

TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND PROSPECTS OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

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Abstract

The given article considers the changes, occurring recently in the tourism industry of the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and focuses on its increasingly increased interdependences with the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). There, the attempts at intensifying collaboration in the sphere of tourism are analyzed and in the study the situation with visitor relations between the SCO member states, the development of joint tours, facilitation of the visa policy, and the prospects of increasing infrastructural facilities are discussed.

Besides, in the article the special attention is devoted to the active involvement of SCO member states in the form of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; specifically, their efforts in the context of the organization in tourism development, implementation of digital services, and promotion of sustainable tourism concepts are examined.

Actual suggestions of sustainable economic growth and development of cultural tourism are provided in the article, in other words, such recommendations as the introduction of effective cheap airline tickets and visa-free travel are offered. Overall, the enlarging tourist industry, and the strategic attempts at forming multifaceted partnership in the SCO area, are narrated to the letter.

Keywords: Soft power, tourism, cultural heritage, foreign policymaking, central asian states, diplomacy, culture, cooperation, education.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the tourism industry is becoming more and more appealing and popular among the domestic and international users of tourism services. This is identified not only by the economic significance of this sphere, but also by its value to the deepening of multifaceted relationships of nations with the outside world, including the cultural and humanitarian relationship of nations, its role in the rapid increase in modernization processes.

The SCO member states with rich cultural-historical background and the same geographical position have a relative advantage in tourism, and it is necessary to develop this industry further.



In this respect, the states which closely collaborate in the context of SCO demonstrate good perspectives at the sphere of tourism.¹

The SCO made a significant milestone of development during its formation and now occupies an essential part of the contemporary relationships between states. The organization is today emerging as an active and powerful multilateral construct that helps to stabilize and develop the Eurasia and encourages the full-scale collaboration. It was in this time that the number of membership in the organization rose by 6 members to 26 of the participants (10 member states, 2 observers, 14 dialogue partners), and interest in the SCO keeps increasing. The Organization has been known to the international community as a force that pulls together the efforts to achieve peace and stability.²

The success of the SCO, its consistently rising potential, and its world fame, in our opinion, happened because of the adherence to several significant conditions.

Member states of SCO boast of cultural landscapes and natural resources. Among 1,092 items that comprise the UNESCO World Heritage List, 135 (i.e. 12.4 percent) are found on the territory of SCO member states. The abundance and diversity of the historical and cultural resources of the SCO territory have been the eyewitness of the multicultural traits of the evolution of the human civilization and culture in ancient Asia and Europe. As a result, collaboration in the sphere of tourism within the framework of the structure is extremely significant to support the evolution of cultural industries in different nations and reinforce communication between people.

The cooperation in the field of tourism is also increasingly growing in SCO space under the impact of the activation of the mutual trust, political dialogue, economic partnership, and cultural-humanitarian relations. This is subdivided into three phases.

The initial phase (2001-2009) may be termed as formation stage. The cooperation in the sphere of tourism was also referred to in several significant SCO documents during this period as a component of the cultural cooperation, but no concrete actions and special documents were related to the cooperation in this sphere. This has been primarily bilateral in nature as well as largely restricted to this form of tourism cooperation between China and Russia during this period and was referred to as SCO cooperation in the tourism sphere.³

The second phase (2009-2016) may be referred to as the realistic first phase of SCO tourism partnership. At this point several key multilateral documents which pertained to cooperation in the area of tourism were signaled. The heads of the tourism authorities of SCO member states held the first meeting in Moscow in March 2015.⁴ To facilitate the spirit of SCO Heads of State Summit, SCO prepared an agreement on cooperation in sphere of the tourism and the plan of

¹ **Bakhtiyor Mustafayev.** UZBEKISTAN AND THE SCO: PROSPECTS FOR MULTI-VECTOR COOPERATION // <https://isrs.uz/uz> – 29.08.2025

² **Li Qi.** Theoretical Background and Practical Promotion of Building a Humanistic Community of the SCO // Journal of Shaanxi Pedagogical University (edition on philosophy and social sciences). – 2021. – No. 50 (02). – p. 17

³ **Strategy for the Development of the SCO until 2025** (15.07.2015). – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/a3YPpGqLvQI4uaMX43IMkrMbfNewBneO.pdf>

⁴ **Program for the Development of Cooperation of SCO Member States in the Field of Tourism.** – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://www.infoshos.ru/ru/?id=135>



its own tourism cooperation. The SCO took the Development Strategy until 2025 at the peak of the city of Ufa in July 2015. During the Tashkent Summit of 24 June 2016, the Program of the Development of Cooperation of the SCO Member States in the Field of Tourism was adopted. It is the initial special document of the SCO in the sphere of tourism, and this document marks the dawn of the tourism collaboration in the context of the SCO.

