

China and other SCO Founding Members Cautious About Accession of India and Pakistan

By [Zhang Wenwei](#)

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The following article brings into light important questions about the accession of India and Pakistan, the two major powers of South Asia, into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The two South Asian powers will change or adjust the geopolitical gravity of the SCO, expanding it outside of Central Asia, and in the process strengthening the Eurasian credentials of the SCO. There are, however, questions on whether the “Shanghai Spirit” of consensus-based decision-making can continue with the entry of India and Pakistan as full SCO members. Should the founding members of the SCO, like China and Russia, establish formal special statuses and rights for themselves to make sure that the focus of the SCO is not changed or diverted by India and Pakistan, as this article published by the Global Times in China proposes?

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, Asia-Pacific Research Editor, 2 July 2016.

The annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was held last week in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Prior to it, Li Huilai, China’s assistant foreign minister, said that the SCO would see some progress in its expansion at this year’s summit after India and Pakistan were given the initial green-light to join the bloc at last year’s Ufa summit. This marks the first expansion by the organization 15 years after its establishment, and will create new opportunities for its development.

But in the meantime, the regional organization is still young and the inclusion of new members may bring it some concerns, which SCO member states need to make plans early on and deal with them well so as to maximize the benefits from expansion.

As SCO observers, India and Pakistan had been committed to promoting cooperation with the organization and remarkable achievements have been made in political, economic and cultural arenas. The two countries requested to join the SCO many years ago. Generally, including new members can help the SCO expand its clout. But the inclusion of the two South Asian powers might also lead to some problems.

First of all, the inclusion may have an impact on the SCO’s principle of consultation-based consensus. Right after its establishment, the six founding member states put forward the “Shanghai Spirit” of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common development.

The principle of consultation-based consensus has been widely recognized and adhered to by the members. In this sense, the inclusion of India and Pakistan may bring into the SCO their long-existing disputes over territorial and religious issues and disturb the organization's efforts to carry out the principle.

Besides, the inclusion may divert the focus of the SCO. As four out of six founding members of the SCO are in Central Asia, the SCO has always concentrated on the region. But the joining of India and Pakistan may split the focus of the SCO, and hence the four Central Asian members will reduce their dependence on the SCO.

Moreover, giving full memberships to India and Pakistan will affect the SCO mechanism. The working languages of the SCO are now Chinese and Russian, and there has already been massive language workload in current meeting mechanisms. If India and Pakistan are taken in, the organization's daily work is likely to increase exponentially.

The SCO has played a critical role in regional stability and development and in enhancing cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Remarkable achievements have been made in this regard. Hence an increasing number of countries are becoming interested in the organization.

Before the Tashkent summit, the SCO consisted of six member states, six observers and six dialogue partners. The inclusion of India and Pakistan will undoubtedly enhance the influence of the SCO, and the member states also highly value and support the wills of observers and dialogue partners to step up their cooperation with the organization.

For the possible problems that may arise after India and Pakistan become full members, the SCO cannot just ignore but instead deal with them in a positive and rational manner. For instance, regulations should make clear the obligations and rights of new member states and in particular demand they respect and carry out the principles of the SCO. The SCO founding members should be given some special rights to dispel their concerns caused by the expansion. Requirements can be proposed to the new members in terms of mechanism-building so as to avoid cooperation bottleneck after the expansion.

As long as the problems are properly handled, the SCO can take the opportunity and enter a new stage.

***Zhang Wenwei** is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.*

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