

## UZBEKISTAN'S STRATEGIC APPROACHES OF TO THE SCO

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**Abstract:** The article reveals that Uzbekistan's strategy towards the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) always has been based on following principles: (1) ensuring national and regional security in Central Asia (2) preserving independence in foreign policy (3) balancing the interests of major powers in Central Asia (4) preventing hegemony of a single state or a group of states within the SCO (5) using the SCO to implement Uzbekistan's priorities in trade, economy and transport interconnectivity.

**Key words:** the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, strategy, Uzbekistan, foreign policy, middle power.

## ЎЗБЕКИСТОННИНГ ШҲТГА НИСБАТАН СТРАТЕГИК ЁНДАШУВЛАРИ

**Аннотация:** Мақолада Ўзбекистоннинг Шанхай ҳамкорлик ташкилотига нисбатан стратегияси қўйидаги тамойилларга асосланганлиги қайд этилган: (1) миллий ва Марказий Осиёдаги минтақавий хавфсизликни таъминлаш (2) ташқи сиёсатда мустақилликни таъминлаш (3) Марказий Осиёда катта давлатлар манфаатларини мувозанатлаштириш (4) ШҲТда ягона давлатлар ёки давлатлар гуруҳининг устунлигига йўл қўймаслик (5) ШҲТ имкониятларидан Ўзбекистоннинг савдо, иқтисодиёт ва транспорт ўзаро боғлиқлигидаги устувор мақсадларини амалга оширишда фойдаланиш

**Калит сўзлар:** Шанхай ҳамкорлик ташкилоти, стратегия, Ўзбекистон, ташқи сиёсат, ўртамиёна давлат.

## СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ УЗБЕКИСТАНА К ШОС

**Аннотация:** В статье выявлено, что стратегия Узбекистана в отношении Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС) всегда основывалась на следующих принципах: (1) обеспечение национальной и региональной безопасности в Центральной Азии (2) сохранение независимости во внешней политике (3) балансирование интересов крупных держав в Центральной Азии (4) предотвращение



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гегемонии одного государства или группы государств в рамках ШОС (5) использование возможностей ШОС для реализации приоритетов Узбекистана в области торговли, экономики и транспортных взаимосвязей.

**Ключевые слова:** Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, стратегия, Узбекистан, внешняя политика, средняя власть.

### Introduction

The SCO emerged from the dialogue platform “Shanghai Five” formed in the late 1990s mainly on China's initiative to resolve border issues with the former USSR countries - Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Its formation took place under the influence of significant changes in international relations at the end of the 20th century, including the end of the Cold War and the shift in the balance of power in the world, the emergence of a new geopolitical situation in Eurasia, and the formation of new regional centers of power, and the emergence of new security threats and challenges - terrorism, extremism, and separatist movements.

The SCO has developed fairly quickly as a relatively prominent regional player, primarily due to the consistent political and financial sponsorship of Beijing, as Chinese scholars argue the SCO was a “brainchild” of Chinese New Diplomacy (Guang, 2008).

But from geopolitical point of view, the SCO was primarily it's kind of a balancing act of concurrent and conflicting strategic interests of China and Russia as these two were seen as the engines pulling the young organization (Alyson, Bailes, Dunay, Guang, Troitskiy, 2007).

In this regard, it has achieved its primary mission as a tool for soft balancing against external hegemony (i.e. against the USA and the West in general) and the creator of its kind of new regionalism in Central Asia (Anadi, 2008).

*The SCO's role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia is assessed differently by researchers. While some call it the “guarantee of stability in Central Asia” (Zhao, 2006) others believe that it has failed to become an effective regional security organization and has therefore failed to demonstrate itself in crisis situations in the region (Saksena, 2014)*



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*Another group of researchers argue that the SCO has contributed to failure of regionalism in Central Asia (i.e. without the participation of the external actors). Within so called “Second Great Game” in Central Asia, regional organizations dominated by China (i.e. the SCO) and Russia (i.e. EurAsEC and later the EAEU) have become strategic instruments of power projection, and they have prevented the successful development of a genuine Central Asian regionalism in Central Asia. (Krapohl, Vasileva-Dienes 2020)*

*Despite polar discussions, in Central Asia itself, there is a general believe that the SCO has contributed to ensure regional stability and promoting broader regional cooperation (Nurimbetov, 2021).*

### **Core Principles of Uzbekistan's Strategy towards the SCO**

The reshaping of the SCO's agenda is an unequivocal and objective process in light of its expansion and the new geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia. This inevitably impacts the strategic approaches of the member states of the Organization, especially those that were at the origins of its foundation.

