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DMITRY YEFREMENKO. TRANSFORMATION OF THE MISSION OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND NEW POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN GREATER EURASIA // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

DOI: 10.31249/rmw/2019.03.04

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Greater Eurasia, Afghan settlement, Central Asia, Indo-Pakistani relations, China, Russia.

Dmitry Yefremenko,
DSc(Politics), Deputy Director,
INION RAN

Abstract. The article examines the new tasks facing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after India and Pakistan

have joined it as full-fledged members. Prospects of peaceful settlement in Afghanistan are analyzed. Special attention is paid to relations within the Russia - India - China triangle, whose development becomes a crucial factor of the successful functioning of the SCO.

A new stage in the history of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization began in 2018 connected with its enlargement due to India and Pakistan having joined its ranks. This reason alone is enough for examining a new balance of power within the SCO, a change of its tasks, and effectiveness of its functioning. No less important is the strengthening of cooperation between the Central Asian countries, which especially concerns the new leadership of Uzbekistan. Finally, new prospects for the transformation of the SCO activity are connected with developments around Afghanistan, including the possibility of the withdrawal of the military contingents of the U.S.A. and NATO.

At the initial stage of its existence and functioning, the SCO successfully coped with building an institutional framework for settlement border issues between China and the states, which became independent after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Geographically, the SCO activity was focused on Central Asia - a strategically important region full of threats to political stability, as well as the emergence of serious rivalry between Russia and China. Their joint work at the SCO has greatly contributed to the prevention of the conflict of interests of the two great powers. Further on, grounds emerged to talk of the division of labor and of mutually complementary functions: Russia makes the main contribution to maintenance of the security of the region, whereas China leads in the spheres of trade, investments and infrastructure development.

Having laid the main emphasis on its work on security problems in Central Asia the SCO after 2005 devoted much attention to new threats connected with the so-called color

revolutions. The technology of the outside support of mass protests aimed at overthrowing ruling regimes has repeatedly been used by the United States and other Western countries in the post-Soviet area. However, the use of this technology in Central Asia has not given geopolitical dividends to the West. Even Kyrgyzstan, which lived through political turmoil in 2005 and 2010, has ultimately decided to come to a closer rapprochement with its traditional partners – Russia and China. In Uzbekistan, an attempt of political destabilization in 2005 was thwarted, and following it the government of the country decided to discontinue U.S. presence on the airbase Khanabad. The adoption of the Astana declaration on July 5, 2005, calling on the United States to determine the deadline of the withdrawal of its bases from Central Asia was of principal importance. At that time the U.S. request to receive the observer's status at the SCO was turned down. In 2014 American military officials terminated their use of the Kyrgyz airbase Manas as a transit point (up to the year 2009 it was used as an airbase by the anti-terrorist coalition headed by the U.S.).

The SCO countries did not have the task to set up a military-political alliance and they have succeeded to achieve a substantial progress in ensuring security to the Central Asian region and curbing destabilizing outside interference. Thereby favorable prerequisites have been formed for the development of economic cooperation in the region, although the SCO itself has not become the very format within whose framework simpler conditions of mutual trade could be reached and investment activity stimulated.

During the 2010th major changes were taking place in the post-Soviet area, and also on the entire Eurasian continent. The newly-emerging structures and initiatives embedded the SCO countries in a new network of economic cooperation and mutual dependence. Among the major developments of that period were the transformation of the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan into the Eurasian Economic Union (with subsequently

joining Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU), the proclamation of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative by China’s Chairman Xi Jinping, and the decision of China’s and Russia’s leaders to link this initiative and integration processes within the EAEU framework. These processes have been interpreted by Russian experts as a major geopolitical transformation, that is, the beginning of the formation of the macro region “Greater Eurasia” [Karaganov, 2016; Yefremenko, 2017]. In June 2016 President Putin of Russia spoke at the Petersburg Economic Forum on the prospect of forming a Greater Eurasian Partnership, which might become an outward integration contour toward the EAEU. According to President Putin, apart from the EAEU, among the participants in the Greater Eurasian Partnership can be the CIS countries, China, India, Pakistan, Iran and other countries concerned [Putin prizval..., 2016].

