

CSS STUDY

Flexibility by design: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the future of Eurasian cooperation

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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) should be given more attention as China and Russia increasingly turn their attention to Central Asia. The two regional hegemony have used the SCO as a platform to balance and coordinate their interests in the Central Asian region. As its primary initiator, the SCO constitutes China's most important policy tool for regional security in its Western neighborhood. For Russia, which has co-led the organization, the SCO is a well-established format for Sino-Russian-Central Asian cooperation, which can potentially be used to promote its plans for a Greater Eurasian Partnership. The SCO is also of strategic and political relevance for its Central Asian members, which lack alternative inclusive cooperation platforms.

The SCO evolved from an *ad hoc* cooperation to address immediate security concerns which appeared as a consequence of the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Since then, the SCO member states established problem-solving mechanisms and processes, and developed a broader approach to regional governance. To a large extent, form and content of the SCO have been defined by Chinese foreign policy principles and priorities.

Today, the organization is at a crossroads. China's economic rise has shifted the power balance within Central Asia, as well as within the SCO. Anxious about China's growing dominance, Russia does its best to counterbalance China's weight. It has blocked Chinese attempts at deepening economic integration among SCO members and supported India's entry to the organization in order to dilute China's dominant position within the SCO.

As a consequence of this imbalance, the SCO could either remain a relevant actor for cooperation in Eurasia or risks degenerating into a symbolic organization. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that this will, in large part, depend on the role that the SCO will be given in the respective foreign policy strategies of its leading member states, China and Russia. Indeed, it has been these two countries' commitments that have given the organization its role and significance in the past.

Executive Summary: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a multilateral group initially comprised of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It was founded in 2001 and enlarged in 2017 to include India and Pakistan. Since its formation, the SCO has been focused on regional non-traditional security, with counter-terrorism being a priority: The fight against the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and extremism has become its hallmark. During the life of the cooperation, however, the organization’s agenda has gradually expanded. Today, themes such as economics and culture are also on the agenda.

History After the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, a power vacuum emerged in the Eurasian space. The existing security and economic architecture dissolved and new structures had to be put in place. In this situation, the SCO, and the informal multilateral cooperation process preceding it (“Shanghai Five”), filled a gap. What first started off as a mechanism to promote demilitarization and confidence-building measures in border areas developed into a broader process, which helped the participating states (i.e. the post-Soviet states and the two regional hegemony, Russia and China) to define their relationships. During this process, new rules of the game in Central Asia were defined.

What’s new In many regards, the SCO constitutes a novelty. It was an important stepping stone towards China’s current approach to cooperation and security in Eurasia as well as towards its stable partnership with Russia. The SCO was co-initiated and continues to be co-led by China and Russia, which are its main engines. Yet the cooperation largely follows Chinese foreign policy principles and priorities, thereby facilitating China’s access to Central Asia without openly challenging Russia’s leadership in the region. In contrast to other regional cooperation formats, the SCO has been able to moderate regional change rather than entrenching existing cooperation patterns.

Power and balance in the region For around a decade after its founding, the SCO was seen as the major coordinating and ordering force in the region, however, its position was increasingly challenged by structural and policy changes taking place in Central Asia as well as changes in the organization itself. Over the past few years, a rising China and an ambitious Russia have presented their plans for deepened cooperation in the Eurasian region and are becoming increasingly assertive in their actions. While staying committed to the SCO for the time being, they both promote their own cooperation for-

mat in the region, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, respectively.

Contested future The recent accession of India and Pakistan as full members of the SCO has the potential to fundamentally change the nature of the organization and its relevance for the region. With these new members, the SCO encompasses nearly half of the world’s population and a quarter of the world’s GDP. As such, the inclusion of India and Pakistan into the SCO brings a fundamental shift in the geographical, and potentially thematic, scope of the SCO, whose purpose and existence has hitherto been closely linked to the Central Asian region. It also affects its political weight. An alignment in the policy positions of China, Russia, and now India, even if occurring only occasionally, has the potential to decisively shape debates and politics at the international level.

An understudied organization Paradoxically, given its size and potential significance, the SCO is one of the world’s “least-known and least-analyzed”¹ multilateral groups. Views sharply diverge with regard to the SCO’s relevance. In the past, the organization’s image in Western media and policy circles has not been consistent nor very positive. Portrayed as “anti-NATO” or merely a “paper tiger”, assessments of the organization have often been extreme. Except for its new member India, the organization is composed of authoritarian states, which have in the past been criticized for their repressive regimes and their poor human rights records.

Minimal formal structure Some of the organization’s defining features make it difficult to understand its nature and assess its impact: The SCO is an internally-focused organization with fuzzy boundaries and weak external ties. Admission criteria, rights and obligations for members, observers and dialogue partners are opaque and under constant negotiation. Tangible outcomes in terms of institution- or region-building are few and the persistence of bilateral mechanisms make it a loose and heterogeneous construct. The content and format of SCO cooperation are in flux, which reflects an underdeveloped legal framework and makes the cooperation reminiscent of a process rather than a static, concrete organization.

Extensive informal ties The lack of formal structure does not mean that the organization is politically irrelevant, though. Substantial cooperation has taken place under the SCO umbrella. The organization provides its members with a platform through which they can coordinate their interests and strategies. Members, notably China and Russia, have utilized the platform to do just this.

1 Bailes, Alyson J K, and Pál Dunay. “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Regional Security Institution.” In *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, by Alyson J K Bailes, Pál Dunay, Pan Guang, and Mikhail Troitskiy, 66. SIPRI Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2007.

SCO cooperation has resulted in political and legislative alignment among its member states in areas that constitute domestic policy priorities, such as counterterrorism.

An alternative model for internal and international governance? In addition to facilitating their effective cooperation on the ground, the SCO has provided its members with a platform to voice their common visions for a regional and global order in the international political arena (e.g. the promotion of a multipolar world order or non-interference in domestic affairs, as embodied in official declarations and documents). In 2005, for instance, the SCO member states jointly called for a timetabled withdrawal of US military forces from their territories.

Euro/Swiss view From the European and Swiss perspectives, the need for a better understanding of, and a coordinated approach towards Eurasian organizations and initiatives, like the SCO, has become more pressing with their increasing westward reach. With China and Russia making Eurasia a foreign policy priority, and India seeking to step up its efforts in the region, answering the question of actor relevance in the region has become critical.

Research questions Against this background, this study addresses the following questions: What is the SCO? What is its current and future relevance? Why and how could Europe and Switzerland engage with the organization?

Scope The study is structured into five chapters and a concluding recommendations section. Chapter 1 highlights the organization's distinctive features in terms of set-up and agenda (institutional analysis). Chapter 2 examines how individual states' interests shape SCO cooperation and how they have changed over time (political analysis). Following this, Chapter 3 addresses the question of enlargement and why it has been a divisive issue. Chapter 4 uses scenarios to discuss possible future trajectories of the SCO after the enlargement. In the final part, the study explores the potential risks and opportunities of engaging with the SCO (Chapter 5), before ending with some general and Switzerland-specific policy recommendations.

1 An institutional analysis of the SCO: Minimal formal structures and a flexible agenda

1.1 The SCO's institutional set-up

1.1.1 SCO members, observers and dialogue partners

Figure 1: SCO geographic scope in 2017: Members (red), observers (blue) and dialogue partners (green)

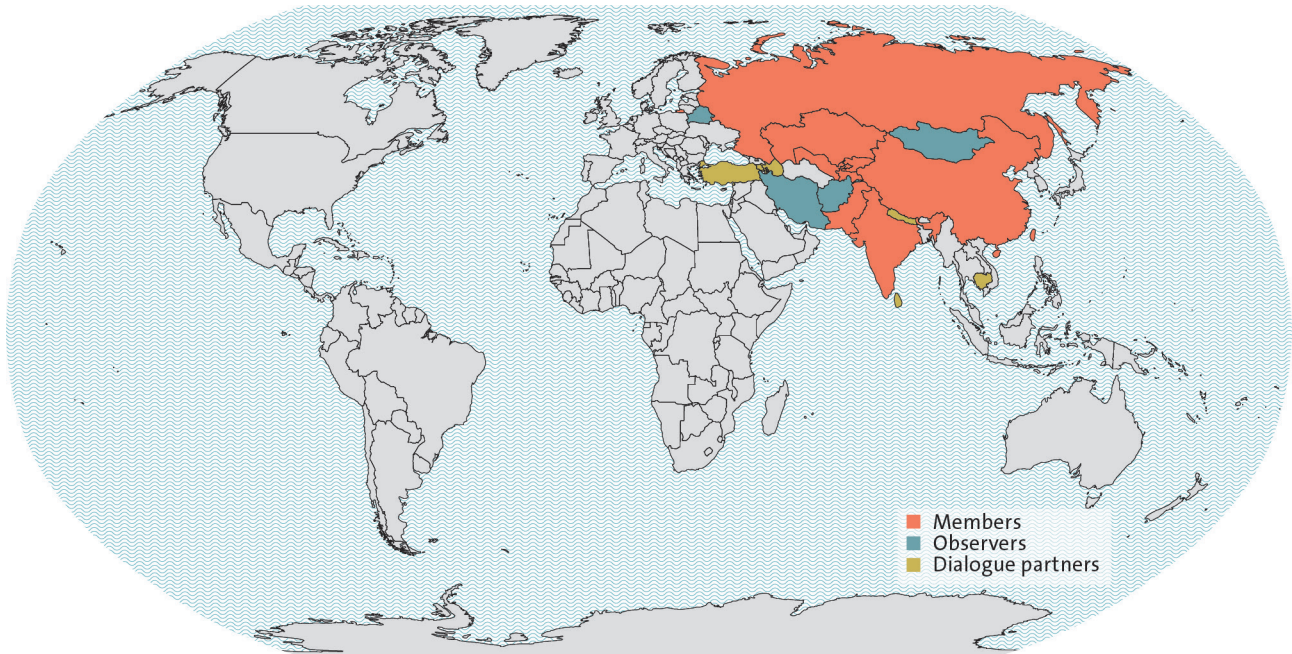


Table 1: SCO members, observers and dialogue partners (as of 2017)

Members	Observers	Dialogue partners
China	Afghanistan (since 2012)	Armenia (since 2016)
India (since 2017; observer 2005–2017)	Belarus (since 2015; partner 2009–2015)	Azerbaijan (since 2016)
Kazakhstan	Iran (since 2005)	Cambodia (since 2015)
Kyrgyzstan	Mongolia (since 2004)	Nepal (since 2016)
Pakistan (since 2017; observer 2005–2017)		Sri Lanka (since 2009)
Russia		Turkey (since 2012)
Tajikistan		
Uzbekistan		

From 1996 on, the loose multilateral cooperation process between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, having started in the early 1990s, was continued as the Shanghai Five process. It culminated in the founding of the SCO in 2001, in which Uzbekistan also took part. The status of observer states was introduced in 2004 and the status of dialogue partners has existed since 2008. Turkmenistan attends meetings as a guest attendee. Sixteen years into the SCO's existence, and after a long application procedure, India and Pakistan were admitted as new members in 2017. Among the non-members (see Table 1), Iran and Afghanistan have applied for full membership.² It is not clear if or when they will be admitted.

