



The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia And The Future Of Cooperation With The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Abstract: This article examines the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's evolving relationship with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and explores the prospects for future cooperation between the two sides. The study analyzes Saudi Arabia's strategic interests in engaging with the SCO in the context of shifting global geopolitics, multipolarity, and the diversification of its foreign policy under Vision 2030. Particular attention is paid to political dialogue, economic cooperation, energy security, regional stability, and cultural exchange as key areas of interaction. The paper also evaluates the potential benefits and challenges of Saudi Arabia's deeper involvement with the SCO, including its impact on regional security architecture and international partnerships. By assessing both opportunities and constraints, the study contributes to a broader understanding of Saudi Arabia's role in emerging multilateral frameworks and the future trajectory of cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Keywords: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Shanghai Cooperation Organization; international cooperation; multipolar world; foreign policy; regional security; economic integration.

INTRODUCTION: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential regional and international powers, playing a significant and active role in international organizations due to its special position in the global system of relations. This is attributed to several key factors, including:

- its strategic geographical location connecting

three continents.

- economic importance as the world's largest oil exporter and one of the most crucial players in ensuring the stability of global energy markets.
- religious significance, as Saudi Arabia is the cradle of revelation, the custodian of the two holy sites of Islam, and the spiritual center for Muslims worldwide.

All these factors determine the Kingdom's role as one of the main actors in shaping the decisions of international and regional organizations, which, in turn, serve as instruments for implementing the country's foreign policy agenda.

Saudi Arabia is a founding member of the United Nations since 1945 and is the only Arab state within the "Group of Twenty," whose summit it hosted in 2020. In 2005, the Kingdom joined the World Trade Organization, and the headquarters of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is located in the city of Jeddah.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia plays a key role in maintaining the stability of global oil markets due to its leading position in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

In this context, a comprehensive analysis of the process of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which it joined in 2023 as a dialogue partner, is of particular importance. The scientific relevance of this research is determined by the need to identify the strategic goals of this step, as well as to analyze its potential consequences for the development of bilateral and multilateral relations between the Kingdom and the member states of the organization, as well as for the formation of new regional and global balance of power.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was officially established in 2001 in the Chinese city of Shanghai. The main goals of its establishing were as follows:

- strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly relations between member states;
- countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism;
- developing cooperation in the field of security and military coordination;
- promoting the formation of a multipolar world;
- stimulating cultural, scientific, and technical exchange.

The headquarters of the SCO is located in Beijing, and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is based in Tashkent (Republic of Uzbekistan). In subsequent years, the organization expanded with new members: India

and Pakistan joined in 2017, and Iran joined in July 2023.

Today, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is one of the most significant regional associations in Asia, combining political, economic, cultural, and, above all, security dimensions. It positions itself as an alternative or complement to traditional international associations. Having emerged as a continuation of the "Shanghai Five," the organization initially aimed to deepen cooperation in security, counterterrorism, countering extremism, and border protection. Over time, the scope of its tasks has significantly expanded to encompass economic issues, energy, regional integration, as well as cultural exchange. Thus, the SCO has transformed into a multifunctional platform focused on simultaneously achieving security and development.

According to Dr. Hisham Abdulaziz al-Ammar, a number of political, historical, and economic factors influenced the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Among them, rising of modern challenges and threats - terrorism, extremism, and separatism being the most dangerous has a special place. The organization was established as a new form of regional interaction, within which priority is given to security and economic cooperation across all spheres.

The scholar also emphasizes that one of the key factors in the establishing of the SCO was the common problems and challenges faced by the states of the region, they are primarily rising of terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, religious fundamentalism, water issues, as well as cross-border crime. (al-Ammar, 2022)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, and Iran as full members. The observer states in the organization are Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka joined as dialogue partners.

According to Rashid Alimov, the Secretary-General of the SCO in 2016-2017, despite the fact that the SCO is not a military alliance, the fight on the front lines against terrorist threats requires the organization to continuously develop and strengthen mechanisms aimed at completely eradicating terrorist activity. In this context, the SCO will continue to conduct planned counter-terrorism exercises, including operations within the framework of the "SCO for Peace" mission. Furthermore, the organization will enhance cooperation in countering radical propaganda, public justification of terrorism, separatism, and extremism in the media and information space, based on the Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International

Information Security between the SCO Member States. (SCO, 2017)

Alimov also noted that uniting four nuclear powers within a single regional organization gave the SCO additional deterrent potential in the system created to maintain a strategic balance of power and political stability in the world. (SCO, 2017)

According to Dr. Wang Jin, over the past two decades, the SCO proposed and implemented numerous ideas and initiatives that embody the so-called "Shanghai spirit," founded on mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and the aspiration for joint development. The organization has made a significant contribution to enriching and elevating the system of values and principles on which it is based. Primarily, the SCO introduced a new type of security concept that calls for abandoning Cold War mentality, bloc confrontation, and the practice of achieving "absolute security" at the expense of other states' interests, in order to maintain global security. In the same vein, at a meeting in early 2002, the foreign ministers of SCO member states called for the adoption of a new security concept based on trust, mutual benefit, and cooperation. (Jin, 2023)

Furthermore, Dr. Wang Jin emphasized that among the SCO's objectives, promoting genuine multilateralism and explicitly opposing any forms of domination, power dictates, and monopolization of authority were of particular significance. The organization has never confined itself to a narrow circle or an exclusive alliance for select parties. On the contrary, the SCO advocates to adhere to the goals and principles of the UN Charter, to embrace the concept of joint creation and participation, and to provide a new platform and pathway for multilateral cooperation aimed at improving global governance. It is precisely for this reason that the prospects for cooperation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization open up broader horizons and more extensive opportunities. (Jin, 2023)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a dialogue partner in 2023. This step represents a significant development in its foreign policy course, as it reflects the Kingdom's aspiration to diversify strategic partners and strengthen its global position, particularly in Asia and Central Asia, which are gaining increasing geopolitical importance.

