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Four Problems of the SCO in Connection with Its Enlargement

One of the main issues facing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is its enlargement. Traditionally, this issue has been viewed in terms of practical policy. The longer this dispute over enlargement drags on, however, the greater the depth it acquires. The enlargement debate reflects the unique political culture of the SCO. Another issue well-known from other organizations also arises—“different levels” in the admission of new participants. But the question of the organization’s future is emerging in discussions of enlargement as the main matter in dispute: is it to be a global future (as Russia is more inclined to see it) or a regional future (as China is more inclined to see it)? Thus, the SCO faces one of the most important conflicts of today’s world—that between globalization and regionalization. While debates about these trends and the relationship
between them continue in the political, economic, and social sciences, the SCO has to make a practical choice in favor of one of the trends or find a way to combine them in determining its work priorities. The authors reformulate the issue of enlargement as a problem of finding a balance between globalizing and regionalizing trends in the SCO strategy. At the practical level this will make it possible to reconcile the basic interests of Russia and China in Eurasia.

The declaration adopted at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit held in 2015 in Ufa (Russia) indicates that the member states “note with satisfaction the decision to start the procedure for the admission of India and Pakistan to the SCO” (“Ufimskaia” 2015). However, discussion continues regarding the timetable for implementation of this decision; at times it even returns to the question of the expediency of admitting India and Pakistan to the SCO. Moreover, these arguments are not confined to matters of practical policy: they are beginning to touch on more general issues pertaining to the role currently played by the SCO and to its prospects for future development. This makes the question of SCO enlargement interesting not only in terms of practical policy but also from the standpoint of scholarly research. In the course of many years of discussions about enlargement, four problems facing the SCO have come to the fore—the problem of the political culture of the SCO and application of the principle of consensus; the problem of multiple formats of participation in the SCO and preservation of the monolithic nature of the organization; the problem of how to interpret the principle of openness; and the problem of the global or regional role of the SCO in world politics.

It seems to us that the question of enlargement has become a focus of many unwritten rules and specific decision-making mechanisms in the SCO that are very often concealed from the view of the external observer. Clarification of the role of these “hidden springs” will enable us to better understand why the SCO is what it is, why it acts in the way it does, and what distinguishes it from other international organizations.
In preparing this article the authors used not only official documents and scholarly publications but also the results of in-depth interviews with experts from SCO member states, India, and Pakistan, and also material from conferences in which they participated in 2015–16. As a rule, these conferences were conducted in accordance with the Chatham House rule, which permits one to disclose opinions expressed but not the identities of those who expressed them.

The political culture of the SCO: How should the principle of consensus work?

In casting doubt on the expediency of admitting India and Pakistan to the SCO and arguing this point mainly with Russian experts, Chinese specialists come close to raising a very sensitive issue: how should the principle of consensus in the SCO be understood and applied?

Up to now consensus in the SCO has received a broad interpretation—as decision making based on general agreement. The Charter of the SCO lays down that “decisions in bodies of the SCO shall be made by means of agreement without voting” (“Khartiia” 2002). We see that the Asian attitude toward expressing a negative stance has become part of the SCO’s “political culture.” The situation has been described many times in the literature on special characteristics of negotiations with Asian partners: if they disagree they do not say “no” but prefer “unclear and vaguely positive expressions with an elusive and hidden negative meaning” (Graham and Lam 2003, p. 86).

SCO participants try to avoid expressions of firm negation and also sharp and open disputes that might require their use. Although the Charter of the SCO provides for a member state to set out its point of view on specific aspects of decisions made, in practice, disagreements, even if they exist, are never exposed to public view.

This kind of political culture is thought to help preserve the spirit of concord. But is it possible to place an issue on which
there is no general agreement on the agenda of the SCO? In fact, this practice has emerged. As the Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov said in an interview: “Yes, consensus is necessary, but discussion must begin somehow” (“Press-konferentsiia” 2015). A rather difficult situation arises: if an issue on which there is no general agreement does appear on the SCO agenda, then to what extent can a country that wishes to do so block its discussion?

