

# Figure of Eight

More inclusive than ever, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization champions a new model of regional cooperation. By Sun Zhuangzhi

At the 18th Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Heads of State, the first summit since the expansion of its membership, leaders of the eight member states mapped the future of a larger organization. The meeting, held in Qingdao, east China's Shandong Province, on June 10, saw the release of milestone documents that codify their consensus. All this will further enhance the solidarity and influence of the SCO.

## Evolution

The SCO came into being against a distinct international backdrop in the aftermath of the Cold War. It was created as a mechanism to meet the needs of countries in the region in terms of maintaining stability and promoting shared development. Under the Shanghai Five grouping, predecessor to the SCO, China, Russia and countries in Central Asia not only defused risks stemming from long-term confrontation between China and the Soviet Union but also succeeded in building mutual confidence militarily and achieving disarmament in border areas. In addition, they launched joint law enforcement and border defense cooperation programs in a bid to cope with nontraditional security threats—especially extremism, terrorism and separatism—as well as trans-border crimes such as drug trafficking.

After the SCO was founded in 2001, collaboration in security expanded to cover a wider range of issues with the signing of a series of legal instruments and the introduction of several mechanisms for dialogue. The SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure was set up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, as a standing body through which to regularly conduct information sharing and joint antiterrorism exercises. The SCO often takes a coordinated stance on security hot spots and has become a pivotal force for regional stability.

Along with its security efforts, the SCO has found it equally important to synchro-

nize strategies in the economic, cultural and political arenas. Economic ties, which lay the material foundation for the SCO, are essential to the organization's growing dynamism and appeal. The Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation was signed at an SCO prime ministers' meeting in Beijing in 2003. Then members identified 11 priority areas and 127 key projects, and established seven working groups within the framework of the economy and trade ministers' meeting. They have made trade and investment facilitation current goals for economic cooperation and are boosting joint action in energy, transportation, finance, customs, agriculture and industrial capacity. By combining multilateral and bilateral initiatives, the SCO has contributed to its members' pursuit of mutually beneficial outcomes and common prosperity.

The organization has also inaugurated meetings of senior officials in charge of the culture, education, science and technology, health, environmental protection and tourism sectors. The SCO University has been established, involving dozens of educational institutions in member states. Various cultural, artistic, media and youth exchange programs have been implemented to improve cross-cultural understanding and friendship among the people of SCO nations.

## Ethos

The SCO has adapted to profound changes in the international landscape and spearheaded the rapid development of multilateral cooperation with an innovative approach. The Shanghai Spirit—a code of conduct characterized by reciprocal trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common development—and new concepts of security and cooperation advocated by China have become the foundational principles of the organization. These ideas are a drastic departure from Cold War thinking and power politics, as they call for establishing partnerships instead of military alliances while opposing zero-sum geopolitical games.

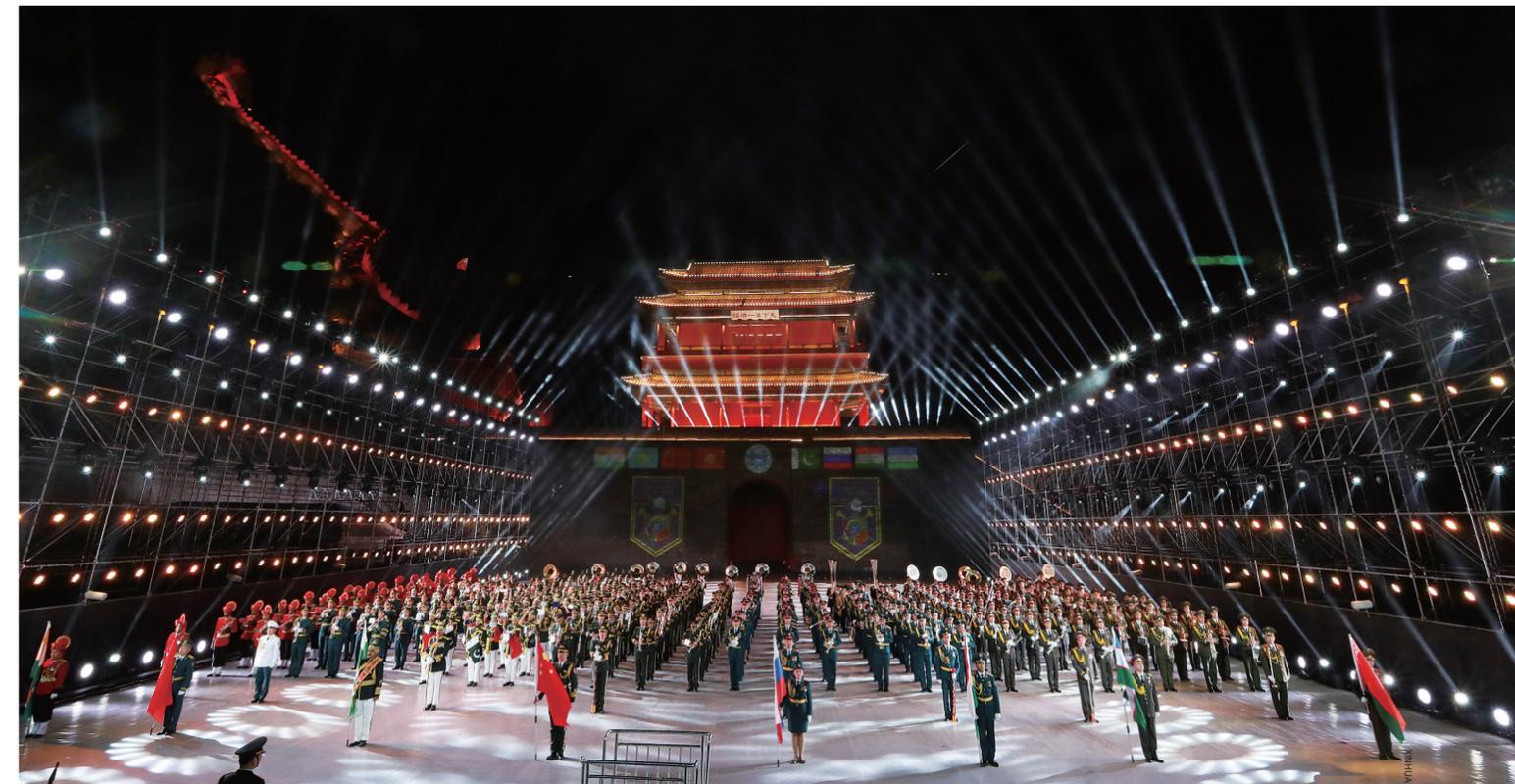
They have helped safeguard the interests of emerging economies and developing countries, representing a new direction for regional cooperation.