The practice of engagement of non-SCO members, such as observer states, has changed over time and does not necessarily correspond to the formal regulations found in official SCO documents. Dialogue partners' rights are granted through an accession memorandum, but confined to agreed fields of cooperation. In contrast to SCO members, observers and dialogue partners are not actively involved in decision-making, but in the past, have sent the head of state or another high-level official to participate in the annual SCO Heads of State summit.

1.1.2 The SCO's internal organizational structure

The SCO is an inter-governmental organization with a minimal institutional structure and an extensive informal cooperation network. All important decisions on the direction and agenda of SCO activities are taken by the heads of state on a consensus basis: The ultimate decision-making body is the Heads of State Council, which convenes once a year. The organization's limited budget covers the costs of the permanent bodies, which dispose of limited personnel resources, i.e. the secretariat and the anti-terrorist center (RATS), as well as the non-charter based bodies, which were initiated in 2005 and 2006 and are comprised of non-governmental members (see Table 2). Under the SCO Charter, the official languages are Russian and Chinese.³

The member countries' political will to cooperate and their commitment to a partnership, which is long-term and substantial in nature, is most visible in consultation mechanisms and processes that complement the formal structures and high-level meetings (not shown in Table 2). The SCO's Security Council Secretaries meeting is a case in point. In this format, secretaries of national security councils and senior officials from all member states as well as the SCO Secretary-General convene to ensure law enforcement and security coordination between SCO member states.⁴ National practices and laws are harmonized in areas such as counterterrorism and cyber security.

Table 2: The SCO's organizational structure

Permanent bodies	Convening bodies	Non-charter based permanent bodies <i>non-governmental members</i>
The Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent	The Council of Heads of State – CHS	SCO Interbank Consortium <i>regional financial institutions</i>
The Secretariat in Beijing	The Council of Heads of Government – CHG (Prime Ministers)	SCO Business Council <i>business and financial institutions</i>
	The Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs – CMFA	SCO Forum and Discussion Club <i>researchers/academics</i>
	Meetings of Heads of Ministries and/or Agencies	SCO Youth Council <i>youth organizations</i>
	The Council of National Coordinators (responsible for directing the organization's day-to-day activities and preparing meetings of the CHS, CHG and CMFA)	SCO Energy Club <i>energy suppliers and consumers</i> (MoU in 2013)

2 "Rashid Alimov: SCO Agenda Is an Agenda for Region-Wide Development." SCO, December 19, 2017. <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20171219/367739.html>.

3 For more details on the organizational structure of the SCO, see: Aris, Stephen. "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2." International Peace Institute, December 2013.

4 Koldunova, Ekaterina, and Nivedita Das Kundu. "Russia's Role in the SCO and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities." Valdai Discussion Club Grantees Report. Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, December 2014.

Upgrading the organization's weak institutional and legal standing, and ceding sovereignty to supranational power, is not in the interest of the individual member states. On the contrary, SCO institutional law aims to ensure its members' state sovereignty and national interests.⁵ Policy areas where the SCO is active do not necessarily lie in its exclusive competence. Furthermore, obligations in SCO cooperation documents often are not legally binding in the proper meaning of word nor does the organization have the authority to enforce them.

In contrast to other regional groups, such as the European Union (EU), bilateralism within the SCO is a persistent feature, resulting in a loose and heterogeneous construct, in which legal and institutional arrangements among individual member states may vary. Under the SCO, multilateral cooperation has evolved from bilateral ties. Even after the formation of the SCO, China has continued its practice of concluding bilateral agreements in areas of its interest, such as the cooperation on the fight against the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism or the promotion of good neighborliness.⁶ Both are key elements of SCO cooperation (see "The SCO's agenda" further below).

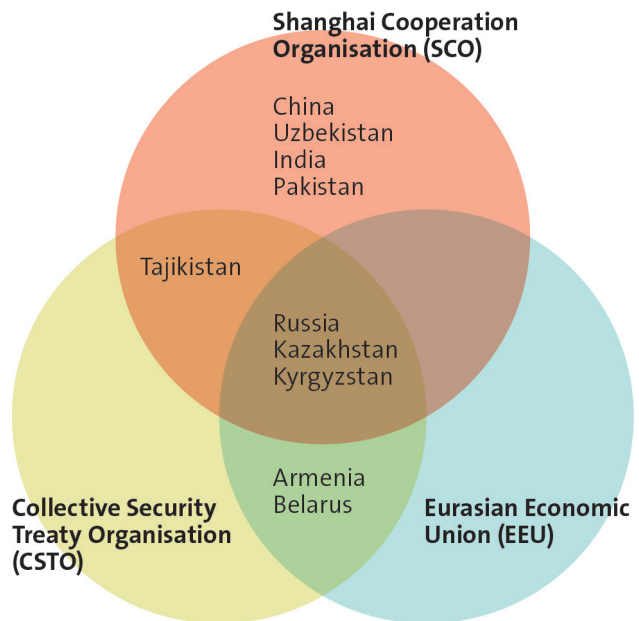
1.1.3 The SCO and other regional cooperation formats in Central Asia

The SCO is not a regional integration project and has limited region-building power, but it has "carved out a significant role for itself as a forum for regional cooperation on specific issues".⁷ Its leading nations do not aim to transform the political regimes in the region, but to stabilize them. The organization is specialized, e.g. with capabilities in fighting terrorism, but is not set up in a way to guarantee the region's security by itself.⁸ It rather complements the capabilities of its member states and other regional organizations, with which it has overlapping mandates and memberships ("spaghetti bowl" of regional institutions in Central Asia⁹).

The SCO approach finds itself in a "competitive complementarity" with other regional cooperation formats, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The various formats overlap and are complementary in terms of

"principles of governance and relations to other regions and scales" (Figure 2).¹⁰ A distinction can, however, be made between a Russia-led post-Soviet core that prefers closed regionalism, and a more open and varied approach in which China participates. The former is typified by the Russia-led integration schemes, i.e. the EEU for economic integration and the CSTO for regional security, and the latter by the SCO.

Figure 2: Overlapping and nested regional cooperation formats in Central Asia



The SCO has been promoting an open regionalism. The dividing line between privileged insiders, among which cooperation is pushed, and outsiders excluded, is not very sharp. This is exemplified by China's ties to other countries in the region. It has concluded agreements on the fight against the "three evils" with Pakistan and Turkmenistan, and treaties or statements on good-neighborliness with Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan and Turkmenistan.¹¹ Compared to China's more recent foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the SCO still has a distinctly multilateral character with a defined member base and, at least until its enlargement, a clear geostrategic focus, namely Central Asia.

5 Suter, David. *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Chinese Practice of International Law*. Zürcher Studien Zum Öffentlichen Recht 232. Zürich: Schulthess Verlag, 2015. (See, more specifically: p. 673 on the discussion of the 'conflict clause' contained in SCO documents).

6 Ibid.

7 Aris (2013)

8 Koldunova and Das Kundu (2014)

9 Linn, Johannes F. "Central Asian Regional Integration and Cooperation: Reality or Mirage?" In *Eurasian Integration Yearbook*, 96–117. Eurasian Development Bank, 2012.

10 Aris, Stephen. "In-between Europe and Asia: Regional Organisations and Eurasian Region-Making." In *Inter-Organisational Relations in International Security*, edited by Stephen Aris, Aglaya Snetkov, and Andreas Wenger. London: Routledge, 2018.

11 Suter (2015), pp. 511–512 and 761.

1.1.4 The SCO's external relations: Focus on cooperation in international forums

The organization's outward appearance and external ties have traditionally been rather weak and not a focal point of SCO activities. Instead, SCO member states focus on cooperation with international and regional organizations, in areas in which the organization is active. Partners are, for the most part, UN agencies or regional organizations under the leadership of Russia or China, but they also include ASEAN, ECO and the ICRC (see Table 3). The typical instrument used to regulate the form and content

of SCO cooperation with external actors are Memorandums of Understanding (MoU). In addition, the SCO-RATS undertakes outreach activities on its own (e.g. it has an MoU with Interpol).¹²

However, the will of the SCO parties to consult with each other and coordinate positions in international organizations and forums is an early feature of the SCO cooperation format. It was embodied in a number of early SCO documents,¹³ and later on also in bilateral documents between China on one hand and other SCO members, as well as observers, such as Afghanistan and Mongolia, on the other. An important document ensuring this consultation framework is the 2004 SCO MFA Interaction

Table 3: External actors cooperating with the SCO

SCO cooperation partners	Focus of cooperation according to MoU
CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States (MoU 2005)	Security, the economy, and the humanitarian sphere (through regular contacts between heads of executive bodies and consultations between experts from SCO Secretariat and CIS Executive Committee)
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations (MoU 2005)	Combating terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, money laundering, and illegal migration
CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organisation (MoU 2007)	Regional and international security and stability; fighting terrorism, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and organized transnational crime (relations of equal and constructive cooperation between the secretariats)
ECO – Economic Cooperation Organisation (MoU 2007)	Economy and trade, transport, energy, environment, tourism (by sharing information and positive experience)
UNO – United Nations Organisation (Joint Declaration on Cooperation 2010)	Upon requests of the UN, the SCO Secretariat together with the member states and the RATS Executive Committee prepare reports on the fulfillment of certain UN General Assembly resolutions, on a regular basis.
UNODC – UN Office on Drugs and Crime (MoU 2011)	The SCO and UNODC cooperate across a range of areas related to international health, safety and security, in particular drug trafficking/use, human trafficking and other forms of organized crime, and terrorism.
UNESCAP – UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (MoU 2012, 2015)	Examples of SCO-UNESCAP cooperation include SCO attendance of ESCAP events on socioeconomic development, and ESCAP experts' assistance to the drafting of the SCO Agreement on International Road Transport Facilitation (2014).
CICA – Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (MoU 2014)*	Settling regional conflicts, strengthening core non-proliferation regimes, and searching for joint responses to the current challenges, such as terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and arms trafficking (emphasis on similarity of approaches)
ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross (MoU 2017)	Maintaining a dialogue on international humanitarian law applicable only to armed conflicts (circulation of information), developing a dialogue in the humanitarian sphere, and organizing events to prevent and respond to emergencies

Source: <http://eng.sectesco.org>

*The MoU with the CICA was signed on the sidelines of the CICA Shanghai Summit in 2014. At the summit, China took over the chairmanship of CICA (a position it still holds).