For the time being, a balance exists between placing an issue on the SCO agenda even without general agreement on it and avoiding a firm “no” in conformity with the political culture of the SCO. This balance is achieved simply by leaving the non-consensual issue on the agenda of the organization, where it may remain for a very long time. The adoption of a document that mentions a contested issue, even if it declares an intention to settle it, does not signify any real progress in this direction. In other words, an issue on which there is no consensus may be placed on the agenda, but it must remain there for an indefinite period of time—until general agreement emerges.

In the history of the SCO such a case has already occurred. We refer to the issue of an SCO Bank—an idea put forward by China. This issue has been on the organization’s agenda since 2010, and it has been mentioned in the declarations issued at the past three annual summits at the top level. It first appeared in the declaration issued at the SCO summit in Bishkek in 2013, formulated as follows: “The heads of state noted the importance of work being conducted to study issues pertaining to the creation of a Development Fund (special account) of the SCO and a Development Bank of the SCO, and instructed that efforts be continued to complete this work as soon as possible” (“Bishkekskaia” 2013). The same formulation was repeated word for word a year later in the declaration issued at the 2014 summit in Dushanbe (“Dushanbinskaia” 2014). The formulation in the declaration issued at the 2015 summit in Ufa was even more definite: “The member states will continue work to create a Development Fund (special account) of the SCO and a Development Bank of the SCO for the purpose of stimulating
trade and investment ties in the region” (“Ufimskaià” 2015). From this formulation it may appear that the matter has progressed from the stage of “study” to that of “implementation.” But the real situation is that there has been no movement toward the creation of an SCO Bank because there is no consensus on this issue (Russia has had doubts concerning the expediency of creating an SCO Bank, proposing instead to transform the Eurasian Development Bank into an SCO Bank; however, it has not found understanding). Nevertheless, formally the issue remains on the agenda of the organization.

Based on the issue of an SCO Bank, we can conclude that the practice mentioned above has become established in the SCO: an issue on which there is no consensus can appear on the agenda but cannot be finally settled.

We have the impression that the Chinese side has understood the Ufa declaration of 2015, which envisioned the start of the procedure for the admission of India and Pakistan, not as the beginning of a process with a precisely known result in the form of the admission of these two countries, but as the appearance on the agenda of an issue on which there is no consensus and that cannot be finally settled until consensus is achieved.

In procedural terms, an analogy can be drawn between the issue of an SCO Bank and that of enlargement. Nevertheless, these are obviously very different issues. And here a subtle point arises, which is partly psychological and concerns the political culture of the SCO.

It was not only the majority of SCO member states that have understood the Ufa declaration to mean that the issue of giving India and Pakistan membership status has basically been settled and that their accession will take no longer than the time needed to complete formal procedures. This is also how the matter has been viewed by India and Pakistan themselves—and, indeed, by the whole world community, which is observing with interest the involvement of new countries in the SCO. If the issue of SCO enlargement meets the same fate as that of an SCO Bank, then the whole world will see this as undermining the authority of the
organization in regional and world affairs—the authority in which all SCO member states, including China, take such pride.

China therefore finds itself in a situation where it must either say a firm “no” (and block the issue) or reconcile itself to enlargement that moves forward without its consent. China, it seems to us, feels uncomfortable in this sort of situation. Chinese experts complain that it is unfair and unfriendly of diplomats to push the process of SCO enlargement forward at such sensitive points.

Will China decide to say a firm “no” in order to halt enlargement? Hardly. Will China abandon efforts to divert the issue of enlargement into a labyrinth of paperwork? No. Will China be willing to do this even at the expense of the SCO’s authority? Possibly. For the time being Chinese specialists let it be understood that there is no consensus on the issue of SCO enlargement and therefore it cannot be finally settled. And yet at the practical level Chinese diplomats allow the SCO to issue documents containing formulations that appear to push the issue forward. It seems to us that discussions of SCO enlargement have come very close to questions pertaining to the political culture of the organization and to interpretation of the general consensus rule. A turn of the discussion in this direction could be of great significance for the future of the SCO.

