

Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to make an enquiry and analyse the effects of expansion of SCO on the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an emerging regional security organization consisting on China, Russia, and four central Asian states. The organization was officially established in 2001 with an objective of cooperation in regional security and fighting terrorism. Incognito objective of SCO was to counter increasing US influence in the region in post 9/11 scenario. Presence of NATO forces in Chinese and Russian backyard was detested by both regional powers thus stimulating swift formation of SCO. Pakistan and India being two important regional players could not remain oblivious of this significant development and applied for its membership in 2006 and 2014 respectively. The decade long deliberations culminated into receiving Pakistan and India as full time members during 15th SCO summit held at Ufa (Russia) on 10 July 2015. Admittance of the two nuclear armed states having large populations, improved economies and large standing armies added new dimensions in SCO's framework. By virtue of this long awaited expansion, Pakistan has renewed prospects to contribute in regional peace and stability by integrating with SCO member states economically and militarily. Moreover, under the SCO flagship, Pakistan can improve its relations with majority of its neighbours being members of SCO. The enduring geo-economic and geo-political interdependencies will diminish chances of multilateral conflicts thus prospects of lasting peace and prosperity have immensely increased.

Key Words: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Economic dimension, Security dimension

Introduction

Number of regional intergovernmental organizations is slowly increasing in the world. These organizations are becoming multifunctional pursuing security and economic stability as their prime goal. As the lines between friend and foes are gradually blurring therefore the focus of states has shifted towards conflict reduction/resolution and meeting transnational challenges like terrorism, separatism and extremism through joint coordinated efforts. Coincidentally, the regions lacking existence of such organizations are suffering

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heavily from instability and violence. SCO is a transnational organisation comprising on states from Europe, central, west and south Asia. The organization was conceived for cooperation in non-traditional security areas by few regional countries situated north of Pakistan. However, over the years, organization's role has been expanded to a number of other areas like economic, energy, education and cultural cooperation. SCO is best described by Chinese scholars as 'a cart with two wheels', referring to the equal degree of importance attached to security and economic cooperation¹. The organization which had a humble beginning with five members on 15 June 2001 witnessed its first expansion after 14 years of its existence when admission of Pakistan and India were approved on 10 July 2015 during Ufa summit. As of today, SCO has six member states (China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), two acceding states (Pakistan & India), four observer states (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia), six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey) and three guest attendants (ASEAN, CIS and Turkmenistan). Their geographic locations can be seen in the map placed at the end. Though admission of Pakistan and India has been formally approved yet both the states have to fulfill certain legal and statutory obligations. It is expected that SCO will grant full member status to Pakistan and India during next annual summit planned in December 2016 at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The expansion announcement through 15th Summit at Ufa laid special emphasis on commitment towards deepening economic cooperation and resolve for closer coordination in security which is expected to lift SCO to a new high (Xi, 2105). Concurrently, SCO is being perceived as 'Warsaw Pact of East' by American scholars capable of challenging American interests in the region. Paradoxically, few opine that SCO is a security organization jointly led by Russia and China for countering US hegemony in the region (Khan, 2103). However, this blame has been repudiated number of times by the organization during various summits over the years.

Origin and Objectives

The origin of SCO is rooted in the historic border dispute between erstwhile USSR and China. The dispute became multilateral when the former Soviet Central Asian Republics (CARs) gained independence in early 1990s. In 1996, Russia, China and three central Asian Republics- Kazakhstan,

¹ Excerpt from speech of Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin at SCO St. Petersburg Summit delivered on 7 June 2002. The topic of the speech was "Shanghai spirit and promotion of world peace" available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gjhdqzz/lhg_59/zyjh/t10897.htm

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Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed an agreement for mutual cooperation and confidence building under multilateral arrangement known as 'Shanghai Five' forum (Scheineson, 2009). Another agreement was signed in 1997 by these states aimed at reduction of military forces in their contiguous border regions, measures for military restraint and transparency along borders (Trofimov, 2003).

