

B. Seilkhan\*  
G.K. Bukeshova

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan

\*Corresponding author: balausa\_95\_07@mail.ru

## New SCO development strategy: analysis of Russia's interests

**Abstract.** *After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new geopolitical situation arose, which gave rise to new threats, challenges, and problems, both on the regional and on world stage. The already heterogeneous Central Asia, as well as the neighborhood with Afghanistan, made us think about security and stability in the region. It was then that the historic decision was made to create the SCO.*

*It is during this period that the US strategy toward post-Soviet Russia and the country of Central Asia is emerging. The strategy clearly saw the desire of the United States of America to distance new independent states from Russia, which recently were part of the USSR, all this happened against the background of maximum opposition to its renewed self-assertion in the region and in the world.*

*The problems of cooperation in the field of security were a red thread in all the adopted documents, Russia itself adhered to this idea and insisted during its chairmanship in 2008-2009 and 2014-2015. Further, Russia began to actively promote its interests against the background of the aggravation of relations with the West. It was Russia that initiated its expansion, as well as strengthening cooperation in issues of disarmament, settlement of international and regional problems, the peaceful use of outer space, information security, and the formation of a more equitable international financial structure.*

*Thanks to Russia, such strong players as India and Pakistan, Belarus in observer status, and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Nepal as dialogue partners were attracted to this organization.*

**Keywords:** *Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia, cooperation, interests, challenges, Afghanistan, regional security, observers, disarmament.*

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### Introduction

The creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was predetermined by the new geopolitical reality after the collapse of the USSR and the growth of new challenges and threats in the world and regional arena. Security issues, including in connection with the instability in Afghanistan, immediately came to the forefront of the activities of the «Six». In this regard, on the

basis of an agreement between the states, the main goal of the SCO was approved as: strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborliness between the participating countries; promoting their effective cooperation in the political, trade, economic, scientific, technical and cultural fields; jointly ensuring and maintaining peace, security and stability in the region; advancing towards the creation of a democratic, just and rational new international political and economic order. Based

on the main goals of the organization, which we have listed above, we will analyze the work done between Russia and the SCO over these 20 years of cooperation [1].

Consolidation of cooperation in the field of security has always been the cornerstone of Russia's line in the SCO, which it sought to consolidate in every possible way during its chairmanship in the Organization in 2008-2009 and 2014-2015. In 2008-2009, Moscow's most important goal was to ensure further consolidation of cooperation within the SCO, including on the basis of the Agreement on Long-term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation signed in 2007 and in the direction of countering new challenges and threats.

Subsequently, in the context of the complication of its relations with the West, as well as in the light of the further complication of the situation in the world and the region, the eastern vector of foreign policy began to acquire important additional importance for Moscow. This, among other things, led to the further intensification of its activities in the SCO. The manifestation of this trend was the intensification of the line to further increase the political «profile» of the Organization as an influential and promising Eurasian structure. During the presidency in 2014-2015, Russia has once again focused special attention on the problems of regional security, having carried out, in particular a number of measures aimed at improving the already established forms of cooperation and testing new ones. The Ufa SCO Summit was a significant foreign policy victory for Russia. It focused on the adoption of the SCO Development Strategy for the next decade. The common approaches of the Member States were clearly outlined, as the fundamental issues of the modern world order, the problems of disarmament, the settlement of international and regional problems, the peaceful use of outer space, information security, and the formation of a fairer international financial structure.

Almost immediately after the creation of the SCO, Russia advocated the expansion of the Organization. Russia's unconditional achievement during its chairmanship in 2014-2015 was the launch of this process by attracting India

and Pakistan, as well as granting Belarus observer status, and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Nepal – as dialogue partners. Russia has sent an additional signal in this direction to other SCO member states by supporting the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative put forward by China in 2013 and linking it with the implementation of the tasks of the Eurasian Economic Union.

The preservation role of Russia as one of the main driving forces of the SCO will continue to correspond to its strategic objectives, including the fact that the main element of the conjugation of the interests of the SCO countries in the near future will remain the problem of countering terrorism and extremism.