The third stage (since 2017 to this day) is regarded as the era of increased growth of tourism cooperation within the system of the SCO. The necessity to collaborate in the area of tourism between the member states of the organization is on the constantly growing level. According to the terms of the One Belt - One Road program that China offers, the states of the Central Asian region are currently inviting collaboration in the area of tourism.⁵

At the Astana Summit, 9 June 2017, the Joint Action Plan on the implementation in 2017-2018 of the Program on the Development of Cooperation of SCO Member States in the Field of Tourism was signed.

The signing of the “Joint Action Plan in Implementation in 2019-2020 of the Program of the Development of Cooperation of SCO Member States in the Field of Tourism took place upon the signing of the Qingdao Summit on 9 June 2018.

The heads of the departments of tourism management of the SCO member countries placed the Joint Action Plan on the Implementation of the Program on the Development of Cooperation of SCO Member States in the Field of Tourism in 2021-2022 under common signature on 23 May 2020.⁶

Interestingly, at this point, it is worth mentioning that another significant aspect of multilateral cooperation in the field of tourism and other spheres of the SCO was the shift in the ways Uzbekistan treated the organization since 2017. This will be addressed in the subsequent sections of the article independently.⁷

In case we are talking about the key directions and the success of cooperation in the area of tourism in the SCO, they are as the following:

The level of cooperation in the sphere of tourism in the SCO is getting more profound with the enhancement of transport infrastructure and the rising openness of the member states. This is not only the assurance of good utilization of natural and cultural resources, but it also is the catalyst of the tourism industry.

In the field of tourist resources, the SCO also signed cooperation agreements with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and performed the works in the field of protection of historical monuments, realization of the scientific research and restoration of the places of cultural heritage using.

Based on this, it is possible to state that, with the growing need in collaboration in the sphere of tourism, the SCO member states are increasingly becoming concerned with cultural

⁵ SCO: cooperation in the sphere of tourism goes out on a new trajectory // SCO website. – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://rus.sectsc.org/news/20170426/260270.html>

⁶ Information message on the results of the meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the SCO (Qingdao city, 9-10 June 2018) // SCO website. – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://rus.sectsc.org/news/20180610/443025.html>

⁷ Heads of tourist administrations of the SCO member states discussed the Program of development of cooperation for 2021-2022 years – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <https://news.myseldon.com/ru/news/index/230838975>



monuments protection and the development of cultural resources. The culture resources development, on its part, can act as a sustainable cultural basis of tourism cooperation development.

As an illustration, in 2014, the project, Silk Road: Chang'ish-Tian-Shan Corridor Road Network, jointly nominated by China and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, was added to the UNESCO world cultural heritage list. This was the initial cross-border collaboration that was conducted in the context of the SCO and an effective heritage practice.⁸

A ceremonial opening of a photo exhibition bearing the name of the Cultural Heritage Essence of the Silk Road Capital Shaanxi was organized at the National Museum of Kazakhstan in 2016 in cooperation with the Embassy of China in Kazakhstan, the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Heritage Bureau and the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Kazakhstan.⁹

The rich did show the distinct intangible cultural heritage of China and Kazakhstan, which helped in enhancing the understanding and friendship of the two peoples. An exhibition named SCO National World Heritage Exhibition took place in Beijing during 14 June 2017.

The SCO Secretariat organized a succession of events dubbed Eight Wonders of the SCO in 2019. This program is expected to establish a common tourist area of all SCO countries and convey the cultural diversity and the tourist potential of SCO to the entire world.

The noteworthy sites are those that have strong historical and cultural background and are chosen by the corresponding tourism authorities of that particular state.

The plan exposes the cultural and historical marvels of the eight member states in the SCO to images in the media, product exhibits among other forms. This project reveals completely the cultural history and culture benefits of the SCO.