These states working under 'Shanghai Five' mechanism of 1996, with addition of Uzbekistan, declared setting up of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on 15 June 2001 as a regional intergovernmental organization. The objectives of the organization set forth by the members states were (Schneider, 2008):

- Bolstering of mutual trust and good-neighbourly relations
- Boosting cooperation in socio-political and socio-economic fields
- Enhancing educational, scientific and technological cooperation
- Augmenting collaboration in the fields of energy, communications and environment
- Safeguarding regional security, peace and stability
- Pursuing of fair international socio-economic order.

The founding documents of the organization laid special emphasis on fighting against terrorism, separatism and extremism which are commonly known as 'three evils' (Fredholm, 2013) in organizational literature. The organizational development process helped members to cultivate a common approach of cooperation through mutual trust, mutual respect, consultation and equality which is often referred as 'Shanghai Spirit' (Jaffer, 2016) and is driving philosophy of SCO. Shanghai Spirit emphasises on the principles of harmony, working via consensus, respect for other cultures, non-interference in others' internal affairs, and nonalignment. The progressive march towards maturity of SCO since its establishment can be divided into three distinct phases (Haas & Putten, 2007):

- Phase I (1996-2001)–Confidence and security building measures amongst member states
- Phase II (2001-2004) –Steps for regional security against 'three evils'
- Phase III (2004- till to date) –Emergence as comprehensive international organization

SCO member states are spread over vast geographical area on the globe. States cover area from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok and from Okhotsk Sea to

South China Sea. If the four observer's states are included then its area extends up to Middle East through Indian Ocean. The members including observer states possess 17.5% of world proven oil reserves, 47–50% of known natural gas reserves and host almost half (1.8 Billion) of the world's population². After formal joining of India and Pakistan in December 2016, SCO will have four nuclear weapons states (Russia, China, Pakistan and India) and three of the world's major emerging economies (Singh, 2009) in its folds. The basic data of member states including India and Pakistan is shown in the table below.

States	Area(Km Square)	Population	GDP (US \$ Billion)	GDP Per Capita (US \$)	Military Expenditure (US \$ Million)
China	9596960	1367485388	11380	14300	216220
Russia	17098242	142423773	1236	23700	43136
Pakistan	796095	199085847	247.8	4900	8662
India	3287263	1251695584	2183	6300	52392
Kazakhstan	2724900	18157122	195	24700	2641
Kyrgyzstan	199951	564939	7.153	3400	**
Uzbekistan	447400	29199942	65.95	6100	**
Tajikistan	144100	8191958	8.045	2800	88.95

Source: CIA World Fact Book 2106 * Data not available

Guiding Principles

The concept of non-meddling in domestic affairs of the member states is very appealing for predominantly authoritarian member states (White, 2005) of the organization. Although few observers profess that SCO is not a normative organization however this belief is contested by Chinese who claim that 'Shanghai Spirit'³ forms the corner stone of organization's norm. This provides an in-built dual function as inward-looking provides a basis for members to work together productively and the outward-looking for challenging strategic threats faced by the member states.

The foundation of SCO charter (26 Articles) adopted in 2002 is in line with the basic principles of international law. The organization promotes environment

²This data has been compiled from Handbook of US Department for Energy and Information for natural gas and world crude oil reserves.

³ 'Shanghai Spirit' denotes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common development, in a bid to build a community of shared destiny in the region.

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of reciprocated respect, mutual trust and friendly bilateral ties. It aims to augment cooperation in economic, cultural, political and regional security fields. Concurrently, collaboration in the fields of science, technology, communication, energy and environmental protection falls very high on the organization's agenda. The most conspicuous objective amongst many clauses of its charter is 'sovereign equality of states', rejection of 'hegemony and coercion' in international affairs which makes SCO 'non-directed' towards other states and international organizations. Though SCO has repeatedly clarified that it does not expect itself to emerge as a military block, it now holds regular joint military exercises amongst its members and is often viewed as a counter to the eastward expansion of NATO (Chin, 2010). So far six joint military exercises have been undertaken by the organization since 2003. The participation of smaller member in the joint manoeuvres has not been very regular however Russia and China have been consistent in partaking.

