

CRITICAL STUDIES OF
THE ASIA-PACIFIC

EURASIAN REGIONALISM

**THE SHANGHAI
COOPERATION
ORGANISATION**

Stephen Aris



Eurasian Regionalism

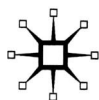
The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association for South East Asian Nations
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	Collective Treaty Security Organisation
EU	European Union
EurAsEC	Eurasian Economic Community
GUAM	Georgia, Uzbekistan, Armenia and Moldova
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OCSE	Organisation for Collective Security in Europe
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations

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1

Introduction

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is an emerging regional organisation in post-Soviet Central Asia, which has become an important part of both Russia's and China's regional strategy towards Central Asia and the security and economic policies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Beyond its importance to its member states, the development of the SCO is of wider significance to global politics, security and economics. Russia and China are two of the most prominent states of the international system because of their territorial size, economic capacity, military strength and status as permanent members of the UN Security Council. Indeed, this is reflected in their inclusion in the widely used categorisation of the BRIC countries, a term developed to label a set of states expected to develop into major political and economic powers in the next 50 years.¹ In addition, owing to their centralised political systems and views on international affairs, both of which are deemed to be distinct from those of the West, Russia and China are often depicted as alternative power centres within the international system. Therefore, the formation of a regional organisation comprising both Russia and China has important connotations for global politics, security and economics.

The SCO is also a significant case study for International Relations theory, in particular the growing literature on regionalism and regional organisations outside of the West, as it illustrates how two major non-Western powers perceive and seek to develop a framework for regional cooperation (see Busse 1999; Acharya 2001; Alagappa 2003; Sharpe 2003; Acharya and Johnston 2007a; Wunderlich 2007). For Security Studies it provides insights into the nature and perceptions of security

as seen by major non-Western powers (see Job 1992; Ayoob 1995; Glen 1997; Roe 1999) and evolving approaches to regional security governance (see Cottey and Averre 2002; Sperling et al. 2003a; Krahmann 2005a; Kirchner and Sperling 2007a; Webber 2007) across the world.

As well as having relevance for International Relations theory and the wider international system, the emergence of the SCO is also very important for our understanding of its member states' foreign policies and the region of Central Asia in general. The SCO is integral to China's foreign policy and its emerging regional strategy (see Drover et al. 2001; Lanteigne 2005; Wu and Lansdowne 2007; Dent 2008; Wang and Zheng 2008). The adoption of the 'good neighbour' policy in the 1990s placed strong and favourable relations with bordering countries at the heart of Chinese foreign policy. Against this background, the SCO is very significant as the first fully fledged regional organisation, of which China is a formative member and in which it has had a significant influence. In this way, it represents a crucial test case of China's regional strategy, especially given that there is already evidence of the Chinese leadership seeking to replicate its approach to the SCO in other regions of the world (Lanteigne 2005, 116; Pan 2008, 253).

The SCO is also a notable development in Russian foreign policy. It serves as an important element of Moscow's approach to the former Soviet space, where, in recent years, Russia has pursued a renewed multilateral strategy aimed at developing closer relations with those former Soviet states most inclined to cooperate with it (see Weitz 2006; Bigg 2007; Kobrinskaya 2007; Libman 2007; Vinokurov 2007; Wilson Rowe and Torjesen 2009). However, until the launch of the SCO, the Russian leadership's strategy was limited to bilateral relations and participation in multilateral frameworks over which it had a predominant influence. In this light, the pursuit of a multilateral mechanism in conjunction with another, and arguably more significant, world power is an extremely interesting development in Russia's regional strategy towards the post-Soviet space.

Although studied relatively little, in recent years Central Asia's role within the wider international system has been receiving increasing attention from both the academic and policy community (see Allison and Jonson 2001; Allison 2004; Olcott 2005; Rumer 2005a; Crosston 2006; Rumer et al. 2007; Allison 2008a). The presence of unstable states, radical Islamic groups, organised crime and the transportation of drugs from Afghanistan to Europe have concentrated the minds of Western actors on the relevance of Central Asia to their own security. In 2007, the EU adopted its first comprehensive Central Asia strategy.²

In addition, the existence of raw materials, including oil and gas, in the region has alerted energy ministries to the geoeconomic benefits of the region. Indeed, Central Asia's new significance is emphasised by its greater prominence in the Western media as a function of the US-led NATO operation in Afghanistan.

