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Research Paper

**The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Turns 20 Years:
Its Contribution to the Stability in Central Asia**



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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) initially emerged on the threshold of the new century as a model for new regionalism in Central Asia. Despite its limitations the SCO made an important contribution to regional stability and multilateral cooperation in Central Asia. The enlargement in 2017 enhanced the SCO's geopolitical weight, now it has a chance to transform into the Eurasian organization.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On June 15, 2001, the leaders of Russia, four Central Asian countries, and



China signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Shanghai.

The SCO is a product of the new geopolitical situation in Central Asia as a result of the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations. It was formed on the basis of the Shanghai Five, which was formed in the 1990s to find solutions to border problems inherited from the Soviet Union to the



Central Asian republics. Originally operating as an ad-hoc mechanism with the active support of China and Russia, this format has become a full-fledged regional organization by the beginning of the 21st century.

Until recently, the SCO's main focus was on Central Asia. However, the entry of Asia's large but long-time rival countries into the SCO in 2017, such as India and Pakistan, as well as the ongoing geopolitical shifts in Eurasia, pose a number of serious challenges to the organization.

SCO Profile: "Hegemonic Regionalism" or "New Model" of Regional Cooperation

Prior to India's and Pakistan's accession to the SCO, experts used to describe the organization as a platform for cooperation based on "competition and cooperation" between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia. The approaches here are significantly different and contradict each other. This dichotomy is reflected by the critical views of Western scholars and experts on the organization on the one hand, and by the assessment of the SCO as an example of a new regionalism by representatives of Chinese and Russian schools of political science, on the other hand.

Neo-realists in the West ^[1] see the emergence of the SCO as a "model of dominance in Central Asia" developed primarily by Russia and China.



According to them, within the SCO, the two countries have shared "responsibilities" in the region: Russia is responsible for security and military-political issues, while China has chosen to develop economic cooperation.^[2] According to this approach, the SCO is a bloc formed against NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).^[3]

According to another Western school - *the normative approach*, the SCO aims to "limit democracy and human rights and protect authoritarian political regimes".^[4] For example, according to Roy Allison, a British expert, the nature of SCO became obvious in the early 2000s following the "Color Revolutions" supported by the United States and other Western countries. The British scientist describes the organization as a "security integration" project that seeks to ensure the security of Central Asia's ruling elites and the current political regime.^[5] So supporters of this view have described the SCO as a "club of authoritarian states whose goals and objectives are directed against Western and democratic values."^[6]

Another group of Western scholars believes that the SCO is a clear example of "hegemonic regionalism ^[7]." According to their theory, integration associations emerging outside the Western world are formed mainly under the "patronage" of the major powers in the region. Regional hegemons use

such structures to strengthen their position in relations with other regions of the world and power centers. ^[8]

It needs to be highlighted that the views of Western researchers on the SCO, based on skepticism and concern, were formed in the late



twentieth century and the first decade of the XXI century. At the time, the United States and Europe were particularly concerned about the organization's potential to become an alternative "center of power" that could jeopardize the Western-led world order.

Russia was initially more optimistic about the SCO as a means of shaping a new security system with its participation in Central Asia. This issue is also widely discussed in the approaches of Russian researchers (D.V. Gordienko, Yu.A. Nikitina, D.A. Borisov and others [9]). At the heart of their views is the idea that the SCO is a mechanism for securing Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia. This includes not only the SCO's competitiveness with the United States and NATO, but also the need to strengthen the partnership between the SCO and other regional security mechanisms in the Russian-led region ^[10]. Moscow has always been a supporter of the development of security and political-military cooperation within the SCO. An example of



this is the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation and Interaction between the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of SCO, the CIS Anti-Terrorism Center (ATC) and the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), signed in 2018 at the initiative of the Russian Federation^[11].

Chinese researchers are very positive about the development of the SCO, its importance for China's foreign policy, its place in the processes in Central Asia and in the system of international relations in general. **First**, their research provides a conceptual basis for Beijing's official position and strategy towards the SCO. In the early 2000s, Zhao outlined following six priorities of China's strategy towards the SCO: (1) the fight against the "three evils" (terrorism, extremism and separatism); (2) to ensure the security of border areas; (3) to contribute to regional stability; (4) participation in the economic development of the region; (5) to prevent Central Asia from falling under the influence of states or military blocs hostile to China; (6) access to energy resources in the region. ^[12]

Second, Chinese researchers note that the conceptual elements of China's foreign policy define the doctrinal and ideological foundations of the SCO, first and foremost in the SCO Charter, which defines the ideas and concepts of the struggle against the "Shanghai spirit" and "three evils. ^[13] "The SCO



was established at the same time with the implementation of socialist modernization and policy reforms in China. That is why its formation is directly linked to the development of China and changes in diplomacy ... The SCO is a discovery of Chinese diplomacy” , says Pan Dapeng^[14].

