

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization amidst the Rising International Tensions

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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established over two decades ago, stands as one of the most prominent international entities within the non-Western geopolitical sphere. Despite garnering significant interest from regional actors, the SCO continues to seek strategic direction, develop innovative frameworks, and formalize new agreements. This analysis delineates the principal vectors underpinning the SCO's trajectory: security, economic integration, energy cooperation, cultural exchange, and public engagement, particularly through academic programming. Furthermore, the article examines the SCO's contributions to the conceptualization and advancement of Greater Eurasia. Drawing on an extensive review of the SCO's adopted documents, the organizational bodies established under its aegis, as well as expert and official discourse, the authors posit that the SCO demonstrates considerable potential across these domains and has attained noteworthy success, particularly in the realm of security. Nonetheless, it is observed that the implementation of policies and decisions has at times been incomplete and inconsistently executed by both the organization and its member states. Despite these challenges, the SCO has emerged as a vital mechanism not only for fostering cooperative relationships among its members but also for ensuring security and stability throughout the Eurasian region. The geopolitical upheaval of 2022 has brought serious changes to the international system, increasing the importance of the SCO and driving its ongoing development and deep transformation to boost its effectiveness. This article explores potential paths for this transformation across the SCO's main areas of focus: security cooperation, economic and energy collaboration, and cultural cooperation alongside academic and expert dialogue.

Keywords

SCO, regional security, economic integration, energy security, Greater Eurasia

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The Evolving Geopolitical Landscape and the Role of the SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was officially founded on 15 June 2001, when leaders from six nations—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—signed its declaration in Shanghai. The day prior, China's then-leader Jiang Zemin met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the modest assembly hall of Shanghai's Jinjiang Hotel to discuss bilateral relations and the goals of the SCO. Notably, nearly three decades earlier in February 1972, the same hall had hosted the historic signing of the Shanghai Communique between US

President Richard Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. This context added symbolic weight to the Jiang-Putin meeting, emphasizing that the SCO was built upon Sino-Russian strategic cooperation and marking a departure from

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the Cold War era. Moscow and Beijing, now aligned, aimed to steer the world away from unipolarity and US dominance toward true multipolarity.

Over its two decades of existence, the SCO has achieved significant progress, both through expansion with new member states and by strengthening its framework with new institutions like the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. Despite these achievements, challenges persist. Progress has been gradual, but some scholars insist that the SCO's full potential remains unfulfilled (Lukin, 2015). Additionally, it has been pointed out that the expansion of the SCO may present significant challenges to its future effectiveness in functioning and setting common objectives (Denisov & Safranchuk, 2016). So far, the SCO has upheld its tradition of addressing new challenges via gradually formulating responses that align with its existing institutional mechanisms and culture, rather than undergoing significant structural changes.

Adapting the SCO's Security Agenda to Emerging Challenges

Among the three aforementioned areas, the SCO has made the greatest progress in the field of security. Numerous important international agreements have been signed, and joint military exercises are conducted on a regular basis.

Anti-terrorism cooperation holds particular importance, as all SCO member states have faced, or continue to face, the threat of international terrorist attacks—a threat that has intensified since the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan in 2020–2021. The security agenda also encompasses the SCO's efforts in combating drug trafficking, ensuring information security, and addressing issues related to illegal immigration (Mikhaylenko et al., 2022).

Military cooperation is also developing. SCO member states conduct "Peace Mission" exercises nearly every year, alongside regular training for intelligence services and law enforcement agencies. Following the anti-narcotics strategy adopted in Bishkek in 2019, SCO members have carried out the international anti-narcotics operation known as Spider Web within their territories. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent has achieved a high level of operational coordination. As Putin noted in his address to the Council of Heads of State (Summit) in Dushanbe in September 2021, the SCO "is by right one of the most influential centers of the multipolar architecture of international cooperation, making a significant contribution to security in the Eurasian region, its sustainable socioeconomic growth, and international peace and stability as a whole" (President of Russia, 2021).

Yet despite its successes, the SCO's role as an international security institution remains limited. Emerging

geopolitical challenges now necessitate the SCO's gradual but decisive transformation into a comprehensive security organization, serving as the primary institutional backbone for the Greater Eurasian security framework. Additionally, taking on this central role requires further expansion of the organization, even though this move risks diminishing its already modest effectiveness in the short-to-medium term.