¹² <http://ecrats.org/en/news/cooperation>

¹³ According to the SCO Convention 2001 (see Table 4), “[u]pon mutual consent, the Parties may hold consultations, exchange views and coordinate their positions on issues of combating acts referred to in Article 1 (1) of this Convention, inter alia, in international organizations and at international fora.”; The “search of common positions on foreign policy issues of mutual interest, including issues arising within international organizations and international forums” is stated as an area of cooperation in the SCO Charter of 2002.

Protocol, which foresees meetings among SCO member states' representatives in New York during UN General Assembly (UNGA) sessions, and the possibility of using the SCO Secretariat to exchange their views in a more efficient way.¹⁴

Cooperation with and in the UN has been a priority of the SCO since its formation. Since 2004, the SCO has the right to participate in the sessions and work of the UN General Assembly as an observer. In a recent move, China and Russia tried to have the organization recognized as a regional security organization under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Voting cohesion among the six original SCO members within the UNGA has been high, as an analysis of the adoption of UNGA resolutions suggests:¹⁵ In 84.7% of the cases the votes of the members aligned or were non-contradictory (abstention or no vote), which is approximately the same level as the voting cohesion as for EU member states.

1.2 The SCO's agenda

1.2.1 Focus on regional stability: Security as the main pillar of cooperation

At its core, the SCO is an organization for regional security that focuses on confronting non-traditional security threats. The fight against the “three evils”, terrorism, separatism and extremism – a concept coined by the Chinese government – was embodied as a key element of SCO cooperation in 2001, when the organization was established. The six founding members – China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – signed a corresponding document (see Table 4) that lays out these priorities. Other security threats the organization is concerned with include weapons and drug-trafficking and trans-border organized crime.

Cooperation among the involved countries was minimal to begin with. Facing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new border countries, China's main concern in the early 1990s was to ensure stabil-

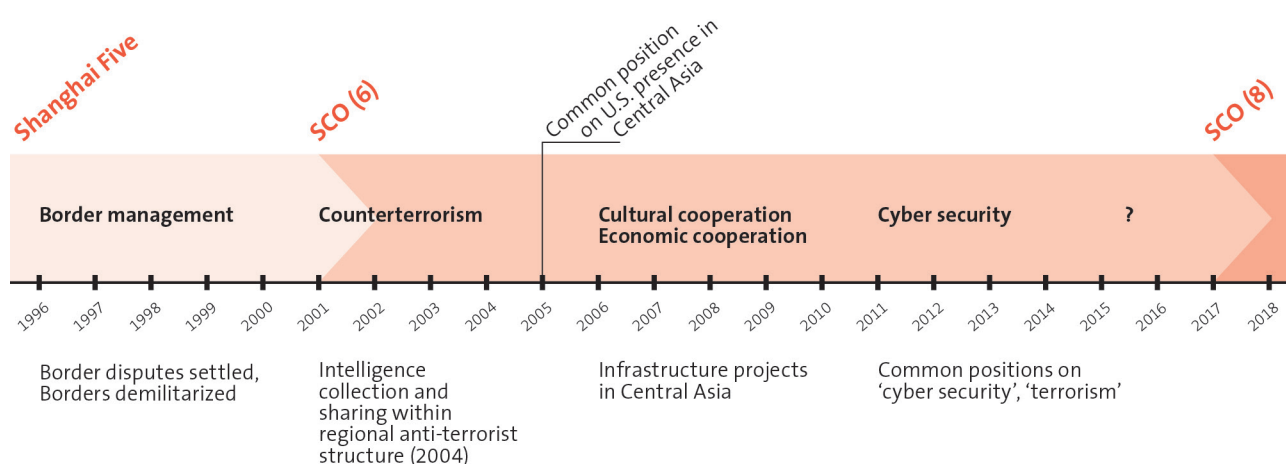
Table 4: Some basic SCO documents, defining content and form of cooperation

Adopted in	Title of document	Content	Related documents
2001	The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism	Defining mutual exchange of information and intelligence between member states as a central component of cooperation	- Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2002) - Convention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation against Terrorism (2009) - SCO Convention on Countering Extremism (2017)
2002	Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Specifying formal and procedural aspects of the organization, including institutional structure, areas of cooperation, decision-making procedure (by consensus), and official languages (Chinese, Russian)	
2007	Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation	Formalizing the concept of friendly ties between SCO countries	
2015	Development Strategy of the SCO until 2025	Reaffirming and aiming at stepping up SCO activities in security, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation and in building international connections with the UN and regional partner organizations.	

¹⁴ Suter (2015), p. 752

¹⁵ Huotari, Mikko, Jan Gaspers, Helena Legarda, and Sabine Mokry. “China's Emergence as a Global Security Actor: Strategies for Europe.” MERICS Papers on China. Mercator Institute for China Studies, July 2017.

Figure 3: SCO timeline



ity in its direct neighborhood, and particularly among its restless Western provinces. During a first phase of (military) confidence-building, the countries that later became known as the Shanghai Five (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) focused on the settlement of border disputes and demilitarization of border areas (Figure 3).

When the informal security cooperation in the 1990s (considered successful and stable) was formalized and broadened through a series of SCO agreements from the early 2000s on (see e.g. SCO Charter in Table 4), emphasis was not only placed on effective cooperation, but also on the principles and “spirit” of cooperation.¹⁶ Building up long-term relationships of good-neighborliness among the countries in the region has been promoted as a basis for cooperation in official documents and declarations issued at the SCO’s annual summits.

The SCO’s focus on security, and more specifically on counterterrorism as a priority area of cooperation, is institutionally reflected in its anti-terrorist center: the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The RATS was established in Tashkent in 2004 and is one of the SCO’s most tangible outcomes (Figure 3). Together with the Beijing-based secretariat, the RATS constitutes the institutional backbone of the organization, as defined in the SCO Charter. Responsible for collecting and sharing intelligence, a centerpiece of RATS activities has been the construction of a database on terrorist, separatist and extremist actors.¹⁷ The RATS has also had an active role in organizing extraditions and joint military exercises among its members.

1.2.2 Between traditional and non-traditional security cooperation

Despite its focus on security cooperation, the SCO is not intended to be a military bloc nor an alliance.¹⁸ Unlike the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, the SCO lacks a mutual assistance clause and does not have a common military force or unit. Nevertheless, some elements of military cooperation still exist, including joint military exercises, which take place on a regular basis. The best-known components of this cooperation are the so-called “Peace Missions”, which have been conducted on a roughly biannual basis since 2005.¹⁹

While such large-scale military exercises are nominally focused on terrorism, the thousands of troops²⁰ that participated in them were trained in conventional combat activities,²¹ employing conventional weapons.²² Russia and China largely led and dominated these and other smaller-scale exercises (counterinsurgency exercises), whereas other SCO members participated as active participants or observers. The capacity-building effects of these military exercises are particularly beneficial for Chi-

18 Oldberg, Ingmar. “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Powerhouse or Paper Tiger?” Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, June 2007.

19 The Peace Mission exercises took place in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2016. The next SCO Peace Mission exercise is scheduled to be held in Russia in August 2018 (http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12166538@egNews).

20 Depending on the Peace Mission exercise, the number of troops ranged between 1500 and 10000. Source: Table 2 in de Haas, Marcel. “War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 378–406.

21 The Peace Mission exercises included air defense, bombing and aerial refueling training. Source: Allen, Kenneth, Philip C. Saunders, and John Chen. “Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications.” *China Strategic Perspectives* 11. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, July 2017.

22 Weapons employed in Peace Mission exercises included tanks and armored vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft and helicopters and warships. Source: de Haas (2016).

16 In the 2002 SCO Charter, for example, reference is made to „the spirit of mutual trust, mutual advantage, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity and aspiration for joint development”.

17 The SCO’s definition of the term “terrorism” is discussed in later sections.

na's internationally inexperienced PLA, as well as for the underfunded armed forces of Central Asian SCO members, notably Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Counterterrorism is a field in which the SCO and its leading states, China and Russia, have been particularly active. Approaches to defining the threat of terrorism and practices of fighting it, including the means deployed by SCO member states, are different from the ones promoted, for example, by the OSCE²³ and NATO,²⁴ which are also active in this field. Within the SCO, terrorism is defined to include separatism. More specifically, the term encompasses a full range of activities of varying violence levels, also including warfare. In the 2014 peace mission, for example, armed forces were trained to repress an insurgency by a separatist group supported by an international terrorist organization. The attack targeted the political regime rather than civil society and the responsible force in fighting it was the military rather than the police. As a consequence of this broad definition of terrorism, the lines between non-traditional and traditional security issues are blurred.

1.2.3 A flexible multi-issue organization: Socio-economic cooperation as a second pillar

In addition to regional stability, joint economic prosperity and development has emerged as another main goal for the SCO since the mid-2000s. The flexibility in the SCO's agenda, which has gradually expanded, not only to include socioeconomic cooperation, but also cultural and humanitarian cooperation (detailed in the following sections), is a characteristic of China-led cooperation formats. The basic decision in favor of cooperation and connectivity precedes more practical and detailed aspects of cooperation, such as the instruments, standards and even norms of cooperation. Participating countries negotiate and fix them later in the process. In such a setting, cooperation is not limited to pre-defined areas of cooperation.²⁵

Economic cooperation within the SCO framework has focused on large-scale investment and infrastructure projects.²⁶ Using the SCO, China has provided loans to the poorer Central Asian states; (in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008/9, financially distressed SCO

members were offered 10 billion USD). China has also been a major force behind SCO efforts to develop transport infrastructure, for instance, by seeking to play an active role in (re-)building motor road sections of the E-40 international transport corridor, situated on the territory of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Russia. Another major project, actively promoted under the SCO, is the construction of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, on which discussions are still ongoing. Other bilateral and trilateral projects were (re-)labeled as SCO projects, although the organization only held a limited role in them.