It can be seen that the geographical area of the Greater Eurasian Partnership practically coincides with the territory of the states which are full-fledged SCO members, or those with the observer status. In this context the SCO could be regarded as one of the most serious aspirant to the role of an international organization capable to regulate the formation of Greater Eurasia. Undoubtedly, the development prospects of the SCO are influenced by the general situation of international politics, including the growing confrontation between the leading world powers. In its Strategy of National Security endorsed by Donald Trump in December 2017 the United States proclaimed China and Russia the main leading world powers, throwing a challenge to American might, influence and interests [National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017]. Considering China and Russia as a threat and in its turn, threatening the crucial interests of these countries, the United States contributes to a further strengthening of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership. This partnership in its scope and tasks can come ever closer to an informal alliance, whose conditions and stability are not regulated by a framework interstate agreement.

Evidently, China and Russia had strong leverage on other parties to use the SCO for a more active opposition to American pressure. However, the leaders of the SCO countries preferred another option, enabling to make the SCO a more multifaceted organization capable to take into account a broad range of interests and project stabilizing influence far beyond the boundaries of Central Asia. This choice seems rather clear-sighted, inasmuch as the SCO helps draw other countries and regions to a greater format of geopolitical transformations in which India and Pakistan are going to play a very important role, along with China, Russia and Central Asian countries. Russia and China have agreed that the SCO will not play the role of a direct opponent to the alliances led by the United States.

Stronger cooperation between Central Asian countries is of great importance for determining the future development of the SCO. The decisive role in these processes belongs to the new economic and political strategy of Uzbekistan. Due to the efforts of its President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a considerable part of border problems with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have been settled. The Uzbek-Tajik relations, which were previously very strained, have gradually improved. Considerable progress has been reached in the most painful water and hydrotechnical problem for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Work has become more active in the construction of transport corridors in Central Asia and implementation of infrastructural and energy projects. Uzbekistan initiated the setting up of the Consultative Council of the heads of state of Central Asia.

The leaders of the SCO countries at their summit in Qingdao on June 9–10, 2018, expressed firm support to the efforts of the Central Asian countries to develop cooperation in political, economic cultural-humanitarian, and other spheres. A positive characteristic was given to the first consultative meeting of the heads of states of Central Asia (Astana, March 15, 2018). Thus the Qingdao Declaration elucidated the attitude of Russia and China to the new format of integration of Central Asian countries, in

which Turkmenistan also takes part, keeping its neutral status. Beijing and Moscow examine important novelties in the interstate relations of the Central Asian countries as compatible with the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, integration processes within the EAEU, and possibilities of cooperation with the SCO framework.

In view of the expansion of the SCO, the security of Central Asia does not lose its significance. But whereas previously Afghanistan could be viewed as an external factor for Central Asian security, now a settlement of the conflict in that country is of crucial importance for the further existence of the SCO. Except the U.S.A., all foreign participants in the Afghan settlement are either full-fledged SCO members or have the observer status (Iran). Of course, difference of interests between individual SCO member-countries may, and possibly will, be expressed regarding concrete political and military parameters of Afghan settlement, the role of the "Taliban" movement in this process, and also U.S. presence in Afghanistan. The influence of Indo-Pakistani contradictions on the Afghan conflict may also cause certain apprehension.

Further on, security in Central Asia and the establishment of peace in Afghanistan will be viewed more and more often by the SCO countries not as the two separate, but mutually connected processes, and as a single process. The effective solution of tasks involved in the struggle against the penetration in the region of international terrorist organizations and network structures, growing organized crime, narco-traffic, distribution of extremist ideas and distorted interpretations of Islam calls for a comprehensive approach.

Russia is making a considerable contribution to the search for Afghan settlement with the support of the SCO countries. Despite the official ban of "Taliban" in Russia, Russian diplomacy proceeds from a realistic assessment of the developments in Afghanistan, maintaining a dialogue with the basic groups exerting influence on the military-political situation in that country. The prospects of the development of the inter-

Afghan dialogue in the Moscow format, along with the course of President Donald Trump toward the cessation or radical curtailment of direct American participation in the conflicts in the Middle East have induced the United States to step-up its own diplomatic efforts. Under U.S. pressure the government of Ashraf Ghani thwarted the negotiation process in the multilateral Moscow format throughout 2018, despite the constant deterioration of the situation of security and increase of the part of Afghan territory uncontrolled by the Ghani government. As a result, it was American diplomats who entered into direct negotiation with the "Taliban" early in 2019, and President Ghani left aside [U.S., Taliban...] was forced to remind his fellow-countrymen of the deplorable plight of his predecessor Najibullah executed by Talibs in 1996.

