

## **Shanghai Five To Be Transformed**

**Author:** [Arkady Dubnov](#)

Uzbekistan to join new body to tackle instability in the region

A new political bloc involving Central Asian countries along with Russia and China is likely to come into existence this month in an effort to improve regional stability.

The Shanghai Organisation for Cooperation, SOC - combining the Shanghai Five, S-5, nations and Uzbekistan - will tackle some of the most serious threats to the region, such as religious extremism and terrorism.

The new group is expected to come into being at the fifth anniversary summit of the S-5 in Shanghai on June 15.

Kazakstan, China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan established the S-5 as an informal alliance, at a summit in Shanghai in 1996, in an effort to resolve a protracted border dispute between the Soviet Union and China.

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, the Central Asian states made sorting out frontier problems with China a priority. Beijing, in turn, found dealing with the independent countries individually more beneficial.

China has succeeded in resolving all border disputes with Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan, but has yet to do so with Tajikistan and Russia.

Tajikistan and China both claim parts of the Pamir mountains, while Russia and China are vying for a few islands on the River Amur in the Far East.

S-5's greatest achievement has been in relieving tensions along the Chinese border. A 100-km wide "transparency" zone - a sort of demilitarised area - has been set up on both sides of the frontier.

As far as border delimitation is concerned, the accession of Uzbekistan to the "Shanghai process" is completely irrelevant, as the country has no common frontier with China.

But border issues have been slipping down the S-5 agenda over the years, superseded by new regional challenges such as religious radicalism, terrorism, separatism and narcotics trafficking - all of which are to some extent connected to the on-going war in Afghanistan.

The S-5 nations, notably Russia, view Tashkent as a key player in securing Central Asian stability.

The Kremlin was very vocal about this during Uzbek president Islam Karimov's two-day visit to Moscow on May 3. Karimov was there to discuss details of Uzbekistan's imminent accession to the "Shanghai process".

The idea of Tashkent joining S-5 is not new. A few years ago, Uzbekistan expressly indicated its willingness

to get involved, but China and Kazakhstan gave it the cold shoulder.

Apparently, Beijing feared Russian influence in S-5 would be enhanced by the accession of another post-Soviet member. Kazakhstan, which has always regarded Uzbekistan as its regional rival, simply did not want it in the "Shanghai Club".

But things changed in 1999 when militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, invaded Kyrgyz section of the Fergana valley in what has become known as the "Batken events". In 2000, Tashkent was granted observer status in the Shanghai Five.

In July 2000, Karimov attended the Shanghai summit in Dushanbe. The Uzbek leader's visit to the Tajik capital was a milestone in itself, given the tensions between the two countries in recent years.

Tashkent has publicly accused Dushanbe of harbouring IMU militants in its Tavildara area, from where they have allegedly attacked neighbouring countries.

For its part, Dushanbe is demanding the extradition of Colonel Makhmud Khudoiberdiev, who spearheaded a revolt in Khodzand against Tajik president Emomali Rakhmonov's government three years ago. Khudoiberdiev has allegedly found refuge in Uzbekistan.

Vitaly Vorobiov, Vladimir Putin's special envoy to the S-5, says the Kremlin wants Tashkent involved in the "Shanghai Club" for a number of reasons, not least because Uzbek membership could ease the strain between all the nations of the Central Asian region.

It is no secret that, despite the bilateral "Eternal Friendship" agreements signed between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in the 1990s, the level of mutual trust between these nations is at an all-time low.

Part of the friction can be laid at the door of personal issues between the heads of state. But national security and sovereignty matters have also taken their toll. In response to the Batken incursions, Uzbekistan unilaterally mined its borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan - a policy which has cost dozens of civilian lives.

Tashkent refused to provide Kyrgyzstan with a map of the minefields, because of fears that they may end up in the wrong hands. "We cannot be sure that if someone is ready to pay for the maps they wont be sold!" said an Uzbek diplomat.

Nevertheless, Moscow remains optimistic, saying constructive dialogue has resumed between the Central Asian capitals. "Although the Shanghai treaties applied confidence-building steps only to national borders, not international relations," said Vorobiov, "we are hopeful that once Uzbekistan joins in, all SOC nations will have the good will to make this happen."

The new alliance has already attracted the attention of such extra-regional nations as Mongolia, South Korea, Iran, India, Pakistan and even the United States.

Pakistan, for one, has recently tried to apply for S-5 membership, but met with the vehement opposition of Tajikistan, which accuses Islamabad of backing the Taleban in Afghanistan. The S-5 nations back the Taleban's opponents, the Northern Alliance.

The SOC will be established as an open-ended organization, but Russian diplomats have remarked that the mechanism of new member admission is yet to be worked out. It appears that SOC membership could be granted to Pakistan with some strings attached - for instance an insistence that it becomes more cooperative on Afghanistan.

Arkady Dubnov is a journalist with the Vremya novostei newspaper in Moscow

**Location:** [China](#)  
[Uzbekistan](#)  
[Tajikistan](#)  
[Stavropol](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/shanghai-five-be-transformed>