1.2.4 A developmental approach to cooperation and security

Cooperation as envisaged in the SCO format emphasizes the security-economy nexus. Such a policy approach has previously been adopted by the Chinese government in the development of its Western provinces. According to this approach, good infrastructure favors economic development and economic development, in turn, contributes to stable economic and political conditions. Infrastructure development, seen as a good starting point for active policy-making, has also been a major focus of cooperation within the SCO. China has invested massively in transport and communication development in Central Asia. These major infrastructure projects constitute some of the most visible outcomes of SCO activities (see section above).

1.2.5 Towards a security community

The idea of building a community that commonly strives for joint security and prosperity is promoted within the SCO, first and foremost by China. Educational and cultural exchanges are considered useful in building such a community and form closer people-to-people ties. A model for these efforts is the SCO university network, in which universities from SCO member and observer countries²⁷ participate, offering joint degrees and student exchanges.²⁸ Under president Xi Jinping, the promotion of Chinese culture and political values beyond the borders has further been intensified.

23 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

24 North Atlantic Treaty Organization

25 On the flexibility, inclusiveness and openness of China-led cooperation formats, notably the BRI, and their network style of organization, see: Codehardt, Nadine. "No End of History. A Chinese Alternative Concept of International Order?" SWP Research Paper. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2016.

26 For details, see: Aris (2013).

27 There are participating universities in all the original SCO member states, the new member states India and Pakistan, and two of the four current observer states, namely Iran and Mongolia.

28 Li, Lifan. "Cosying Up." China-US Focus, June 20, 2011. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/cosying-up>.

1.2.6 A platform for defining and promoting common norms and positions

In addition to the effective cooperation that is taking place on the ground, the SCO provides its members with a platform to define and voice their common political visions and positions at the international level. SCO member states, collectively and individually, support an international order that is based on multipolarity and the respect for cultural diversity, and refer to the respect of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, in a strict interpretation, as the main principles for cooperation among states. In the past, the organization has been advertised, especially by Russia, as an alternative model for regional and international governance.

In recent years, the SCO was more actively engaged in defining common positions and shaping norms, which could then be systematically inserted into discussions with international organizations. Often such norms would have a primarily domestic origin and application, but with implications for countries' interactions with other states. Since 2016, security concepts and linguistic markers, such as the promotion of sustainable security through economic development, or the importance of building a "human community" with "shared destiny",²⁹ which are well-established in the SCO context, are systematically being included in UNSC³⁰ and UNGA resolutions on China's initiative.³¹

Some of the concepts and positions promoted under the SCO depart from current international standards. As to terrorism, the definition and the scope of targeted behavior under the SCO's concept have been criticized by human rights advocates as being "overbroad"³². Any actor or action of political opposition risks being categorized as (act of) terrorism, separatism or extremism. In the field of cyber security, which has received growing attention in the SCO since the mid-2000s, the organization promotes a state and information-control-focused approach. This constitutes an alternative to the Western multi-stakeholder model, involving actors from civil society and industry.³³

29 In SCO documents, reference is made to "common destiny".

30 UN Security Council

31 Huotari et al. (2017)

32 "Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: The Impact of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." A Human Rights in China Whitepaper. Human Rights in China, March 2011. <https://www.hrichina.org/en/publications/hric-report/counter-terrorism-and-human-rights-impact-shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

33 Huotari et al. (2017)

2 A political analysis of the SCO: Sino-Russian relations as a basis for SCO cooperation

In many respects, SCO cooperation reflects the Chinese approach to security and cooperation (see box below). Form and content of SCO cooperation are largely shaped by Chinese foreign policy principles and priorities. China has been the main engine behind the SCO's evolution. Even so, the success of the SCO has crucially depended on China's ability to balance its interests in the region with other SCO member states, most importantly with Russia.

China's interest in Central Asia and the SCO³⁴

- **Stability in the Western neighborhood and its own Western regions:**
 - coordinate and balance strategic interests with neighbors
 - fight against common transnational threats, such as terrorism, separatism and religious extremism
 - economically develop the regions to stabilize them
 - settle and avoid disputes over 3000 km long border
- **Access to energy resources and markets (for this purpose invest in infrastructure and economic development)**
- **Limit outside influence, in form of physical presence near its Western flank (e.g. US bases) and normatively (promote own view of international relations based on principles of sovereignty and non-interference)**

For China, the SCO has been the main instrument for regional security and cooperation in its Western neighborhood. Considering regional development and economic integration an integral part of regional security, China has sought to promote the organization as a multi-issue, multidimensional cooperation format.

34 Zhao, Huasheng. "Central Asia in China's Diplomacy." *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, September 16, 2016, 145–222.

While the main input for initiating and pushing the cooperation within the multilateral setting may have come from China, the organization could not have developed the way it has without the consent and active co-leadership of Russia. China and Russia have gradually strengthened their relations since the break-up of the Soviet Union.³⁵ Their “strategic partnership”, while limited and at times selective in scope, has proven remarkably resilient and stable.³⁶ It includes cooperation in strategic sectors such as arms sales, energy, and the North Korean nuclear issue.³⁷ The global strategic environment provides a strong basis for a continued close relationship.³⁸

Russia’s interest in Central Asia and the SCO

- Focus on securing its sphere of privilege interests (regional dimension):
 - maintain strong politico-security ties with former Soviet countries
 - promote economic cooperation with former Soviet countries under Russia’s leadership
 - balance and hedge against China and other competing international influence in the region
- (Re-)build Russia’s international standing and power (international dimension):
 - promote a multipolar world order and build a Russia-centered pole

For Russia, the SCO offered “a new model of successful international cooperation” – “a viable alternative to substantive rapprochement with the West”.³⁹

2.1 China and Russia: Balancing interests in Central Asia and within the SCO

In many respects, China’s approach to Central Asia, as observed since the early 1990s, has been more strategic and proactive than Russia’s. Whereas Russia focused on securing its sphere of privilege interests, China defined and formulated its interests in terms of energy security, trade and security early on. Still, under Putin, Russia’s policy in Central Asia has become more assertive despite the constraints placed by Russia’s limited economic and financial resources.

The capacities and interests of China and Russia towards Central Asia are, in many respects, complementary, resulting in an arrangement which is at times referred to as “division of labor” between the two regional powers.⁴⁰ Russia is Central Asia’s main security provider and guarantor, with close political ties to the local security establishments and military bases in three of the five Central Asian countries. China is the economic powerhouse, having become the main moneylender and trading partner of the region.

For China, the SCO has been a door opener to the Central Asian region, where local elites continue to operate under the strong strategic influence of Moscow, and where anti-Chinese sentiments tend to persist within the population.⁴¹ Today, China is seen as an accepted economic partner and investor in Central Asia, but suspicion remains, for example, over whether to open markets to Chinese products.⁴² In seeking its way into the Central Asian region, China has been careful not to challenge Russia’s interests in the region. It has abstained from interfering in local politics and reiterates its intention not to seek leadership or a sphere of influence in the region.

From today’s perspective, the regional order is changing, albeit slowly. Rather than driving change, the SCO has been moderating change in Central Asia. Russia’s influence is lasting also thanks to historically grown institutional and personal ties to local elites in the region, including to people in the secret services and armed forces. These channels help Russia to maintain an active military and cultural diplomacy (reassertion of Russian leadership

35 Carlson, Brian G. “Room for Maneuver: China and Russia Strengthen Their Relations.” In *Strategic Trends 2018: Key Developments in Global Affairs*, edited by Oliver Thränert and Martin Zapfe, 2018.

36 Grieger, Gisela. “Russian Ties with China in the Face of Western Sanctions.” Briefing, EPRS European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2017.

37 Carlson (2018)

38 Fels, Enrico. “The Geopolitical Significance of Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia for the Belt and Road Initiative.” In *Rethinking the Silk Road*, 247–67. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018.

39 Troitskiy, Mikhail. “A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.” In *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, by Alyson J K Bailes, Pál Dunay, Pan Guang, and Mikhail Troitskiy, 66. SIPRI Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2007.

40 For a critical account of the notion, see Skalamera, Morena. “Russia’s Lasting Influence in Central Asia.” *Survival* 59, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 123–42.

41 Laruelle, Marlène, and Sebastien Peyrouse. *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor*. Hurst & Company, 2012.

42 For a differentiated account of Central Asian strategic concerns and interests in light of China’s growing dominance in the region, see Syroezhkin Konstantin L., *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost’ v Tsentral’noi Azii* [Problems of Contemporary China and Security in Central Asia], Almaty: KISI, 2006.

in managing regional security in the face of the Islamic threat, promotion of Russian language, media and popular culture).⁴³

Russia will remain a major actor in the region, but it faces increasing international competition, mainly by China, and mainly in areas such as trade and energy.⁴⁴ With the launch of the oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and China (2006) and the gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and China (2009), Russia lost its exclusive position in energy transportation in the region. China is also becoming increasingly active in the military-security area, providing military assistance to the armed forces of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

From the perspective of the Central Asian states, the Sino-Russian arrangement has held many advantages, even if the declared equality among members has not been a reality. The SCO gives the smaller countries a place at the table where topics are discussed that are of direct relevance to them.

Central Asian States' interest in the SCO

Maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy:⁴⁵ As small countries surrounded by regional superpowers, C.A. states have had an interest in

- balancing between Russia and China.
- balancing between Russia and China on one hand, and Western states and institutions on the other.

Providing political legitimacy:⁴⁶ Faced with weak state capacity and international criticism for their security policies, C.A. rulers have had an interest in:

- reinforcing domestic regime security.
- defending their regimes from external criticism.

Promoting connectivity and economic development: As one of the least integrated regions in the world, which is landlocked and was left with old Soviet infrastructure that needed to be overhauled, C.A. states have had an interest in

- attracting needed investments.
- enhancing (regional) trade and connectivity, including more efficient transport systems.

Having a platform for dialogue and coordination among Central Asian states:⁴⁷ As a result of unresolved problems, such as territorial and water disputes and inter-ethnic animosities, C.A. states are locked in conflictual relations and have an interest in

- sharing a framework in which they regularly meet and exchange views and information about issues of common concern.

2.2 Past achievements: Maximizing common interests, minimizing conflicting interests

The SCO's past development has been shaped by the convergence or divergence of interests of China and Russia. Successful cooperation has been characterized by interest convergence, while interest divergence has determined the boundaries of SCO development (Table 5). It has been the SCO's search for the smallest common denominator of interest between these two major players that has led to the organization's highly focused but flexible cooperation format.