Judging by available information, the main outlines of possible settlement may look as follows: the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan in exchange of the Talibs' guarantees not to protect terrorist groups in the country's territory and not to cooperate with the IS. Although it is supposed that in order to reach an agreement within the framework of these negotiations on the political future of Afghanistan, the present Afghan government should participate in the procedure, in actual fact the subject of the matter is Washington's readiness to reconcile with the dominating role of the "Taliban" in future Afghan policy.

It is evident that the situation in Afghanistan becomes a serious challenge to the SCO, too. The slowdown of the inter-Afghan dialogue in the Moscow format does not at all mean that Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and other SCO member-countries have no more opportunities to influence the situation in Afghanistan. Rather, it is possible to talk of a temporary pause, when the question on the withdrawal of the U.S. troops is agreed on directly between the U.S.A and the Talibs. But even at that stage, both the Talibs and the Afghan government will be interested in broadening a dialogue with the SCO (including Iran,

which has the status of observer-country at the SCO). When the withdrawal of U.S. troops begins, the security vacuum will increase in the country, and the authorities which will actually control a greater part of Afghan territory will inevitably step up their interaction with the SCO leading countries and, possibly, with the entire organization. Thus, the SCO will face the task of a broad assistance (except direct military interference) to further stabilization in Afghanistan and non-admission of the deployment of terrorist groupings (primarily those connected with the IS) on the territory of Central Asia.

Meanwhile, the Russian military-diplomatic and expert communities seriously fear the danger of a possible purposeful destabilization in Central Asia as a "concomitant result of the American withdrawal strategy." The main threat in this case may come not from the "Taliban", but from other extremist groupings, for which Afghanistan is a transit territory. Turkmenistan, which is not a member of the SCO and CSTO, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, whose state institutions remain inadequately consolidated. Nevertheless, the most realistic scenario of a complicated situation may be connected not with the transfer of "jihad" to Central Asia, but with a combination of extremism with narco-traffic, which is necessary to fight at the level of individual states and at the level of interstate coordination, particularly, greater coordination between the CSTO and SCO in the sphere of security and combat the "three evils forces." On the whole, the active role of the SCO and the coordination of positions of its member-countries become the key outside factors for the stabilization of Afghanistan itself, and the entire Central Eurasia along with it.

The expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after India and Pakistan have joined it meant a considerable increase in its political and economic weight, as well as additional interstate contradictions, which had previously a peripheral significance for the SCO. Indo-Pakistani rivalry is potentially the most serious problem, which may lead to a considerable

weakening of the SCO efficiency. However, the functioning of the organization in an enlarged composition in 2018 gives ground for cautious optimism. It is evident that in 2018 both Pakistan and India were striving to avoid the negative effect on the functioning of the SCO due to their contradictions. Perhaps, the leadership of these countries wished to show that their entry in the SCO was a serious political achievement for them, all the more so since the Indian opposition (namely, certain influential leaders of the Indian National Congress) criticized Narendra Modi for “the speedy” joining of India to the SCO as a full-fledged member. But one can also say that the new participants of the organization “have imbibed the Shanghai spirit well enough” to be able to work together along the lines drawing mutual benefit as much as possible. Of course, the hope that the Indo-Pakistani conflict lasting over seventy years may be settled in the SCO format is unrealistic. For one, India has a negative attitude to the attempts to bring about a settlement of the conflict beyond the framework of the bilateral relations. However, a simultaneous participation of both India and Pakistan in the SCO may enlarge the spheres and increase the experience of positive interaction of the two countries by creating a positive atmosphere for searching a settlement of fundamental difference between both these countries.

Russia is interested in the normalization of Indo-Pakistani relations. Having no opportunity to exert a tangible influence on this process, Moscow is forced to balance between New Delhi and Islamabad, regarding India as a number one partner. However, in the relations with this partner Moscow has sometimes to look for non-standard arguments. For example, the Russian-Pakistani joint anti-terrorist exercises in September 2017 under the code-name “Druzhba - (Friendship) - 2017” in Kashmir controlled by Islamabad was taken by India as a clear sign of Moscow’s displeasure with the intention of the Indian authorities to diversify the sources of the supplies of military

planes. As a result, India has again increased purchases of Russian military equipment.

The new situation of full-fledged and simultaneous participation of India and Pakistan in the SCO allows Moscow to move more resolutely along the road of strengthening relations with Pakistan. A considerable drawing closer of their positions on Afghanistan and worsening of relations of Russia and Pakistan with the United States create possibilities for raising their bilateral interaction to the level of advanced partnership. The political elites of Russia and Pakistan increasingly recognize that their countries' strategic interests continue to draw closer and that their friendly relations with China play a major role in it. It is also important that Pakistan supports Russia's actions in Syria, even despite the fact that this support complicates its relations with such important partner as Saudi Arabia [Ramani, 2019].

