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Lagebericht

Auslandsbüro Kasachstan (Astana)



Kazakhstan - Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

On July 4, 2024, the capital of Astana hosted the meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). President of Kazakhstan Tokayev met Xi Jinping and Putin and other foreign state officials. One of the key events was Belarus' accession to the SCO. For the first time, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, attended the SCO summit.

One of the primary agendas of the SCO meeting was addressing regional security and counterterrorism. The member states¹ reaffirmed their commitment to combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which are collectively referred to as the "three evils", term introduced by China's home politics. However, the effectiveness of this commitment remains questionable due to several factors:

- **Divergent Security Interests:** The member states have varying security priorities. For instance, China's primary concern is the stability of its Xinjiang region, while Russia focuses on maintaining its influence in Central Asia and finding new ways to overcome the western sanctions. These differing priorities can lead to fragmented and uncoordinated efforts.
- **Limited Military Coordination:** Despite regular joint military exercises, the SCO lacks a unified command structure and rapid response capability. This limits the organization's ability to respond swiftly to emerging threats.
- **Influence of External Actors:** The presence and interests of external actors, such as the United States and NATO, in the region complicate the security dynamics. The SCO's strategies often reflect a balancing act between confronting and accommodating these external influences.

Economic cooperation was another key theme of the meeting, with a focus on enhancing trade, investment, and infrastructure development within the SCO framework. The following points highlight the progress and challenges in this area: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Synergies: China's BRI remains a central pillar of the SCO's economic agenda. Several member states, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have benefitted from BRI-related investments. However, concerns about debt sustainability and the terms of Chinese loans persist.

¹ Belarus, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (*observer status*: Afghanistan, Mongolia; *dialogue status*: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bahrain, Cambodia, Egypt, Kuwait, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Türkiye, UAE)

- **Intra-Regional Trade Barriers:** Despite the emphasis on economic integration, intra-regional trade within the SCO remains limited due to tariff and non-tariff barriers, logistical bottlenecks, and regulatory discrepancies. The lack of a free trade agreement within the SCO further hampers economic integration.
- **Energy Cooperation:** Energy cooperation, particularly in oil, gas, and renewable energy, was highlighted as a key area for collaboration. Russia and Central Asian countries are major energy producers, while China and India are significant consumers. Coordinating energy policies and infrastructure development could enhance regional energy security and economic stability.

The SCO meeting in Astana also underscored the evolving geopolitical alignments within the organization and their broader implications:

- **China-Russia Axis:** The meeting highlighted the deepening strategic partnership between China and Russia. Both countries view the SCO as a platform to counterbalance Western influence and promote a multipolar world order. This axis, however, raises concerns among other member states about potential dominance and unequal power dynamics within the SCO. Vladimir Putin spoke at the meeting, where, commenting on the war in Ukraine, he said that this crisis had arisen as a result of the "absolutely unceremonious and adventurous policy of the USA and its satellites". He stated that Russia has never refused peace talks with Ukraine and is ready to continue.
- **India-Pakistan Dynamics:** The inclusion of India and Pakistan as full members has introduced new complexities into the SCO. While both countries participated actively in the meeting, their longstanding bilateral tensions pose challenges to cohesive decision-making. The SCO's ability to mediate and foster dialogue between India and Pakistan remains limited. This time it was shown through the absence of the Prime Minister of India, who has been announced to participate.
- **Central Asian Autonomy:** Central Asian member states, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have been pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy, balancing relations with major powers like China, Russia, and the West. The SCO provides these countries with a platform to assert their regional interests while managing external pressures. President Tokayev also expressed the opinion that "sanctions conflicts cause significant damage to the world economy" and "narrow the prospects for further development".

The recent SCO meeting in Astana showcased the organization's potential and limitations in addressing regional security, economic cooperation, and geopolitical alignments. While the SCO remains a crucial platform for dialogue and collaboration, its effectiveness is constrained by divergent interests, limited coordination, and external influences. Moving forward, the SCO will need to strengthen its institutional mechanisms, enhance intra-regional cooperation, and navigate complex geopolitical dynamics to achieve its objectives.

At the same time, the meeting once again demonstrated the importance of international recognition for Kazakhstan, the strength of Tokayev's foreign policy over domestic policy, where citizens are still waiting for genuine reforms to enhance their quality of life and freedoms.