The accession of India and Pakistan in 2017, Iran in 2022, and Belarus in 2024 has significantly boosted the SCO's potential as a central institution for Eurasian security. This expansion strengthens its capabilities in crucial areas, including collaboration on Afghanistan, counter-terrorism efforts, combating organized crime and narco-trafficking, and addressing cyber threats (Ebrahimitorkaman, 2020). An expanded membership base could also pave the way for the emergence of a "hard security" agenda within the organization or, at the very least, foster meaningful discussions on the topic, especially given the presence of various conflicts among its members. In the medium term, this development has the potential to enhance the SCO's effectiveness as an international security institution, despite its existing internal challenges.

Cooperation with Other Organizations

Cooperation between the SCO and other regional organizations is also important. In 2005 secretariats of ASEAN and SCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to undertake cooperation both security and economic issues and have had close contacts ever since. Deepening security dialogue and developing practical cooperation would serve the interests of both groups. First possible steps may be granting some ASEAN members the status of observers of SCO or merging SCO military exercises with the joint Russo-ASEAN anti-terrorist exercises (Shumkova & Korolev, 2018). A central topic in this dialogue could be the fight against terrorism and other non-traditional threats. Promoting cooperation among anti-terrorist agencies, including joint exercises and the development of information-sharing platforms, could further strengthen the SCO's collective security framework.

Another promising vector is the development of institutional cooperation between the SCO and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), five of six members of which are currently also members of the SCO (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan). The SCO and CSTO signed a Memorandum of Understanding in October 2007, on the basis of which they maintain regular contacts and cooperate on maintaining regional and international security and stability, countering terrorism, combating drug trafficking, suppressing illegal arms trafficking, countering organized transnational crime, and other issues.

However, the SCO's security-related development will probably, at least at first, be defined by a narrow and rigid agenda, so that the organization does not get dragged into

difficult problems that do not directly concern it, like territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Such an outcome would be undesirable, as it would have a deconsolidating effect given China's involvement in those disputes. It would force Russia to more clearly and unambiguously formulate its position on the issue, something that will be inexpedient for at least the near future. And the very subject of the South China Sea conflicts may be used by the US to insert itself into various dialogue formats or to sow discord between the SCO and ASEAN. The same can be said about the Ukrainian crisis since positions of SCO members on it differ.

The SCO's Economic Agenda

Economic cooperation has been the most challenging area for the SCO, marked by a lack of substantial achievements. Although experts and officials from member states have long discussed the importance of establishing an SCO Development Bank to finance multilateral economic projects, progress has been limited to a general contractual framework, with only a few multilateral projects, primarily logistical, being implemented. This shortfall is acknowledged within the organization. During the 23rd meeting of the Council of Heads of State in July 2023, Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev candidly stated: "It must be recognized that, over more than 20 years, not one major economic project has been realized under the auspices of the SCO. One obvious reason for this is the absence of project-financing mechanisms." He suggested that the Council of Heads of Government consider establishing a joint investment fund (Pavlenko, 2023).

In the current geopolitical climate marked by rising international tensions and polarization among major power centers, it is vital to safeguard the achievements the SCO has made over its 20-year history. This makes the task of enhancing multilateral economic cooperation a top priority. Given the present circumstances, where SCO member states are observing international conflicts with apprehension, efforts to push for an ambitious common security agenda that extends beyond maintaining regional stability and combating international terrorism are unlikely to garner broad support. Most SCO members also have their own views regarding cooperation with the US and EU. While fearing interference in their internal affairs and the imposition of unacceptable Western political and economic models, they are still interested in developing trade and economic cooperation with all parts of the world, in foreign investment, and in foreign aid, and they do not seek a full-scale geopolitical confrontation with any power center. Despite concerns about interference in their internal affairs and the imposition of undesirable Western political and economic models, SCO members remain interested in expanding trade and economic partnerships globally, attracting foreign investment, and receiving foreign aid. They aim to achieve these goals without engaging in full-scale

geopolitical confrontation with any major power center. However, some SCO members are already affected by Western sanctions, while others are wary of secondary sanctions or are facing economic slowdowns due to broader global issues stemming from military conflicts. These challenges highlight the mutual benefit that deeper economic cooperation within the SCO could provide in mitigating such threats and supporting economic stability among its member states.