Interests of SCO Members States

In any international organization, interests of the member states act as major drivers for its operation. Pursuance of shared interests and goals gives strength to the organizations for meeting its ambitions and objectives. However diversity of interest acts as starting point for finding common scheme for resolution of conflicts without letting it to spill over to open warfare.

SCO is a classic example of unified diversity as most of its members widely differ in ethnic and linguistic make up. The strategic positions of the member states and their role and influence in the world politics is another major diversity where China and Russia are two recognized global powers whereas the four Central Asian member states have recently (26 December 1991 onwards) gained independence and do not have much of the political leverage in the world. These states are far smaller in size in comparison to the China and Russia and all are landlocked. Even within the cluster of four CARs (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) difference of size and hydrocarbon reserves categorizes them differently. The oil and gas reserves of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are much more than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China and Russia enjoy the status of nuclear weapon states. They are permanent members of UN Security Council and have been under the influence of communist ideology and reign. China is a rising economic power creating financial challenges even for other world power and Russia has started marching towards redefining its lost status in the world politics.

The striking unusual feature of the SCO is that it's all founding members had by and large autocratic form of governments. This offers plausible explication

for rejection of extremism and secessionism as well as foreign interference. The secrecy of SCO's activities is by-product of communist approach toward worldly affairs. In this perspective it is not unfair to categorize SCO as a pact for regime survival: a pro-status quo, as well as anti-terrorist coalition (Bailes, Dunay, Guang, & Troitskiy, 2007).

SCO has been interested to expand its footprint by adding more members in the organization. Despite the working language limitations⁴, the expansion could extend its strategic and economic interests beyond Central Asia (Lanteigne, 2010). In the wake of exit plan of US forces from Afghanistan and killing of Osama bin Laden, SCO started deliberating inclusion of Pakistan and India (Dikshit, 2011) and Afghanistan (special guest) for full membership (Radyuhin, 2011). SCO's regional successes in bringing peace and stability in region made Turkey to actively pursue and apply for membership of SCO.

Russian interests in SCO are very complex and have four different dimensions and levels; China-Russia relations, relations with Central Asia, relations with USA and general world politics. Russia having contiguity and cultural relations with central Asian states, is not new to CARs whereas rest of the world is isolated from many realities of the region therefore she treats these states as its strategic extension. Any security breakdown or anti-Russia development on its door steps would be an unwelcomed manifestation. Therefore status quo as prevalent in the region during last quarter of a century has been most suited and puts Russian in comfortable position for safeguarding her regional interests. The four central Asian member states have always been very cooperative and non-provocative towards Russia. They even facilitate Russia to use their military facilities at her free will. Central Asia is still free from foreign interferences therefore Russia does not have to compete with any serious infiltration by EU or NATO. The SCO holds promise for Russia in regulating of cooperation, competition and shifting of balance of power for dealing with China. Since the beginning of disintegration of Soviet Union in early 90s, Chinese have economically transformed and have overtaken all regional countries. Chinese economic intrusion in central Asia in general and Russia in particular is somewhat a sticky point in their bilateral relations. On the contrary, growing Chinese energy needs can only be fulfilled through regional resources of central Asia thus Chinese have deep seeded interest to invest in central Asian states.

Many political analysts believe that real cause of co-founding SCO by Russia and China was the result of competition with USA and NATO and bulwarking

⁴Russian & Chinese are the only two official languages of the organization

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their expanding zone of influence. There is no denying to the fact that a powerful anti-USA streak in Russia's mind about central Asia is ever present. The US involvement in the region has rapidly grown since 9/11 incident (Bailes, Dunay, Guang, & Troitskiy, 2007). USA had acquired air bases from the central Asian states; Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for launching strikes in Afghanistan however Russian pressure through SCO (Astana Declaration 2005) compelled both central Asian states to get these bases vacated in 2005. Central Asian's own potential for nurturing indigenous terrorism is a point of serious concern for Russians.