Maintaining peace and stability in the region has been a priority interest of political leaders in SCO member states. Members are not only concerned with the stability of their states in general, but also more specifically with the stability of their political regimes. Importantly, they are largely in agreement in their assessments of what constitute the main security problems facing them and how they should be addressed. For example, when the Uzbek government bloodily repressed an uprising in Andijan in 2005, China, Russia, and the SCO at large, endorsed the Uzbek government's response as a legitimate reaction to what was considered an attack committed by extremists.

When the Sino-Russian-Central Asian cooperation process gained momentum in the late 1990s, emerging terrorist and religious extremist networks reached into the Central Asian region and became a major source of concern. Islamist movements have since posed a major challenge to the weak Central Asian states. A religious element can also be found in the separatist movements China faces in its Xinjiang province, or those facing Russia

43 Skalamera (2017)

44 Koldnuova and Das Kundu (2014)

45 Bailes and Dunay (2007)

46 On this idea of "protective integration", see: Allison, Roy. "Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia." *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 185–202.

47 On recent developments in this regard, which became possible after the new Uzbek president had taken office in late 2016, see: "Central Asia Leaders Confab but Stop Short of Binding Commitments." *Eurasianet*, March 16, 2018. <https://eurasianet.org/s/central-asia-leaders-confab-but-stop-short-of-binding-commitments>.

in the North Caucasus. Combating these various, inter-linked, transnational threats under the banner of counter-terrorism has been a main motivation of SCO activities.

Today, security conditions in Central Asia are still volatile. A major source of regional instability is Afghanistan. The country is not only home to highly active terrorist and extremist groups, but also to drug and weapon smugglers operating internationally. As a consequence of Afghanistan’s porous borders, its neighbor countries fear spill-over effects. The SCO framework allows member countries to effectively address such security challenges that are transnational in nature and would exceed individual countries’ capacity to respond to them.⁴⁸ This is of particular relevance to the Central Asian SCO members, which suffer from limited state capacity, and tend to face their own severe bilateral and domestic security problems (e.g. border and water conflicts, inter-ethnic quarrels and the unresolved question of succession⁴⁹).

SCO states’ interests also align in the economic sector. China has the financial capital to infuse its SCO partners’ economies with much needed investments and loans. The region has also benefited from China’s investments in its aging infrastructure, improving its accessibility and connectivity. Today, Central Asia and China are linked up through a growing network of oil and gas pipelines, transportation and communication lines. To fuel its rising energy demand, China has invested in oil and gas extraction. It also invests in modernizing and expanding

regional road and rail infrastructure, which at the same time benefits its own economy.⁵⁰

Since the SCO’s foundation, the search for common positions on foreign policy issues has been a matter of common interest. China and Russia were united in their unease and disapproval regarding the post-2001 US presence in the region. While they were, in principle, supportive of the operation of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the US basing rights in Uzbekistan (2001–2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2001–2014) and its right to overfly and to land and refuel in airfields in Tajikistan were a concern. The SCO gained prominence in the Western consciousness when it issued a joint declaration at the Astana summit in 2005, in which it urged the US to set a timeline for its withdrawal of military forces from Central Asia. This contributed to the SCO’s image as anti-NATO in Western media and policy circles.

Table 5: Interests of SCO member states

Common interests	Conflicting interests
Security	
<i>Regional stability as the main concern:</i>	
Cooperation in the fight against “new” non-traditional security threats: Focus: Counterterrorism Focus: Afghanistan	Traditional security cooperation (supported by Russia, not wanted by China)
Economics	
Common economic development with a focus on energy and infrastructure cooperation (“Connectivity”)	Further economic integration (SCO free trade zone etc. pushed by China, blocked by Russia)
Outward appearance and external ties	
Limitation of Western influence and presence in the region, promotion of a multipolar world order	Regional vs. global vision of SCO promoted by China and Russia respectively

48 Aris (2013)

49 See Zogg, Benno. “Putin’s Next Steppe: Central Asia and Geopolitics.” CSS Analyses in Security Policy 200. Zurich: CSS ETH Zurich, December 2016.

50 This approach supports China’s exports, benefits its companies active in construction and infrastructure development, and reduces excess capacity in these sectors.

2.3 Internal factors of change: Interest divergence within the SCO

Despite a large overlap in interests, some internal conflicts are inherent to the SCO and have surged to the surface in recent years. Such conflicts concern various dimensions of SCO cooperation. In the field of security, for example, Russia, as the main security provider, has shown interest in extending cooperation beyond the fight against non-traditional security threats to include elements of traditional, hard security cooperation. China, however, does not share this interest. Suggestions by the Russians to form a more formal alliance or a closer cooperation between the SCO and the CSTO (merger or joint military exercises) have, for example, been rejected by the Chinese.⁵¹

Since the beginning of this decade, friction has also become evident in the context of the SCO's economic agenda, which has increasingly been pushed by China. Beijing, the driving force behind economic cooperation within the SCO, has sought to establish an SCO free trade zone and an SCO development bank. Opening their markets to Chinese products in a free trade zone was met with skepticism in almost all SCO member states, but the proposal of a regional development bank was more positively received. Such attempts at deeper economic integration have, however, been systematically blocked by Russia, not wanting to further boost China's dominant economic position.

Over time, it was, however, the question of the SCO's geographical scale and scope that has turned into the most controversial aspect of SCO cooperation. China has primarily been interested in the SCO as a tool for regional cooperation and coordination. For Russia, by contrast, the organization's great appeal has laid in its international dimension: More than any other SCO member state, it has valued and used the SCO as an instrument to establish a demarcation line between Western and its own alternative norms and spheres of influence. Accordingly, the positions of China and Russia on the question of enlargement differ, making it a particularly divisive issue.

While the interests of China and Russia in the SCO, both converging and conflicting, have been persistent and stable over time, the conflicts appear to have gained momentum in recent times. An important reason for this trend has been the major changes underway in the Central Asian context (detailed in the following section) with China being the main source of the overall dynamism.

2.4 External factors of change: Changing context and shifting strategies in Central Asia

Around the years 2011 and 2012, major changes in geopolitical power and strategies started to become visible in Central Asia, posing new challenges for the SCO. The world in and around which the SCO was created had changed (Table 6), and as one analyst remarked “[p]erhaps the SCO's biggest achievement is its survival”.⁵²

Table 6: Drivers of change in Central Asia

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | China's rise and diverging paths of Central Asian states |
| 2 | Emerging new alternative cooperation formats and strategies (China's BRI; Russia's EEU, Greater Eurasian Partnership) |
| 3 | Afghanistan, retreat of the West (security vacuum) and new potential threats associated with returning foreign fighters |

(1) Heterogenic from the start, differences between countries became amplified due to structural changes. China has risen to become a global economic player, which has altered power relations at the global level, and certainly within the SCO and the Central Asian region. At the same time, some Central Asian members of the SCO have taken diverging paths: Although they all face severe economic and social problems (e.g. particularly pronounced in Tajikistan), resource booms have created uneven wealth distributions; (Kazakhstan's resources have contributed to an economic windfall).

(2) In addition to structural economic changes, foreign policy changes in China and Russia also contribute to dynamism in Central Asia. Coming to power in 2012, the Chinese president Xi Jinping made China's standing in the world a political priority, and this concern has guided China's foreign policy plans and actions. Xi's flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative, first announced in 2013, exemplifies this positioning. 2012 is also the year in which Vladimir Putin assumed his third term as Russia's president and around which the foreign policy course, largely determined by him, was set with new priorities and goals, including rapprochement with Eurasia, the consolidation of the Eurasian region, and a distancing from the US and the EU.⁵³ The 2014 rupture with the West over the Ukraine crisis set the final seal on the course.

51 Lanteigne, Marc. "Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the 'Crimea Effect.'" In *Russia's Turn to the East: Domestic Policymaking and Regional Cooperation*, edited by Helge Blakkisrud and Elana Wilson Rowe, 119–38. Global Reordering. Palgrave Pivot, 2018.

52 Yu, Bin. "The SCO Ten Years After: In Search of Its Own Identity." In *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics: New Directions, Perspectives, and Challenges*, edited by Michael Fredholm, 29–61. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013.

53 Trenin, Dmitry. "Vladimir Putin's Fourth Vector." *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 30, 2013.

(3) External actors and politics also influenced the situational picture in Central Asia. In 2011 and 2012, announcements were made that the military presence of US troops and NATO forces would be discontinued or significantly reduced by the end of 2014. The potential emergence of a power vacuum in the region was anticipated to lead to a worsening of the security situation in Afghanistan, a much-feared scenario within the SCO community.⁵⁴ Another potential source of destabilization has been associated with foreign fighters returning from Iraq and Syria.⁵⁵

From today's perspective, these shifts in actors' power and priorities in the Eurasian space constitute a major challenge for the SCO. They helped create a situation in which the accession of new members to the organization, a development not fully backed by all the original members, became possible. The 2017 enlargement, in turn, poses a challenge by itself given that the final outcomes associated with this move, with respect to the organization's future focus and functioning, remain unclear.

3 The SCO at a crossroads: India and Pakistan join the organization

In June 2017, India and Pakistan were admitted as full SCO members. The political decision to start procedures for them to join the organization was already made two years before. To many observers, this decision and its implementation came as a surprise. Previously, the SCO agenda had stagnated for a period, and neither China nor the Central Asian states had shown active support or interest in the candidacies of India or Pakistan. During its first years of existence, SCO member states were even in agreement not to expand the organization. They placed a tacit moratorium on the admission of new members in 2006, which was reiterated at several occasions also in 2007 and 2010.⁵⁶

The main supporter of the SCO's enlargement in general, and of India's accession in particular, was Russia, which has to be seen in the context of Russia's growing unease facing an increasingly powerful China. From 2009 on, Russia officially supported India's ambition to join the SCO. Russia views India as one of its major international partners, the two countries having held close ties since the Cold War. Today, they cooperate in various multilateral frameworks, such as the G-20, BRICS⁵⁷ and RIC (Russia, India, China). According to a common interpretation, Russia welcomed India's entry into the SCO as a balancer against an increasingly dominant China.