In the SCO, economic development varies greatly from member to member. Social systems, cultural traditions, geographic environments and national defense capabilities are also markedly different across national borders. Regional cooperation requires acknowledgement of these disparities before members can reach consensus, define reasonable objectives and trajectories, and develop full potential for future cooperation.

Despite myriad challenges, the SCO continues to make great strides. In fact, an increasing number of countries and international organizations have expressed intentions to work closely with the organization. In 2004, Mongolia became the first observer to the SCO, and in the following years, five new observers and six dialogue partners were admitted, expanding the institution's geographic space for cooperation. The SCO has also become an observer to the UN General Assembly, as its constructive voice on international affairs is better heard.

The political will of SCO leaders is a primary factor in the institution's growth. Bilateral relations of a strategic nature—especially effective communication between heads of state—are conducive to executive decision-making in favor of multilateral cooperation. A solid legal foundation has also played a part. The SCO has signed a number of important agreements, including the SCO Charter, the Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, and the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism, establishing basic principles for cooperation.

Last but not least, the extension of the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination on a regional dimension makes it possible for the SCO to engage in extensive multilateral collaboration. China's contributions are considerable, including the provision of more than \$22



Military bands from Shanghai Cooperation Organization member countries perform in Beijing on April 24

billion concessionary loans to other member states, as well as the funding of training sessions and exchange programs.

## Inclusiveness

The SCO tries to uphold principles of openness and transparency while emphasizing the importance of not inciting rivalries with other organizations and states. Having entered into partnerships with many international organizations, the SCO is not exclusive of other multilateral mechanisms that exert influence in the region. It supports the implementation of various transnational initiatives with the belief that regional issues should be resolved politically through collaboration.

A symbol of this vision came as the SCO held an international conference on Afghanistan in 2009, to which delegates from numerous countries and international organizations, including the United States and the European Union, were invited. After China proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative in 2013, which aims to enhance connectivity along and beyond the routes of the ancient Silk Road, the SCO provided a platform for countries in the region to align their development strategies. It has offered assistance to several transnational projects

and multilateral initiatives in Central Asia, such as the EU-led construction of highways and the nuclear-free-zone initiative put forward by Central Asian states.

The maneuvering of some major powers has fueled tension between nations and generated instability within certain countries, exacerbating the complexity of the region's security landscape. Antiterrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq are plagued with new uncertainties. The SCO calls for respecting the authority of the UN and norms of international law while standing against intervention in the domestic affairs of countries in the region by external actors.

Since its inception, the SCO has been harried with questions about its mission and function. Critics have been vocal in their prejudices with cynical predictions and pejorative rhetoric. Some Western scholars have gone so far as to claim that the SCO intends to become an "Eastern NATO" ready to confront the West, while some analysts speculate that competition between China and Russia in Central Asia will undermine the organization's internal unity. Since the accession of India and Pakistan last year, the number of doubters has increased. They argue that conflicts between India and Pakistan and between China and India will make it difficult for the SCO to operate,

and that the organization could be at risk of collapse.

These arguments are not grounded in facts. Cooperation has recently been the defining feature of relations between China and Russia, as well as between China and India, which is in the interest of all three countries.

The SCO will not become a military or political alliance, nor a bloc that is antagonistic to the West and competes with it for spheres of influence. The Qingdao summit illustrated the commitment of SCO members and observers to building a community in which countries across the region share the same future, with interests intertwined based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Their cooperation will not only change the outlook of Eurasia; it is indicative of how global governance can be improved, and how China's vision for a community with a shared future for mankind can become a reality. ■