One such country is Uzbekistan, whose positioning in the SCO has always been distinguished from the approaches of other Central Asian participants.

Uzbekistan's approaches to multilateral cooperation institutions, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, were characterized by a distinct positioning. During that period, the leadership of Uzbekistan was very cautious about joining any international organization, fearing it might affect the sovereignty of the state. Tashkent consistently kept its distance from organizations seeking integration, particularly in the security sphere (Laruelle, 2012). This adherence to the strategy has largely remained intact to this day. For instance, Uzbekistan is currently not a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and participates in the activities of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) only as an observer.

Returning to the security situation in Central Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the picture was not very favorable. After the collapse of the former USSR, disintegration processes in the region intensified, and the Central Asian countries were still very weak, engaged in strengthening their statehood, fighting for the preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Their ability to ensure stability and security in the region by military means was limited.



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In such conditions, Uzbekistan had very few strategic options (unlike other founding countries of the SCO, Uzbekistan did not participate in the "Shanghai Five" due to the fact that it does not share a common border with China). Against the backdrop of the emerging danger in Afghanistan in the late 1990s with the rise to power of the radical Taliban movement, it became clear that the CSTO did not have the full potential to ensure security in Central Asia (In its more than 30 years history the CSTO conducted only one weeklong operation in Kazakhstan (2022) with a small number of troops during the same period, (Stratievski, 2023). Moreover, as previously mentioned, Uzbekistan's leadership considered avoiding foreign influence in security matters a top priority. However, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO was not an organization controlled by a single major state like the CSTO. In Tashkent's view, China and Russia were major powers that balanced each other within the SCO (Huasheng, 2004) On the one hand, the intention to pursue an independent foreign policy while avoiding the influence of major countries and, on the other hand, the desire to maintain a geopolitical balance in Central Asia were strategic goal of Uzbekistan's foreign policy at that time. It is highly likely that Tashkent perceived the SCO primarily in this context. In this regard, ensuring national and regional security and independence in foreign policy activities formed *the main principle of Uzbekistan's strategy towards the SCO*.

In our view, the *second important conceptual basis* for Tashkent was the desire to maintain a strategic balance of competing interests of the leading centers of power in Central Asia through the SCO, and to prevent any major country from establishing complete control over the region. This positioning is often characterized as the pursuit of a multi-vector or equidistant foreign policy.

International observers note that this approach of Uzbekistan manifested itself in its tactical actions within the SCO from the early years. In some cases, they seemed contradictory. For example, the start of the peacekeeping operation by coalition forces led by the United States in Afghanistan in December 2001 seriously changed the geopolitical situation in the region. This led to the formation of a strategic partnership between Tashkent and Washington, although for a short period. Some experts viewed this as an attempt by Uzbekistan to strengthen its strategic partnership with the United States and balance the influence of Russia and China in the region, thereby enhancing its own role in the region (Fumagalli, 2007).

The principle of ensuring a balance between major centers of power in Tashkent's strategy towards the SCO was once again confirmed during the "short cooling" of relations



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with the West after the Andijan events of 2005 (Aris, 2006). In the same year, at the SCO summit in Astana (Kazakhstan), Uzbekistan included in the agenda the issue of setting deadlines for the withdrawal of US military bases from Central Asia. This proposal was supported by all members of the organization. Thus, it can be emphasized that the SCO, with its large powers like Russia and China, allowed the medium and small members of the organization from Central Asia to balance the influence between competing geopolitical poles.

