

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION: AN ANTI-WESTERN ALIGNMENT?

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is often portrayed as attempting to counter the increasing Western presence in Central Asia. However, as far as the member states are concerned, its main purpose is the management of intra-state and transnational security issues that its leaders regard as threats to the stability of their respective regimes. While the SCO is of limited military relevance, its economic potential is a source of interest for both its member states and states in surrounding regions. Taking into account the growing importance of the SCO to the region, the West should not exclude a priori the idea of selective cooperation with the SCO on common security interests.



The leaders of the SCO, observer states, and Afghanistan at the latest meeting in Ekaterinburg, 16 June 2009.

In recent years, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has been attracting increasing international attention, and has appeared on the radars of Western states with interests in the region of post-Soviet Central Asia. Although officially established in 2001, the SCO remained relatively unknown outside its member states until its annual summit in Astana in 2005. At this summit, the SCO member states issued their usual annual joint declaration, which included a passage calling for US and NATO to set a timetable for the withdrawal of their troops based in the region as part of the ongoing NATO operation in Afghanistan. This statement came against the background of the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space and heavy Western criticism in response to the Uzbek government’s repression of an uprising in its Andijan region a month earlier. In these circumstances, the statement was widely interpreted by West-

ern analysts as signaling that the SCO represents a threat to Western interests. Indeed, some analysts have characterized the SCO as little more than an expression of the anti-Western agenda of Moscow and Beijing, and as being primarily aimed at keeping the US out of the region.

However, this depiction of the SCO provides only a very selective picture of the organization and its aims. The SCO is primarily a tool for addressing non-traditional security concerns among its membership, in particular the struggle with the so-called “three evil forces” of the region: terrorism, separatism, and extremism. In dealing with these challenges, the SCO conflates regional and domestic security into a single approach, emphasizing the survival of the existing Central Asian regimes. While certain members of the SCO may not welcome the growing US role in the region and issue state-

ments to this end, overall, its member states are much more interested in addressing intra-regional security than in competing for influence with the US. In addition, economic cooperation within the SCO framework, especially the proposed Energy Club, is providing a second source of appeal to its membership, as well as to its observer states in adjacent regions.

An anti-Western alignment?

Interpretations of the SCO as anti-Western are the result of a number of SCO statements seen as critical of the West and asserting the SCO’s central place in Central Asia. Statements such as the one issued at the Astana summit have been accompanied by others arguing for the inviolable right of states to conduct their domestic security policy as they see fit, free from Western criticism regarding their anti-democratic policies. Indeed, SCO statements often castigate the alleged “double standards” of the West, referring to Western practices of condemning the domestic security practices of SCO members while intervening in the domestic affairs of other states. The SCO interprets this as violating what its members consider the central norm within the international system: national sovereignty. Western military actions in Kosovo and Iraq are emphasized, while China’s approach to Tibet and Xinjiang, Russia’s approach to Chechnya, and the Central Asian Republics’ domestic security practices are defended. Another aspect of SCO rhetoric that raises concerns in the West is its anti-hegemonic discourse about the unilateral approach of the US to international affairs and its promotion of the virtues of a multipolar world.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

- Membership is Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mongolia are “observer states”, while Belarus and Sri Lanka are “dialog partners”.
- Formed in 2001, building on Shanghai 5 and the Shanghai Mechanism.
- Institutions include a Secretariat in Beijing, a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent, a Business Council, and an Interbank Association.
- Stated goals are to address threats to regional security, develop economic cooperation, and establish closer ties between members.
- Membership encompasses a third of the world's population and a quarter of the world's land mass.

Beyond rhetoric, another supposed indication of anti-Western tendencies is seen in the military exercises conducted by SCO member states. In 2007, the SCO held the large-scale “Peace Mission 2” military exercise in Chelyabinsk, and another exercise is planned for 2010. Such exercises have been interpreted by some analysts as demonstrations of strength by Russia and China, intended as a clear signal to the US and Europe that Central Asia is their sphere of influence and that they have the military capacity to enforce this claim.

