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## SCO REGIONAL MILITARY EXERCISES: IMPACT ON THE BALANCE OF POWER AND REGIONAL STABILITY (BASED ON THE EXAMPLES OF «PEACE MISSION», «ANTITERROR»)

**Abstract.** The article examines regional military exercises of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), particularly the *Peace Mission* and *Anti-Terror* maneuvers, focusing on their influence on the balance of power and stability in Eurasia. In the context of global transformations, the SCO serves as a key platform for multilateral military cooperation. The primary goal of the research is to assess how these exercises strengthen anti-terrorism potential, affect the regional balance of power, act as a tool for shaping an alternative security architecture, reveal internal contradictions, and highlight the need for transparency and communication. The tasks include examining the strategic purposes of the exercises, evaluating their political and military implications, identifying factors shaping their perception by regional actors, and analyzing the Kazakh perspective. The methods involve comparative analysis of SCO doctrines, examination of official statements, and assessment of regional reactions through open sources. The main novelty of the work is to demonstrate how large-scale maneuvers simultaneously enhance operational compatibility and generate debates about their legitimacy and underlying motives within the evolving Eurasian security landscape. The results show that the Peace Mission and Anti-Terror activities increase joint readiness against terrorism, influence the regional power configuration, and contribute to the emergence of alternative security mechanisms. At the same time, the exercises expose internal disagreements among members and underscore the importance of openness and communication for maintaining stability and a positive image of SCO activities.

**Keywords:** SCO, military exercises, «Peace Mission», «Antiterror», regional security, balance of power, stability, Eurasia, Kazakhstan, terrorism.

### Introduction

The current stage of international relations development is characterized by the transformation of the global order, a shift in the centers of power, and the increasing role of regional organizations in ensuring security. In this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), uniting key players of the Eurasian continent, assumes particular significance as a platform for multilateral military cooperation. One of the most vivid forms of this cooperation is regional military exercises, such as “Peace Mission” and “Anti-Terror.” These maneuvers, conducted under the auspices of the SCO, are aimed at honing the interaction of the armed forces of member states in countering new challenges and threats, primarily terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

However, beyond their declared objectives, the conduct of large-scale military exercises inevitably impacts the regional balance of power and the overall atmosphere of stability. Discussions regarding the legitimacy, direction, and true aims of such maneuvers are ongoing among both the expert community and politicians. This article is dedicated to analyzing the influence of SCO regional military exercises, exemplified by the «Peace Mission» and «Anti-Terror» drills, on the balance of power and regional stability in Eurasia. The study aims to identify

how these exercises contribute to strengthening or, conversely, complicating the situation in the region, as well as to determine the factors that shape their perception by various actors.

### **Materials and methods of research**

In writing this article, the author mainly used publications by various authors that directly or indirectly consider aspects related to the SCO regional military exercises, such as the «Peace Mission» and «Antiterror». In addition, the following official SCO documents were used: charters, declarations, agreements and statements concerning military cooperation and the conduct of exercises; press releases and reports of the ministries of defense of the participating countries: information on the goals, progress and results of the exercises provided by the defense departments of the SCO member states (for example, the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China, etc.); scientific publications and analytical materials: articles, monographs, reports of research centers and expert organizations devoted to the SCO, regional security, military exercises and the transformation of the world order. Among them, the following should be noted: works by such authors as A.V. Safronov, V.G. Bakayev, A.I. Bogdanov, S.V. Aksenenko, D.E. Tkachev, E.A. Smirnova, M.V. Lavrov, D.V. Trenin, K.S. Borishpolets, A.V. Fedorov, E.B. Bazhanova, I.I. Ashmarov, V.S. Kashin, A.I. Utkin, as a classic analysis of the balance of power. Additionally, to ensure the Kazakh perspective, the works of such domestic experts as B.K. Sultanov, K.Zh. Alimbekov, S.K. Ibrayev, A.M. Malinovskaya and S.N. Zhakupov were studied; media materials: Publications of leading international and regional news agencies and publications covering the activities of the SCO and military exercises; data from international organizations: reports of the UN, OSCE and other specialized organizations concerning regional security and counter-terrorism. The research methods used were comparative analysis, which compared the goals, formats and results of the Peace Mission and Anti-Terror exercises with other regional military maneuvers, as well as an analysis of their impact on the balance of power in Eurasia. Content analysis was used to study official documents, statements and publications to identify dominant narratives and positions of the participating states. The use of a systems approach allowed us to consider the SCO exercises in the context of broader geopolitical processes, the transformation of the world order and regional dynamics. Historical and political analysis allowed us to trace the evolution of the SCO exercises since their inception and their connection with changing security challenges. Finally, the balance of power analysis assessed the impact of the exercises on the configuration of military potentials and alliances in the region.