**Multiple formats of participation in the SCO and preservation of its monolithic nature**

The SCO has three formats for participation in the work of the organization—membership, observer status, and dialogue partners. The number of observers and dialogue partners has constantly increased in recent years, but not a single new member has been admitted yet. Over the past year, however, some forward movement in this area has been accompanied by the emergence of a new topic of discussion—the creation of a narrower format in the SCO. This may seem paradoxical, but the issue of broadening membership leads to that of creating a “narrow format.”
With increasing frequency, at various meetings of experts, Chinese specialists raise the idea of creating a “narrow format” in the SCO. As they see it, a new membership format can be established by introducing the status of “permanent members” of the SCO for the six current member states. This new mechanism, they explain, is designed to guarantee special rights for the founding states, preserve the “Shanghai spirit” unchanged, and ensure the viability of the organization. The question of what special rights should be assigned to the founding states remains open for the time being. The special rights of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council come to mind. However, given decision making by consensus, which the Chinese themselves insist on preserving, there can be no question of a right of veto in the SCO because there is no voting.

It is possible to envision the creation of narrow and wide formats for bodies of the SCO—the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers), the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and so on. In such an arrangement representatives of states that lack permanent membership status would not be admitted to certain sessions. Therefore, certain decisions could be made by the permanent members acting alone. A two-level system of this sort, it seems to us, is hardly compatible with the principle of equality. It would put an end to the current situation in which there are no differences between the rights of large and small states—a principle to which the Chinese side has made constant reference (“Shanghe” 2014). Russian representatives, by the way, have also seen the “Shanghai spirit” in the fact that in the SCO “everyone is equal, everyone is respected, everyone is listened to, every opinion is taken into account” (Vorob’ev n.d.).

Serious problems can arise if a two-level system is applied in the work of the Secretariat—the standing executive body of the SCO. At present the secretary general is appointed on a rotating basis from among citizens of each member state in turn, using an alphabetical list of the Russian names of member states, for a term of three years (without any right of extension). Will it be possible for new member states—in the immediate future for
India and Pakistan—to nominate their representatives for the top post in the SCO bureaucracy? Is talk about creating a narrow format not a step toward giving the “core states” special rights also in forming the executive body? All officials of the Secretariat are hired from among citizens of member states on the basis of quotas. If India and Pakistan do not obtain such quotas this will make them much less interested in full-scale cooperation within the framework of the SCO, as will any other “narrow format.”

Indian and Pakistani experts are quite frank on this score and expect a rapid rise in the status of their countries within the organization.

So in granting membership to India and Pakistan the SCO may at the same time create an internal format in which they will not participate. For the two countries this will look like second-class membership. In practically all areas of cooperation such second-class membership will harm the reputation of the SCO and reduce its effectiveness. For example, constructive interaction with new partners in the fight against terrorism is hardly possible without the full-scale (and not narrow-format) participation of India and Pakistan in the work of the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Russia in particular has an interest in India’s joining the RATS as soon as possible in order to consolidate the experience that Russia and India already have in fighting extremism on a bilateral basis (Denisov 2016, p. 10).

Although the Chinese proposal has not been thoroughly worked out, experts have also been discussing a new format for membership in other SCO member states. Experts from the Central Asian countries have conveyed their concern to us that enlargement may impede cooperation (at least on certain political issues). They think it would therefore make sense to create a new format within the SCO—a group of deep cooperation that would bring together countries close enough politically for confidential discussion and coordinated action.

