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Iranian and Turkish Moves to Join Shanghai Cooperation Organization Raises Its Profile

While far from an alliance, the SCO is increasingly utilized for managing Eurasian affairs without traditional Western mechanisms and organizations.

Held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from September 15 to 16, the 2022 summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Heads of State Council demonstrated that the SCO was continuing to evolve into a viable international political congregation independent from the West.

Beginning in the early 1800s, international organizations (IOs) began to emerge as modest arbiters of European affairs. But during and after World War II, new IOs established themselves as far more prominent actors on a global scale. The United Nations (UN), the Arab League, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and several other IOs were created to manage the affairs of their member states.

After the Soviet collapse, more IOs were created to manage the independence of new states, globalization, and regional cooperation. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), created in 1991, attempted to coordinate military, economic, and political policies between post-Soviet states. The European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU), created in 1993 and 2002, respectively, bound member states more forcefully to common economic and political norms. Other IOs, like the Arctic Council (1996) and Asia Cooperation Dialogue (2002), aimed to foster broader regional cooperation.

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Most new international organizations meshed neatly with the Western-led liberal world order. But in 2001, the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formally announced, and it established itself as an exclusionary outlier. Originally [known](#) as the Shanghai Five when it was created in 1996, it included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan later joining when it evolved into the SCO in 2001.

The SCO was created partly to help coordinate a new era of peaceful relations between Moscow and Beijing and to manage their [coalescing interests](#) in Central Asian states. In addition, combatting the “[Three Evils](#)” of extremism, separatism, and terrorism were major priorities for the organization, which included data and intelligence sharing and common military drills among its member states.

Over time, the SCO began to embrace greater political and economic integration. Support for autocratic rule and limiting criticism of human rights violations set it apart from other Western-aligned IOs, with the SCO also overseeing the [growth](#) of joint energy projects, the fostering of trade agreements, and the introduction of the [SCO Interbank Consortium](#) in 2005 “to organize a mechanism for financing and banking services in investment projects supported by the governments of the SCO member states.”

But the organization’s most pressing vocation was facilitating a multipolar world order. Investing in an independent forum for economic, political, and military affairs [outside](#) of Western influence became a key component of Russian and Chinese attempts to reduce Western power in global affairs.

Russia and China have also developed complementary mechanisms to the SCO, which have helped decentralize its mission. Following the [blacklisting](#) of several Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) in 2014, for example, [the Kremlin approved the creation](#) of the System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) to replicate SWIFT and introduced the National Payment Card System (now known as Mir), while China created the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS).

These initiatives even proved attractive to states that were more aligned with the Western-led global order. India and Pakistan began SCO accession talks in 2015 and officially [joined](#) the organization in 2017. Despite relatively positive relations with the West, India and Pakistan have both faced Western criticism over human rights and [democratic backsliding](#) in recent years. India's introduction of platforms like [RuPay in 2012](#) and Unified Payments Interface, which eroded the traditional dominance of Visa and Mastercard in the country, also complemented SCO's attempts to reduce Western economic preeminence globally.

At the 2022 summit of the SCO Heads of State Council, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [reiterated that the SCO was not an anti-U.S. or anti-NATO](#) alliance. But the organization's original motive to create a multipolar world was echoed in its Samarkand Declaration, the final [declaration](#) of this meeting, and continues to conflict with Washington's attempts to maintain the U.S.-led world order. According to the declaration, the member states "confirm[ed] their commitment to [the] formation of a more representative, democratic, just and multipolar world order."

This core stratagem continues to appeal to countries around the world. Alongside the leaders of its eight member states, the SCO invited [the presidents](#) of Belarus, Mongolia, and Iran as official observers to the recent summit. Having started its accession process in 2021, Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with the SCO to [join](#) the institution by April 2023.

The SCO would likely alleviate Iran's sense of economic isolation stemming from Western sanctions, a [sentiment shared by Iranian officials](#) at the summit and something that was also [noted back in 2007](#). Belarus has also found itself under [increasing sanctions](#) in recent years and [enhanced its accession procedures to join the SCO](#) in Samarkand.

The presidents of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Turkey were also [invited](#) to the SCO summit as special guests, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announcing that his country would [seek](#) full membership to the SCO. [In 2012](#), Erdoğan joked to Russian President Vladimir Putin about abandoning Turkey's EU aspirations if Russia would allow

them into the SCO. Turkey's renewed attempt comes at a time when its ties with the rest of the Western world are increasingly [strained](#) and could instigate other NATO states, and potentially the EU states, to join the SCO as well.

The SCO has also established strong relations with other IOs. Representatives from ASEAN, the UN, the Russian-dominated CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) were invited to the 2022 summit. Notably absent were any representatives from the EU or NATO. Meanwhile, in 2005, [the U.S. was rejected from gaining observer status](#), solidifying the SCO's status as a bulwark against U.S. influence in Eurasia.

Like all major international organizations, the SCO faces systemic obstacles that hinder its effectiveness and long-term viability. At the recent summit in Uzbekistan, China's Xi Jinping was welcomed to the country by his Uzbek counterpart, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Putin, however, [was greeted by Uzbek Prime Minister](#) Abdulla Aripov, highlighting Russia's strained relations with many of the former Soviet states and the growing strength of Beijing over Moscow. Unlike in the CSTO and the EAEU, Russia is not the dominant actor in the SCO, and will increasingly have to contend with China's predominant authority.

Disputes also remain between SCO member states. India and Pakistan, for example, are afflicted with an [ongoing struggle](#) over Kashmir. China and India have their own [territorial disputes](#) and have engaged in minor violent skirmishes since India joined the SCO. Additionally, deadly clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan [erupted during the recent summit](#), while admitting [Armenia and Azerbaijan](#), both of which are SCO dialogue partners, will only further increase the number of members currently locked in their own territorial disputes.

But the SCO has consistently portrayed itself as a vehicle to supervise these issues. The leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan [met for talks](#) during the summit to assuage tensions. And since 2002, the [Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure \(RATS\)](#) has encouraged military coordination between member states, with the Indian and Pakistani militaries [conducting](#) RATS drills in 2021. More drills between them are planned [for October](#), and while they are aimed primarily at countering unrest from Afghanistan, they

are also part of SCO's attempts to manage relations of member states.

China and Russia have also agreed to “[synergize](#)” the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the EAEU to help mitigate possible tension between them, with both Xi and Putin meeting on the [sidelines](#) of the 2022 SCO summit and pledging to respect each other's core interests.

The SCO member states clearly believe the organization can, and has greater potential to, effectively manage their concerns and regional affairs, and its appeal continues to grow. Besides the additional SCO [dialogue partners](#) (Cambodia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were [granted the status of SCO dialogue partners](#) at the 2022 SCO summit. Myanmar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Maldives were also [granted](#) the status of dialogue partners.

Russian and Chinese influence will fall as more members join, which will also dilute consensus within the organization. But it remains a Beijing and Moscow-led initiative to manage world affairs and to demonstrate that the “international community” is not just the West. With almost [half of the world's population](#) and a [quarter of the global GDP](#), the SCO is increasingly becoming a representative of the Global South.

By pooling together other IOs into an umbrella forum, the SCO can further its goal of challenging the wider Western-dominated IO ecosystem and prevent Washington from setting the global agenda. This will require the constructive management of Russian and Chinese ambitions and the increasingly complex needs of more member states.

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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