### Materials and methods

When writing a scientific article, the authors used the following methods: a systematic method that made it possible to study Russia's political, economic, and military-strategic interests in the region, as well as within the SCO. The use of the comparative method made it possible to compare the interests of other world powers, in particular China, and Iran. The functional method was used in the study of the interests of world powers, and their optimal interaction in the region. The analysis of relations in politics, economics, and the military-technical sphere was carried out.

### Discussion

In 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Its creation followed the logic of the concrete development of the world and regional processes after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new geopolitical reality in this regard, including in Asia, as well as the growing threats of terrorism, separatism, and extremism there [2, 8 p.].

As you know, at the first stage of its existence, the SCO was conceived as a mechanism for maintaining confidence-building measures between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, on the one hand, and China, on the other. Favorable conditions for this were created

as a result of the signing in 1996 of a corresponding multilateral agreement on confidence-building measures in the military field in the area of the common border, and in 1997 - an agreement on the mutual reduction of armed forces in border areas. All this contributed to the removal from the agenda of the border issue between this part of the former USSR and China. Having put at the forefront of its activities the provision of a stabilizing effect on the situation in the region, the SCO additionally aimed at finding and developing new forms of multilateral cooperation between Russia, China, and the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. The rapprochement of the five countries at first was also dictated by the need to establish a mechanism for developing and agreeing on common positions on the most pressing issues affecting the fundamental interests of the participating States.

After Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five, which does not have a common border with China, new challenges, such as terrorism, extremism, separatism, as well as the problem of drug production and distribution, became the priority political topics of the SCO [3, 452-453 p.]. They formed the basis of practical cooperation of the SCO states in the field of security.

The US strategy towards post-Soviet Russia and Central Asia had also been fully determined by the turn of the century. It was based on the desire to detach the new independent states of this area of the former USSR from Moscow as much as possible against the background of maximum opposition to its renewed self-assertion in the region and in the world. The cooling of relations between Moscow and Washington (after the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as as a result of later actions, including the expansion of NATO to the east) predetermined the increasing importance of the Shanghai Organization for Russia, which was increasingly rapidly getting rid of the initial distortions on the western flank of its international policy.

The Russian Chinese relations, which were acquiring the character of a strategic partnership, also pushed Moscow to pay increased attention to the SCO. The growing economic power of

the People's Republic of China has led to the intensification of policy not only in the key East Asian direction for Beijing but also in Central Asia. This was dictated to a large extent by the need to search for new economic opportunities for additional resource provision for the national economy, search for new sales markets, etc. After the creation of the SCO, according to most researchers, an unspoken consensus was reached on a certain division of responsibility in the Central Asian region: Russia - ensuring security, including through the CSTO structures, and China - the economic component. The «distribution of roles» of the Organization between the two superpowers was generally welcomed by the Central Asian States, providing them with a wide field for maneuvering in order to maximize their political and economic interests.

A very positive background for the cementing role of Moscow and Beijing in the SCO was also the bilateral Agreement on Good-neighborliness, friendship and Cooperation concluded between them in the same 2001. The participation of Russia and China in the SCO provided them with additional opportunities to set a good example to partners in Central Asia, simultaneously «look out» for each other at the regional level, as well as coordinate their actions (within the framework of the «strategic partnership» proclaimed in the early 2000s) regarding Washington's aspirations to consolidate in this region. Of no small importance for both countries was their joint monitoring of the situation in Central Asia in the light of the disinterest of both Russia and China in its destabilization and radicalization. Security issues, primarily due to instability in Afghanistan, which shares a border with three of the six SCO members, immediately came to the forefront of the activities of the «six». Russia, having shown considerable activity in saturating the Organization's activities with concrete political content, at a meeting in Bishkek (then the «five») in 1999. Russia advocated for its active cooperation in the field of security and development in the Central Asian region [4].

At the 2001 summit, with the energetic involvement of Russia, there were developed common approaches of the Organization's

member countries in the fight against international terrorism and extremism, as well as a mutual obligation not to allow activities in their States that could harm their sovereignty and security. A concrete expression of this was the Convention [1] on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism signed at the same time, which included, among other things, a specific definition of terrorism, which no other international organization has yet been able to work out. The events of September 11, 2001, in the United States gave a new impetus to the political activation of the Shanghai Six, as well as the new situation in and around Afghanistan after the military operation in this country under the auspices of Washington, as well as as a result of a sharp jump in the illegal production and distribution of drugs from its territory [5].