To date, however, no clear criteria exist for selecting member states for participation in the “narrow format.” Various suggestions have been made. For example, some have suggested returning to the “original group of five”—countries that border on
China and have fully settled border issues with China (it was with the “group of five” that the Shanghai cooperation process began in 1996). This would require an end to Uzbekistan’s participation in the work of the SCO, which would be feasible only if Uzbekistan, after its chairmanship, distanced itself from the organization on its own initiative. If the SCO creates a group of deep cooperation based on the aforementioned criteria after the accession of India and Pakistan, then this will again mean the exclusion of Uzbekistan and India, but in this case the question of Pakistan’s inclusion can be considered open.

It seems to us that the proposal to create a group of deep cooperation is unlikely to be sustained in precisely this form—with the criteria and composition indicated. However, the discussion itself—the emergence of the issue of forming a group of deep cooperation, especially in the context of SCO enlargement—is an important indicator that the SCO is approaching a turning point in its development.

It is clear that discussion of the problem of enlargement has become sharper and moved to a new plane because, following the Ufa summit, the SCO has reached a critical juncture: it must either find within itself the strength to complete the process of the accession of India and Pakistan or again give priority to the higher interest of preserving consensus. Experts rarely discuss the question of how effectively the institution of observers works in the SCO. Candidates for permanent membership are required to pass through a period as observers. India and Pakistan have had observer status in the SCO since 2004. These years could well have been put to better use—above all, in the interests of the organization itself. Instead of depriving new members of some of the rights possessed by the group of founding states, a little thought could have been given to reform in the opposite direction, aiming to involve observer states more broadly in real and not symbolic work within the SCO framework—a goal that has long been proclaimed in words. The fact that Chinese experts are only now starting to make more and more complaints against India shows that China does not take the format of observer state seriously (let alone that of dialogue partner). More precisely,
China views it as an “external” and not “internal” format and, therefore, as little different from the SCO’s relations with third countries.

Specialists are familiar with other instances in which organizations undergoing enlargement have found it necessary to tackle the problem of sustaining the dynamic of cooperation. The European Union has run up against this problem a number of times and, as a result, has adopted the approach of “multispeed integration.” The problem is also well-known in the history of integration in the post-Soviet space. At the beginning of the 2000s the Eurasian Economic Community went over to “multi-level integration.” At a certain stage of their development, all integration-oriented associations, especially if they possess supranational bodies, face an acute dilemma—“depth of cooperation or breadth of membership.” The same dilemma arises in other organizations. It is hardly to be expected that the SCO will prove an exception. But in the case of the SCO the dilemma can have special features.

Above all, it is striking that discussion of “multiple levels” in the SCO should have emerged so early. Six members or eight (if India and Pakistan join) or even nine (if Iran also joins) are not so many (given that member states recognize a common foundation in terms of values, the “spirit” of the SCO) that problems have to arise in maintaining unity and keeping all member states sufficiently involved in work on the SCO’s agenda. It should therefore be possible for the time being to maintain the effectiveness of the organization at a single “speed” (and preferably quite a high one) by means of other measures.

In the case of the SCO, moreover, the problem posed by enlargement might concern not practical cooperation (it is possible though far from certain that the admission of Pakistan and especially India will indeed facilitate cooperation in certain fields) but the preservation of political consensus. It is no secret that India and Pakistan are countries with their own established views on regional affairs and world politics; they have their own style and content in the discussion of strategic issues that they will inevitably bring with them into the SCO, even if they declare...
that they accept all the formal rules of the organization and adhere to its “spirit.” India and Pakistan will not become other than they are as a result of membership in the SCO; rather, it is the organization that will become a little different. It is symptomatic that in discussions of the future membership of India, Chinese experts, in enumerating possible difficulties, are increasingly emphasizing not bilateral issues, such as the disputed borderline between India and China or the problem of the Dalai Lama, but the different political culture of contemporary India. The entire structure of Indian political life, in the opinion of Chinese specialists, bears Western features; the Indian bureaucracy also behaves in a Western manner. This may introduce unnecessary elements of conflict into the working arrangements already established in the SCO.

