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Cooperation among the SCO member states in the field of regional and national security: political challenges and prospects

Specialty 5.5.4 — International Relations, Global and Regional Studies

ABSTRACT

of the dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Political Sciences

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Relevance of the Research Topic

Since the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), cooperation in the field of regional and national security has remained one of the principal areas of interaction among its member states. Within the Organisation, a legal framework and cooperation mechanisms have been established to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism. Afghanistan-related issues and international information security have also become part of the cooperation agenda. The transnational nature of contemporary security threats requires multilateral coordination among member states and the reconciliation of their national interests in order to maintain regional security.

The enlargement of the SCO over the past decade is of particular importance for the development of its security cooperation. Since 2017, India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus have joined the Organisation. As a result, the number of member states has increased from six to ten, and the Organisation's geographical scope has expanded considerably. At the same time, the structure of national interests and political priorities of the member states in the field of security has changed. Enlargement has presented the SCO with new challenges in coordinating the positions of its members and integrating new members into existing cooperation mechanisms.

One of the principal political challenges facing SCO cooperation in the context of enlargement is the coordination of member states' national interests while maintaining the principle of consensus. This principle ensures the participation of all member states in decision-making. However, differences in their interests and political priorities may complicate the development of agreed positions on specific security issues. The nature of these difficulties depends on the issues under consideration and the degree to which

the interests of the participating states coincide. It is therefore particularly important to examine the capacity of existing SCO institutions to ensure the stability of cooperation and adapt to changes in the structure of member states' interests.

To identify the political challenges and prospects of SCO cooperation, the study examines three areas of security: combating terrorism, separatism and extremism; Afghanistan-related issues; and international information security. All three areas became part of the Organisation's agenda before its first enlargement in 2017, but they differ in their institutional foundations and forms of interaction. Permanent specialised mechanisms and joint activities have been established to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism. Cooperation on Afghanistan-related issues is based primarily on political coordination and the activities of the SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group. In the field of international information security, an intergovernmental legal framework and expert-level cooperation mechanisms have been developed. Comparing these areas makes it possible to determine how differences in national interests affect cooperation in regional and national security following SCO enlargement.

The scientific and practical relevance of this research lies in the need to assess the political challenges and prospects for the development of SCO security cooperation after enlargement. The study seeks to identify the relationship between the national interests of member states, the principle of consensus and the institutional effectiveness of cooperation. An analysis of the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation makes it possible to identify the conditions for maintaining its stability, the SCO's capacity for institutional adaptation and the limitations on the further development of cooperation in

regional and national security.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research is to identify how similarities and differences in member states' national interests in the field of security, in the context of SCO enlargement, affect the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation, as well as to determine the conditions and prospects for the further development of SCO security cooperation.

To achieve this aim, the following research objectives are established:

1. To identify the theoretical foundations for analysing the relationship between member states' national interests, the enlargement of international organisations, decision-making rules and the institutional effectiveness of cooperation.

2. To analyse the formation and development of security cooperation among SCO member states and identify its institutional foundations, principal mechanisms and forms of interaction in the three areas of security under consideration.

3. To compare the national interests and political positions of the ten SCO member states in the three areas of security under consideration, based on national strategic and policy documents.

4. To identify changes in the structure of member states' security interests during SCO enlargement in 2017–2024 and examine how these changes were reflected in the Organisation's cooperation up to and including 2025.

5. To compare the institutional effectiveness of cooperation in the three areas of security and determine how SCO enlargement and differences in member states' national interests affect the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of

cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation.

6. To analyse the political challenges and institutional limitations of SCO security cooperation and assess the conditions for its further development.

Object of the Research

The object of this research is cooperation among SCO member states in the field of security.

Subject of the Research

The subject of this research is the political conditions for coordinating member states' national interests in the field of security and the institutional effectiveness of their cooperation in the context of SCO enlargement.

Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis is that the impact of SCO enlargement on the institutional effectiveness of security cooperation depends on the degree to which member states' interests coincide on specific issues, the possibilities for coordinating their positions under consensus-based decision-making, and the institutional foundations established in each area before enlargement.

Where member states' interests coincide to a relatively high degree and stable cooperation mechanisms are in place, the inclusion of new member states is accompanied by greater institutional continuity. Where national interests differ substantially and cooperation mechanisms are less developed, additional difficulties arise in coordinating positions and implementing joint decisions. The nature of these difficulties varies across specific areas of security.