SCO experts from Russia and other member states have long advocated for accelerating the development of the SCO's economic component. However, not all of their initiatives were supported by their respected governments. The Russian government used to be apprehensive of China's economic dominance, some Central Asian states referred to lack of resources. Officially, China and the Central Asian states have always supported economic cooperation, but in different forms. China has insisted upon creating conditions for the "gradual implementation of the free movement of goods, capital, services, and technologies"—objectives set by the SCO Charter (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2003)—that is, the creation of a *de facto* free trade area. This is natural, since China's powerful industry demands expanded markets. The Central Asian states have adopted a more cautious position. In practice, these ideas of seriously expanding multilateral economic cooperation have often collided with the inertia of thinking in several countries. It is now perfectly clear that, if the SCO had produced more major multilateral economic projects, it would be much easier for the members to face the sanctions that challenge them today. The inclusion of major economic powers in the SCO, including nations like Iran and Belarus that are under Western sanctions, is likely to spur the initiation of international projects within the organization. This development could bolster the SCO's influence and increase its significance to a substantial portion of its members' populations.

The Rebirth of the Energy Club?

Energy could easily become the driver of deeper economic engagement. Given the current destabilization of global energy markets—brought about by the G7's implementation of price ceilings, embargoes, and other sanctions against Russian oil and oil products—energy cooperation is becoming one of the SCO's main priorities. But the strategy of the West appears to be extending beyond its declared goal of depriving Russia of energy export revenues. Essentially, the US and its allies are attempting to alter, in their favor, the functioning of global energy markets. Through measures such as price ceilings and other restrictions, Western states aim to establish a buyers' cartel capable of controlling energy prices. Additionally, they are leveraging the climate change agenda to limit competition and impose their own rules, technologies, and standards extraterritorially within the renewable energy sector. This climate policy is

sometimes aimed less at reducing CO₂ emissions and combating climate change and more at securing competitive advantages for manufacturers in leading Western economies. For example, the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) imposes taxes on CO₂-intensive production from abroad—such as fertilizers, iron, steel, aluminum, cement, and chemicals—while allowing European producers to purchase CO₂ emission quotas. Consequently, the primary burden falls on producers in the Global South, including countries like South Africa and Brazil (S&P Global, 2023). Western states are also exerting pressure on developing economies and countries in the Global South to shift from readily available and relatively inexpensive hydrocarbons to investment-heavy green energy. This comes despite the fact that Western economies themselves built their growth and prosperity on the intensive use of hydrocarbons (Pilling, 2022).

In this context, the SCO could serve as a platform that proposes an alternative energy agenda and promotes international best practices in the energy sector. This agenda would not be aimed at creating competitive advantages for any particular bloc but rather fostering equitable and cooperative energy solutions on a global scale. Formally, the SCO already possesses an institutional mechanism for accomplishing this: the Energy Club. However, the Energy Club requires significant further development, and its history reflects the SCO's slow progress and limited effectiveness in this area. President V. Putin proposed creating the Club back in June 2006, at the Sixth Summit of Heads of State of the SCO (RBK, 2006). The Club was to harmonize SCO members' energy strategies on the basis of a broad consensus between the official, business, and academic circles of exporters, transit states, and importers. Although the Russian initiative was endorsed by all other heads of state, its implementation faced various challenges and progressed slowly.

Proposal for a new energy platform materialized in an initiative adopted by the SCO during the meeting in Xi'an, China, from 21–23 September 2011. Subsequently, at the Fourth Eurasian Economic Forum, energy ministers from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan expressed their support for the "Xi'an Initiative." The SCO Council of Heads of Government held on 7 November 2011, in St. Petersburg, took the final decision to create the Energy Club and adopted the corresponding protocol (which, *inter alia*, provided for a Secretariat). To coordinate the Club's activities, the SCO set up a High-Level Group (HLG) consisting of Deputy Ministers of Energy for the development of fuel and energy, as well as representatives of relevant departments, of energy companies, and of leading analytical institutes within the SCO. Convocations of the members' relevant Ministers were expected to precede meetings of the HLG.

The HLG's second meeting was held on 16 February 2012 in Beijing, where China proposed drafts of the Club's

Charter and of a Program of Joint Action for Creating the Energy Club. However, the activity around the club was limited to rhetoric for a long time (Sheveljova, 2014). In December 2013, the Memorandum on the Creation of the Energy Club was signed in Moscow, establishing it as an informal platform for discussing issues related to the harmonization of laws related to the energy sector; the promotion of the energy security of SCO members, observers, and dialogue partners; cooperation between the region's major energy producers, transporters, and consumers; energy pricing. The Memorandum was signed by the deputy energy ministers of four SCO members (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan), three SCO observers (Afghanistan, India, and Mongolia), and three dialogue partners (Turkiye, Belarus, and Sri Lanka). Russian experts noted at the time that the "Club could become an influential platform for aligning the energy policies of the organization's members and observers, which include many of the largest energy producers and importers" (Lukin, 2014).