China's strategic interests in being part of SCO are not just for dispelling Russian regional influence. It is much beyond and lies in mutual strategic reconciliation which includes avoidance of border clashes and establishing an orderly framework for peaceful coexistence in Central Asia. As China is economically getting stronger therefore she wants to build an independent block organized on non-western principles to safeguard Western intrusion. SCO offers three strategic advantages to China. Firstly, strategic depth for protecting its economic and political influence over central Asian States, secondly possibility to develop her western region which is greatly underdeveloped and lastly SCO helps in leveraging trilateral relations with Russia and USA.

Chinese perceive Central Asian market as promising and lucrative for economic gains thus any non-regional incursion has negative implications. The economic and hydrocarbon potentials of central Asia are being considered as an additional guarantee for Chinese success. Theoretically, China could have pursued aforementioned national interests even without getting into any regional security arrangement like SCO however this would have increased regional tension and instability manifolds. The security risks involved in this kind of overture are avoided since last few decades as their focus has shifted from 'hard power to soft power'. It has become very clear that economic interest of Chinese remains paramount for their joining of this multilateral organization. China's interest in security cooperation under the SCO framework has emerged out of its concern regarding separatist forces in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. She believes a transnational network is supporting the Uyghur separatist groups in Xinjiang (Hao & Liu, 2012). China has deep interest in the security of the Indian Ocean Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCS), and strongly supports a multilateral framework of SCO as a vehicle for bringing a complete regional peace and security (Khan & Ahmed, 2105).

Another Chinese interest in SCO is the suppression of terrorism and separatism. The secessionist feelings in the western regions like Xinjiang are

perceived as very serious internal threat to Chinese national integrity. The prospects of emergence of violence by discontented population and domestic protests in collaboration or abetment of transnational movements are threats which China does not want to face at the critical juncture of economic transformation. The post 9/11 scenario helped Chinese tremendously to get this Xinjiang group included in the list of US declared terrorist organization. The separatist movements in the western region have been controlled through iron fist strategy. However this does not make Chinese complacent of situation therefore antiterrorism activities stay very high on list of organizational priorities.

The four Central Asian States had capricious start after independence. These states were situated in the most unexplored and under developed region in the world. But at the same time region was under influence of two great powers; Russia and China. The internal turmoil, disorder, interstate rivalries and presence of open conflict on the south were few serious challenges faced by the fledgling states in early 90s. Despite many internal policy differences, the central Asian states have followed multi-vectored balancing strategy; first, between Russia and China, Second, central Asian members of SCO and west. This allows central Asian leaders to take part in generating regional approaches to cooperation and security on an equal basis with the larger regional powers—an opportunity that Central Asia has not had before in modern times (Maksutov, 2006). Their own line of thinking enables them to off-set subordinate role which leaders of these states were obliged to practice in pre independence days. Despite being part of SCO, central Asian states have maintained their relations with outside world like EU, OSCE as deemed appropriate by their political leadership. Provision of military facilities by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to US led coalition in 2001 is a case in point. These states have been continuously receiving Western military aid for military reforms, intelligence gathering and improvement in interoperability (Oliker & Shlapak, 2005). From security standpoint, the major achievement is formal delineation and cooling off of their frontiers with China and Russia. The main security focus of Central Asian states has been new emerging threats and combating terrorism, insurgencies and drug trafficking. With this background, development of anti-terrorism and extremism cooperative strategies has made the real difference which resulted in following:

- Greater Chinese and Russian economic support
- Chinese and Russian help to overcome bilateral frictions
- Framework for transnational aspects of the problem

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- Supplying vehicles and communications equipment along with and other technical support for combating terrorism from both China and Russia.

The fact that these outcomes can be handled in multilateral framework presents a great leap forward by itself. The issue of cross border drug trafficking from Afghanistan has gained prominence only through SCO threatening national security of regional states. The northern drug rout emanating from Afghanistan passes through CARs before entering into Russia for onward ferrying drugs to Europe. This has forced all regional states to cooperate for saving their future generations.