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of the Research

The research is primarily based on the institutional approach. The works of R. O. Keohane, R. Axelrod and K. A. Oye are used to explain the conditions for multilateral cooperation among states with differing national interests. Studies by M. Kahler, D. J. Blake and O. L. Payton provide a basis for examining how the number of participants and decision-making rules affect the coordination of member states' positions within international organisations. The works of T. Gutner, A. Thompson, J. Tallberg, T. Sommerer and R. Lall provide a basis for analysing the institutional effectiveness of international organisations and the relationship between their formal structures and the results of their activities.

The research employs comparative, institutional and historical methods, as well as qualitative content analysis. The comparative method is used to examine the national interests and political positions of the ten SCO member states and to compare the institutional effectiveness of cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism, addressing Afghanistan-related issues and ensuring international information security. The institutional method is applied to analyse the principle of consensus, SCO bodies and cooperation mechanisms. The historical method is used to trace the development of security cooperation from 2001 to 2025, taking into account the Organisation's enlargement in 2017–2024. Qualitative content analysis is applied to the study of official documents of the member states and the SCO.

The empirical basis of the research consists of national security strategies and concepts, foreign policy documents, legislative acts and official statements of member states, as well as conventions, agreements, declarations, strategies, cooperation programmes and materials issued by SCO bodies. These sources are used to compare

the national interests of member states and assess the institutional effectiveness of cooperation according to three criteria: the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation.

Scientific Novelty of the Research

The scientific novelty of this research consists of the following:

1. A theoretical framework has been developed for analysing SCO security cooperation, in which member states' national interests, the enlargement of the Organisation, the principle of consensus and institutional effectiveness are examined within a single analytical approach. Member states' security interests are defined in terms of their perceptions of threats, political priorities, objectives and approaches to achieving them, as well as their needs for multilateral cooperation. Institutional effectiveness is assessed according to three criteria: the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation.

2. A systematic analysis has been conducted of the formation and development of SCO security cooperation, identifying the institutional foundations of three areas: combating terrorism, separatism and extremism; Afghanistan-related issues; and international information security. It has been established that forms of multilateral cooperation existed in all three areas before the first enlargement, although the development of their legal frameworks, specialised mechanisms and practical interaction differed considerably.

3. Based on national security strategies, national security concepts, foreign policy

documents and specialised policy documents of the ten member states, a comparison of their national interests and political positions in the three areas of security has been conducted using a common set of indicators. Similarities and differences have been identified in threat perceptions, political priorities, objectives and approaches to achieving them, as well as in the need for multilateral cooperation.

4. Changes in the structure of member states' security interests resulting from SCO enlargement in 2017–2024 have been identified. Following the accession of India and Pakistan, interests related to South Asian security became more prominent within the Organisation. Iran's accession increased the representation of interests related to West Asian security. The accession of Belarus broadened the geographical scope of the interests represented within the Organisation. The nature of these changes varies depending on the particular area of security.

5. By comparing the institutional foundations of the three areas of security before enlargement with the results of cooperation after enlargement, the conditions affecting institutional effectiveness have been identified. It has been established that the formulation of agreed policies remains possible in all three areas after enlargement, while the most significant differences are observed in the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation. Areas in which stable working procedures and regular interaction existed before enlargement have demonstrated greater institutional continuity following the inclusion of new member states.

6. The opportunities and limitations of the institutional adaptation of SCO cooperation with ten member states have been identified. It has been established that the

conditions for integrating new members into existing forms of interaction vary according to the institutional foundations of each area of security. Institutional decisions adopted in 2025 have expanded the organisational framework for cooperation. The Universal Centre for Countering Security Challenges and Threats, which includes the Information Security Centre, creates additional conditions for specialised cooperation, although its actual effectiveness requires further assessment. Cooperation on Afghanistan-related issues continues to face limitations related to the functioning of cooperation mechanisms in distinct phases and the practical implementation of cooperation.

Main Propositions Submitted for Defence

1. A comparison of the national interests of the ten SCO member states shows that the degree to which their interests coincide varies across specific areas of security. Membership in the same organisation does not imply identical political priorities or a willingness to cooperate on all issues. Nevertheless, differences in threat perceptions and national priorities do not preclude overlapping interests on particular security issues. Therefore, the possibilities for coordinating positions within the SCO depend on the structure of member states' interests and the nature of the issue under consideration.

