

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Regional Chessboards

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Abstract

In spite of its young age, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has managed to become a valuable tool for enhancing cooperation between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While all of its member states seem to agree that the most promising arena for cooperation is the socio-economic sphere, its primary challenge lies in ensuring regional stability and security at the same time as its individual member states balance their interests upon various chessboards. Russia's assertive behavior in the post-Soviet space and Afghanistan's struggle to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime are both testing the limits of the SCO's capability to contribute to the stabilization of the complex and rather unpredictable security environment of Central Asia.

The Evolving SCO Chessboard

The SCO does not seek to impose a specific model for regional development on Central Asia, apart from stressing the importance of sustainable and constructive dialogue. According to its framework, member states are encouraged to view their national interests first and participate in and further their engagement with the SCO at a pace with which these national governments are comfortable, as long as they do not completely disregard the interests of their SCO partners. This perspective is premised on the belief that by having such a non-invasive approach to regional cooperation—based on open and flexible dialogue—a long-lasting organization can be built, which gradually matures and becomes stronger. As has been widely noted, the SCO's development is closely linked to the institutionalization of Sino-Russian relations.¹ Beijing views the SCO as a unique platform for enhancing its interests in Central Asia and, contrary to popular belief, is not preoccupied with using the SCO as a balancing tool *vis-à-vis* Russia or the United States. Moscow, on the other hand, pursues a multidirectional foreign policy when it comes to maintaining its regional influence in Central Asia, positioning itself as a potential 'bridge' between the European and Pacific arenas.

Having these two prominent great powers—both with global aspirations—as the key drivers of the SCO has naturally attracted attention from elsewhere in the world, with particular interest focused on the organization's behavior in situations involving these two players, and its relations to other external actors active in Central Asia. While in 2005 the primary concern of analysts was how the SCO would jointly respond to the longevity of an external (US/NATO)

military presence in the region,² more recently focus has shifted to how the member states are reacting to Russia's engagements in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).

Russia's Chessboards in its Near Neighborhood

The SCO's lukewarm support for Russia's interventions in both Georgia and Ukraine raised eyebrows worldwide. In this way, the SCO has largely managed to preserve its guiding principle of not allowing a single state or issue to overshadow the rest of its agenda. However, Russia's preference for military interference in its neighborhood may make it harder for China, and subsequently the SCO, to remain impartial on such issues in the future, and could lead to the SCO taking a more pro-active approach to mediating tensions within the region. Such a shift is, however, unlikely in the near future considering China's stance on non-interference and its lack of experience in mediating international conflicts. Additionally, China has been subjected to a major dilemma in relation to the Ukraine crisis, as it has had to navigate between several important trading partners: Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the US. In this context, Beijing has articulated its neutrality, while its leadership subsequently released a first blue paper on national security, which hinted at a strategy of balancing its ties with all major partners by "allying with Russia, reaching out to and enhancing relations with Europe, and stabilizing relations with the US."³

The SCO members have repeatedly declared that the organization was neither established to function as a security alliance that would act in regional conflicts against third parties, nor to meddle in its member states' internal affairs. It has, however, acknowledged that since its establishment new problems have arisen

1 Aris, S. 2008 "Russian-Chinese relations, through the Lens of the SCO," *Russie.Nei.Visions* (34): 246–249; Kizekova, A. and B. Ho. 2014 "The Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Sino-Russian Interactions," *Izvestiya Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* («the Bulletin of Irkutsk State University») (7): 108–115.

2 The joint call for setting a deadline for the withdrawal of troops in the aftermath of the Andijan Uprising in Uzbekistan in 2005.

3 See Yu Bin, 2014 "Western Civil War' Déjà Vu?" CSIS, *Comparative Connections* 15 (3) for an informative overview of China's neutrality with Chinese characteristics in the Ukraine crisis.

beyond the scope of its initial focus on the ‘three evils’: terrorism, extremism and separatism. Nonetheless, the organization continues to concentrate on the same non-traditional security threats (drug and human trafficking, weapon smuggling, use of information and communication technologies for destructive purposes) that have been on its radar for years. The US government and the United Nations have acknowledged the SCO’s role in countering terrorism and narcotics in Eurasia on more than one occasion. Moreover, the member states aspire to have a global impact on issues such as international information security and the prevention of cyber conflicts.⁴

Commentators have downplayed the SCO’s preparedness to respond to regional security challenges, pointing to its lack of binding agreements, its underfunded institutional organs and the lack of strong commitment to the organization from individual member states. Although it has developed into a complex institutional structure and its member states interact frequently through multilevel meetings in both official track-one frameworks (heads of states, ministerial meetings) and non-official track-two arenas (SCO Forum), it has yet to evolve into a fully-fledged regional organization that is able to tackle all the multidimensional security challenges present in contemporary Central Asia.

In response, Russia has proposed setting up a ‘Universal Center for Countering Threats to the Security of SCO Member States’, as a hub for expert analysis. This initiative would bring a more comprehensive approach to dealing with security challenges by transforming the current Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). This permanent body is in charge of a specialized portfolio and thus unable to address the full array of threats facing the member-states beyond terrorism, which are often interlinked.

Afghanistan—the Source of Several Threats and Challenges

The most pressing ‘chessboard’ for the SCO member states lies in Afghanistan (an SCO observer member since 2012). Afghanistan poses various security threats, and the post-2014 withdrawal of US and NATO troops raises a question about how the SCO will act to secure the region without the presence of allied forces. A great deal depends on how fast and in what numbers the US and NATO troops depart from Afghanistan. The Obama administration confirmed that the current US troop contingent of 32,000 will be cut to 9,800 after 2014. And even these troops will gradually be withdrawn until all have left by the end of 2016. This decision has already been criticized by various parties from the Republican camp, as well as officials and

military personnel closely connected to military strategic planning. The main criticism surrounds the public declaration of the withdrawal, which has provided the Taliban and other groups with a set date for when they could further escalate their operations.⁵ Furthermore, there is not much unity among the approaches of the EU and NATO to the security situation in Afghanistan.