The Andijan events themselves was classified by some Western scholars as a “turning point” in the SCO dynamics as the Astana Summit supported the principle of state sovereignty, underlying the Western models of the governance (Aris, 2006).

In our view, *the third important principle of Uzbekistan in relation to the SCO was to prevent any member state from becoming hegemonic in the organization.*

Uzbekistan, as one of the founding states of the SCO, has always advocated for strict adherence to the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit” (mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and pursuit of common development) by all Parties, which define the conceptual foundations of the Organization, as well as for decision-making based on consensus. According to available information, the inclusion of politically important principles such as openness, non-alignment, and non-targeting against third countries and international organizations in the SCO Charter was initiated by Uzbekistan.

It should be noted that this principle continues to maintain its continuity for Uzbek diplomacy to this day. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has held office since 2017, consistently states that the further strengthening of the role and prestige of the SCO will still directly depend on the commitment of all member states to the aforementioned principles of the "Shanghai Spirit". The leader of Uzbekistan clearly demonstrated this position during the country's chairmanship in the SCO in 2021-2022. Firstly, in an article by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, published in about 30 leading foreign publications on September 12, 2022, titled "The Samarkand Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Dialogue and Cooperation in an Interdependent World", the following is noted: "The key to the SCO's international legal appeal is its non-aligned status, openness, non-targeting against third countries or international organizations, equality, and respect for the sovereignty of all participants, non-interference in internal affairs, prevention of political confrontation and competitive rivalry" (CGTN, 2022).



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A few days later, in his speech at the Samarkand summit on September 16, 2022, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, continuing this position, once again highlighted that maintaining the non-aligned status of the Organization and its openness is foremost important.

Strict adherence to the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit” and decision-making based on consensus, in turn, serves as an important prerequisite for Uzbekistan's efforts *to prevent the transformation of the organization into a military or military-political bloc*. In our opinion, this is the *fourth principle* of Uzbekistan's strategy towards the SCO.

Many researchers believe that Russia seeks to transform the SCO into a military-political alliance and, on this basis, further strengthen its influence in Central Asia and use the organization in its confrontation with the West (Aydintaşbaş, Dumoulin, Geranmayeh, Oertel, 2024). Uzbekistan, along with other countries in the region, always advocates for maintaining the non-aligned status of the SCO (Schmitz, 2022). India and Central Asian countries hold the same position. China has never openly expressed a clear opinion on the possibility of transforming the SCO into a military bloc. For Beijing, it is more strategically important to have the role of the organization as a conductor of its concepts for building a new type of international relations rather than using it as a tool for military-political confrontation with the United States (Huasheng, 2022).

The above principles continue to shape the basis of Uzbekistan's cooperation with the SCO. Their practical implementation is aimed not only at realizing the national interests of the country and the priority goals and objectives of foreign policy strategy. They also serve to maintain balance within the SCO, prevent deviations from the fundamental principles enshrined in the Charter, including attempts to turn it into a political or military bloc.

### Conclusion

In the new feature the SCO will face more changes under the influence of both internal and external factors. It is currently entering a new stage - the stage of transformation. The collective response of the member states to this was the decision adopted at the Samarkand summit in 2022, which provides for the improvement of the SCO's activities. Draft paper of reform agenda of the Organization should have been prepared under the current Kazakhstan Chairmanship in the SCO (Bellaby, 2023).

How the SCO will develop in the future? Will Central Asia remain its “geographic core” or the previous importance of the region for the SCO will decrease? What are the



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approaches of Central Asian countries and Uzbekistan in particular to the global and regional role of the SCO? Will the organization become a victim of the “great power game and competition”, or will it still be able to turn into a strong multilateral institution capable of participating in the formation of a multipolar world as some member states hope?

The answers to these serious questions remain open. The ongoing expansion of the SCO may further increase uncertainty.

This situation creates certain opportunities for Uzbekistan, which is considered one of the central country of Central Asia. It can implement skillful middle power diplomacy aimed at strengthening multilateral cooperation and legitimacy within the SCO, preventing and resolving conflicts, and ensuring geopolitical balance.

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