The exhibition titled E Eight Wonders of the SCO was shown in the city of Tashkent on 19 May 2022 as part of the Minister meeting in tourism and culture of SCO member states. It is necessary to note that the representatives of the countries of Shanghai Cooperation Organization constitute a great example of the multinational and intercivilizational dialogue. They all have brilliant culture and architecture monuments and exclusive nature. Noticeably, of the list of the Eight Wonders of the SCO the architectural ensemble of Poi Kalon with which is the decoration of Bukhara was not left out.¹⁰

On the one hand, the eight wonders can enhance interest in tourism by the population of the SCO countries member states and the neighboring zones, on the other hand, this is a chance to protect and advance the cultural and historical sites with the help of collaboration in the sphere of tourism.

In the political aspect of building the tourism sector, collaboration on the issue of tourism in the SCO is contributing significantly in building the cultural industry of member states. The statement regarding the year 2017 as the Year of the Chinese Tourism in Kazakhstan shows

⁸ Zhao Zhen. *Current situation and potential of cooperation in the sphere of tourism between SCO member states // Report on the development of the SCO (2020 year)*. – Beijing: Publishing House of Literature on Social Sciences, 2020. – 227 p.

⁹ *Silk Road: road network of the Chang'an-Tianshan corridor // CCTV China website*. – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://tv.cctv.com/yskd/dmzg/sllw/index.shtml>.

¹⁰ "8 miracles of the SCO" are being exhibited in Tashkent [Electronic resource]. – <https://yuz.uz/news/shhtning-8-mojizasi-toshkentda-namoyish-etilmoqda>



that the officials of both nations have gained a confidence that the growth in the number of mutual visits would reinforce the financial sector and intensify cultural relations.

There were two tourism cooperation forums, which have taken place between China and Kazakhstan in 2017 and 2018, in Beijing. In the framework of the forum, the Chinese and the representatives of Kazakhstan stressed that the further collaboration in tourism related spheres is to be designed in three major directions:

first, to establish an efficient and workable cooperation system in the tourist sector;
second, to promote cooperation on different levels related to the sphere of tourism;
third, in order to encourage teamwork in major undertakings.

To appeal to more tourists, Kazakhstan is actively working on its unique folkloric, ecological, hunting tourist products and others. 11

The Republic of Uzbekistan also established positive manifestations in its interaction with the SCO as serious changes in the foreign policy activity started in 2017. Application of new approach to SCO, the Government of Uzbekistan although appreciating that much and much good have been achieved according to the framework of the organization, is carried forward by the fact that there now remain enormous potentials that can be tapped to further enhance practical partnership within the organization. Among them, one can distinguish the sphere of trade and economy, transport and communications, the field of innovation and digital development, tourism, culture, education, healthcare, and people in the diplomacy of the population.

The promotion of multilateral cooperation devoid of any limitations with the frames of organization has become the priority and this is reflected in the active stimulation of our country of initiatives and proposals of economic character.

Further to this, on 20 August 2019, during the fifth meeting of the Subcommittee on Humanitarian Cooperation in the Committee of China-Uzbekistan Intergovernmental Cooperation taking place in Beijing, the parties exchange the principal results achieved during the recent years in the spheres of the protection of cultural heritage, tourism, and cultural exchanges and the directions of the future work priorities.12

Due to the introduction of electronic visa by Uzbekistan and the ease of visa acquisition by Chinese tourists, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Uzbekistan between the years 2017 and 2019 tripled.13

This number was 22 thousand in 2017, 34 thousand in 2018, and during the period of January to September 2019, 33 thousand. The next news was published in September 2019 by the Information Service of the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan: since 1 January 2020, citizens of China were introduced into a visa-free entry regime in 7 days.14

11 Chinese-Kazakh forum of tourist cooperation took place in Beijing // Information Bureau of the State Council of China. – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/35353/35354/document/1554342/1554342.htm>

12 R. Nurimbetov. Strategic approaches of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Monograph // 2024

13 R. Nurimbetov. Strategic approaches of the Republic of Uzbekistan within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: current state and prospects. Author's abstract // 2024 - B-33.

