

Interconnectivity in the Region of Eurasia: Mongolia's Presence in the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization)

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed in 2001 after breakdown of the socialist system and the Soviet Union as a new form of cooperation between former socialist countries in Eurasian region. Mongolia joined the SCO in 2005 with an observer member status. Since 2007, Presidents of Mongolia began to participate every year to the Summit of the heads of SCO member states. By the initiative of Mongolian President, in 2014 the tripartite format of the meetings of the leaders of three countries: Russia, China, and Mongolia were established. In June 2016, during the third meeting of the leaders of Russia, China, and Mongolia in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), "The Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor Program" document was signed. This program is aiming to develop the infrastructure of three countries, ensuring the competitiveness of products on the world market, and strengthening the Eurasian integration. The content of this program is combining the main ideas of Chinese "Belt-Road" megaproject, Russian initiative for developing of Eurasian economic integration and Mongolian "Steppe Road" project. The main goal of the "Steppe Road" initiative is to involve Mongolia to become the transit territory for transportation of natural gas, oil, and other products between Russia and China. In conclusion, the author gives some comments regarding the issue of full membership status of Mongolia to the international organization—SCO.

Keywords: multi-pillar policy, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the tripartite format of the meetings of the leaders of Russia, China, and Mongolia, Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor Program, "Steppe Road" project initiative

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed in 2001 as a challenge to new changes occurring on vast Eurasian space after collapse of the socialist system and the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War, the emergence of the new international order, the normalization of Chinese-Russian relations, the rise of terrorism, and other circumstances created the need for search of mutual understanding between the states of the Eurasian continent, creation of new structures for dialogue on issues of regional cooperation, global challenges of world politics and international relations.

The original purpose of "Shanghai Five" was the struggle against international terrorism, nationalistic separatism, and religious extremism. Since life is multifaceted and brings forward new challenges, in the process of forming the SCO as an international organization, its activities subsequently covered the spheres of economy and humanitarian aspects. Since January 2004, the SCO has started functioning as a full-fledged

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international structure with its own working mechanism, staff, and budget. The SCO is not a military bloc or an open regulatory conference on security issues, so it occupies an intermediate position. As a new mechanism for dialogue and cooperation between states, the SCO fulfils its main mission to strengthen stability and security in a broad space which unites participating states in combating terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking, developing economic cooperation, energy space, scientific and cultural interaction. Therefore, this international organization was formed as an optimal mechanism for dialogue and development of joint decisions concerning a huge range of tasks.

Relations Between Mongolia and the SCO

With the end of the Cold War, fundamental changes have taken place in the internal situation, politics, and international relations of Mongolia. With the collapse of the world socialist system and the USSR, Mongolia was given an opportunity to conduct an independent foreign policy which expressed the fundamental interests of the Mongolian people. The country was given an opportunity to pursue a balanced policy with regard to neighbouring states, avoid participation in their bilateral conflicts that do not affect the interests of Mongolia, formulate new “policy of a third neighbour”, pursue an active foreign policy in international relations, and promote its own interests. During the Cold War, Mongolia was involved not only in the international confrontation between the West and East, but also directly involved in ideological first, and then a direct military conflict between the Soviet Union and China, which had a negative impact on national security of the country. Since the late 1980s, Soviet-Chinese relations began to normalize with a positive effect on normalization of Mongolian-Chinese relations.

The “Foreign Policy Concept of Mongolia”, adopted by the country’s parliament in 1994 and updated in 2011, indicates that the country will adhere to basic principles of peace, openness, multi-pillar policy and independence. Article 14.1 of the Concept defines the priority objective of the foreign policy of Mongolia as friendly relations with Russia and China, with which it will pursue a balanced policy in the spirit of good neighbourly relations and the development of large-scale cooperation. At the same time, historical traditions and specifics of economic cooperation with these states will be taken into account. Deepening international relations and cooperation with its two neighbours, Mongolia is developing relationship of strategic cooperation with Russia since 2009 and with China since 2011.

Adhering to the principles of openness and multi-pillar policy, Mongolia expressed desire to cooperate with the SCO, in which two great neighbours of our country play a big role: the Russian Federation and People’s Republic of China. In June 2004, at the Summit of heads of SCO member states in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), the organization expanded accepting Mongolia as a new member with observer status. It’s remarkable that our country became first member-state with observer status in history of SCO.