### **Discussion**

The SCO regional military exercises, primarily the Peace Mission and Anti-Terror, play a dual role in the context of regional security and the balance of power. On the one hand, their stated goals - the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism (ITES) - correspond to the common interests of the member states and help strengthen their anti-terrorist potential. Conducting joint exercises allows for the coordination of actions, the exchange of intelligence information, the interaction of various branches of the armed forces and special forces. This, in turn, can increase the effectiveness of responding to real threats emanating from unstable zones, for example, from Afghanistan (A.V. Safronov, 2018; S.K. Ibrayev). Joint training of anti-terrorist operations helps to build up operational compatibility and trust between the armed forces of the participating countries. This, in turn, can be seen as a positive factor contributing to strengthening stability in the region. The Peace Mission exercises, which have been held regularly since 2005, typically cover a wider range of scenarios, including, in addition to counterterrorism, practicing joint actions to maintain peace and security (Press release of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan; K.Zh. Alimbekov).

However, holding such maneuvers also carries certain risks and ambiguous consequences for the regional balance of power. Firstly, the scale of the exercises, often involving significant troop contingents, modern weapons and large-scale movements, can be perceived by neighboring states that are not members of the SCO as a show of force and a potential threat. This is especially true for those countries that view the strengthening of the military potential of Russia and China as a factor changing the regional balance (D.V. Trenin, 2016; B.K. Sultanov, 2019).

Secondly, the dominance of countries such as Russia and China in the exercises sets the tone and determines the direction of cooperation. This raises questions about the extent to which the exercises reflect the interests of all SCO members, and not just the leading powers. For countries such as India and Pakistan, participation in SCO exercises occurs against the backdrop of their own bilateral rivalries, which leaves an imprint on the nature and extent of actual interaction (A.I. Bogdanov, 2019). And although the SCO is positioned as a platform for dialogue, deep-seated contradictions between these countries may limit the potential for truly close military cooperation. From Kazakhstan's perspective, it is important that SCO exercises contribute to rapprochement between the positions of all members, rather than exacerbate existing differences, as emphasized in the works (A.M. Malinovskaya, 2022). Third, in the context of the transformation of the world order, when traditional security institutions are weakening and new challenges are emerging, SCO exercises can be interpreted as an attempt to form an alternative security architecture independent of Western blocs (K.S. Borishpolets, 2017). Such an interpretation may increase geopolitical tensions, in particular, in the relations of the SCO with NATO or other Western-oriented structures. Kazakhstan, as a country striving for a balanced foreign policy, carefully analyzes these processes, seeking to play the role of a bridge between various centers of power, which is reflected in studies (S.N. Zhakupov, 2018). It is important to note that the perception of SCO exercises as a threat or, conversely, as a factor of stability largely depends on the foreign policy of member states and their communication strategy. Open information about the objectives of the exercises, transparency in their implementation and emphasizing the exclusively defensive nature, as is often done in official statements (M.V. Lavrov, 2015), are designed to reduce the wariness of external players. However, the intensity and scale of the exercises, especially those conducted against the backdrop of an aggravated international situation, inevitably attract increased attention and can potentially be used in the context of geopolitical competition.

### **Research results**

1. Strengthening anti-terrorism potential: SCO regional military exercises, such as the Peace Mission and Anti-Terror, contribute to enhancing the interoperability of the armed forces of member states in the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. They allow for the development of coordination, information exchange and joint actions of units, which increases their effectiveness in the face of common threats (V.G. Bakayev, 2020; E.A. Smirnova, 2022; S.K. Ibrayev, 2021).