Importantly, Russia's affirmative position on the question of SCO enlargement is in line with its international vision of the SCO, which is opposed to China's regional vision.⁵⁸ For China, the SCO is useful as an authoritative regional organization, whereas Russia sees its value as an element in a new international architecture, a non-Western pole in a multipolar world. Russia's vision of the SCO has become one in which SCO membership is ideally expanded to all players in continental Asia (see Chapter 4 on SCO's potential role in Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership scheme). Pakistan's entry is therefore positively viewed by Russia.

China's acquiescence to India and Pakistan's accession occurred at a time when it had become clear that its attempts at deeper economic integration would be

54 On the centrality of the question of Afghanistan to the SCO, see Weitz, Richard. "Afghanistan, Not New Members, Will Determine SCO's Relevance." *World Politics Review*, July 14, 2015. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16223/afghanistan-not-new-members-will-determine-sco-s-relevance>. SCO efforts to address the security challenges emanating from Afghanistan include: the establishment of a Beijing-based SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005; the adoption of an action plan in 2009 calling for joint operations to combat terrorism, narcotics trafficking and organized crime; the admission of Afghanistan as an SCO observer in 2012 and the signing of a protocol on information sharing between SCO-RATS and the Afghan government that same year; the reactivation of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2017 (after a seven-year pause).

55 In a briefing to the UNSC Counter-Terrorism Committee on 23 October 2014, the Director of the Executive Committee of SCO-RATS explained that SCO members were currently facing new threats and challenges, including foreign terrorist fighters, i.e. SCO member state nationals involved in conflict zones abroad, in particular in Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan." (<https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/2014/10/24/counter-terrorism-committee-welcomes-close-cooperation-with-the-regional-anti-terrorist-structure-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization>)

56 Lukin, Alexander. "Should the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Be Enlarged? Russia and Stability in Central Asia." *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 22, 2011.

57 BRICS is made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

58 For a detailed discussion of China's regional vision of the SCO and Russia's international vision, see: Denisov, I. E., and I. A. Safranчук. "Four Problems of the SCO in Connection with Its Enlargement." *Russian Politics & Law* 54, no. 5–6 (November 1, 2016): 494–515.

systematically blocked by Russia and when regional policy instruments became available that constituted an alternative to the SCO, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. In the past, other countries, such as Mongolia, were more favorably discussed by Chinese experts as potential candidates for membership in the SCO. Under the criteria of ensuring unity, efficiency and goals of the SCO, a future SCO membership of Pakistan and especially India was considered more problematic (due to Sino-Indian border disputes, the India-Pakistan rivalry, etc.).⁵⁹

Still, certain factors make the accession of India and Pakistan interesting also for China and the Central Asian states. China is interested in a stable Pakistan for economic and security reasons, having invested heavily in the country. Integrating Pakistan into the SCO framework seems a natural extension of China's strong engagement with the country. China has similar economic and security concerns with regard to Afghanistan, where it has also been actively investing. Both Pakistan and India are considered key partners in creating and sustaining a stable political order in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, in the light of India's opposition to Chinese activities in South Asia, more specifically to the Belt and Road Initiative, India's participation in the SCO is positively seen by China as it opens up additional communication lines and opportunities for cooperation. From the perspective of the Central Asian states, the SCO enlargement potentially allows for a diversification of political and economic relations.

Nevertheless, with the 2017 enlargement, the question of the geographic scope of the SCO, which has been a divisive one, has not been settled. On the contrary, the question of who to let in could lead to serious disruptions among SCO members. How will, for instance, Iran's application be dealt with in the future?⁶⁰ The accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO has set a precedent for other states potentially interested in joining the organization. It is a precedent most SCO members seem not have been comfortable with.

India and Pakistan's interests in the SCO

Both newcomers highlight the historical and cultural links as well as the economic and strategic complementarities that exist with members of the SCO.

India: Counterterrorism and Connectivity (Connect Central Asia 2012⁶¹).

More specifically, India is interested in:

- Central Asia as a new strategic neighborhood for India (energy cooperation, China)
- A stable Afghanistan
- Non-Pakistan centered counterterrorism information and activities
- Bolstering India's status as a pan-Asia player
- Keeping all options open in terms of international partnerships

Pakistan: Opening new foreign policy options

More specifically, Pakistan is interested in:

- Avoiding international and regional political isolation
- Continuing and deepening a strong partnership with China
- Engaging in substantial regional economic and security cooperation (with the potential to attract new investment and trade partners)
- (Re-)connecting with landlocked Central Asia, for which Pakistan wants to be a bridge

59 Zhao, Huasheng. "China's View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (June 2013): 436–60.

60 When Iran applied for full membership in 2008, it was decided that countries under UN sanctions could not be admitted. SCO members feared that perceptions of the organization and their individual relationships with the West would be negatively impacted. After sanctions were lifted in 2016, Russia seemed more enthusiastic than China about quickly initiating Iran's accession to the SCO. Now that the US renounced its commitments under the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which created the basis for the removal of the sanctions, a quick accession of Iran does not seem within reach.

61 Koldunova and Das Kundu (2014)

4 The SCO from 2017 onwards: Growing in size – growing in significance?

Today, the SCO encompasses two of the five permanent UN Security Council members, four nuclear-armed states and accounts for “about 23 percent of the planet’s land-mass, 45 percent of its population, and 25 percent of global GDP.”⁶² Will the SCO’s gain in membership translate into a gain in relevance?

4.1 The organization’s full potential realized: A possible scenario for future SCO cooperation

In the past, it was the capacity and willingness of China and Russia to coordinate their interests in the Central Asian region that gave the SCO its purpose and direction and drove it forward. In the future, the organization’s fate is also likely to depend on these two countries and their interest and commitment to the organization. This is especially because the SCO has a potential role to play in both countries’ Eurasian cooperation schemes, i.e. in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s Greater Eurasian Partnership. Under these schemes, both countries have invested effort in remaining committed to the SCO as a policy tool in Central Asia and beyond, and are even interested in further strengthening its role.

China has shown an interest in bringing together its regional and international foreign policy efforts. The thematic and geographical overlap between the Belt and Road Initiative and the SCO, under which energy and infrastructure cooperation has been taking place, is substantial. Certain analysts discuss the possibility of the SCO becoming a security complement to China’s economic initiatives in the region. As China continues to invest massively in politically unstable countries, an evident need exists to ensure the security of its infrastructure and peo-

ple abroad. The SCO, along with the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), was mentioned in official speeches and documents by Chinese leaders who reiterated their interest in building a regional security architecture.⁶³

The SCO can be seen as being at the core of an emerging governance pattern, in which China invests in existing regional institutions, strengthens cooperation between them, and creates new institutions. At the SCO meeting in 2017 president Xi Jinping announced China would contribute an additional 1.47 million USD to the SCO secretariat to facilitate its work. While this amount pales in light of China’s BRI investments (estimated to be at 150 billion USD/year), the SCO remains an integral part of China’s efforts to strategically (re-)think and plan the Eurasian region. This also includes continued investments that China makes in research and capacity building on topics relevant to the SCO. A case in point is the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation, which was set up under president Xi Jinping.

Under its Greater Eurasian Partnership, Russia has started seeking closer cooperation and partnership with other Asian states, while expanding cooperation with China remains a priority. They include India, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN nations and other Asian organizations. The SCO is seen as “a natural negotiating venue for this partnership, provided that it is infused with more energy and openness and turned from a purely regional organization into an organization of organizations and a discussion forum.”⁶⁴ President Putin is briefed once a week on SCO activities. In a recent development, Russia has even indicated its willingness to give more room to the SCO’s economic dimension.

China and Russia’s continued commitment to the SCO also seems likely against the background of their strong overall partnership: Russia has not only been a reliable partner in the SCO, but also in more recent China-led international and regional organizations and initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2015), the Silk Road Fund (2014), the BRICS New Development Bank (2014) and the Belt and Road Initiative (proposed in 2013). In the field of security cooperation, both countries remain committed to organizing joint military exercises. Furthermore, they present positions at security conferences, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue or the Xiangshan Forum, that are very much aligned.

In this possible scenario for future SCO cooperation, the organization would successfully consolidate and become a pillar not only of a stronger Sino-Russian coop-

⁶² Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov, as cited in Gabuev, Alexander. “Bigger, Not Better: Russia Makes the SCO a Useless Club.” Commentary. Carnegie Moscow Center, June 23, 2017.

⁶³ Ekman, Alice. “At the 2016 Xiangshan Forum, China Outlines a Vision for Regional Security Governance.” *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2016.

⁶⁴ “Toward the Great Ocean - 5: From The Turn To The East To Greater Eurasia.” Valdai Discussion Club Report. Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, September 2017.

eration in Central Asia, but of Eurasian cooperation at large, also including India. If China and Russia found a way to combine the organization's regional and international elements to suit their interests and remain committed to the organization as a relevant tool in their respective foreign policies, the SCO would likely remain relevant to the other SCO members as well.

4.2 What we should actually expect: A likely scenario for future SCO cooperation

However, China and Russia's grand strategies for the Eurasian region are still in the making, and there is much to suggest that priorities will rather shift away from the SCO. For the time being, China does not seem to want the SCO to change or expand any further, thereby diluting its geostrategic focus even more. Upgrading it to a larger-scale platform that coordinates interests across all Eurasia, as envisaged by Russia, thus, does not seem to be a likely option. Such a transformation would require major efforts from all players involved, including the new members, which is not given at this stage.

In addition, the accession of India and Pakistan adds to the heterogeneity of the SCO. This will bring new dynamics and issues into the organization, potentially making the search for the lowest common denominator more difficult in future. Critical voices exist as to whether India is interested in constructively collaborating within a China-led organization. Other major concerns are whether India and Pakistan will carry their conflict(s) into the SCO and whether they will be willing to share intelligence with one another, which is a central element of SCO (RATS) cooperation. Furthermore, practical obstacles, such as language barriers, need to be successfully overcome.

With the accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO, Central Asian member states will likely experience more difficulties in advancing their positions within the organization. Central Asian experts have expressed their concern that the enlargement could impede cooperation. In the years leading up to the enlargement, they, like their Chinese counterparts, have considered the possibility of creating a narrow format within the SCO, a group of deep cooperation among selected members.⁶⁵ At the EU-Central Asia meeting of foreign ministers in Samarkand in November 2017, an exclusively Central Asian cooperation

format was discussed, possibly indicating that Central Asian states try to keep their options open. Commitments to such a Central Asian cooperation format were reiterated at a consultative meeting of Central Asian presidents held in Kazakhstan in March 2018.