SCO and Regional Security

The functions of any well-established regional organization can be divided in four broader categories; firstly, Avoiding, containing or sublimating armed conflicts, secondly, constructive military cooperation between member states, thirdly, promotion of security sector reform and democracy or good governance and finally, combating of non-traditional security threats (Bailes & Cottey, 2006). From conflict avoidance standpoint, it can be stated that SCO including its predecessor 'Shanghai Five' both managed to reduce possibilities of many open conflict between its member states by affording free engagement in the field of security through cooperative mechanisms. While the security environment of the region may have been affected through shifting of power balances, yet SCO as an institutional arrangement has provided a new channel which did not exist previously.

SCO has two permanent coordinating bodies; Secretariat for administrative support and Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) which deals in as the name implies fighting against terrorist activities within the member states. Member states conduct regular joint ant-terrorist exercises, share information by intelligence updates through RATS mechanism and collaborate in the field of anti-drug activities (Iqbal, 2015) as well. Despite increasing military cooperation amongst member states, SCO does not work as military alliance like NATO as few member states already have Collective Security mechanism in place like Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Regional security dynamics is continuously evolving over the last two decades. The fateful events of 9/11 had serious repercussions on the region. US attack on Afghanistan under the guise of uprooting terrorist nurseries had spill over effects on the CARs. These states felt threatened by the terrorism stemming from neighbouring Afghanistan (Wu & Landsdowne, 2008). US war on terror temporarily improved bilateral relations between two arch rivals (USA

& Russia) and former had cooperation from CARs in the shape of air bases for launching air strikes and other ancillary needs. However the cooperation short lived as Russia and China voiced concerns over the prolonged presence of US forces in the central Asian region. The member states reiterated through a joint statement about their commitment to fight and uproot terrorism through SCO rather than extra regional forces. China was prime mover of this resolution as its vulnerability was connected to its internal security of Xinjiang region having border contiguity of about 3000 Km with central Asian States. Political instability in CARs and looming threat of 'spill over effect' of Afghan turmoil forced China to accelerate need for security cooperation within SCO.

Despite the noble intentions and resolve to fight against the 'three evils', there is lack of coordination and harmony between SCO partner states to further cooperation in fields of security & military. Decision to participate or otherwise in annual joint exercise code name 'Peace Mission' which is highly acclaimed achievement of the organization is made at individual member state on the basis of principle of voluntariness (Song, 2014).

The latest geo-political developments in the region have long term repercussions. Lifting of economic sanctions from Iran, killing of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mansur, US nod for India to enter in the esteemed Nuclear Supply Group (NSG), opening of India-Iran-Afghanistan trade route from central Asia and Panama gate scandal are not routine occurrences. USA is believed to be behind most of these activities. The timings for execution of these actions are very important. Pakistani and foreign press carried stories of Mullah Mansur being hosted by Iranian authorities in Iran for mediating a deal for Americans allowing US to station troops permanently in Afghanistan. The deal could not be struck due to some unknown reasons thus Mullah Mansur was killed for non-compliance of US desires. Permanent basing of US forces in the neighbourhood of China, Russia and Pakistan affords flexibility of operations in the region. It is perceived that a regional alliance/block consisting on India, Iran, Afghanistan and USA is in the offing and would be announced soon. The main purpose of this quadrangular block will be to check southward extension of SCO. The expansion of SCO has will become a tumbling block against the greater designs of USA in the region. The expanded existence of SCO will in fact augment regional security and stability which is the need of the hour for his part of the world.