14 Li Qi. Theoretical subtext and practical promotion of building a humanistic SCO community // Journal of Shaanxi Normal University (edition on philosophy and social sciences). – 2021. – №50 (02). – P. 17



As stated in the data of the Statistics Agency, there were 57.7 thousand Chinese citizens who arrived to Uzbekistan on a tourist basis in January-October this year. This is a larger number compared to the equivalent time of 2023 by 22.3 thousand individuals, or 63.1 percent. A total number of 50, 052 Chinese people reached Uzbekistan as tourists in the period January-October 2024. Overall, in this time, almost 6.5 million foreign citizens came to Uzbekistan as tourists. Based on the statistics of the Statistics Agency, this amount grew by 951.3 thousand individuals or 17.2 percent in comparison with the respective of 2023.¹⁵

Based on this one can deduce that simplification of visas plays an important part in exchange of personnel between the two countries as well as promoting tourism sector.

SCO member states enjoy a great degree of political confidence with each other, which shows that they can cooperate in the sphere of tourism. Nevertheless, there are also issues related to commercial collaboration in the sphere of tourism in the context of SCO. To begin with, the collaboration in the tourism sector in the SCO has started out late and is at an early level. The extent of development of the area of tourism in the member states of SCO is not even. Furthermore, the extent of the use of tourist resources by SCO member states is insufficient. In this respect, we believe that, currently, it is required to create the formation of the single tourist platform consolidating in a single locality data of information on visas, hotel service, and routes. The reason behind this is that it brings convenience to the incoming tourists and fastens the exchange of information.¹⁶

Along with the exceptionable circumstances, including the coronavirus pandemic in recent years, which became an impediment to collaboration in the tourism industry in the SCO, the SCO is moving the entire resources to secure the proper operation of the tourism industry and supports the ongoing development of the tourism sector.

Indicatively, the current Secretary-General of the SCO has noted that contactless services, virtual tourism and online exhibitive developments can be made via the sophisticated technological platforms including big data and artificial intelligence. These are used to minimize the risks and recover tourism.

Moreover, the SCO is logically utilizing the existing rich tourist resources of different countries, makes efforts to make the tourist visa administration process easier and simpler, in addition, helps to develop cultural enterprises and the cultural industry of different states by studying cultural heritage and collaborating in the tourism sphere. This, naturally, is meant to boost the tourist traffic by providing option of short-term visa-free movement of people across member states.

Collaboration within the cultural exchange, education, and tourism areas helps to strengthen the mutual understanding between the SCO member states, supports the traditional good relations and gives the base of the popular opinion and civil society to advance the SCO. The reciprocity of trust and cultural proximity between states should be possible as the result of this educational and cultural exchange using the SCO Youth Forum, cultural festivals, and schooling programs.

¹⁵ Since 2020, Chinese citizens have 7-day visa-free entry. – [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.norma.uz/novoe_v_zakonodatelstve/s_2020_goda_kitayskim_grajdanam_-_7-dnevnyy_bezviz

¹⁶ 57.7 thousand Chinese people visited Uzbekistan for tourism purposes <https://uza.uz/posts/662009>



To make a further contribution to the evolution of this sphere, we find it essential to enhance the further integration of the process in the historical and cultural sense by developing the collective brands on the Silk Road Heritage and SCO Cultural Route.

To augment the focus on sustainable and ecotourism, the joint programs should be created to protect the natural resources and to create green energy and ecotourism.

It is necessary to add that all the states within the framework of the SCO aim at diversifying the tourism industry. In this respect, SCO states have had tourism relations with member states. This has led to world cultural and tourist cooperation, which has increased among the member states. The official statistics indicate that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are to develop mutual tourist exchange. Nevertheless, the potential of tourist attraction in these nations can still be used.

From this point of view, tourism is a key sector of priority importance. In order to further develop tourism among SCO countries, traditional and digital promotion campaigns should be carried out effectively, airline ticket prices should be reduced to a more affordable level, and visa-free travel should be supported. On the other hand, the development of regional cooperation plays an important role in strengthening economic growth, cultural exchange, and friendly relations among peoples. Through effective cooperation among member states, the use of digital technologies, and the introduction of sustainable tourism principles, the region can occupy a competitive position in the global tourism market.

Therefore, for SCO states, developing the tourism sector as a single strategic direction is one of the important factors for achieving sustainable economic and cultural integration.

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