Russia is interested in broadening the access to the market of Pakistan, even despite the sad plight of the economy of that country. Interest is growing in Russia in using the Chinese-Pakistani corridor and the port of Gwadar, although due to the geographical and logistical factors, the economic effectiveness of the development of this route by a large number of Russian consignors is not yet clearly evident.

Thus, Russia will strive to use new opportunities to cooperate within the SCO framework both in order to lower the tension in Indo-Pakistani relations, and also to strengthen Russia-Pakistan partnership. However, the balancing policy will be preserved, although it will be resorted to more choosy and, perhaps, in a broader geostrategic context. Thus, it can be surmised that broader military-technical cooperation with Islamabad will be used by Moscow to warn New-Delhi against a too excessive rapprochement with the United States within the format of the four-partite dialogue (Quad). At the same time, the enthusiasm of the Indian elite with the concept of the Indo-Pacific region, and especially the prospects of cooperation with the

United States, Japan and Australia is conditioned mainly by the range of problems of Chinese-Indian relations.

The Chinese-Indian relations are also a source of problems. Russia and Central Asian states are interested in smoothing and, if possible, overcoming the existing contradictions. As is known, the former Prime-minister of Russia Yevgeny Primakov put forward an idea of a tripartite dialogue of Russia-India-China in December 1998. Despite broad initial doubts as to its success, this idea began to be broadly discussed later by the expert community, and in 2006 the first meeting of these countries' leaders took place in St. Petersburg, which contributed to the formation of the BRIC group (BRICS at present). The tri-partite interaction of Russia, India and China continues to exist today, fulfilling the role of the supporting framework for the BRICS. Equally, the significance of this tri-partite format is growing for the SCO, too, where the role of coordination between the Central Asian states is increasing simultaneously.

One can talk of two scenarios of the interaction of Russia, India and China and its influence on the SCO. The first scenario presupposes that the most positive characteristics in this triangle will be given to Russian-Chinese and Russian-Indian relations, whereas relations between China and India will be more problematic, having ups and downs. In that case the role of Russia will be to help reach workable compromises on the current SCO and BRICS agenda. If all's good and well, these three countries will be able to formulate a common position on major international problems, or timely react to some or other crisis processes in the sphere of the economy or security. The second scenario presupposes a gradual and qualitative deepening and broadening of cooperation in the RIC format based on the common assessment of geopolitical transformations in Greater Eurasia. In this case one can suppose that the SCO will later become the foundation for the formation of Great Eurasian Partnership, and Russia, India and China will jointly come to

understanding their major role in forming the common destiny of mankind.

At present, the first variant looks more realistic. Declaring the multi-vector character of its foreign policy, India is striving for the consolidation of its positions as a big power with which all leading players in international politics will wish to develop friendly relations. A number of Indian experts recommend to preserve India's participation in various multilateral formats of cooperation, inasmuch as such participation confirms its growing prestige in the international arena, and secondly, reflects the requirement for the demonstration of its presence as an influential global actor [Unnikrishnan, Purushothaman, 2019].

The functioning of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2018 gives grounds to certain optimism. The expansion of the SCO composition has not led to paralysis of the organization's work due to inner contradictions of its participants. Predictions of certain Russian observers that the organization will turn into a more pompous, but less useful organization [Gabuev, 2017], and an interest in its activity will disappear first in China and then in other Eurasian countries. During its chairmanship in the SCO China suggested a constructive agenda of work to the SCO, while continuing to implement its "One Belt, One Road initiative" and its harmonization with the integration processes within the EAEU framework. This meant for international politics a reliable continuation of work to form a polycentric world order, and for the world economy – the diversification of transport corridors and a further restructurization of the global value-added chains in favor of China and some other countries of the non-western world.

Perhaps, the efforts of the SCO countries to achieve Afghan settlement and the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO military contingents from Afghanistan connected with it were of the great importance. A sharp acceleration of these processes in the beginning of 2019 will, undoubtedly, be in the focus of attention of the further work of the SCO, just as the non-admission of a

breakthrough of the extremist and terrorist groups from northern Afghanistan to Central Asian countries. If these tasks are successfully tackled, the SCO will find itself at the forefront of important geopolitical and geo-economic transformations in Greater Eurasia.

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