The perceived threat is not only to the mechanism and ritual of the SCO’s work but also to its substantive aspect. At present the member states take a broadly similar view of world problems. Agreement in the appraisal of regional and global events arises not just without argument but almost without discussion. There might be disagreement over how to react to an event or what formulation to use in a document. But the member states of the SCO have a largely shared understanding of the meaning of what is happening in the world. In this respect the SCO is perhaps the most monolithic of the world’s international organizations. Iran, which for formal reasons has not approached the stage of membership, is closer to this shared understanding (albeit with certain twists) than are India and Pakistan. Unless they renounce their strategic traditions, which of course cannot be expected of them, these countries will introduce greater pluralism into the SCO (Safranchuk 2015).

It is worth emphasizing that a widening of the spectrum of opinions inside the SCO would not in itself be a negative development. Nor can it be denied altogether, however, that this would have consequences for the political consensus within the SCO on regional and global problems. Thus, for the SCO the dilemma will be—“monolithic unity or breadth of membership.” The SCO is very near the point at which it will have to resolve this dilemma, and this too may have serious consequences for its future.
How to interpret the principle of openness

Sharp discussion of this question is proceeding for the time being mainly on a “second track”; recently, moreover, Chinese experts have made their formulations even more restrictive. Sometimes, for example, one hears that the basic provisions of the SCO Charter make no allowance for enlargement and that the principle of openness contained in this document refers only to the development of cooperation between the SCO and third countries and between the SCO and other international organizations. We heard these opinions expressed, for instance, by one of the leading Chinese specialists on the SCO during the eleventh session of the SCO Forum held on April 28–29, 2016, in Dushanbe (Tajikistan).

This is not a new approach: Chinese experts have voiced such views in the past. Thus, Yu Zhengzi of the Chinese Foundation for the Study of International Problems spoke of this at a roundtable in June 2012. An important precondition for solving the problem of membership in the SCO, he said, is compliance with the principle of the regional orientation of the organization, while the principle of openness to accession by new members as contained in the charter means openness with respect to a specific region—Central Asia (Liang 2012).

On the latter point a similar approach to defining an “SCO space” has been taken by certain Russian specialists. In 2012 Vitalii Vorob’ev, a senior research associate of the Center for the Study of East Asia and the SCO at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, described the SCO space:

An outstanding feature of this space is that it contains the core of the Eurasian continent (in geopolitical terminology—the “heartland”), called Central Asia. This region is a center of gravitation of interests and efforts. Certainly it is necessary to pay attention to what is happening to the west, to the south, and farther to the east (in the zone of the Pacific Ocean). But modes of interaction with actors outside the SCO space are inevitably different from the logic of intra-SCO intercourse. (Vorob’ev 2012)
But let us turn to documents. Article 13 of the charter states that “the SCO shall be open to accession by other states of the region, which shall be obliged to comply with the goals and principles of this Charter and also with the provisions of other international treaties and documents adopted within the framework of the SCO” (“Khartiia” 2002). Nowhere, however, does the document define “the region”; there seems no good reason to confine it to Central Asia, especially now that requirements have been set for new member states.

In 2006 a secret decision was adopted at a session of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CMFA) of the SCO to place a moratorium on the admission of new member states. The moratorium was later confirmed at meetings of the organization in 2006, 2007, and 2010. The moratorium was secret because it conflicted with the principle of openness as embodied in the SCO Charter (Lukin 2012, p. 35). The summit in Tashkent on June 11, 2010, adopted Regulations on the Admission of New Member States, which set clear requirements for a state to join the SCO and indicate that it must belong to the Euro-Asiatic region. Thus it would appear that the issue of the “SCO space” has been settled, although different conceptions of the limits to openness remain.