SCO and Regional Prosperity

SCO framework does not deal with regional security matters in isolation. The economic globalization has forced organization to envisage free trade and movements of goods within the political bound of member states. The

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interrelatedness of security with economy needs no explanation. Improved regional security will positively impact prevalent poverty level in the region. Improved economic conditions will gradually remove the grounds of the 'three evils' (terrorism, separatism and extremism). In 2003, a special programme for cooperation in energy, information, telecommunications, environmental protection and the comprehensive utilization of natural resources was launched by SCO. The operation in trade and investment facilitation was with an emphasis on building infrastructure such as roads and railways and harmonizing customs and tariffs (Haas & Putten, 2007). The two main founding members, China and Russia are true economic strength of the organization. The burgeoning economy of China makes it a world economic power whereas Russia stands out because of her huge energy resources. The central Asian member states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan control approximately 40% of the world oil and natural gas resources (Haas & Putten, 2007). The cumulative GDP of all member states including Pakistan and India is about \$15.323 Trillion as shown in the table. The economic strength of the organization will get a boost when Pakistan and India formally join the organization in end-2016. India is world's 9th largest economy and is maintaining an average GDP growth rate of slightly over 7% per annum (Statista.com, 2016) since last many years. Apart from economic expansion and strengthening, the new members will provide political, industrial, military support and offer many other opportunities to the organization. The expanded regional connectivity through infrastructure development (China Pakistan Economic Corridor - CPEC) will pave way for greatly increasing volume of trade among the members states (Brohi, 2015). The Chinese conceived 'One Belt One Road' project passes through Pakistan's newly developed western port Gwadar. The planned facilities in Gwadar area will convert Pakistan into regional energy corridor for SCO members for oil trade. Gwadar port's road connectivity with Kashgar (Western city of China) being shortest route has great economic potential and promise. Facilities like Special Trade & Economic Zones along the planned network of roads, railway and pipe lines will facilitate huge job creation which will in turn help in reducing poverty in the region in general and Pakistan in particular. The road infrastructure will connect land locked CARs with sea thus will provide trans-continental connectivity. Concurrently, Gwadar will become a gateway to Middle East and Africa for majority of SCO members. This also has another hidden opportunity for Pakistan's foreign policy. This offers a good leverage and a bargaining handle to get free from western political clutches and economic coercions. The regional reconnection through economic integration and interdependencies will also offer possibility of peaceful conflict resolution which is espoused by SCO as one of its policy objective. The Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline project with extension of scope - China becoming a stakeholder may witness progress. This will help in

alleviating miseries of power starved Pakistani nation. TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan– Pakistan–India) gas pipeline project may also mature through good offices of SCO secretariat due to convergence of interest of member states.

China has been pursuing establishment of joint financial institution under SCO framework since long for undertaking developmental work. She advocates that SCO member states must have their own financial bank. She believes non-availability of funds is major hurdle in regional infrastructure development projects. Moreover, absence of on-going projects at regional level hinders inflow of money in the region from extra-regional states.

The economic activity which is about to kick start in Pakistan once the implementation of CPEC projects get underway through the broader framework of SCO, unemployment and poverty will certainly reduce. Economy has direct linkage with terrorism and crimes. The upsurge in economic activities will provide alternate means for livelihood to the people. The cumulative economic strength of member states is harbinger to the economic development and prosperity in the region.

Conclusion

SCO is an emerging international organization having wide domain of political, economic, and security cooperation amongst its member countries. As a result of institutional, political and economic development, its significance is being felt worldwide. The organisation is one of the rapidly developing centres for the world's multi-polarity. Acceptance of Pakistan and India as full members has expanded its zone of influence south towards warm waters of Indian Ocean. However, the overall success and efficacy of SCO largely depends on the bilateral relations between China and Russia being big brothers of SCO. Though US are maintaining limited presence in the region however increased US involvement in the region will pose a real challenge for this fledgling organization. The enhanced economic and military strength of the organization with induction of Pakistan and India will open new vistas of regional development, economic activity and security. From security stand point, Pakistan Armed forces especially Pakistan Army has long experience of fighting against terrorism which can be shared and utilized by SCO member states. Central Asian Republics and subcontinent cannot survive independently against common threat of terrorism. The maturing of SCO with expanding scope and popularity would discourage involvement of extra regional countries in future. It is expected that SCO will finally become a power balancing organization and would revive multi-polarity lost against US might few decade ago.

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SCO will provide a forum to the belligerent neighbours to deliberate on their conflicting issues during the side-line leaders' meetings. These opportunities can be extremely fruitful in resolving and discussing issue informally.



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