Developing the topic of cooperation between the participating countries in the field of security, the Russian side focused on the need for the early adoption of basic documents that would make it possible to translate the activities of the «six» into a practical course. Evidence of this was the extraordinary meeting of the SCO foreign ministers initiated by Moscow on January 7, 2002, in Beijing, at which the main topic was the situation in Afghanistan. In particular, the inalienable right of the Afghan people themselves to choose the structures and nature of the authorities was emphasized, and it was noted that attempts to draw the country into the sphere of someone's influence could lead to a new crisis and complication in the regional situation.

In this context, the SCO summit in St. Petersburg on June 7, 2002, became a landmark for the Organization, at which its Charter was adopted, an Anti-Terrorist structure and a Secretariat were created, which turned the SCO into a full-fledged regional organization. Russia sought to proactively consolidate the supporting structures of the member states cooperation in the field of security during its chairmanship in the SCO in 2008-2009 and 2014-2015.

The objective reason for this was the further complication of the situation in the world as a whole and in the Middle East in particular, including as a result of the «color revolutions»,

the failure of numerous attempts by the United States and the West to resolve the situation in Afghanistan, etc. The relentless threat of destabilization in Central Asia itself, the growing process of spreading terrorism, and religious and political extremism in the face of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) and others in the neighboring regions of the Near and Middle East also had a negative impact on the overall situation.

An additional external impetus to the negative processes was also given by the sharp escalation of the confrontation between Russia and the West in recent years and, as a result, a hard line on its part on the political and economic isolation of Moscow in the international arena. In the new conditions, the eastern vector of foreign policy acquired additional, in a certain sense, vital importance for the country. This has led to the expansion of Russia's relations with Asian countries both on a bilateral and multilateral basis. A natural manifestation of this trend was the intensification of the line to further increase the political «profile» of the SCO as an influential and promising Eurasian structure. The goal of the Russian chairmanship in the Organization in 2008-2009 was to ensure further consolidation of cooperation within its framework, including on the basis of the Agreement on Long-term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation signed at the Bishkek summit in 2007 and in the direction of countering new challenges and threats [6].

The Convention [1] against Terrorism was adopted, which strengthened the legal framework for relevant cooperation within the framework of the «Six», the Program of Cooperation in Combating Terrorism for 2010-2012, as well as an Agreement on the training of anti-terrorist personnel. Considering the virtually deadlocked situation in Afghanistan, Moscow initiated a representative international conference, which ended with the adoption of both a general declaration and separate documents between the SCO and the IRA on countering challenges to regional stability emanating from Afghanistan.

During its next presidency in 2014-2015, Moscow, responding to the challenges of the



time, once again focused special attention on the problems of regional security, holding, among other things, a number of activities aimed at improving the already established forms of cooperation and testing new ones. The main attention was paid to three main issues of primary importance for improving the policy of the «six».

These are the elaboration of a new Strategy for its development for the next decade, the launch of the process of accession to the Organization of India and Pakistan, as well as the formulation of a common approach of the member states to the idea of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) put forward by China in 2013. Its implementation (in addition to the geo-economic component) would have the most important geopolitical significance both for the initiator of the idea and for other participants of this mega project.

The July 2015 summit in Ufa, of course, took a special place in the further strategic development of the «six». Against the background of the ongoing degradation of relations between Moscow and the West and the increasing conflict potential in the wake of events in Ukraine, the results of the meeting of the heads of the state became a significant foreign policy victory for Moscow. At the same time, the next BRICS summit held there, in Ufa, gave an additional political sound to the new dimension of international cooperation that is gaining momentum outside the framework of the participation of the traditional Western community in it.