The current official Russian interpretation consistently emphasizes the direct connection between enlargement of the SCO and implementation of the principle of openness. During a session of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO in Bishkek in September 2013, President Putin pointed out the need to confirm the openness of the organization in practice and to work out how to deal with the question of admitting new participating states (“Putin” 2013). In June 2015, at the opening of a session of the CMFA of the SCO, the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stressed the crucial importance for the SCO of its enlargement based on its founding principle of openness (“Lavrov” 2015). Thus Russia views openness as one of the basic principles that sustain the international authority of the SCO. Although the Chinese also talk about openness, they prefer to interpret it as the basis for relations with external actors; they also clearly
declare that there are limits to openness and that these limits should be determined based on consensus. This, it seems to us, is how one should understand the speech of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi at the session of the CMFA of the SCO in Tashkent on May 24, 2016. Wang Yi declared that China supports “a gradual and planned advance of the process of enlargement based on consensus” (“Wang Yi” 2016).

Discussion of the relationship between open and closed regionalism also remains topical in other member states of the SCO. The states of Central Asia have no interest in being locked into the depths of Eurasia, far from the main trade routes. Nor, however, is it in their interest to be completely open to the world. The entire region of Central Asia is extremely small in absolute terms on the scale of the world economic system. Under conditions of complete openness to the world the countries of the region are at risk of losing their economic sovereignty and becoming a space for land transit and for a number of large infrastructural and energy projects that will serve the economic interests of the elite but be of little benefit to the mass of the growing population.

The SCO: A global or a regional role?

The member states of the SCO have to face a question that is still “under wraps.” It is not discussed openly, but it is coming to the surface in the debate on SCO enlargement. The question is: what kind of organization should the SCO be—regional or global? For the time being, diplomats find it easy enough to obscure this question behind clever formulations that, at a rhetorical or declaratory level, reconcile the two alternatives. However, the discussion of certain practical aspects of the development of the SCO turns on this unresolved and not even openly posed question.

In many ways the question of SCO enlargement boils down to precisely this. For an organization that is a major player in a polycentric world, the choice is unambiguously in favor of enlargement. For a player at the world level, it is a definite advantage
to have member states such as India and Pakistan. For more than a decade already, the official speeches of Russian representatives have included clear statements to the effect that the SCO is an element in a new international architecture. Authoritative Russian experts also note that the SCO is one of the rapidly forming centers of a multipolar world (Luzianin 2015, p. 6).

China does not dispute this. Nevertheless, it sees the SCO as a regional organization. At the level of global institutions, China aims not at the creation of a new international architecture but at the greatest possible expansion of its presence and influence within already existing international institutions, which for a long time have been dominated by the Western countries (Denisov 2015). Despite the military-political tension that exists between China and the United States and between China and a number of American allies, China counts on coming to an agreement with the Western countries concerning “rules of play.” Beijing’s rejection of the “Big Two” of which Obama spoke during his first presidential term did not mean a refusal to adapt to the international political and economic architecture basically in its current form. Therefore, China needs the SCO as an authoritative regional organization but not so much as an element in a new international architecture or as an instrument of confrontation with the West.

For China the main zone for which the SCO is responsible is Central Asia. In the opinion of a Chinese specialist on the SCO, Chen Yuzhun, “the main function of the SCO is joint protection of stability and security in the Central Asian region” (“Shanghe” 2014). Our conversations with Chinese experts convince us that they do not envision new member states from outside this region. China has other regional approaches toward South Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Beijing is not inclined to mix them all together. It is for this reason, by the way, that China may not go beyond declaratory support of the Russian idea of a partnership encompassing the Eurasian Economic Union, the SCO, and ASEAN.