In addition to these formal improvements, such exercises foster significant psychological and operational benefits. Participating units gain experience in navigating multinational environments, which involves overcoming language barriers, differences in military culture, and variations in operational procedures. This adaptation is critical for real-world counter-terrorism operations, where rapid decision-making and coordinated actions determine success. Moreover, the exercises serve as testing grounds for advanced intelligence-sharing systems, communication technologies, and joint operational planning. For Kazakhstan, whose borders are extensive and ethnically diverse, this practical exposure enhances national preparedness and facilitates regional coordination, ensuring that the country can respond effectively to unconventional threats such as cross-border extremism or hybrid warfare tactics.

2. Impact on the regional balance of power: The scale and frequency of exercises, especially with the participation of Russia and China, have a noticeable impact on the regional balance of

power. They may be perceived by neighboring states that are not members of the SCO as a demonstration of the bloc's growing military potential, which provokes a response and intensifies geopolitical competition (A.I. Utkin, 2005; V.S. Kashin, 2020; B.K. Sultanov, 2019).

Beyond the demonstration of force, these exercises have a significant psychological and strategic effect. They signal to regional and global actors that the SCO possesses the capacity for rapid mobilization, coordinated operations, and technological integration. Neighboring countries, particularly those outside the SCO, might interpret this as both a deterrent and a challenge, prompting adjustments in their defense strategies. However, excessive displays could also exacerbate tensions, potentially triggering arms races or defensive posturing. From Kazakhstan's perspective, the challenge lies in maintaining regional stability by balancing the signaling of strength with confidence-building measures and diplomatic engagement. The exercises thus operate not only as a military tool but also as a factor influencing perceptions of regional power dynamics.

3. An instrument for forming an alternative security architecture: SCO exercises, conducted against the backdrop of a transforming world order, can be interpreted as an element of forming an alternative regional security system independent of the West. This contributes to the polarization of international relations and increased geopolitical tensions (D.E. Tkachev, 2017; A.V. Fedorov, 2019; S.N. Zhakupov, 2018).

In my view, these exercises do more than assert independence from Western-led security structures—they actively create a testing ground for innovative approaches to regional security. The integration of land, air, and cyber units in joint drills allows the SCO to explore hybrid operational tactics that are highly relevant in modern warfare. By experimenting with such multi-domain operations, member states gain valuable insights into crisis management, counter-terrorism, and cross-border coordination. This positions SCO as not merely a military bloc but as a platform for developing a distinct, multipolar security architecture. For Kazakhstan, this represents both an opportunity and a responsibility: participating in such initiatives enhances influence within the bloc but also necessitates careful management of relationships with both SCO and non-SCO neighbors to avoid escalating regional polarization.

4. Difficulties due to internal contradictions: The presence of countries with pronounced bilateral rivalry, such as India and Pakistan, within the SCO creates additional challenges for deepening military cooperation. Their participation in the exercises is often formal or takes place in line with their own national interests, which limits the potential for true synergy and can transmit bilateral contradictions to the organizational level. From Kazakhstan's perspective, this factor requires special attention when assessing the effectiveness of the SCO as an instrument of stability (A.M. Malinovskaya, 2022).

These internal tensions affect not only operational efficiency but also intelligence-sharing and joint planning. Units from rival countries may withhold certain information or adopt cautious operational behaviors, thereby limiting the overall effectiveness of exercises. Yet, even formal participation has value: it creates structured settings for diplomatic engagement, conflict de-escalation, and confidence-building. For Kazakhstan, there is a strategic opportunity to act as a mediator or stabilizer within the SCO framework, ensuring that national rivalries do not undermine collective objectives. This also emphasizes the need for standardized operational protocols that minimize the influence of bilateral disputes on the bloc's cohesion and effectiveness.

5. The need for transparency and communication: The perception of SCO exercises as a factor of stability or a threat largely depends on their transparency and active communication of their goals. Official statements emphasizing the defensive nature and focus on combating common threats are intended to reduce wariness, but the intensity of the maneuvers continues to be the subject of close attention. Kazakh diplomacy is actively working to ensure transparency and minimize the risks associated with military exercises in the region (K.Zh. Alimbekov, 2020).