To sum up, the challenges facing the SCO, which result from the enlargement and the conditions that have caused it, are manifold: Firstly, China and Russia could block the SCO's further development or simply disengage from the SCO as a consequence of their continuously differing views on the organization's geographic scope (regional vs. international vision) and agenda (deepening of economic integration or not). Secondly, as a consequence of the accession of India and Pakistan, the SCO could suffer from a loss in cohesion and a reduced capacity for reaching consensus. Thirdly, and consequently, not serving its member states interests anymore, the SCO could lose its utility as an effective and legitimate instrument for regional policy-making.

In light of these developments, a more minimalist scenario seems realistic at present. Cooperation among SCO member states is likely to stagnate in the short to medium term and then re-focus on SCO core activities, namely counterterrorism and Afghanistan. Such a scenario suggests a strong(er) focus on security cooperation within the SCO. Member states' commitments to be active in these areas is already visible. For example, the SCO-Afghanistan contact group has been reactivated. Efforts will concentrate on finding ad hoc responses. Attempts at governance-building will not be continued. In other areas, such as economics, the SCO is likely to be superseded by other regional cooperation formats, such as the China-led Belt and Road Initiative and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

In addition to the cooperation in the field of security, the normative power dimension of SCO cooperation is likely to remain relevant. Even if cooperation between China and Russia within the SCO stagnates or weakens, its overall partnership is stable and substantial. China and Russia have joined forces in their quest to change the international order and global institutions to better accommodate their interests and status. In recent years, they have become more active in the making and promoting of norms. Regional organizations, such as the SCO, play an increasingly important role in this. These activities are going to continue independent of the success of the SCO as an effective tool for regional policy-making.

This scenario is one in which past achievements are not all lost. This seems realistic since organizations typically do not die, and additionally, the SCO has some specific features that make it resilient to major changes, including member expansion. The SCO has never been an executing or enforcing body, but coordinates, consults, makes space for the creation of common understandings, builds capacity and helps establish redlines in SCO mem-

⁶⁵ Denisov and Safranchuk (2016)

ber states' interactions in Central Asia. Decision-making without the active consent of all members is possible as the example of the enlargement process shows. Furthermore, the parallel and flexible structure of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms allows members, observers and dialogue partners to participate to the extent they choose in areas they hold interests.

On balance, more concrete indicators exist to suggest that China and Russia are rather disengaging from the SCO. Russia, being anxious about China's rise, and more specifically about its growing influence in Central Asia and the SCO, pushed for SCO's enlargement to dilute China's dominant position within the organization. In doing so, some observers suggest, Russia has turned the SCO into a useless bureaucracy.⁶⁶ At the same time, China's lack of opposition to the expansion can be interpreted as a loss in interest in the SCO, which it had previously employed as a tool for achieving pragmatic goals. Instead, China pushes other regional and international cooperation formats in pursuit of its interests, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund. Russia, too, has increasingly placed focus on cooperation formats that it leads (i.e. the EEU and CSTO) aside from the SCO.

5 The SCO as a regional partner in Central Asia: A case for engagement?

5.1 Switzerland's strategy and engagement in Central Asia

According to its Foreign Policy Strategy 2016–19, Switzerland seeks to consolidate its regional presence and networks in various world regions, including Central Asia. Acknowledging the growing importance of regional organizations, Switzerland is not only interested in establishing and deepening bilateral cooperation with individual countries, but also seeks to strengthen its presence in regional organizations (if this interest is reciprocated). Systematizing the country's activities as an observer and partner in regional organizations is defined as a focus in the current Swiss Foreign Policy Strategy.⁶⁷

Active in the region since the early 1990s, Switzerland today maintains well-established bilateral relations with countries in Central Asia (Table 7). Political access to the countries is facilitated through Switzerland's position as the head of a voting group at IMF and the World Bank, of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are also members. Cooperation has also successfully been ensured through representations Switzerland has successively opened in all the capital cities. The main economic partner in Central Asia is Kazakhstan, which is also one of Switzerland's main oil suppliers.

66 Gabuev (2017)

67 "Swiss Foreign Policy Strategy 2016–19: Federal Council Report on the Priorities for the 2016–19 Legislative Period." Berne: Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, 2016.

Table 7: Switzerland's strategic interests in Central Asia⁶⁸

- Switzerland's potential influence in multilateral institutions, such as the Bretton Woods institutions
- Switzerland's economic and energy interests
- Stability and security in the region
- Switzerland's "pioneering" relations with (an increasingly westward looking) China

Switzerland is also an active donor in the region, ranking closely behind major bilateral donors like the US and Germany.⁶⁹ Central Asia is a focus region of Switzerland's development cooperation, and through its economics ministry (SECO) and development agency (SDC), Switzerland has funded projects promoting political and economic reforms, mainly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but also in Uzbekistan – particularly with respect to water management.

As a small state committed to neutrality as a guiding foreign policy principle, Switzerland has, in the past, sought stable relations to all states, including autocracies, to which it has traditionally maintained diplomatic and economic relations. Since 2000, the promotion of human rights and democracy are defined as foreign policy goals in the Swiss constitution. Nevertheless, since 2005 Switzerland has promoted strategic partnerships including with countries like China and Russia.⁷⁰

Beyond its activities in Central Asia, Switzerland has actively followed, and engaged with, actors and developments in the Asian continent as a whole. Switzerland maintains "pioneering" relations with China.⁷¹ It was one of the first Western countries to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950. After recognizing its market economy status in 2007, Switzerland was the first country in continental Europe to sign a free-trade agreement with China in 2013. It was also one of the first countries in Europe to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016. To further strengthen and define cooperation with Asian partners, Switzerland became a

68 See: "Stellungnahme des Bundesrates zur Motion von NR Fehr (11.3143) 'Strategiewechsel Gegenüber Helvetistan.'" Das Schweizer Parlament, May 11, 2011. <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefte?AffairId=20113143>; Ammann, Kathrin. "China, der grosse Freund der Schweiz." SWI swissinfo.ch, January 13, 2017. https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/staatsbesuch_china-der-grosse-freund-der-schweiz/42838682. On EU/European interests and positioning towards the SCO and Central Asia, see: Antonenko, Oksana. "The EU Should Not Ignore the Shanghai Co-Operation Organisation." London: Centre for European Reform, May 2007; Grieger, Gisela. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation." Briefing. EPRS European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2015.

69 "Total Official Flows by Country and Region." Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Several years. Accessed May 26, 2018. <https://stats.oecd.org>.

70 Nünlist, Christian. "Umdenken der neutralen Schweiz." In *Außenpolitik mit Autokratien*, edited by Josef Braml, Wolfgang Merkel, and Eberhard Sandschneider, 246–55. Jahrbuch Internationale Politik 30. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014.

71 Ammann (2017)

Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 2016 and has participated in the Asia-Europe Meetings since 2012.

5.2 Engaging with the SCO: Opportunities and risks

5.2.1 Why engage with the SCO?

In the future, Europe will be increasingly exposed to normative questions raised by Chinese actions and proposals. This is a consequence of China's growing economic power, the westward push of its regional initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), combined with a more recent political assertiveness and willingness to shape global governance in areas of its interest. In contrast to the BRI, the SCO has an institutionalized multilateral framework and a geostrategic focus. It may offer some additional entry points in engaging with China, which are not provided in the BRI framework.

The current disconnectedness with Russia and its sphere of influence poses a challenge to policy-makers in the West. Even before the 2014 rupture, Russia has been promoting the SCO to Eurasian states as an alternative model for governance. In the field of security cooperation, the SCO seems today increasingly attractive as an alternative option, even to countries which hold membership or close ties with NATO. For instance, Turkey, as a NATO member, and Azerbaijan, which used to be a strong contender for NATO membership, have become SCO dialogue partners.⁷² In contrast to the CSTO, the SCO offers a format for cooperation in which relations among members are more equal and open and Russia's geopolitical weight is moderated by China's presence.

The SCO is likely to remain an important (or even the most important) coordinating force in certain fields that are of vital interest to the Central Asian region, such as the fight against terrorism and other transnational security threats. The security situation in Central Asia remains volatile, and for this reason, the SCO is potentially an interesting and important contact for external actors who are interested and active in the Central Asian region.

72 Huotari et al. (2017)

Current positioning of international/European actors towards the SCO: Why engage with it?⁷³

For external relations officers at the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS), the OSCE and NATO, it is China's membership in the SCO that makes the organization interesting. Except for China, the original SCO member states are all participating states of the OSCE. The same goes for NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme. A stronger engagement with the SCO is seen as potentially useful in opening up additional communication lines with China. For the time being, the SCO is acknowledged as an actor in Central Asia and is being monitored on a regular basis along with other actors and developments in the region.

The SCO was mentioned in the EU Central Asia Strategy of 2007 as one of the regional organizations with which the EU was prepared to "enter into an open and constructive dialogue" and to "establish regular ad hoc contacts".⁷⁴ The strategy was reviewed four times (2008, 2010, 2012, 2015), but since 2010 no further reference has been made to the SCO. Instead, the EU relies on the OSCE and the UN as cooperation partners in the region. This approach may be confirmed (or changed) when the EU issues a new Central Asia strategy in 2019. While the topic of connectivity is likely to be given a prominent role, it is not clear if the SCO will be considered.

5.2.2 Practical obstacles to a partnership with the SCO

With its enlargement in June 2017, the SCO has entered its most uncertain phase. In many respects, the joining of India and Pakistan compounds the uncertainties and vagueness revolving around the organization, including its purpose and geostrategic focus. As a multifaceted organization with a focus on security cooperation, the SCO lacks both a clear profile and transparency. This complicates the interaction with outside actors.

While the SCO is a legitimate and efficient tool for the internal coordination of member states, the same is not necessarily true for its outside representation. The SCO and its individual member states have made limited efforts to develop the organization's relations to other countries and organizations, possibly reflecting both a lack of resources and interest. In its pre-2014 interactions with the EU or NATO, Russia was the only SCO country to

regularly mention the organization (along with its favorite regional security scheme, the CSTO). Even so, Russia – like all other SCO member states – has had a strong preference for bilateral, rather than multilateral, relations.

The fact that the SCO is an elite project put in place by authoritarian leaders lead to practical and normative problems in establishing relations with the organization. The weak legitimacy of Central Asian rulers negatively affects their scope of action. Furthermore, the acceptance of the SCO among the broader public in SCO member states is limited: Firstly, the organization is not well known, which is, at least partly, related to its focus on security cooperation activities. Secondly, cooperation and development potential in areas of direct benefit to the local population, such as industrial development or greater intrastate connectivity, which is of particular relevance to the Central Asian public, has not been (sufficiently) addressed within the SCO.