As a regional organisation formed to address a diverse range of challenges in Central Asia, the SCO is of considerable importance for our understanding of both the region and specific Central Asian Republics. The Central Asian Republics have pursued divergent foreign and security policies since they became independent states following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each is faced with the prospect of managing relations with one another and the larger neighbouring, regional and international actors seeking to develop a stake in the region (see Allison and Jonson 2001; Rumer 2002). Often, the Central Asian Republics' foreign policy strategies have been characterised as attempting to 'play off' interested extra-regional states against one another and aiming to assert advantage over each another (Kubicek 1997; Allison 2004). Against this background, the SCO is an interesting development in the Central Asian Republics' foreign and security policies. It is the only regional organisation in Central Asia to include two major extra-regional powers. Also, it is the only primarily Central Asian regional organisation of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have all maintained full membership since its foundation.³

The evolution of the SCO⁴

The SCO is the institutional outcome of a process of cooperation that has begun almost 20 years ago. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, an immediate priority for the newly independent Republics and their neighbouring states was to reach agreement on new borders and resolve long-term territorial disputes. For the post-Soviet Republics of Central Asia this involved negotiating their new independent boundaries with China. To this end, the Shanghai mechanism was created in the early 1990s, in order to facilitate the settlement of border issues between China and the Central Asian Republics, with the involvement of Russia as a long-term influence on the region. From this limited framework, the scope of cooperation grew into the Shanghai Five mechanism,⁵ which introduced a broader agenda of security and economic issues than just border delimitation. The signing of the Founding Declaration of the SCO on 15 June 2001 provided the first formal



Illustration 1 Map of the SCO member states and observer states

institutionalisation of the Shanghai process, creating a fully fledged regional organisation.

At present, the SCO's full membership stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, covering most of the territory of the Eurasian continent. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have all been full members of the SCO since its formation in 2001, although Uzbekistan was not a participant in the Shanghai Five. In addition to full membership, an associate status within the SCO was created, termed 'observer' states, with India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia being accepted as official observer-members, while in 2009 a further associate-member status was introduced, allowing Sri Lanka and Belarus to become official 'dialogue partners'. However, in spite of these two categories of associate membership, the SCO is overwhelmingly centred on its core full membership.

The SCO's agenda now covers security, economic, cultural and humanitarian collaboration between its members. The primary agreed foci are targeting the transnational security challenges disrupting the region, and developing economic cooperation between its members to contribute to regional stability. This agenda has proven itself relevant enough to its member states' leaderships for the SCO to establish itself as an important part of the regional security and political architecture in Central Asia (Chung 2006; Aris 2009).

This book characterises the evolution of the SCO as proceeding through three periods since its official inauguration in 2001: an initial phase of institutional development (2001–04), followed by a phase of expansion and development of its agenda (2004–07), and finally a phase focused on the implementation of commonly agreed projects (2007–10).

2001–04: Institutional development

Although functioning primarily on an interstate, rather than a supranational, basis, the SCO has developed an institutional structure of seven organs, most of which was completed by 2004. Following the formation of the organisation, it took another two years for the primary legal document of the organisation, the SCO Charter, to come into effect on 19 September 2003. In 2004, the SCO formally introduced its bureaucratic and permanently functioning institutional backbone, with the inauguration of its Secretariat in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent. However, in spite of the development of a permanently functioning institutional base, the annual Heads of State Summit, at which common declarations, agreements and agendas for the coming year are signed, is of central importance.

2004–07: Agenda development

The establishment of the Secretariat and the RATS in 2004 was seen as representing the culmination of the institutional development process. Indeed, with these permanent institutions in place, work on developing the SCO's agenda for practical cooperation moved forward more significantly. From its outset, the SCO's primary focus has been on addressing the non-traditional security issues commonly perceived by its members as threatening regional stability, in particular tackling the threat of the so-called three evils: terrorism, separatism and extremism. Hence, the Shanghai Convention on Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism was signed on 15 June 2001. Although this document laid out the basis for cooperative work against these challenges in the early 2000s, a significant increase in cooperative efforts towards these aims ensued with the creation of the RATS in 2004 as a practical organ for collaboration on these issues. At the same time, the SCO's security focus was widened to include non-traditional threats other than the 'three evils', such as collaboration on tackling organised crime and narcotics, as well as the development of traditional security collaboration, with large-scale SCO military manoeuvres.⁶ As well as progress in security cooperation, from the mid-2000s a wider range of cooperative programmes was developed,

with a greater focus on economic cooperation. This was evident by the creation of an SCO Business Council and Interbank Association, and discussion about the creation of an Energy Club, in addition to the development of trilateral and quadrilateral economic infrastructure projects under the umbrella of the SCO.

2007–10: Implementation of agenda

From the end of 2007, many officials and regional scholars of the SCO have noted a conscious choice by the organisation to focus on the implementation of the agenda and programmes discussed and developed in the mid-2000s. Hence the aim has become to consolidate the consensus reached up to this point, before moving on to the next stage of agenda development. This ambition has been modified in light of the global financial crisis, with the SCO forced to acknowledge the lack of available funds for project implementation and seeking to develop financial support funds to help members through the crisis. Another major international, as well as, significantly, regional, development that has impacted on the SCO has been the increasing insecurity in Afghanistan, created by the resurgence of Taliban-allied fighters and the setting of timetables for withdrawal by NATO forces. This has increased concerns within the SCO about the effects of an unstable and unfriendly conduit state for extremism and the illegal narcotics trade on the doorstep of post-Soviet Central Asia. As a result, Afghanistan has become a major focus for the SCO. A further notable addition to the SCO agenda during this period has been an increasing focus on *people-to-people* cooperation, such as the development of a common SCO University.