In 2005, at the Fifth Summit of the SCO heads of state in Astana (Kazakhstan), the Declaration of the heads of SCO member states was signed recording further consolidation of efforts and strengthening of coordination, which expressed the desire of SCO for expansion and improvement of its activities.

Starting from this Summit on, delegation of Mongolia’s representatives began for the first time to participate in the annual meetings of the SCO as an observer country. This participation was a clear expression of deep interest of our country in active engagement in the process of political and economic cooperation of the SCO member countries which later allowed expansion of Mongolia’s relations with Central Asian countries. Since the start of permanent involvement in the activities of the SCO, Mongolia has been paying great attention

to improving relations between the SCO member states and observer countries, seeking ways and opportunities to expand cooperation with the SCO member states. From this position, Mongolia expresses its gratitude to all members of SCO for understanding of the observer-state's position regarding development of trade and economic cooperation with the countries of the SCO on a mutually beneficial basis.

It should be noted that the SCO observer-states are entitled to participate in the meetings of the Ministers and the heads of the SCO member states, because the SCO Secretariat invites Mongolian delegation to participate in such meetings and other events. This opens up new opportunities for Mongolia to establish business contacts at various levels of cooperation, to obtain necessary information for promotion of a permanent mechanism of interaction. Here we can give a detailed example.

The SCO supported Mongolia's initiative to hold a regular meeting of the SCO Business Council in Mongolia's capital Ulan Bator. A regular meeting of the SCO Business Council was held on December 23, 2010 in Mongolia, in which the heads of national business councils of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan participated. The meeting discussed for the first time the issue of the possibility of the SCO observer-country participating in projects implemented within the framework of Business Councils. Particular attention was paid to expanding cooperation in areas of energy, transport, minerals, and health. Ulaanbaatar meeting was of great significance for Mongolia since it gave a new impetus to exchange of information between member-states and observer-countries of the SCO, establishment of business relations between the businesses of these countries and providing information for the SCO member-states on the prospects of intensification of Mongolia's participation in multilateral cooperation.

In 2007, President of Mongolia Enkhbayar Nambar for the first time attended the Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) Summit of the heads of states of the SCO. From 2009 to 2017, President of Mongolia Elbegdorj Tsahia actively participated in the annual Summits of the SCO heads of state. In 2012, Mongolia proposed to organize SCO Forum in Ulaanbaatar with the aim of intensifying cooperation between the member states and observer countries of the SCO.

In the spring of 2014 the President of Mongolia Elbegdorj Tsahia proposed the "Ulaanbaatar dialogues" initiative for the purpose of establishing new mechanism of Mongolia's dialogue with the two neighbouring countries—Russia and China at the highest level. This initiative was supported by the leaders of the two neighbouring states Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. In September 2014 at the Dushanbe (Tajikistan) Summit of heads of member states of the SCO, the first meeting of leaders of the Russian Federation, People's Republic of China and Mongolia took place. During the meeting, the need for development of cooperation in such format was stressed and it was agreed to continue to hold such meetings on regular basis. During this meeting, President Xi Jinping supported the proposal of the Mongolian President Elbegdorj Tsahia on the possibility of linking the Chinese "One Belt—One Road" megaproject with the Mongolia's "Steppe Road" project initiative. It is noteworthy that the leaders of the three states met within the framework of the SCO Summit, which confirms the need to further strengthen Mongolia's multilateral cooperation with the SCO member-states.

During the first meeting, the leaders of the three countries stressed for the first time the importance of linking interests of each of the three sides, as manifested in the desire to integrate Chinese "Belt-Road" megaproject, the Russian policy of development of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Mongolia's "Steppe Road" initiative. The goal of the Mongolia's "Steppe Road" project is active participation of Mongolia in the transit transportation of goods from Europe to Asia.

The second meeting of the leaders of the three countries of Mongolia, China, and Russia took place in July 2015, again at the annual Summit of heads of state of the SCO member-states in Ufa (Bashkiria) during which all sides agreed to further promote trilateral format of cooperation aiming to develop concrete proposals and practical projects.