The Club's first meeting took place in June 2014 in Astana and highlighted several promising areas for cooperation among members. These included traditional fuels, focusing on new technologies for the extraction, transportation, and processing of oil, gas, and coal, as well as clean coal technologies. In 2015, chairmanship of the Club passed from Kazakhstan to China, which did not end up being very active. But the next year, Russia took further steps to advance cooperation via the Club. On 22 November 2016, a new meeting of the HLG was held at the fifth international "Energy Efficiency and Saving" conference (ENES-2016) in Moscow, attended by representatives of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. They made several important technical decisions to heighten the Club's effectiveness, including the adoption of a standard agenda for HLG meetings and of an agreement that any signatory to the Club's Memorandum can become a chair, regardless of its status in the SCO.

To accelerate the Club's institutionalization, Russia also proposed the formation of member-state branches. The Russian plan, developed by the Ministry of Energy, foresaw the branches' unification (after their creation) into a single structure analogous to the SCO Business Council. The initiative was supported by China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Belarus, and Tajikistan. In 2016, Russia created its national branch of the Energy Club, consisting of sectoral working groups for electricity, oil, gas, coal, nuclear power, and other renewable resources. It is headed by the Ministry of Energy, and includes representatives of the country's largest energy companies. On 11 December 2017, it was decided that the Russian National Committee of the World Energy Congress would serve as the Russian branch's secretariat.

In June 2023, the Energy Club consisted of 12 SCO members, observers, and dialogue partners: Russia, India, Kazakhstan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan,

Belarus, Iran, Mongolia, Turkey, and Sri Lanka. Kyrgyzstan also planned to join the Club, but has not yet taken concrete steps in that direction, while Uzbekistan has so far refrained from any energy cooperation within the framework of the SCO. Although the Club has developed slowly and remains limited in its effectiveness at this stage, the shifting dynamics of international relations, marked by the end of the unipolar order, are creating new opportunities for the Club's growth and influence.

Given the significant roles of the SCO's full members, observer states, and dialogue partners within the global energy landscape, energy cooperation within the SCO holds substantial potential. China and India, two of the world's largest energy importers, are projected to see continued growth in their share of global consumption. Notably, their demand for Russian energy resources has risen considerably since the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia, effectively replacing the demand from less friendly states. The SCO also comprises major energy exporters in various capacities, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. Enhanced energy cooperation among these countries within the SCO framework could elevate the regional and global significance of the Energy Club (Dutta, 2008; Feng, 2008).

Notably, the participation in the SCO of Saudi Arabia (a dialogue partner since 2022) and Iran—two of the key members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which have just recently restored diplomatic relations with one another—may enhance the Energy Club's global influence, transforming it into an additional stabilizing force on the international oil market. Such a role has become especially relevant given the G7's attempts to alter the market mechanisms of oil-price-formation in its favor through the imposition of artificial price caps.

The Club's Eurasian regional activity is directed at harmonizing the energy strategies of, and strengthening energy cooperation between, exporters (Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) and importers (China, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan). Some experts believe that, by harmonizing the energy development of SCO participants, the Energy Club could propel the SCO's transformation into a self-sufficient energy system (Bushev, 2011). The creation of a gas hub in Turkey, for the trade of piped and liquid natural gas in Europe and Eurasia, may add a new dynamic to the Energy Club's international development.

Given the transforming international order, the Energy Club's Central Asian subregional activity has also taken on new meaning. In November 2022, Moscow proposed creating a "triple gas alliance" between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (Plamenev, 2022), which would coordinate their gas-related cooperation and harmonize their external energy strategies. The traditional links between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in the gas sector, which stretch

back to the Soviet era, may serve as a foundation for this alliance. Although Central Asian gas was transported by Russian pipelines for 30 years, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have recently been unable to satisfy their internal demand with their own production. Gazprom can easily make up for the two states' deficits: note the gas-swaps by which Gazprom has historically satisfied Uzbekistani and Kazakhstani demand (Yenikeeff, 2008). Some experts also believe that the three states should consider transforming their traditional Soviet-era gas infrastructure and building new pipelines for Russian exports to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and even China (Konyrova, 2023).