Equally, the SCO also does not seem to have a cohesive strategy on how to deal with Afghanistan’s security. The SCO member states recognize that the Afghan government is not in full control of its territory and that it is unable to protect its own people. Although many of the security threats to its member states emanate from Afghanistan, the SCO does not have the competence to intervene in a non-member state’s domestic affairs. The organization is ill-equipped to respond militarily and lacks adequate finance to fund potential military operations in Afghanistan. It has formed an international operational command for eradicating narcotics production, but there has not been any agreement to commit troops. Furthermore, the SCO has not ever engaged in the collective military trainings of Afghan counter-narcotics operations, in a fashion similar to those conducted by NATO, or bilaterally by Russia. Moscow, in particular, has focused on boosting the protection of state borders, migration controls and equipping the CSTO’s Collective Rapid Reaction Force.⁶

Russia’s national coordinator to the SCO, Kirill Barsky, explained in an interview to the InfoSHOS web portal (October 2013) that the SCO could not replace the coalition forces in the aftermath of the US/NATO withdrawal, but that it could assist Afghanistan in strengthening its law enforcement and supporting it in socio-economic development. This view has been shared by Kazakh experts, who also express confidence in the SCO’s capacity to provide humanitarian assistance or mediation. They believe that the main sources of the conflict and insecurity are rooted not in military confrontation, but in poor socio-economic conditions, and thus consider that the SCO should contribute to Afghanistan’s economic development, rather than responding militarily, in order to stabilize the security situation.⁷

A Promising Silk Road Economic Belt?

One SCO initiative that could involve Afghanistan is the proposal made by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during his September 2013 visit to Central Asia that a *Silk*

4 Kizekova, A., 2012 “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Challenges in Cyberspace,” RSIS Commentary (033).

5 Gordon, M.R. 2014 “Criticism Over Troop Withdrawal Emerges From Beyond G.O.P.,” New York Times (June 4).

6 See Haas, M. 2014 Russia and allies towards post-2014 Afghanistan, East West Institute Report, Brussels.

7 See McDermott, R.N. 2013, Central Asian Security Post-2014: Perspectives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, DIIS Report (12).

Road Economic Belt should be built. The details of this project are still a work-in-progress, but it would seem that the main focus is on breaking down political barriers and finding common interests. The SCO members would open up their transportation channels, promote trade facilitation, improve investment protection mechanisms, laws and enhance monetary circulation. The initiative was met with a positive response from the other member states. The SCO's Secretary-General Dmitry Mezentsev encouraged the member states to study the proposal carefully and find workable formats for joint cooperation.⁸ The inclusion of Afghanistan within this Silk Road Economic Belt could lead to greater transregional engagement and improve its future options for development.

Russia has recently demonstrated its readiness to deepen its economic ties with China by signing a 30-year multi-billion dollar gas deal in May 2014. It is expected that Russia will deliver some 38 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year, starting in 2018. Some analysts have predicted that the Kremlin will use this deal for political leverage *vis-à-vis* Beijing, but considering China's successful diversification of its energy portfolio in recent years, such a scenario appears to be unlikely. To the contrary, the signing of this contract—10 years in the making—has further reinforced the resolve of the member states to collaborate bilaterally first, then seek to further improve their economic ties within the framework of the SCO.

President Vladimir Putin recently approved a 'Plan for Russia's SCO Presidency 2014–2015', which set the goal of enhancing economic cooperation within the SCO space. An organizing committee was established in 2012 to prepare both Russia's SCO Presidency and the hosting of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in the city of Ufa in 2015. Russia is placing symbolic importance on these events, having organized the very first BRICS (BRIC as it was then) meeting in Yekaterinburg in 2009. Back then, the SCO and BRICS summits and presidencies took place in the wake of the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, with the stated focus of both institutions being to demand a

“greater voice and representation in international financial institutions,” and to create a joint funding mechanism for development and aid. The most recent BRICS negotiations have dealt with the establishment of a development bank and the issue of a pool of currency reserves. This pool would be created to aid BRICS members and as a response to the problem of the depleted resources of the International Monetary Fund, often used to “saving the euro one day and another day—the national currencies of developed countries,” as noted by the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassador-at-Large Vadim Lukov.⁹

For the SCO member states, stronger economic cooperation, underpinned by the efforts of Russia and China within BRICS, is important because they all stand to benefit from such projects. However, all the plans for economic cooperation are highly dependent on how the security situation on the ground evolves from the end of 2014 onwards. Some political elites in Central Asia have been calling for more a pro-active approach to regional security and support for existing frameworks, such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). During the fourth CICA summit in Shanghai, on May 20–21, the Uzbek President Islam Karimov remarked that recent developments in Ukraine had been worrisome and could have an impact on its ongoing border disputes (interstate disputes with its neighbors within the Ferghana Valley: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). While the Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbaev suggested creating an Organization for Security and Development in Asia, as an equivalent and alternative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in order to tackle the regional security issues.

In light of the unwillingness of all parties (regional and external) to commit to joint practical solutions, the SCO member states will most likely find themselves confronted with a more volatile region after the NATO/US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Given this scenario, it will be pertinent for all SCO member states to act coherently and treat regional security and stability as their first priority, as only then can regional economic cooperation thrive.

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8 Xiaob, S. 2014 “SCO ‘active’ in seeking solution for Afghan security problems,” Global Times (February 14).

9 “BRICS development bank, currency reserve pool to begin work in 2015,” Russia & India Report (April 12, 2014).