

How is SCO threatened by the Islamic Fundamentalists in the Eurasian region

written by Ms Zarka Khan | March 26, 2024



The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a Eurasian political, economic, international security and defense organization established by China and Russia in 2001. Currently, eight countries enjoy the status of the SCO full members: India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; four countries including Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia have an observer status with the SCO, and six countries including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka have a dialogue partner status. If we take a map of the region where all of these countries are located, it is mostly, in the Asian Region. The Asian region is known to be turbulent, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism since 9/11, Asia has become prominent in terms of their ground breeding Non state entities such as terrorist organization. With the instability in Afghanistan since 9/11, most the terrorist entities rose out of need to defend their homeland against the American invaders. Due to Pakistan and Afghanistan having porous borders, mostly there would movement of these non-state actors to hide and seek refuge. As there are many historical grievances known among the parties of South Asia, there are assumptions that most of these Islamic fundamentalist groups are funded by neighbors to create instability in the region. These instabilities not only impact the livelihood of these nations, but cost them in terms of restrictions on travel to other countries, sanctions etc.

Now, to understand how SCO is threatened by the role of non-state actors in the region, we have to understand the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. The Chinese Sinic order is at the risk of Uighurs Muslims in the Xinjiang regions, as they are at the border with Mongolia to the northeast, Russia to the north, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to the west, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the southwest, and India, Nepal, and Bhutan to the south (though directly with India along the disputed border). Any revolt that is experienced in Xinjiang will have a spillover effect. East Turkistan Islamic Movement is a Uighur militant organization operating in the region. Russia also has 1.4 million Muslims living in Chechnya, any type of spillover effect from Islamic fundamentalist activities can potentially risk the stability of the region. Pakistan has Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan operating within its borders, and Afghanistan has Tehreek-e- Taliban Afghanistan and India has Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in Kashmir. Central Asia has the Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan that has managed to spur civil wars and create chaos in the region. It expanded its operations to other countries in the region. Islamic Jihad Union, a splinter group of the IMU, known for its involvement in global jihad and attempts to conduct attacks in Europe and against coalition forces in Afghanistan. Lastly, Hizb ut-Tahrir. Although it claims to be non-violent, this international pan-Islamist and fundamentalist organization calls for the re-establishment of the Caliphate and has been banned in several Central Asian countries due to its radical ideology. These groups threaten the SCO's stability by promoting radicalization, committing acts of terrorism, and challenging the territorial integrity of member states. Their activities can destabilize the region, affecting not just internal security but also international cooperation and development projects.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays a crucial role in coordinating efforts to combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism among its member states. Established in 2002, RATS is based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and serves as a platform for SCO member countries to share intelligence, coordinate anti-terror activities, and conduct joint military exercises aimed at enhancing their capabilities to tackle non-state actors and terrorist threats. To date, RATS has undertaken a range of activities to counter terrorist organizations within the SCO member states. RATS facilitates the exchange of information on terrorist activities, movements, financing, and other related intelligence among member states. This has been crucial in preempting and preventing terrorist attacks, disrupting terror networks, and arresting individuals involved in terrorism. The SCO, through RATS, organizes regular joint military and counter-terrorism exercises among its member states. These exercises, such as the "Peace Mission" series, are aimed at enhancing the readiness and interoperability of the military and security forces of member states in responding to terrorist threats. Moreover, RATS has been instrumental in the development and implementation of legal frameworks and agreements among SCO member states to combat terrorism. This includes agreements on extradition, mutual legal assistance, and the standardization of laws to prevent terrorism, extremism, and separatism. RATS also organizes workshops, seminars, and training programs for law enforcement and security personnel of SCO member states. These programs focus on enhancing the capabilities of member states in areas such as counter-terrorism financing, border security, cyber security, and the prevention of radicalization. RATS actively seeks to collaborate with other international organizations and regional bodies in the fight against terrorism. This includes working with entities such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Anti-Terrorism Center. As due to the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Afghanistan having the reputation for Opium producing fields, it is important arrest these smugglers. As the SCO members are connected through land, through the BRI and other routes, it's important to safeguard these routes. Moreover, the BRI's emphasis on connectivity facilitates greater regional cooperation, which can enhance the effectiveness of initiatives like RATS in securing the region from terrorist threats.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION



The role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in relation to RATS and the SCO's counter-terrorism efforts is multifaceted. While primarily an economic project aimed at enhancing connectivity and cooperation across Eurasia, the BRI also has security dimensions. Through infrastructure development and increased regional integration, the BRI seeks to address some of the underlying socio-economic conditions that can contribute to terrorism and extremism. Tackling the threats posed by non-state actors and terrorist organizations to the SCO and its member states requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond military and intelligence-sharing measures. This includes addressing the root causes of terrorism and extremism, such as poverty, inequality, political disenfranchisement, and ideological radicalization. Furthermore, enhancing regional cooperation, improving governance, and promoting sustainable development are also key to undermining the appeal and reach of terrorist organizations in the region.