However, the proposed triple gas alliance does have vulnerabilities: Central Asia's leading gas producer, Turkmenistan, is absent, and the West might impose secondary sanctions against Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for cooperation with Russia. But Turkmenistan appears ready to cooperate with the SCO in the realm of investment, economics, and trade (TASS, 2022). (Turkmenistan's significant resources have formed the basis for Central Asian gas supplies to China, and are also viewed as the key source of gas for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline, whose construction Russia may assist (TASS, 2023)). And coordination of Russian and Central Asian producers' strategies, via the Energy Club, may neutralize the risk of secondary sanctions, and is thus preferable.

Today, the Energy Club's main problem lies in its incomplete institutionalization. The Club mainly serves as an additional platform for the discussion of various energy-related issues by the deputy energy ministers of the SCO's full and associate members, while only Russia is really attempting to transform it into a fully fledged institution of the SCO. Thus, in November 2022, Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin told the SCO Council of Heads of Government about the necessity of enhancing the Energy Club's role and of deepening "practical cooperation in the energy sector" (Government of Russia, 2022).

Currently, given the changing world order, the question of intensifying the SCO's energy cooperation has become particularly timely. This is understood within the organization itself, which has launched new forms of cooperation. Thus, in 2021, Tajikistan proposed creating a new mechanism for energy cooperation within the SCO: the Conference of Energy Ministers. It has already shown its effectiveness in the course of its first three meetings—on 12 August 2021 (online), 24 June 2022 (online), and 14 March 2023 (online). These meetings led to the adoption of a joint declaration on cooperation in energy-sector modeling and the exploration of new types of fuel, as well as an agreement to establish a permanent Working Group of SCO Member States on Energy Sector Cooperation. The growing importance of energy security brings into focus the future of the Energy Club as an institution for mutually beneficial energy collaboration. It remains to be

seen which of these mechanisms will take the lead in advancing energy dialogue both among SCO members and on a broader scale.

Deepening the Academic-Expert Dialogue within the SCO

Over the years, the SCO has developed an extensive ecosystem of social structures that support its functions. These include various international public and business entities such as the SCO Youth Council, the SCO Business Council, and the SCO Interbank Consortium. However, the academic-expert community is arguably the most essential component of this ecosystem. In the modern world, nearly every major international organization employs “track two” diplomacy—collaborations involving research centers and experts that study relevant issues and offer their expertise. The UN, ASEAN, APEC, and CSTO, among others, all benefit from such ecosystems.

In the SCO, this role is undertaken by the SCO Forum. Its founding documents describe it as a multilateral, public consultative-expert mechanism aimed at providing research support to the SCO, fostering collaboration among research centers of SCO member states, informing the public about the principles and objectives of the SCO’s activities, expanding its connections with both academic and general public circles, and facilitating exchanges of opinions among experts in politics, security, economics, ecology, new technologies, the humanities, and other fields. Grounded in the principles of the SCO Charter, the Forum operates according to SCO regulations and the laws of its member states. It works closely with the SCO Secretariat, the Council of National Coordinators, and the foreign ministries of SCO member states (Reglament, 2007, pp. 19). The Forum was founded in Moscow in 2006, after which V. Putin wrote in the article “The SCO: A New Model of Successful International Cooperation” that “the SCO Forum that was created not long ago and unites representatives from various professional and academic circles” is “destined to become a unique nongovernmental mechanism that unites experts from the Organisation’s member states” (President of Russia, 2006).

Two years later in Beijing, at the third meeting of the Forum, Chinese FM Yang Jiechi noted that “Over the course of 2 years, organizing various types of exchanges, discussions, and bilateral events, the Forum has conducted a comprehensive exchange of information and opinions and brought forward various proposals. By providing state agencies with useful information and bases for decision-making, the Forum has significantly aided the SCO’s development. China values this highly” (Yang, 2008).

The Forum includes one research center—the most authoritative in studies of the SCO—from each of its nine members. The center receives the status of SCO National

Research Center, and in this capacity joins the Forum. The Forums’ first members were the Nursultan Nazarbayev Foundation’s Institute of World Economics and Politics, the Chinese MFA’s China Institute of International Studies, Kyrgyzstan’s National Institute for Strategic Studies, the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and Russia’s MGIMO University’s Center for China, East Asia and SCO Studies. After the accession of India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus, the Forum also admitted the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Institute of Strategic Studies (Islamabad), Institute of Political and International Studies of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Iran, and Belarussian Institute of Strategic Studies.