In addition to these measures, SCO exercises could function as instruments of public diplomacy. By sharing detailed reports, operational analyses, and media coverage, member states



can reinforce the perception of their activities as defensive and cooperative rather than aggressive. For Kazakhstan, proactive communication not only mitigates misperceptions but also strengthens the country's reputation as a stabilizing actor. Maintaining transparency ensures that exercises contribute to confidence-building and fosters predictability in regional security dynamics. In the long term, such approaches enhance SCO's credibility as a security bloc that combines military preparedness with responsible, transparent conduct.

### **Conclusion**

SCO regional military exercises, such as the Peace Mission and Anti-Terror, are an important tool for developing multilateral military cooperation in Eurasia. They objectively contribute to strengthening the anti-terrorist potential of member states, increasing operational compatibility, and developing mechanisms for joint response to common challenges. Beyond immediate tactical benefits, these exercises foster mutual trust among the armed forces of participating countries, providing a foundation for coordinated responses not only to terrorism and extremism but also to humanitarian crises, natural disasters, and other non-traditional security threats. By practicing joint maneuvers, member states gain valuable experience in interoperability, command structures, and rapid decision-making, which enhances the collective resilience of the SCO in the face of unpredictable regional challenges.

At the same time, the significant impact of these exercises on the regional balance of power cannot be ignored. The scale of the exercises, their frequency, and the participation of leading global powers such as Russia and China contribute to the transformation of the regional security architecture. They send clear strategic signals to neighboring states and the international community regarding the operational capabilities and coordination potential of the SCO. Such exercises may be perceived as a demonstration of strength and cohesion, influencing the security policies of non-member states and prompting adjustments in military planning or diplomatic postures. The visibility of these maneuvers also reinforces the SCO's role as an emerging center of multipolarity in Eurasia, highlighting its capacity to operate independently from Western-led security structures.

Particularly complex is the participation of countries with significant bilateral contradictions, such as India and Pakistan. Their rivalry can limit the depth of military cooperation within the SCO and simultaneously shape external perceptions of the exercises. However, even when participation is cautious or formal, it provides a structured framework for dialogue and confidence-building. From Kazakhstan's perspective, the successful functioning of the SCO as a tool for ensuring regional security depends on the organization's ability to mitigate internal tensions and convert potential conflicts into constructive engagement. This requires both careful diplomatic management and the establishment of operational protocols that minimize the impact of bilateral disputes on broader collective objectives.

Furthermore, the perception of SCO exercises by external actors highlights the critical importance of transparency and communication. By actively promoting the defensive and anti-terrorist nature of their activities, member states can reduce misunderstandings, avoid unnecessary escalations, and foster trust within the region. Kazakhstan, in particular, plays a key role in ensuring that these exercises are not perceived as aggressive posturing but as coordinated efforts to maintain stability. Public diplomacy, media engagement, and detailed reporting on objectives, scenarios, and outcomes of the exercises can reinforce the credibility and predictability of the SCO as a regional security actor.

In conclusion, SCO regional military exercises serve as a multidimensional instrument for enhancing security cooperation, shaping the regional balance of power, and developing an alternative framework for Eurasian stability. Their effectiveness is determined not only by the operational capabilities demonstrated during the maneuvers but also by the political, diplomatic, and perceptual dimensions surrounding them. For Kazakhstan and other member states, the continued development of the SCO as a stabilizing factor requires ongoing attention to internal

cohesion, clear communication with neighboring countries, and adherence to principles of transparency, openness, and good-neighborliness. By maintaining these priorities, the SCO can effectively combine military preparedness with strategic diplomacy, reinforcing its role as a mechanism for security, cooperation, and regional resilience while minimizing risks associated with military competition or misperceptions.

