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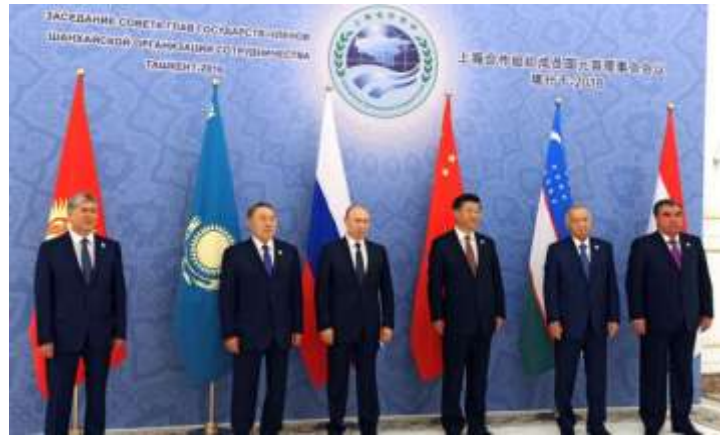
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Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Story of Success and Expansion

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Founded in 2001, the SCO is a political and security organization comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Military cooperation between the member states involves intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism operations in Central Asia and joint work against cyber terrorism, among other things.

This year the Organization marks two anniversaries: the 15th Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and 20 years of the Shanghai Five, the organization all SCO members, except for Uzbekistan, had been members of. After the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, the Shanghai Five was renamed to become the SCO. India, Iran and Pakistan were admitted as observers in 2005. The 2010 SCO summit lifted the moratorium on new membership, paving the way for expansion of the grouping.

The 2016 summit took place on June 24 in Tashkent. SCO leaders signed the Tashkent Declaration and the 2016-2020 Action Plan to raise the regional cooperation to a qualitatively new level.

The leaders reaffirmed the support for the Silk Road Economic Belt, a regional development initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 that seeks to boost regional economic activities by linking China with Europe through Central and Western Asia by inland routes. The SCO members will jointly construct the Silk Road Economic Belt, which they said, can be one of the tools for facilitating regional economic cooperation.

The Organization will implement joint transportation infrastructure construction projects, push for the building of international transportation corridors and hubs that link Asia and Europe, and deepen cooperation in areas including economy and trade, energy, investment, agriculture, culture, science, technology and environment protection.

The SCO called for joint and consolidated efforts to deal with the growing threat of international terrorism and extremism and address their root causes. The members will continue working on the preparation of the SCO Convention on Combating Extremism, which will be an important part of the legal basis of the cooperation in this regard. The leaders also pledged concerted work in combating transnational organized crime.

The participants emphasized that activities of the SCO are not directed against other states or international organizations, and that they are willing to develop contacts and cooperation with other regional and global organizations and countries that share the goals of the SCO Charter. In particular, the participation of Russia and China in BRICS provides a solid ground for boosting the cooperation between the two international groups.

The summit stressed the importance of enhancing mechanisms of global governance based on the UN Charter to achieve a fairer and more equitable world order. The SCO members said they are committed to further strengthening the central coordinating role of the UN in international relations, and support consultations in search of a «package solution» to the reform of the UN Security Council.

The 2016 event is a milestone in the history of the Organization. Two more countries – India and Pakistan – are a step away from joining the Shanghai Cooperation organization to make it a global (Trans-Asian) political structure.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain stamped their signatures on the respective memorandum.

The document lays down the conditions for Indian and Pakistani participation in the organization's global budget, their fees for its permanent agencies and other details. The formal process of joining the SCO as a full member will take some months. Both countries are expected to become full members by the next meeting at Astana in 2017.

Thanks to their integration in the SCO, the two neighboring countries, both nuclear powers and rivals that have clashed in several wars since 1948, have a new place to smooth out their differences.

Expanding from six to eight full-fledged members, the SCO has made an important step to bring together three largest and most powerful Eurasian states and four nuclear powers. With the integration of new members, the group will unite 50 percent of Eurasian territory, 45 percent of the population on the planet and 19 percent of global GDP.

«Indeed, as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization expands its areas of operation and its membership through the participation of the powerful countries I have just mentioned, it turns into a very powerful international association that commands respect and is relevant both in the region and worldwide», said Russian President Putin.

The India-Pakistan admission may also help improve strained ties between India and Pakistan by opening another communication channel. No doubt the membership will improve the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan with Russia, China and other members interested in their rapprochement. The territorial disputes and nuclear arms will remain, but the very fact of being united in the same organization pursuing common goals will help them start a dialogue. For instance, all SCO members are interested in addressing the problem of Afghanistan. India and Pakistan can make a big contribution to finding proper solutions.

The admission of India and Pakistan comes at a time when the two nations are seeking greater engagement in the Eurasian region, which is one of the most strategically important areas of the world. Moreover, Central Asian countries are rich in hydrocarbons. This makes them particularly attractive for energy-starved India and Pakistan. Both New Delhi and Islamabad are pushing ahead with infrastructure projects aimed at deepening their connectivity to the region. While India is developing the Chabahar port in Iran in the hope that it would grant it land access to Afghanistan and Eurasia bypassing Pakistan, Islamabad is resting its hopes on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a mammoth multibillion dollar Chinese plan to develop Pakistani infrastructure and broaden economic links.

Iran is next to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Tehran has long sought membership in the SCO but the group kept the country waiting until it reached an agreement with the US, Europe and other key international players on its nuclear program. With the

addition of Iran, the group would control around a fifth of the world's oil and represent nearly a half of the global population.

The Organization has great prospects for the future. Participation of the SCO countries and CIS (the Community of Independent States) countries in the process to align the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt could be a prelude to the formation of large Eurasian partnership, Russian President Vladimir Putin said when speaking at the meeting of the SCO summit.

«Good prospects open up with the launch of negotiations on the alignment of the Eurasian union and China's Silk Road Economic Belt. I am convinced that involving all SCO states and also the CIS countries in this integration process could be a prelude to the formation of large Eurasian partnership», the President emphasized.

The Russian leader noted that the countries of South-East Asia show interest in cooperation with the SCO in economic matters, which was discussed at the recent ASEAN Summit in Sochi.

According to Vladimir Putin, financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank for Infrastructure Investments and BRICS Bank could contribute to the successful implementation of economic projects within the SCO.

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Over the 15 years of its existence, the SCO has become a consolidated, full-fledged, and very influential international association independent from the influence of the United States. The successful and expanding SCO offers an alternative to an outdated vision of a unipolar world dominated by Washington.