Currently, the Forum’s primary activity is its annual meetings, where significant issues related to the SCO’s development are discussed. These meetings result in the adoption of final protocols and recommendations, which are then submitted to the relevant SCO bodies and the foreign ministries of its member states. Additionally, member institutions, even those that do not otherwise engage in dialogue, can participate in collaborative research and extensive information exchange. Continuing to deepen this dialogue is crucial for several reasons. First, it ensures that the SCO’s policies and initiatives are informed by diverse perspectives, making them more effective and adaptable to complex global challenges facing the SCO countries. Second, sustained dialogue strengthens connections between member states’ academic and expert communities, fostering trust and shared understanding. Lastly, as geopolitical and economic dynamics evolve, maintaining and expanding the academic-expert dialogue can help the SCO remain forward-thinking and capable of navigating emerging challenges.

The SCO as a Cornerstone Institution for Greater Eurasia

Advancing in the major directions outlined above would only tap into a portion of the SCO’s potential as a crucial regional and global platform. A key strategic objective for the SCO should also be its active engagement in the significant regional and global development processes that gained momentum in 2022. These processes include the formation of a mega-regional international order in Eurasia, aimed at ensuring the security of the continent’s non-Western states and fostering the development of their vast potential. In this context, Russia has introduced an ambitious initiative for the Eurasian continent aimed at harnessing its full potential: the creation of a Greater Eurasian community focused on co-development and security. This vision encompasses a vast region stretching from ASEAN, South Korea, and potentially Japan in the east, to India in the

south, and extending to Iran and Turkey in the west. The main pillars of this community are Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), China, and importantly, the SCO, serving as foundational elements in fostering regional integration and stability.

Numerous Russian initiatives have aimed at building a Greater Eurasian community, including linking the EAEU with China's One Belt, One Road Initiative, the Agreement on Economic and Trade Cooperation between the EAEU and China, and enhanced cooperation with ASEAN (Li, 2018). The cornerstone initiative in this context is (President of Russia, 2016), proposal to establish a Greater Eurasian Partnership (President of Russia, 2016), which has been echoed in joint declarations with other SCO member states. However, this proposal still lacks comprehensive substantiation and concrete implementation strategies. The institutional environment that has been formed in Eurasia, consisting of many duplicative and even contradictory initiatives, does not fully satisfy the current needs of the region's states: sustainable growth, political stability, and security.

The creation and development of the Greater Eurasian community is not just a Russian plan or desire, but also an objective process based on fundamental global geopolitical tendencies. Its foundation is the Russo-Chinese rapprochement, which has been facilitated by the growth of China, the collapse of the USSR, and the strengthening of a new Russia, and has been stimulated by the efforts of the US and its allies to contain the development of both states and thereby establish Western global dominance. As Richard Sakwa aptly put it, "Russia and China have aligned more closely and worked with a growing list of partners in the Global South in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) bloc. Many more organizations and associations give substance to the emerging political East. Most importantly, their proclaimed normative foundations insist on sovereign internationalism and other core ideas of the Charter International System.... In other words, the emergence of the political East does not threaten the Charter International System but strengthens it" (Sakwa, 2023, pp. 87–88). Many states of the region have their own interests, which also drive them to more active participation in the creation of a new Eurasian system, free from external interference (Lukin & Novikov, 2021).

In the new conditions, the SCO must define its role in the processes of Eurasia's consolidation. Most conceptions of Greater Eurasia assume that this new community will be built on the basis of extant, well-established organizations and groups: the EAEU, SCO, CSTO, ASEAN, and perhaps APEC. This implies a significant role for the SCO as one of the most authoritative Eurasian structures. However, exactly what kind of role that should be—mainly political, economic, or cultural-civilizational—remains a matter of serious discussion.

It is already evident that the core of the Eurasian system will be defined by close cooperation between the EAEU and China (Rolland, 2019). However, the system's success will also hinge on the active participation of other key players such as India, ASEAN, and potentially, in the future, the EU or some of its member states. Nonetheless, the readiness of different Eurasian states to engage in such cooperation varies significantly; some are keen on deeper integration and even political union, while others are interested solely in expanding trade, economic, and cultural ties. Therefore, at least in the initial stages, it is essential to avoid imposing strict membership criteria, which have historically created internal challenges for entities like the EU and NATO. The SCO could play a pivotal role as the second most intensive level within a series of concentric circles of Eurasian cooperation. This would allow states outside the EAEU to participate in the Eurasian system to the extent that they are prepared. The third circle could then consist of states that are not members of either the EAEU or the SCO. This multi-tiered concept could be further elaborated and refined by SCO experts.