Attempts by the international community to reach out to the SCO have not been met with positive reactions in the past, and consequently, it is difficult to forecast how requests for cooperation would be handled in the future. For example, a request by the US for observer status was denied by the SCO in 2005,⁷⁵ and German efforts at engagement with the SCO during their OSCE chairmanship preparations in 2015 were also spurned.

Current positioning of international/European actors towards the SCO: Practical obstacles⁷⁶

The SCO's evolving identity explains why some external actors are rather cautious to engage with it. In Brussels and Berlin, a general "wait-and-see approach" is adopted towards the SCO. In 2008, the then-EU special representative to Central Asia, Pierre Morel, was cited as having referred to the SCO as a "work in progress".⁷⁷

From the perspective of external organizations and governments, the formulation of policies towards the SCO is a challenge as it requires effective coordination among various administrative units. This is a consequence of the SCO's multifaceted character and its geographic expanse. At the EEAS, the China division has a leading role in shaping the EU's approach towards the SCO, cooperating closely with the Central Asia and Russia divisions to achieve this goal.

⁷³ Established based on interview data

⁷⁴ "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership." Brussels: Council of the European Union, May 31, 2007.

⁷⁵ For more details on this, see: Boland, Julie. "Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Lost Decade? A Partner for the United States?" 21st Century Defense Initiative Policy Paper. Brookings, June 20, 2011, p. 27.

⁷⁶ Established based on interview data

⁷⁷ Hu, Richard Weixing. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A New Regional Kid on the Block?" European Policy Centre, February 18, 2008. http://www.epc.eu/prog_details.php?cat_id=6&pub_id=880&prog_id=3.

5.2.3 Potential normative obstacles to a partnership with the SCO

The SCO is a prominent example of a cross-regional phenomenon. In recent years, authoritarians around the world found instruments and institutions helping them to “shield their regimes from external criticism” and “erode the norms that inform and underlie the liberal international political order”.⁷⁸ In this context, regional organizations have become a potential major source of norms that counter liberal democracy, posing a growing challenge to the liberal international order. When engaging with the SCO, the risk of endorsing repressive states, and unintentionally helping them promote repressive norms regionally and internationally, must be considered.

SCO practices in the field of security cooperation often do not respect international standards for the protection of human rights and de facto undermine the UN Refugee Convention. An essential element of the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism has been the mandatory extradition of suspects. Often, the obligation of *non-refoulement*, a principle of international law, is not respected, and asylum is denied without due process protections.⁷⁹ SCO member states are, for example, obliged not to grant refugee status to any person accused by another SCO member state of having committed an act of terrorism, separatism, or extremism.⁸⁰ The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly condemned Russia’s extradition of terrorist suspects to SCO member states.⁸¹

Current positioning of international/European actors towards the SCO: Normative obstacles⁸²

In the past, establishing formal ties with the SCO has not been an option for the EU. SCO principles, considered problematic in terms of human rights standards, constitute an obstacle in this regard.

The Ukraine crisis in 2014, which saw Russia’s annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, and the escalation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, has fundamentally changed relations between the EU and Russia, making the establishment of formal ties between the EU and the SCO even more unlikely. Russia’s membership in organizations tends to incite skepticism from potential EU partners. A

similar analysis applies to NATO-Russian/SCO relations. Before 2014, there was some discussion to engage with the SCO – this is now off the table. Attitudes among EU and NATO officials seem, however, more favorable towards the SCO as compared to the Russia-dominated CSTO.

5.3 Strategies towards the SCO: Possible formats and fields of engagement

5.3.1 Possible cooperation formats: Formal and informal ways of engaging with the SCO

According to the 2002 Charter, the “SCO membership shall be open for other States in the region that undertake to respect the objectives and principles of this Charter and comply with the provisions of other international treaties and documents adopted in the SCO framework”. The regulation on Admission of New Members to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2010) specifies that a state that wishes to join the SCO should belong to the Euro-Asian region.

The organization’s non-Western identity has been a defining feature of the SCO so far. The situation has somewhat changed, with Russia promoting more openness, potentially opening up the possibility for participation by (Western) European states. Notably, the question of which countries should be admitted as members, or even as observers or dialogue partners, is not yet settled. Currently, countries with an observer or dialogue status are typically countries that have indicated an interest in eventually becoming a member.

Less formal ways of engaging with the SCO include cooperation based on a Memorandum of Understanding in which the fields of cooperation are defined: The SCO has stepped up its efforts to build relations with other organizations, but the focus has been on UN organizations and regional organizations in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasia.

An even less formal way of cooperation are the exchange of visits and meetings between SCO officials and government officials of non-SCO countries or representatives of other organizations. This also includes mu-

78 Cooley, Alexander. “Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms.” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (July 23, 2015): 49–63.

79 “Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: The Impact of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.” *A Human Rights in China Whitepaper*. Human Rights in China, March 2011.

80 Suter (2015), pp. 512–538

81 Suter (2015), pp. 479–482

82 Established based on interview data

tual conference participation as well as bilateral meetings that take place on the margins of large international conferences, such as UN conferences. OSCE events are forums in which the SCO, especially SCO-RATS, regularly takes part to present its activities and share its views on security issues. Conversely, OSCE representatives receive invitations to, and participate in, SCO-RATS events.

Current positioning of international/European actors towards the SCO: Cooperation formats⁸³

As of today, no Western European country has formal ties with the SCO. Germany, for example, which has a leading role in shaping the EU's position towards Central Asia, has, for the time being, settled to an "informal ad hoc dialogue" with the SCO.

Between the EU (member states) and the SCO only ad hoc contact exists. Contact typically takes the form of meetings between EU representatives and the SCO secretariat in Beijing. Through the exchange of diplomatic notes they inform each other on their activities. There are currently no operational cooperation activities between the EU and the SCO. Formalizing ties by becoming an observer, for example, is not considered interesting since the potential influence of observers is seen to be limited.

The OSCE maintains relations with the SCO that are described as „minimal existing“. However, both sides have shown interest in advancing cooperation and fostering joint approaches on issues of common interest. Swiss Ambassador Thomas Greminger, OSCE secretary general since July 2017, has been active in reaching out to international and regional organizations. During his first six months at the organization, he met with the SCO secretary general, Rachid Alimov.

5.3.2 Possible cooperation fields: The SCO as a partner in security, economics and more?

At its core, the SCO is a security organization. Even if the organization is considered dysfunctional in other areas, the member states will stay committed to and engaged in activities in the field of counterterrorism. The fight against the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism is a key pillar of SCO security cooperation and is well established. When engaging with the SCO, security dimensions and counterterrorism activities should be given special attention.

The SCO agenda has broadened over the years, potentially opening cooperation in new fields. Current developments however indicate that SCO countries are likely to increasingly resort to bilateral mechanisms when it comes to economic cooperation, especially in the fields of energy and infrastructure, and other regional cooperation formats. China and Russia strongly promote their own economic integration schemes, i.e. the BRI and the EEU respectively.

Current positioning of international/European actors towards the SCO: Cooperation fields⁸⁴

The thematic overlap between SCO and OSCE activities is large: Combating transnational threats like terrorism, violent extremism, and trafficking in drugs, arms and people is a common interest. This explains why the SCO has, in the past, actively engaged in OSCE events.

In acknowledgement of its achievements in the field of economic cooperation CAREC has decided to engage with the SCO; the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, created by the Asian Development Bank in 1997, is an active and well-established actor in Central Asia. The new CAREC 2030 strategy mentions the SCO, along with the BRI and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), as regional cooperation mechanisms, with which CAREC seeks to strengthen coordination.

83 Established based on interview data

84 Established based on interview data

Recommendations

General recommendations:

Closely monitor

The SCO is set up in a way that it can change quickly and is located in a region with a volatile security situation. It is recommended to closely monitor how the SCO develops in the coming years, which will be decisive for its future. This should include efforts to enhance research capacities that seek to better understand relevant developments on the ground. Will SCO capacity for action improve or will it, as a consequence of the enlargement, lose momentum and focus? What are the conflicts and activities the SCO will be engaging in?

Be clear about one's own position

Its member states, notably China and Russia, have used the SCO as a locus to formulate common positions and norms. Some security concepts, such as terrorism or cyber security, which they also promote in international forums, are problematic in terms of their implications for human rights and liberal democracy. To be sensitive to differences in policy definitions and approaches and clear about one's own position will help shape future interactions with the SCO and its member states.

Engage in (normative) discussions where they take place (UN, OSCE, etc.) and coordinate with like-minded states

As a rather internally-focused organization, the SCO has chosen the UN and to some extent the OSCE as forums to promote, and sometimes actively present, its (foreign) policy positions and norms to a broader public. These efforts will continue as the organization seeks to strengthen its ties with the UN and regional organizations. Having an ongoing and active debate about topics that affect the governance in key policy areas, and the international order at large, is important in the face of the ongoing global power shift.

Specific recommendations:

Maintain and strengthen bilateral ties to individual SCO states

Switzerland maintains good relationships with individual SCO member countries. Given these countries' preference for bilateral solutions, it is important to remain engaged

in a bilateral dialogue. Multilateral cooperation can only complement bilateral cooperation.

Be selective when engaging with regional organizations.

Some regional organizations, including the SCO, operate on principles that constitute a challenge to the international liberal order. Particularly problematic from the perspective of international law are SCO members' practices in the field of security cooperation. This must be considered when formulating Switzerland's policies towards regional organizations in Central Asia.

Act through international organizations

Security: At the regional level, the OSCE plays a central role in Switzerland's commitment to peace and security. The OSCE is also mentioned as a regional partner by the EU. Combining expertise and resources with the OSCE and the EU in the region could be an interesting option to explore. The current OSCE secretary general being a Swiss may open additional doors for the promotion of Swiss initiatives within the OSCE including outreach activities towards the SCO.

Economics: An enhanced engagement with the region through financial institutions, such as the AIIB, could be fruitful. They are more institutionalized than the SCO is and have a clearer (economic) profile. Switzerland could bring in its expertise in the financial sector.

No formal engagement at this stage

Seeking formal ties with the SCO is not recommended at this stage. Given the form and content of SCO cooperation, it is not clear what could be gained from a formal engagement and whether the interest for cooperation would be reciprocated, i.e. it is likely that any approach would be rebuffed by the SCO.



The **Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich** specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international relations and security policy. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The Center is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners, focusing on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.