It should also be taken into account that fifteen or even ten years ago the SCO was not just the main but—apart from bilateral
contacts—almost the only instrument at the disposal of Chinese policy in Eurasia. Over the past five years, however, China has turned its attention to a number of other multilateral organizations and mechanisms in Eurasia (both new and long established). Beijing has shown interest and expanded its participation in them. Chinese diplomacy now has at its disposal a wider range of multilateral formats in Eurasia and is trying to use them as instruments of its regional policy. China has assumed multiyear chairmanship at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was long chaired by the country that initiated this mechanism (Kazakhstan), and also at the Istanbul Process for Afghanistan. Neither the CICA nor the Istanbul Process can in any way replace the SCO for China, but China has assigned the SCO to a specific niche in its regional policy in Eurasia. Promotion and development of the Chinese-initiated Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) may lend further impetus to this Chinese approach.

Because the SREB is in many respects not only an economic initiative but also an important ideological concept designed to emphasize the new character of Chinese diplomacy under Xi Jinping, Chinese experts may somewhat exaggerate the influence that this initiative might have on the work of the SCO. Nevertheless, the Chinese side is quite persistent in proposing to use the existing mechanisms of the SCO in order to achieve the goals of the SREB, which over the long term is bound to make the regional dimension of the SCO yet more important to China. Moreover, given the political significance of the project, this makes China even more insistent that the working arrangements of SCO bodies that it understands and approves be preserved.

It is no longer so important whether certain Russian specialists are right to argue that had Russia not impeded China’s initiatives to expand economic cooperation within the SCO China might not have initiated the SREB project and might have contented itself with the economic opportunities offered by the SCO (Gabuev 2015). Most Chinese experts either reject this argument or only partly agree with it. In any case, it is no longer possible to resolve this question in the conditional tense, and opinions will continue to differ.
Interestingly enough, the positions of both Russia and China on whether the SCO should be part of a new global international architecture or a regional organization conflict with some of each country’s other approaches.

In its economic development China relies mainly on exploiting the processes of globalization to the maximum possible extent. For all its efforts to develop its domestic market, China is hardly able to sustain its rate of economic development without the global market. China is one of the main beneficiaries of globalization and is doing all it can to maintain this situation. China has an interest in transit across the expanses of Eurasia for land access to Europe and the Near East. This will not replace sea routes but will provide China with a sort of strategic insurance. Although China itself has such a strong interest in globalization, however, it blocks globalization for the SCO and for its partners in the organization by confining the SCO to a regional role. Curiously, certain Chinese specialists assert that, even after SCO enlargement through the accession of India and Pakistan, the work of the organization should continue to focus on Central Asia, which will still play the key role (“Wang Yi” n.d.). It turns out that for China the “SCO space” is not a geographical concept but above all a political one—that is, a space of common interests; China intends to pursue its interests in South Asia by using other mechanisms—primarily bilateral ones.

Russia has traditionally taken a wary attitude toward the “Asian format” for Central Asia—that is, attempts to reorient the region in the direction of South Asia through Afghanistan. Such was the essence of the American conceptions of “Great Central Asia” and the “New Silk Road” (the latter is still operative). Plans to link Central with South Asia to form a single region have been viewed in Russia with caution at the official level (“Obzor” 2007, p. 11) and almost with hostility at the unofficial level because Americans, especially experts, have said with regard to both these projects that they want to give the states of Central Asia greater economic independence from Russia. And yet now Russian specialists argue that India and Pakistan should be admitted to the SCO because they will
contribute to economic cooperation in the region (Lukin 2015). But if we look at the kind of economic agenda with which India and Pakistan are coming into the SCO, we find that it resembles the conception of “Great Central Asia”—for they have mastered this conception well. The United States, at least under the current administration, is already showing limited interest in this agenda for a number of reasons. But in South and Central Asia, and also in Afghanistan, the seeds of the conception of “Great Central Asia” have acclimatized well and struck very deep roots within the political elite.

If Russia really believes that India and Pakistan are coming into the SCO for the sake of an economic agenda that is almost absent in the SCO, then why is Russia not afraid that they will bring with them ideas of “Great Central Asia”—ideas toward which Moscow quite recently had at least a wary attitude? And if India and Pakistan are seeking to join the SCO for the sake not of an economic but of a military-political agenda, then this should make Russia, which has traditionally maintained military-political superiority in the region, even more wary. For a long time India had a military-political interest in Central Asia (Banerjee 2007), and to some degree it still has such an interest.