The SCO in the New Strategic Situation

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first major sign of significant changes in the global landscape. The pandemic severely impacted international cooperation, as many states opted for national-level measures, diminishing the role of international organizations. The SCO member states also had to implement restrictive measures which inevitably affected practical cooperation and limited interactions between their governmental bodies. In response to these challenges, SCO members adapted their methods of collaboration to not only preserve but also strengthen their multilateral cooperation despite the pandemic. The organization largely succeeded in this effort, effectively passing a stress test and proving its capability to respond to new risks and challenges.

Throughout the pandemic, valuable experience was gained in operational cooperation against COVID-19, laying the groundwork for enhanced cooperation in sanitary-epidemiological and biological security. The SCO adopted online formats for many activities, a novel approach for the organization, enabling continued engagement through virtual meetings of foreign ministries, health authorities, sanitary-epidemiological agencies, tourism boards, and experts in transport and finance. The SCO member states largely demonstrated a high degree of solidarity and mutual support. As the then SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov pointed out in December 2020, the organization managed to reformat the operation of its main mechanisms of sectoral cooperation and prepare an important political and economic decisions. Russia, as the SCO's chair in the first part of this period, played a significant role in this reformatting (RIA Novosti, 2020).

The latest phase of the Ukrainian crisis, which began in February 2022, has significantly reshaped the global geopolitical landscape. This period has led to intense polarization and the emergence of two consolidated camps: those supporting multipolarity and those aligned with U.S. As a result, states and international organizations that previously maintained a neutral stance and sought constructive relationships with both sides have been compelled to make more definitive choices, often taking adversarial positions against the opposing camp. This shift raises important questions about the future of Asian and Eurasian international organizations and cooperation frameworks, including APEC, the East Asia Summit, and the SCO. The controversies surrounding Russian participation in summits of various organizations and forums, such as APEC and the G20, illustrate these challenges. The new geopolitical conditions could substantially weaken these bodies, potentially stripping the region of effective multilateral formats. This shows the urgency for the SCO to maintain effective operations and produce tangible results to continue serving as a vital platform for regional stability and cooperation.

Moscow's shift in focus from Central Asia to Ukraine, directing most of its resources toward the conflict, has posed challenges to the unity of the SCO. Moscow's former Soviet partners, who were accustomed to receiving more attention and support, began seeking alternatives—some turning to the EU, others to Turkey and China. Moscow's attempts to rally even its closest allies around an anti-American stance and opposition to the West did not resonate with foreign policy thinking in Central Asia. Most of its countries do not view the West as an adversary or a security threat and aim to cooperate with all economically advanced nations, including the United States. In February 2023, China presented its own peace proposals, which only partially aligned with Russia's perspective. Many SCO member states value Russia as a partner for trade, economic and cultural collaboration, as well as for its role in helping secure them against what China terms the "three forces of evil"—extremism, separatism, and terrorism. As long as Russia pursued strategic cooperation based on these shared interests, progress toward closer ties continued, albeit gradually but steadily. This process was the foundation for the emerging concept of Greater Eurasia. But most SCO countries, with the only possible exception of Iran, did not plan to take part in the struggle between Russia and the West, especially not the armed one.

This situation has sparked increased interest among Central Asian members in accelerating cooperation outside the SCO, signaling a shift away from Russia's previously consistent and effective approach toward Eurasian integration. Additionally, China has effectively stepped back from the joint implementation of the "Greater Eurasia" project, which for Beijing primarily involved the transit of Chinese goods to Europe—a route now disrupted by European sanctions on Russia. This change has contributed to the establishment of a "5 plus 1" cooperation mechanism

(Central Asia and China), with a secretariat based in the historic Chinese city of Xi'an. These developments prove that the SCO cannot be simplistically labeled as "anti-Western," "anti-NATO," or "China-controlled," as it is often portrayed in the US and Europe (Cooley, 2010, pp. 9–19). Additionally, escalating tensions between China and India have led India to adopt a more cautious stance toward its SCO membership, seeking to downplay its role within the organization.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the activities of the SCO have demonstrated that it is not just a product of international cooperation in Eurasia but also a significant driver of it. During this period, the organization has made substantial progress, enhancing its authority and establishing itself as one of the leading international organizations in the non-Western world. It now garners considerable global interest, not solely due to its concrete achievements, but largely for its role as a counterbalance to Western global influence—a role that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. This positioning, combined with its relatively effective operations, has increased its prominence in a time of rising global turbulence and intensified geopolitical competition. These factors may further prompt the SCO's evolution into a central pillar of both regional and global order.