Third, further developing the above views, in recent years there has been a significant increase in Chinese diplomatic and expert circles’ attempts to interpret the SCO as a "new model" in international relations^[15] and to substantiate it scientifically. Wang Xiaotsuan, another leading expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that the SCO, based on the basic principles of the "Shanghai Spirit" (mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the desire for common development), is a unique international organization that includes states from different civilizations and political systems. This, Wang assumes, allows promoting inclusive cooperation and "harmonious order" within the SCO, in contrast to other international structures ^[16].

The SCO's Mission in Central Asia

Despite the differences in the approaches listed above, there is no doubt that the SCO is a regional organization initiated by China and Russia and supported by Central Asian countries. However, it raises the question of how

much the SCO has contributed to the development of stability and cooperation in Central Asia, and how this is reflected.



This requires clarification of another conceptual issue. Is the SCO itself a real security organization? This again leads to the same dichotomy. A group of experts interprets it as a "guarantee of stability in Central Asia"^[17]. In particular, the former SCO Secretary General R. Alimov notes "despite the fact that the SCO is located in the immediate vicinity of global hotbeds of terrorism, extremism and separatism, the SCO has not allowed the region for which it is responsible to become a hotbed of instability, to fill the gap created here on the threshold of a new century by radical ideologies and extremists, to absorb false values" ^[18]. Other observers, mostly Western experts, say the SCO has failed to find a solution as a classic regional security organization, which will mainly serve to ensure the security of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia^[19]. As a clear example of the SCO's failure to become a real regional security tool, Western observers cite its "empty" position on the Afghan conflict ^[20]. Although Afghanistan has observer status in the SCO and the

issue is constantly discussed within the organization, there is still no single "Afghan strategy" within the structure.

However, in our view, the SCO has always been, in essence, not a classical security or military organization.

First, a more comprehensive analysis of the SCO's contribution to strategic stability and security in Central Asia is needed. Sustainability and security are very broad concepts, covering not only the issues of ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, but also issues of economic development and social stability. It is this approach that allows for a full and objective disclosure of the organization's stabilizing role in the region.

Second, the main founding documents, the Shanghai Declaration and the Charter, show that the Organization aims at "strengthening cooperation in the political, security, economic, cultural, humanitarian and other spheres of the SCO." In other words, the founding states have not initially planned to create the SCO in the form of "collective security" or military-political alliance. In addition, in recent literature, the SCO has been classified not as a "collective security organization" or "economic integration structure", but as a trans-regional organization with a new kind of universal agenda ^[21].

Third, analysts who are increasingly critical of the SCO's role in Central Asia and its activities in general do not pay enough attention to the deep essence of the concept of "Shanghai spirit" and its place in the life of the organization. The "Shanghai spirit" embodies the following principles: "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the pursuit of common development."

The practical application of these principles is of great importance for the Central Asian states. As Amit R. Saxena, an Indian researcher, points out, the "Shanghai spirit" - the SCO's main doctrine - has created the principles of non-interference to internal affairs and the sovereignty of member states, created immunity for Central Asia from the threat of Russia and China^[22]. In turn, as the authors of the analytical document "Regional organizations in Central Asia: peculiarities of cooperation, efficiency-related dilemmas" pointed out, "despite the strong position of Moscow and Beijing, the governments of the Central Asian republics promote their interests, by "vetoing" the consideration of issues raised by the two large countries. As a result, projects that have been pushed forward by Russia and China, despite their superiority, have not been implemented due to a lack of support from the organization's Central Asian members^[23].



In what ways is the stabilizing role of the SCO reflected in Central Asia? In our opinion:

First, the SCO prevented the establishment of a clear geopolitical dominance of a major external power center in the region, thereby ensuring geopolitical balance and strategic stability in Central Asia. In particular, the SCO has ensured that Russia and China do not fall under the influence of the United States and NATO in the region, while the Central Asian states have pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, thereby balancing the interests of leading powers and gaining political, military and economic benefits.