Current interpretations of the SCO

A lot of existing work examines the SCO in light of its geopolitical considerations for the West, and the US in particular. Many Western analysts portray the SCO as a joint Russian–Chinese geopolitical device established in response to the growing US presence in Central Asia. It is thus argued that ‘SCO primarily serves as a geopolitical counter weight to the United States’ (Cohen 2006). Such interpretations range from sensationalist accounts, proclaiming that ‘SCO is “the most dangerous organisation Americans have never heard of” ’ and ‘a potential Warsaw Pact’,⁷ to academic accounts outlining the potential challenge it represents to Western interests in the region. Furthermore, it has been stated that the SCO is only as strong as the Russian–Chinese relationship,

which is often said to be limited in scope and inevitably heading towards competition in Central Asia. From this perspective, Russian and Chinese interests in the SCO are often reduced to a common objective of anti-Americanism (Hanova 2009, 80). Indeed, even some analysts who argue that the main aim of the SCO is not to oppose the US, assert that 'it still engages in a number of activities that serve neither United States interests nor values in the region' (Cooley 2010, 19).

Aside from the implications for the West, a prominent focus within contemporary interpretations of the SCO is on the lack of democratic credentials among its member states. Some of the more critical assessments in this regard characterise the SCO as an 'autocrats club' (Wall 2006), heavily criticising its member states' regimes for their lack of liberal democratic principles and poor human rights records (e.g. Tisdall 2006), while others are more interested in highlighting the alternative nature of values within the SCO compared with the West (e.g. Ambrosio 2008). In general, these accounts often argue that the SCO is a challenge to the West, because it 'represents a formidable challenge to the ideas of universal democracy and human rights through its de facto legitimisation of authoritarianism and by establishing itself as a counterweight to external democratic norms' (Ambrosio 2008, 1322). As Bailes and Dunay (2007b, 13) outline, 'up to very recently, analytical writing about the SCO [has] liked to stress how far away the Organisation actually is from European traditions and norms in its way of dismissing human rights concerns and forbidding mutual "interference in internal affairs"'.

The lack of democratic governance among the SCO member states is related to the view of some analysts that the design and make-up of the SCO is not conducive to the development of serious regional cooperation. Such accounts highlight that as the SCO's member states are not liberal democracies, meaningful cooperation between them is limited to mutual support for methods of controlling dissent (Splidsboel-Hansen 2008). Also, the viability of the SCO is questioned by some scholars, who point to a history of tensions between its member states (Dunay 2010). It is argued that the lingering mutual suspicion between its member states leaves the SCO as little more than a so-called 'talking shop'. This interpretation is often supported by citing the SCO's lack of response to high-profile regional security events, such as the recent incidents of civil disorder in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Blank 2005, 13; Melvin 2010; Weitz 2010). Other accounts highlight a lack of visible integration, arguing that the SCO 'has yet to prove itself as something more than a forum for high-level networking among leaders' (Matveeva and Giustozzi 2008, 1),

and that 'the hype surrounding the SCO has not matched its still meagre accomplishments' (Cooley 2010, 17).

The Central Asian Republics are interpreted by some studies as unenthusiastic about the evolution of the SCO. It is argued that Russia's and China's perceived use of the SCO against the US runs counter to the interests of the Central Asian Republics, because the prevailing Central Asian regimes aim to balance their foreign policy between the various great powers active in the region, including the United States (for more on balancing see Allison 2004; Rumer 2005b, 60–3; Cornell 2007; Lewis 2008, 209–36). In addition, the problematic relationships between the Central Asian Republics are said to present a major constraint on the development of the SCO, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan competing against each other for regional supremacy (Esenov 2010) and rivalry over access to water resources (Dunay 2010, 6). At the same time, other assessments consider that the Central Asian Republics perceive the SCO as serving their interests by providing 'symbolic political legitimacy and equality to Central Asian regimes that struggle to assert this on the broader international stage' (Allison 2008a). Similarly, Matveeva and Giustozzi (2008, 22) note that the Central Asian Republics support the SCO because it facilitates much needed investment towards 'the revival and development of regional communications infrastructure, [projects] in which Western donors were reluctant to invest in the earlier period of international assistance'.

In general, most analysis of the SCO has focused on what its development means for the West, usually in terms of geopolitical considerations, rather than relating its development to its member states and the Central Asian region. Hence, there is relatively little substantive research on the SCO's underlying dynamics.⁸ In addition, studies on the SCO have tended to focus on one particular element of its agenda or on a specific national perspective on the organisation, and have not sought to combine analysis of the various foci and national perspectives that make up the SCO.

Aims of the study

This book argues that in order to understand a regional organisation, it is necessary to examine the context in which its functions and has evolved, as well as the perceptions of its member states. Therefore this study analyses the development of the SCO in relation to the perspectives of its member states and the regional context of Central Asia. In this way, it is not concerned with policy implications for the West;