. This sort of confidence-building mechanism will not only help reduce misperceptions between the member states but also help build consensus on counterterrorism strategies. This is evident from Pakistan and China's case where both countries have been able to develop mutual understanding on dealing with the terrorism issue even though China had expressed its serious concerns on the security of its nationals working in Pakistan. Both countries have taken a firm stand against militant groups working against China and Pakistan's interests in the region. China appreciates Pakistan's role in the war on terror, and both states emphasized the importance of working together to combat the three evils while furthering their counter-terrorism efforts.²² This sort of gesture is highly required for building consensus within the SCO.

Furthermore, synchronization of China and Russia's goals in the SCO is a must for the smooth functioning of the organization. Both China and Russia need to adopt policies that are not detrimental to the interests of either party. As evident from history, China and Russia's policies and approaches towards the Central Asian Republics have been at odds. Recently China's growing security partnerships with certain Central Asian states are challenging the division of labour between the two countries with respect to the Central Asian region.²³ Furthermore, the Ukraine-

Russia crisis has negatively impacted their relationship. Since the crisis broke out, China has been facing a twin problem of maintaining important partnerships and advancing the shared agenda of the SCO. So, in the greater interests of intra-SCO harmony, both founding members of the SCO need to develop a policy synergy and an inclusive approach, wherein both China and Russia play a more constructive role and that approach needs to be in line with the Central Asian states' threat perceptions as they differ in their approaches to military and terrorist operations.

Besides dealing with the question of 'unity in diversity', the deteriorating security situation demands greater and meaningful cooperation between the SCO and the UN over counterterrorism mechanism. For that, existing inter-agency cooperation between the two organizations needs to be formalized. Increased cooperation with the EU is also important to dispel the impression of the SCO as an anti-Western bloc. Small states, in this regard, have a greater role to play in mobilizing cooperation with the UN and the EU.

Furthermore, the SCO-Afghan Contact Group (ACG) that was established in 2005 needs to be revived in light of present-day challenges emanating from the re-grouping and de-grouping of several militant groups within Afghanistan and beyond. Revival of ACG at this point in time is also necessary to discourage segregated approaches of the member states towards Afghanistan. Right now, every country in the region is following an independent and sometimes contradictory approach to Afghanistan, which knowingly or unknowingly is sensitizing the security of other states in the region. This trend, if continues with the same pace and zeal, would likely trigger a tug of war at the

transnational level wherein member states would find it extremely difficult to cooperate.

Last, but not least, the SCO needs to increase financial, technological, and military support to member states in their struggle against terrorism. Such kind of material support will certainly help turn the organization's vision of countering terrorism into a reality. This is high time the SCO should lead the counterterrorism efforts with greater fervour and galvanize support not only from its member states but also from regional and global stakeholders to demonstrate its commitment to eradicating terrorism from the region.

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