The documents adopted in Ufa, including the SCO Development Strategy, clearly outlined the common approaches of the member states to the fundamental issues of the modern world order, to the problems of disarmament, the settlement of international and regional problems, the peaceful use of outer space, information security, and the formation of a more equitable international financial structure. Among the priorities of the «six» in the near future is the need for further comprehensive strengthening of cooperation in the political sphere, increasing concerted efforts to ensure regional security, and countering traditional and new challenges and threats. Considering the new regional realities and the

danger common to all SCO member states of the spread of the militaristic ideology and practice of ISIS, an agreement on strengthening cooperation on a wide range of countering the activities of international terrorist organizations, including preventing the involvement of citizens of their states in them, has become a very significant factor. At the same time, it is quite obvious that with the expansion of the activities of the «Islamic State» predicted by the majority of the expert community in the near future (its military and political activation in Afghanistan, including the extremists of the Central Asian Islamic Movement of Turkestan, the Uighur Islamic movement of East Turkestan, the so-called Caucasus Emirate, etc.), the SCO states will objectively push to further strengthen the anti-terrorist component of the Organization's activities.

After the upcoming formal accession of India and Pakistan to the «six», this task will certainly not lose its relevance. Noteworthy in this context was the holding in Moscow on the eve of the Ufa summit of a high-level Conference on Security and Stability in the SCO region, which again emphasized its quality as «one of the keys and effective international platforms for conducting a broad dialogue ... on countering traditional and new challenges and threats» [7].

Striving to expand the SCO's regional weight in every possible way, primarily in the framework of countering alarming new trends in the field of security, Russia has been advocating for the expansion of the Organization almost from the very beginning of its organizational design. Already in the early years of the SCO's existence, the main criteria, and principles for the admission of new members were developed.

However, until 2006, by mutual agreement of the participating countries, a moratorium was imposed on the process. This period was used for further institutional strengthening of the Organization and expansion of spheres and formats of interaction within its framework. The negative evolution of the situation in the sphere of regional and international security, including the increasingly topical issues of terrorism and security for the SCO zone, primarily due to the

constantly worsening instability in Afghanistan, prompted a gradual change in this approach. At the Dushanbe Summit in 2014, the work on the elaboration and coordination of all the details related to the procedure for expanding the Organization has been completed. The unconditional achievement of the Russian chairmanship in 2014-2015 was the launched process of SCO expansion at the expense of India and Pakistan, as well as the granting of observer status to Belarus, and dialogue partners to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Nepal.

The conclusion (after the Ufa summit) of an international agreement on its nuclear program was good news for Tehran, which has long aspired to join the Shanghai Club. The opening prospects of Iran's admission to full membership of the Organization would significantly strengthen its political component on the western flank. In this regard, the confirmation of the relevant application of Tehran in Ufa was strategically significant. A positive external background for moving forward is the expansion of cooperation between this country and China that has emerged after the lifting of sanctions from Iran, Beijing's support for Russia's actions in the Syrian direction, and new opportunities for Russian-Iranian cooperation, not to mention Tehran's common interest with the states of the Shanghai Organization in stabilizing Afghanistan and countering ISIS on this flank. But although at the summit in Tashkent in June 2016 the SCO heads of State once again stressed the openness of the Organization to the accession of interested states that meet the criteria and conditions contained in the Organization's regulatory documents, such closest applicants as Tehran and Kabul continue to remain on the waiting list.

At the same time, the Russian president emphasized in Tashkent that by now «there are no obstacles left for a positive consideration of Tehran's application,» which was officially supported by Beijing. The expansion of the SCO, despite the appearance of certain technical and other problems, is certainly strategically beneficial both for Russia and the foreign policy ambitions of the Organization itself. This would

strengthen the SCO's international authority and strategic viability and would bring it to a new geopolitical height. At the same time, even at the most superficial glance, it is quite obvious that the evolution of the «six» will become for it not only the most important frontier of development but also a serious internal challenge. In particular, it will focus on the rapid integration of new members into all the structures of the Organization and ensure in the new conditions not only the preservation but also the improvement of the effectiveness of cooperation mechanisms - from the grassroots to the highest [8].