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### **РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ВОЕННЫЕ УЧЕНИЯ ШОС: ВЛИЯНИЕ НА БАЛАНС СИЛ И РЕГИОНАЛЬНУЮ СТАБИЛЬНОСТЬ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ «МИРНАЯ МИССИЯ», «АНТИТЕРРОР»)**

**Аннотация.** Статья анализирует региональные военные учения Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС), в частности «Мирная миссия» и «Антитеррор», с акцентом на их влияние на баланс сил и стабильность в Евразии. В условиях глобальных трансформаций ШОС выступает ключевой площадкой многостороннего военного взаимодействия. Цель исследования – оценить, как данные учения усиливают антитеррористический потенциал, воздействуют на региональный баланс сил, формируют альтернативную архитектуру безопасности, обостряют внутренние противоречия и подчёркивают необходимость транспарентности и коммуникации. В качестве задач рассматриваются анализ стратегических установок учений, оценка их политико-военных последствий, выявление факторов восприятия различными акторами и исследование казахстанской позиции. Методы включают сравнительный анализ документов ШОС, изучение официальных заявлений и оценку региональных реакций на основе открытых источников. Новизна работы заключается в демонстрации двойственного характера масштабных манёвров, которые одновременно повышают оперативную совместимость и вызывают дискуссии о легитимности и истинных мотивах стран-участниц. Результаты показывают, что учения укрепляют готовность к совместному противодействию терроризму, влияют на конфигурацию сил в регионе и способствуют формированию альтернативных механизмов безопасности, при этом выявляя внутренние разногласия и актуализируя потребность в открытости и диалоге.

**Ключевые слова:** ШОС, военные учения, «Мирная миссия», «Антитеррор», региональная безопасность, баланс сил, стабильность, Евразия, Казахстан, терроризм.

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### **ШЫҰ АЙМАҚТЫҚ ӘСКЕРИ ЖАТТЫҒУЛАРЫ: КҮШТІҢ ТЕҢГЕСІНЕ ӘСЕРІ ЖӘНЕ ӨНІРЛІК ТҰРАҚТЫЛЫҚ («БЕЙБІТ МИССИЯСЫ», «АНТИТЕРРОР» МЫСАЛЫНДА)**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымының (ШЫҰ) аймақтық әскери оқу-жаттығулары, әсіресе «Бейбіт миссия» мен «Антитеррор» маневрлері Еуразиядағы күштер балансына және тұрақтылыққа қалай ықпал ететіні талданады. Ғаламдық өзгерістер жағдайында ШЫҰ көпжақты әскери ынтымақтастықтың маңызды алаңы ретінде көрінеді. Зерттеудің

мақсаты – оқу-жаттығулардың антитеррорлық әлеуетті күшейтуіне, өңірлік күштер тепе-теңдігіне ықпал етуіне, баламалы қауіпсіздік архитектурасын қалыптастырудағы рөліне, ішкі қайшылықтарды айқындауына және транспаренттік пен коммуникация қажеттілігін көрсетуіне баға беру. Зерттеу міндеттері ретінде оқу-жаттығулардың стратегиялық мазмұнын талдау, олардың саяси-әскери салдарларын бағалау, түрлі акторлардың қабылдау факторларын анықтау және Қазақстанның көзқарасын зерделеу қарастырылады. Әдістері – ШЫҰ құжаттарын салыстырмалы талдау, ресми мәлімдемелерді саралау және ашық дереккөздер арқылы өңірлік реакцияларды бағалау. Зерттеудің жаңалығы – ауқымды маневрлердің екіұдай табиғатын ашып көрсету: бір жағынан, олар үйлесімділікті арттырады, екінші жағынан – легитимдігі мен шынайы мақсаттары туралы пікірталас тудырады. Нәтижелер оқу-жаттығулардың терроризмге бірлескен қарсы іс-қимыл дайындығын күшейтіп, өңірлік күштер конфигурациясына ықпал ететінін және баламалы қауіпсіздік тетіктерін қалыптастыруға жағдай жасайтынын көрсетеді, сонымен қатар ішкі келіспеушіліктерді айқындап, ашықтық пен диалог қажеттілігін алға шығарады.

**Кілт сөздер:** ШЫҰ, әскери жаттығулар, «Бейбіт миссия», «Антитеррор», аймақтық қауіпсіздік, күштер балансы, тұрақтылық, Еуразия, Қазақстан, терроризм.

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