2. Before the SCO's first enlargement in 2017, different institutional foundations of cooperation had developed in the three areas of security under consideration. Cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism was based on a legal framework, permanent mechanisms and joint activities. Cooperation on Afghanistan-related issues relied primarily on political coordination and the activities of the Contact Group, whose functioning was less stable. In the field of international

information security, intergovernmental agreements and expert-level mechanisms were in place. These differences created varying conditions for institutional continuity following the enlargement of the Organisation.

3. SCO enlargement in 2017–2024 changed the structure of member states' interests and increased the number of participants in joint decision-making. Under the principle of consensus, the results of coordination depend on the nature of the specific security issue and the degree to which states' positions coincide. The failure to adopt a joint document at the meeting of defence ministers in Qingdao in June 2025 indicates difficulties in reaching agreement on a particular politically sensitive issue, but does not prove an overall decline in the Organisation's effectiveness. The adoption of the Tianjin Declaration in September 2025 confirms that the enlarged SCO retains the capacity to coordinate the positions of its member states.

4. SCO cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism is characterised by a relatively high degree of institutional continuity. Overlapping interests among member states make it possible to maintain agreed policies and adopt joint policy documents. The activities of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure ensure the stability of specialised mechanisms, while the participation of new member states in joint activities confirms the continuation of practical cooperation. The institutional foundations established before enlargement facilitate the integration of new members and create conditions for further adaptation of cooperation.

5. Following SCO enlargement, the possibility of coordinating member states' political positions on Afghanistan-related issues has been maintained. However, the formulation of agreed policies is not accompanied by a comparable degree of stability in

cooperation mechanisms and practical interaction. The activities of the SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group have been characterised by distinct phases, while practical cooperation depends on individual projects and the situation in Afghanistan. These features limit institutional continuity and the capacity for adaptation in comparison with cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism.

6. In the field of international information security, the SCO maintains agreed policies based on intergovernmental documents and expert-level mechanisms. The participation of new member states in the work of the Group of Experts ensures continuity in institutional coordination. At the same time, practical cooperation documented in publicly available sources is concentrated primarily on countering cyberterrorism and does not cover all areas of international information security to the same extent. Institutional decisions adopted in 2025 create additional conditions for the development of cooperation, although their actual effectiveness requires further assessment.

Theoretical Significance of the Research

The theoretical significance of this research lies in clarifying the relationship between member states' national interests, the enlargement of international organisations, decision-making rules and the institutional effectiveness of cooperation. Examining national interests in relation to specific security issues makes it possible to distinguish between political disagreements among member states and their interests in particular areas of cooperation. This approach contributes to a more precise assessment of the results of multilateral interaction, taking into account the structure of participants' interests and the institutional conditions of cooperation.

The research distinguishes between the formulation of agreed policies, the functioning of cooperation mechanisms and the practical implementation of cooperation. This distinction makes it possible to assess institutional effectiveness at different levels and to account for differences between the adoption of joint documents, the stability of cooperation mechanisms and practical interaction. The proposed approach may be applied to the study of regional organisations based on intergovernmental cooperation and the principle of consensus.

Practical Significance of the Research

The practical significance of this research lies in the potential application of its findings to the assessment of SCO security cooperation following enlargement. The results may serve as reference material for government agencies and research centres in member states when analysing policy coordination, the functioning of specialised mechanisms and practical cooperation within the Organisation.

The comparative analysis of the national interests of the ten member states makes it possible to identify overlapping needs and differences in political priorities in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism, addressing Afghanistan-related issues and ensuring international information security. The results of the assessment of institutional effectiveness may be used in studies of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, the SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group, cooperation mechanisms in the field of international information security and new institutional forms of interaction.

The materials and conclusions of the dissertation may also be used in teaching and academic research in international relations, regional studies, international organisations and regional security.

Compliance with the Research Areas of the Academic Specialty

The dissertation corresponds to the following research areas specified in the passport of academic specialty 5.5.4, International Relations, Global and Regional Studies: Items 1, 2, 4, 7, 10, 11 and 17.

Presentation and Publication of Research Results

The main propositions and findings of the research were presented at seven all-Russian and international academic conferences held between 2023 and 2025, addressing international relations, regional security and cooperation within the SCO.

Nine academic publications reflecting the content and principal findings of the dissertation have been published, including four articles in peer-reviewed academic journals recommended by the Higher Attestation Commission (VAK) and five publications indexed in the Russian Science Citation Index (RSCI).

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters comprising nine sections, a conclusion, and a list of sources and references.