By the early 2020s, despite the varied preferences of its member states, the SCO had established security as its most advanced sphere of activity. However, with the global situation becoming increasingly tense and conflict-prone, the fact that political dialogue within the SCO has reached high levels is overshadowed by the slow or sometimes absent practical implementation of decisions and agreements. To address this, the SCO should prioritize the quality and execution of key strategic agreements rather than the sheer quantity of its resolutions. A significant step toward internal development would be the planned reorganization of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) into a Universal Centre to Counter Challenges and Threats to Security of the SCO Member States. This transformation could be complemented by enhancing cooperation in economic sectors, particularly energy, and fostering scientific and educational collaborations.

At the 2021 Dushanbe summit, President Putin emphasized the importance of bolstering RATS by expanding its staff to include experts in areas such as anti-money laundering, counter-terrorism financing, and the prevention of weapons of mass destruction proliferation (President of Russia, 2021). Additionally, member states have contributed meaningful proposals in related areas: Kazakhstan on information security, Kyrgyzstan on establishing a Center for Combating International Organized Crime in Bishkek, and Tajikistan on creating an Antinarcotic Center in Dushanbe. While each proposal is valuable, efficiency and coordination would be maximized if these new

structures were incorporated as divisions within the Universal Centre.

The core of the SCO's security agenda remains the coordination of efforts to counter the imposition of hegemony by a single civilizational center—a form of modern colonialism increasingly resisted by non-Western states, including SCO members. The accession of Iran to the organization is a welcome development, as are plans to elevate states such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia from dialogue partners to observers. However, any expansion must strictly adhere to Article 4 of the 2007 SCO Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, which mandates that members “shall not participate in alliances or organizations directed against other Contracting Parties and shall not support any actions hostile to other Contracting Parties” (*Treaty on Long Term Good Neighborliness, 2007*).

The significance of cooperative efforts between the SCO and the CSTO, particularly through joint meetings and initiatives, remains crucial for ensuring regional security. Enhanced cooperation concerning Afghanistan is essential. Although the situation has stabilized somewhat, the SCO's stated goal from the Dushanbe summit—promoting an inclusive intra-Afghan peace process and preventing terrorism, narcotrafficking, and religious extremism from spreading—has not yet been fully realized.

The SCO stands as the ideal political axis for such a vast co-development space and serves as the optimal platform for addressing shared security concerns, particularly after the inclusion of India, Pakistan, and Iran. As discussed, the SCO could also play a significant role in shaping the international economic order, especially in sectors like energy. Additionally, it can provide a crucial forum for negotiating the rules of engagement in various other areas of economic cooperation, which are expected to continue expanding. The emerging system of international trade, influenced in part by Western sanctions against Russia, China, and Iran, is increasingly isolating these states from the West and pushing them toward greater collaboration with each other. This dynamic creates promising opportunities for less developed states in the region, such as Pakistan and some Central Asian nations, which stand to benefit from accelerated economic growth due to the low base effect. Similarly, Iran, emerging from years of sanctions, is poised for rapid economic expansion. The significant economies of China and India further underpin this new space of co-development, providing a robust economic “safety cushion” for the region.

The way forward for the SCO involves addressing both internal and external challenges while reinforcing its role as a stabilizing force in the region. The SCO needs to foster trust and enhance collaboration among its diverse member states, ensuring that national interests align with shared regional objectives. To move beyond its current focus, the SCO should deepen its engagement in non-security areas

such as economic development, trade, infrastructure, and energy cooperation. Establishing mechanisms like a fully operational SCO Development Bank or enhancing the Energy Club's role could unlock potential and solidify the SCO's relevance. Expanding the academic-expert dialogue and think tank partnerships through the SCO Forum could provide valuable insights and policy recommendations addressing shared challenges. In this evolving context, the strengthened roles of Russia and China within the SCO are particularly vital (Lukin, 2020). In the emerging bipolar world order, their successful collaboration is pivotal for maintaining peace and security in the region under conditions acceptable to all members. Deeper Sino-Russian cooperation, both within and outside the SCO framework, can sustain relative stability in Eurasia.

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