This joining has a multifaceted dimension, encompassing geopolitical, economic, diplomatic, and particularly military-political aspects. The security direction occupies a central place, as a significant part of the SCO's mission has been built upon it since the

organization's establishment. The key tasks of the organization are to counter the so-called "three evil forces" - terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Among the main objectives of establishing the organization are also strengthening mutual trust and good neighborly relations between member states, as well as coordination in the sphere of security and military cooperation. All of this are the basis of security for the participating countries, placing security issues at the center of the SCO's agenda.

In this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has given central attention to security issues, which resulted in the creation of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent.

The SCO's openness to new partners is a strategic move aimed at strengthening stability in Eurasia, as well as expanding its expertise in security and improving mechanisms to counter cross-border challenges. In this regard, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered as a valuable addition to the organization's activities, possessing significant experience in combating terrorism and extremism. It should be emphasized that Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to establish a specialized center for countering extremist ideology - "Etidal," established in 2017. This center focuses on combating extremism in the intellectual and media spheres, as well as promoting a discourse of moderation.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's joining to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a dialogue partner is a significant event on the international arena, especially that joining was shortly after the signing of the Saudi-Iranian agreement mediated by China. The People's Republic of China welcomed Saudi Arabia's decision to join the organization. As the official spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Mao Ning, stated: "Beijing congratulates the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on obtaining the status of a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China is ready to strengthen cooperation with Saudi Arabia within the SCO framework to make a greater contribution to ensuring regional security and stability, as well as promoting common development."

This decision reflects the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's strategic course towards openness and building multilateral partnerships amid the transformation of the international system based on the principles of multipolarity. Such an approach contributes to strengthening the Kingdom's position both at regional and international levels by leveraging its economic, military, and security potential within various strategic partnerships. All this enhances Saudi Arabia's role as a key actor contributing to the strengthening of stability

and development in its regional and economic environment.

Dr. Wang Jin, addressing the issue of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia joining as a dialogue partner, noted that within the Kingdom there was a small group of individuals influenced by extremist ideologies, urging them to travel to other countries to participate in so-called "jihad." And that posed a threat to both the national security of these states and the security of Saudi Arabia itself. And that, Riyadh played special attention to combating terrorism and extremism, as well as controlling them both within the country and beyond its borders.

In an interview with "Nezavisimaya Gazeta," Middle East expert and political analyst Elena Suponina emphasized that Iran had gained full membership in the SCO in 2023. Saudi Arabia's decision to join the organization, in her opinion, is not a formality, but rather reflects the Kingdom's growing desire to strengthen economic ties with China, as well as to improve relations with Russia, especially given the intensification of Chinese policy in the region. As for China's success in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it still requires the test of time. Furthermore, this decision reflects Saudi Arabia's fatigue from protracted regional conflicts and its desire to extricate itself from the war in Yemen. (Skosyrev, 2023)

Political analyst Stanislav Tarasov, in an interview with the "Abzats" portal, noted that Saudi Arabia was a key player in the oil production market in the Middle East, and the joining of such a "giant" to the SCO is undoubtedly a positive event. According to him, the Middle East has always been a special region - extremely volatile, yet at the same time interesting and promising. He said that today, we were witnessing the process of the US being pushed out of the countries in the region and a reorientation towards multipolar relations. (Tkachuk, 2023)

The presence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, possessing strategic and economic power, as well as the status of the largest energy resource supplier, is a key factor ensuring its significant influence in any regional or international organization it joins. As previously noted, one of the most important foundations on which the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established was security, and it is in this sphere that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had accumulated extensive and long-term experience. Saudi Arabia has been actively combating terrorism and extremism both at the domestic and regional levels. This experience was gained as a result of countering terrorist attacks within the country, as well as through efforts to combat drug trafficking and organized crime.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered one of the leading states that has made a significant contribution to combating terrorism at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Collectively, these efforts have made its experience a global model worthy of study and implementation.

In light of this, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has implemented a number of measures in this area, which can be divided into several levels: domestic, regional, and international.

- **Domestic level:** elimination of terrorist cells, creation of the "Munasaha" program (for rehabilitation and prevention of extremism), as well as the National Cybersecurity Center.
- **Regional level:** cooperation within the Gulf Cooperation Council, establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, as well as support for the stabilization of Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.
- **International level:** financial support for the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, establishment of the "Etidal" Center in 2017, international cooperation in the field of intelligence sharing.

All these efforts and initiatives open up broad prospects for cooperation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in key areas such as combating terrorism and extremism, exchanging intelligence on the activities of radical organizations, and strengthening cooperation in protecting strategically important maritime communications and cybersecurity.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that Saudi Arabia's status as a dialogue partner does not grant it direct membership in SCO institutions such as the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which is the organization's main security body. At this stage, its participation is limited to attending general meetings and open events. However, this step can be considered a preparatory stage that could lead to full membership in the future, which, in turn, would strengthen the Kingdom's position in Eurasia and deepen the framework of security, economic, and political cooperation within the organization, especially with China and Russia.

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