During the third meeting in June 2016 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the leaders of Russia, China, and Mongolia—Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Elbegdorj Tsahia signed “The Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor Program” document. The main objective of the program is to ensure conditions for development and expansion of tripartite cooperation among China, Mongolia, and Russia through implementation of joint projects. Implementation of the program shall ensure competitiveness of products on the world market and make easier trans-boundary transportation for development of infrastructure. While in the period of socialist construction (1921-1990) the Soviet Union was the dominant political and economic ally for Mongolia, during the last 20 years China became the main trade and economic partner of the country. In such conditions, the successful implementation of the Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor Program which takes into account specific needs of each of the three countries will undoubtedly contribute to Mongolia’s balanced development and enhance efficiency of economic growth. Implementation of this program will facilitate creation of the space for joint mutually beneficial economic development, thereby contributing to fulfilment of the SCO goals and shall serve as a good example of successful cooperation of SCO member countries with observer states. On June 9-10, 2018 in Qingdao, China, the next Summit of the SCO Heads of State took place in which Battulga Khaltmaa, elected President of Mongolia in 2017 participated for the first time. During the Summit of the SCO Heads of States, the fourth meeting of the leaders of the three countries—the Russian Federation, Mongolia, and China was held. During this meeting, President Battulga Khaltmaa put forward a number of proposals:

- On the issue of practical implementation of the Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor Program, he stressed the need for mutual coordination of contacts at the level of ministries and departments of the three countries, implementation of agreements already reached at all levels, promotion of tripartite contacts aiming on implement more than 30 joint projects outlined in this program.
- President Battulga Khaltmaa expressed Mongolia’s interest in becoming an active participant in the transit of natural gas, oil, and other products between Russia and China through Mongolian territory.
- Furthermore, he raised a practical proposal to involve Mongolia in the international highway Naushki-Tianjin, which would pass through the territory of Mongolia and contribute to the development of its transport infrastructure.
- With regard to the status of Mongolia’s membership in the SCO, the President clearly expressed his view that Mongolian society is engaged in active debate over membership in this international organization.

Participation of Mongolia in activities of the SCO, the tripartite format of the meetings of the leaders of Russia, China, and Mongolia, adoption of the Russia-Mongolia-China Economic Corridor Program, the launching of practical projects, active exchange of views on international security, regional and global interaction, establishment of new relations and development of Mongolia’s cooperation with other members of the SCO states are, in my view, a clear example of development of Eurasian integration.

Conclusions and Some Comments

In conclusion, the author would like to say a few words about possibility of full membership of Mongolia

in the SCO. It was often asked this question during presentations at international conferences. As you know, in 2017, the SCO accepted as full members 2 observer-states—India and Pakistan. Many experts believe that Mongolia is a real candidate for full membership in the SCO.

It must be said that there are both external and internal circumstances. Mongolian society has not yet reached a consensus on this issue. Among the Mongolian politicians, scholars, experts, there are differing approaches to this issue. Some believe it's time for Mongolia to become a full member of the SCO. Others expressed a view that we need to wait; it's not yet the time or that we need to wait for the right moment to address this issue. Issues related to foreign policy and national security are solved in the national parliament—the State Khural (Assembly) of the country. At the moment, this question was not put on the agenda of the discussion in the Parliament. So the question of the membership of Mongolia in the SCO is open.

Regarding external circumstances, today the Russian Federation and China maintain a very stable and friendly relationship of strategic partnership, which is a very favourable international factor for Mongolia. Doubts exist that the SCO membership will affect Mongolia's balanced foreign policy with respect to two neighbouring countries: Russia and China. There are also concerns that full membership may lead to increased pressure or dominant position of one or two major SCO players in Mongolia. Unfortunately, Mongolia had a bitter experience in this respect in its historical past.

Some Mongolian experts believe that as long as Mongolia is not able to fully meet the basic criteria for full membership in the SCO which are set out in the organization's charter on membership requirements adopted in 2010 at the Summit of the heads of State in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). Among the eight main criteria, Mongolia may be subject to criticism in relation to the clause on establishment of active relations in trade-economic and cultural spheres with the member-states of SCO. This refers to the issue of Mongolia's cooperation with the rest of Central Asia, with the exception of Kazakhstan, with which our country maintains closer cooperation.

More than once the SCO is criticized as allegedly nothing more than a “discussion club”. Scholars and experts from different countries are putting forward interesting proposals for further improvement and expansion of SCO activities.

The author thinks it is necessary to listen to critical remarks and rational proposals. Then the mechanism of development of the SCO will be more pragmatic and the goals advanced will be realized in practice. If the SCO management and coordination mechanisms are improved in the future, it may well become the world's largest integration bloc due to its vast potential.

Thus, the SCO could transform into a real alternative to Western hegemony and become the basis of a new just world order in form of successful mechanism for integration efforts over the vast Eurasian space.

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