Second, the organization has been balancing the strategic interests of Russia and China in Central Asia, thereby ensuring their constructive cooperation. Despite the competitive interests between the two sides, Moscow and Beijing recognize the organization as an important regional mechanism for communication. From Russia's point of view, the SCO serves China to act in accordance with the rules of the "multilateral game" in Central Asia and, consequently, to curb its ambitions in the region. For the PRC, the establishment of the organization "legitimized" its influence in Central Asia, that is, gave it an institutional form^[24]. This has created a very important image for Beijing in its efforts to dispel accusations of pursuing an "expansionist" policy toward the region. The SCO has also acted as a "buffer"

in the way of competition between the two major powers, namely in resolving disputes between them peacefully and diplomatically, and directing their competition to finding mutually beneficial solutions for regional stability.

Thus, the competition between Russia and the PRC has not reached the level of conflict in the region, which could jeopardize the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states here. This is a very important factor if we take into account the potential conflicts in Central Asia over the remaining borders, ethnic and water resources, as well as threats around the region (the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, terrorism and extremism, the importance of the "Uyghur" factor for China). Therefore, its success in ensuring the balance of power is considered by many experts critical of the SCO as the organization's "most productive political effectiveness."^[25]

Some observers say the SCO has served to ease political, military and economic pressure from Russia, which sees the region as its "sphere of influence" for Central Asia. At the same time, China's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Central Asian states and its economic assistance have helped Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to contain Russia's influence. This means that the Central Asian states have learned to make effective use of the "competitive cooperation" of their two



major neighbors, and the SCO platform has played a very important role in this.

Third, Beijing's "balancing" role with Moscow has strengthened Central Asia's ability to cooperate with the United States and NATO in the military sphere, despite its more liberal foreign policy and its membership in the Russian-led CSTO. Such a "positive" contribution of China to the independent foreign policy of the Central Asian states through the SCO can be seen in the fact that they do not support Russia's interference in the internal affairs of Georgia and Ukraine[26]. Observers say that with the indirect help of China, Central Asian states have not openly supported Moscow's aggressive policy in the post-Soviet space[27].

Fourth, given that the Central Asian republics have not been able to form a "purely regional" integration organization, the SCO has accomplished this task to some extent. The SCO has been and remains a platform for leaders, ministers, security officials and even representatives of economic blocs and experts from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to discuss issues of multilateral regional cooperation, even taking into account the participation of Russia and China.

Thus, assessing the SCO's role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia on the basis of whether it has been formed as a "collective security organization" or an "integration structure" does not fully explain the organization's role in regional stability and geopolitical processes in general.

Rout to broader Eurasia

After Pakistan and India became full members in 2017, the SCO entered a new stage. Its previous essence and profile has changed.



At first glance, the SCO has evolved from a "pure" regional organization to the largest Eurasian interstate body. Currently, the total area of its member states is more than 34 million square kilometers. This means 60% of the Eurasian region. The total population of the SCO countries is more than 3 billion, which is about half of the world's population. In addition, four members of the organization (Russia, China, Pakistan and India) are states with nuclear weapons and an important position in international relations.

But in the post-2017 period, the potential for such a large partnership remains untapped in practice. Cooperation in the fields of economy, transport and logistics, investment and finance, promising economic sectors,

implementation of infrastructure projects has not reached a qualitatively new level. In recent years, member States' aspirations in this regard are largely limited to adoption of programs of general nature and declarative documents.

Regardless in what way the SCO will develop in coming years, it will face the dilemma of expansion. The organization claims its openness to the membership of other Eurasian countries and some of them have been knocking on the door for some years. For example, Iran and Afghanistan, among others.

However, current permanent members are well aware that in light of the worsening of international situation and further aggravation of the global economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is superfluous to discuss this topic. Moreover, the full adaptation of Pakistan and India to the organization is also a time-consuming process. For this reason, hardly worth expecting that SCO will accept new members in the near future. As such, we do not consider the expansion as the factor of an influence on the development trajectory of the organization in short term.

On the other hand, the growing of member states' numbers without addressing the institutional gaps may lead the SCO to the fragmentation, provoking the emergence of "tactical alliances" within itself. This experience

may be applied to other universal international organizations as well. For example, in the SCO case, unresolved bilateral issues among the members could lead to the scenario like that.

Thus, marking its 20th anniversary the SCO is facing serious strategic challenge. It needs to address tough issues: from internal institutional developments to strategic competition among major members. Its member states', primarily Russia, China and India's, common answer to the question of what role this mechanism should play a key role in shaping a future fate of the organization.

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