According to the Doctor of Economics, Professor Xin Li (Director of the Research Institute of Eurasian Studies, Center for International Legal Training and Cooperation of the SCO) «Fast Expansion of SCO will Significantly Reduce the Efficiency of Cooperation Russia's fantasy about coordinating into "Greater Europe" was broken and because of NATO's development toward the east, Russia needed to break out «toward the east» with the Eurasian Economic Union and open up a "Greater Eurasia" strategic space. The "Greater Eurasia" strategic space is to change Russia from a Eurasian scaffold into the core of the rising "Greater Eurasia" and to utilize the «non-Western Greater Eurasia» as an international coalition to face the US and the West. To this end, Russia sees the extended SCO as the institutional stage for "Greater Eurasia" and in 2017 effectively brought India and Pakistan, with their troublesome inconsistencies, into the SCO, with Iran and Mongolia turning out to be full individuals sooner rather than later. As per Russia's desires, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Syria ought to likewise join the SCO.

In this manner, from one viewpoint, an expanded SCO upgrades the international credits and the chance of a bipolar example of conflict with the West, consequently diminishing the need and plausibility of monetary collaboration. Then again, the extending contrasts between the part states and the constraints of the «agreement» guideline have fundamentally diminished the productivity of financial collaboration in the

SCO. Specifically, the hostile inconsistencies and clashes among India and Pakistan, as well as the opposition among India and China for extraordinary power status and regional debates have seriously limited participation in different fields inside the structure of the SCO» [9]

Parallel to the ongoing political processes in the SCO in terms of increasing the anti-terrorist component in its activities, the need to eliminate a significant gap between the political and economic tracks of the Organization's activities remains an urgent task. If there are a lot of good groundwork in security cooperation, a broad agenda has been developed and clear coordination has been established, then certain progress is only being planned on the second track. The continued inertia in this matter is directly related to the lack of all-Russian sources of financing for project activities. For many years, efforts have been directed at the further development of economic ties within the Organization to reach agreements on the creation of its own financial and credit institutions, the development of multilateral cooperation in various industries, including through the implementation of joint projects using the potential of the Business Council and Interbank Association initiated by Russia in the middle of the decade. At the same time, it was hardly possible to attribute to new ideas and proposals the intentions of the member states confirmed at the 2015 summit to continue working on the creation of the Development Fund (Special Account) and the SCO Development Bank, the statement of interest in cooperation in the trade and economic sphere, the expediency of «pushing» to implement the agreements already reached, as well as in continuing work on the List of measures for the further development of the SCO project activities for 2017-2021.

The above-mentioned problems of financial support for its project activities are also waiting for its final decision, not to mention the most difficult work to concretize and harmonize the positions of the participating States on various aspects of the multi-purpose SREB project and its interconnection with other structures of regional economic development. In particular, the acceleration of the entry into force of the

Agreement on the Creation of Favorable Conditions for International Road Transport, signed on the sidelines of the meeting of the SCO heads of State in 2014 in Dushanbe, also requires special attention. Against this background, prospects for a qualitative breakthrough in the economic dimension of activities within the framework of the «six» were opened as a result of the promotion of the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative (SREB) in 2013. By supporting this idea and linking it with the implementation of the tasks of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which entered into force in 2015 with the participation of a number of SCO members, Russia thereby sent an additional positive signal to other member states, as well as observers at the Organization. Joint work in this direction could give a significant impetus to the implementation of the task of ensuring the interconnection of the SREB with the EAEU [10].

Beijing's willingness to pair the Economic Belt with the activities of the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as the agreements on relevant consultations and information exchange reached at the summits in Ufa and then in Tashkent, could provide the SCO with opportunities to enter into this new mega project in detail. Thus, the proposal of the People's Republic of China would be given the form not only of the Chinese initiative itself but of an undertaking associated with the relevant activities of the Shanghai Organization. Such a development, among other things, would significantly smooth out the lingering opinion about the current inability of the «six» (due to tactical differences among its members) to actively launch a program of joint economic projects. The fact that the relevance of the creation of the SCO Development Bank in this context has recently significantly decreased is evidenced by the recent creation by Beijing of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Its co-founders, in addition to Russia, included all the Central Asian members of the SCO, as well as India, Pakistan, and Iran.