**Conclusion**

The SCO is undoubtedly a serious international organization. It seems to us that it has occupied a position that will make it part of world politics (its voice and actions will have weight in international affairs) regardless of how the situation develops within the organization itself, simply by virtue of the very fact of its existence. In the hands of experienced diplomats, the SCO is a serious instrument.

At the same time, however, the strategic issue of the future of the organization is maturing behind the seamless diplomatic facade. The issue can be deferred or smoothed over. This task is within the capabilities of professional diplomats. But in the final reckoning, the issue either will or will not be considered and settled. Either way there will be consequences for the future of the SCO.
Participants in the SCO are already saying that the organization is on the threshold of a new stage in its development. For the time being they are referring mainly to the need to work out a generally acceptable understanding of the “geopolitical balance” in the context of growing turbulence in world affairs. We draw attention to the fact that over the past ten to fifteen years the very understanding of “geopolitical balance” among the Central Asian member states of the SCO has undergone a significant transformation. In the early and mid-2000s “geopolitical games” occupied the minds of many Central Asian politicians, who supposed that active geopolitical maneuvers might yield substantial economic dividends. At that time, “geopolitical balance” was understood to mean an active play on the interests of major regional and global players and even on the conflicts among them in order to make the countries of the region more important and derive advantage from that. In recent years, by contrast, “geopolitical balance” has been understood to mean “geopolitical neutrality”—that is, maintaining a distance from conflicts among the “big players.” The experience of Georgia and Ukraine contributed to this change in the understanding of “geopolitical balance.” It can even be said that in Central Asia a desire to separate the regional agenda from geopolitics is emerging. And within the SCO this desire manifests itself in the striving of many member states to preserve the geopolitical neutrality of the SCO.

SCO enlargement remains an acute problem and may remain acute for many years to come. It cannot be said with any degree of confidence that diplomatic maneuvering over enlargement has ended. It has shifted to a new plane and become more complex. Discussion of enlargement will increasingly be accompanied by discussion of the future of the organization and of its role in world and regional affairs. Whatever the eventual resolution of the problem of enlargement may be, positive or negative, it is growing from an important but still particular issue into the strategic issue of the future of the SCO itself.

The prolonged discussion of SCO enlargement began with the question of whether or not certain countries should be admitted. But over the years the question of “who to admit”
came to be combined with the question of “why to admit” and is now very close to being reformulated as “in what direction to admit.” In the final analysis, Russia and China give different answers to the question of whether or not to enlarge the SCO because they have different visions of the future of the organization. China has a regional vision of the SCO, Russia a more global vision.

Other member states of the SCO have an interest in both a regional and global vision. This manifests itself not only in the case of the SCO but also in how countries of the region view the Eurasian Economic Union, the SREB, the “New Silk Road” (or former “Great Central Asia”), the failed attempt of the European Union to pursue an active policy in the region, or Japan’s newly activated engagement with the region.

To maintain long-term social stability, the region needs broadly based economic development with job creation by means of reindustrialization. Objectively, therefore, the countries of Central Asia themselves have an interest in both globalization and regionalization. That is why they show an interest in projects oriented toward globalization as well as in projects oriented toward regionalization. The most important thing for the Central Asian states is to find—with the aid of external partners—a balance between their interest in globalization and their interest in regionalization. In theory, China and Russia have the best chance of finding the strategic balance that Central Asia needs between regionalization and globalization. It is along these lines that member states can talk about linking the Eurasian Economic Union with the SREB within the framework of the SCO. This practical issue will be tackled in parallel with academic discussions about the relationship between the trends of globalization and regionalization in the contemporary world.

Note

1. The author is referring to the Obama administration.
References