The relevance for the SCO of concentrating efforts on the economic track of its activities is also predetermined by new global trends in international economic relations. First of all,

we are talking about Washington's initiatives on Trans-Pacific and Transatlantic Partnership projects. Their implementation can, in essence, replace the WTO and create a new global economic configuration with the leading role of the United States. And although they are directed primarily against the growing economic power of China and its international integration projects, they should additionally encourage the SCO Club to act more decisively in search of its niche in the global economy, in particular, through the interconnection between the EAEU and the SREB. A certain incentive for this could be the results of the May 2016 meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Astana, which discussed the formation of a single energy market of the Union, as well as the issue of negotiations on the formalization of business cooperation between the EAEU and China.

At the same time, in general, the desired mobility of the SCO in the economic direction is not yet visible, and in terms of the link between the Eurasian Trade Union and the Economic Belt, the approach of the member states has until recently continued to be limited to formulations of a fairly general nature. Although another confirmation at the anniversary summit of the SCO in 2016 of support for the SREB initiative and the speedy implementation of agreements between the heads of government of the SCO states at the end of last year.

As well as the emphasis made by the heads of state at the meeting in Tashkent on the desire to achieve the integration of national development strategies and strengthen the coordination of their trade and economic programs can give momentum to the development of the economic component in the SCO's activities. V.V. Putin's recent initiatives at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016 on a large Eurasian partnership with the participation of the EAEU, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran also gave an additional impetus to the movement towards the creation of a broad Eurasian economic space. This idea, as expressed by V.V. Putin earlier, at the Russia-ASEAN summit in Sochi, the idea of cooperation through the EAEU-SCO-ASEAN was also supported by the Chinese side.

### The results of the study

Last year's summit of the «six» in Ufa and the current anniversary in Tashkent could not but cause increased attention in the West and, in particular, in the United States, although their media did not particularly favor them with wide coverage. Nevertheless, recognizing the growing influence and authority of the Organization, its pronounced desire to strengthen cooperation in the field of security, as well as the emerging new horizons in Eurasian economic cooperation, Washington is closely following the evolution of the SCO, declaring its promising readiness to interact with it. The subject of special attention is the economic aspect, in connection with which the United States is already discussing with Beijing possible joint steps within its SREB initiatives. Washington is interested, first of all, in ensuring that the Pacific reversal of Chinese proposals – the «Maritime Silk Road of the XXI century» – does not undermine American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. The land component of the SREB project is of interest to the United States, first of all, in connection with its policy in Central, South Asia, and Afghanistan.

Further strengthening of the SCO, including at the expense of the economic bloc, can be considered as a definite threat to American positions in the region. Washington's attempts to link the Economic Belt plan with its previously proposed New Silk Road project, as well as the «Heart of Asia» mechanism (the Istanbul Process), can also be aimed at preventing such a scenario. At the same time, he is showing increasing interest in establishing cooperation with China in Central Asia, including as part of the search for a new strategy after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan.

While showing no particular concern about Beijing's growing influence in the region, the United States at the same time does not hide its negativity about Russia's role here, which is to some extent shared in the Central Asian states. It cannot be ruled out that Washington, coordinating its actions with China in Afghanistan (in particular, on possible negotiations with



the Taliban), as well as in the Central Asian dimension, considers certain cooperation here as a kind of balance to its turbulent relations with Beijing in Southeast Asia. Thus, the US Administration also secretly pursues the goal of sowing distrust between Russia and China in this SCO region and, accordingly, weakening the Organization itself. The visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry to Central Asia in November 2015 was also very indicative in this regard, during which Washington's readiness for further comprehensive and substantive cooperation with the countries of the region was confirmed, for which, in particular, there was created a

mechanism for regular contacts of foreign ministers in the 5+1 format. The main thing is that the SCO has adopted the Ufa Declaration and the SCO Development Strategy until 2025. In order not to lose the pace set by the SCO since the Ufa summit, there will be required serious additional efforts. The anniversary meeting of the heads of the SCO member states held in Tashkent this June confirmed the preservation of the positive dynamics gained by the Organization. The final stage of the admission of India and Pakistan to its membership was launched. Delaying the process could lead to significant image and political costs for the SCO.

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