Geopolitical considerations

Although focused on internal issues, the SCO is also influenced by geopolitical issues. A number of large external powers are interested in increasing their role in Central Asia. Since the end of the 1990s, the Russian leadership has been trying to re-establish its dominance in Central Asia, which it neglected to enforce in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. China has also been seeking to expand its presence as an economic force, having successfully addressed aspects of its security concerns within the region, including border demarcation and the spread of extremism into its Xinjiang Province. In the context, both Moscow and Beijing are perturbed about the increasing US military presence in the region that began with the onset of NATO's “Operation Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan in 2002.

Therefore, the SCO does represent a certain degree of solidarity between Russia and China in resisting the increasing US influence. The discourse of the SCO appears to a large extent to be borrowed directly from similar proclamations found in the Russian-Chinese “strategic partnership”. Indeed, Russia and

China are seen by many as the architects of the 2005 Astana Summit statement. However, some observers instead believe that the Central Asian republics, led by Uzbekistan, initiated the statement as a rhetorical expression of their dissatisfaction with US criticism of their domestic security policies. In particular, the leaders of the Central Asian states are alarmed by what many in the region consider as the US role in financing opposition NGOs involved in the “color revolutions”. While it is probable that Russia and China were heavily involved in the drafting of such a controversial passage in the joint statement, this view illustrates that the Central Asian republics often find it beneficial to hide their criticism of US regional policy behind Russian and Chinese competition with the US.

At the same time, the Central Asian republics are, to varying extents, keen on developing positive relations with the US in order to attract increased economic investment and counterbalance their dependence on Russia and China. In particular, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are both very open to cooperation with the West and Western institutions. In 2010, Kazakhstan will become the first former Soviet state to hold chairmanship of the OSCE, while Kyrgyzstan recently reached an agreement to extend the US lease of its Manas airbase. Although all the Central Asian leaders have an interest in upholding the SCO discourse that defends their right to behave as they deem fit in domestic affairs, they are not interested in alienating the West unnecessarily. Indeed, Kazakhstan has often publicly stated that it will act to ensure the SCO does not become an anti-Western vehicle. As the SCO is based on a consensus model of cooperation, the Kazakh position serves as a safeguard against anti-Western motives dominating the organization.

Tackling the “three evils”

The primary security aim for the leaders of the Central Asian republics is the survival of their regimes. To varying extents, the post-Soviet Central Asian regimes are authoritarian in nature and face a series of challenges to their legitimacy and capacity to rule. Indeed, since the end of the Soviet Union, the region has witnessed a civil war (Tajikistan 1992–7), armed incursions by anti-regime groups into the Fergana Valley, terrorist bombings, the “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, and the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan, as well as large-scale organized crime and narcotics-trade networks linking Afghanistan to Europe. These varied security challenges tend to function between and

across national boundaries, so that domestic security cannot be achieved independently by any one of the region's states. As a result, the Central Asian governments have come to consider their domestic security as dependent on their bilateral relations as well as on regional security. In addition, the Russian and Chinese governments regard the security of their troublesome North Caucasus and Xinjiang Province regions as being interconnected with regional stability in Central Asia. Therefore, a regional approach to security in the name of domestic security is the member states' primary motive for participation in the SCO.

Against this background, the SCO has set itself the task of ensuring regional security and stability, and especially addressing the main challenges, or “three evils”, perceived by its leaders. To this end, the member states signed “The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism” in 2001, and created a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure in 2004 with its headquarters in Tashkent. In this way, the SCO is working towards the harmonization of its member states' approaches and developing coordinated practices between their internal agencies. On this basis, common agreement has been reached on common definitions of terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Member states are also working towards the harmonization of legal structures and procedures for dealing with terrorists, as well as sharing intelligence and expertise.

Another aspect of security cooperation in the SCO is the campaign against drug trafficking and organized crime. The counter-narcotics departments of the SCO members' security forces hold regular “Senior Officials Meetings”, and have established common agreements on approaches to drug smuggling and organized crime. However, while it is recognized that the narcotics trade is an increasing problem for its member states, the SCO has yet to establish a really effective and coordinated response to the problem.

Limited military collaboration

According to certain Western analysts, the SCO's irregular military exercises are evidence that the group ultimately constitutes a challenge to the West. Such interpretations assert that the SCO may develop a permanent military force that could be used to pursue Russian and Chinese interests against those of the West, including military interventions in the region. However, there is little prospect that the SCO will develop



a military component. Although “Peace Mission 2” was relatively high-profile, these exercises do not indicate any intention to establish a permanent military force. The SCO claims that its military exercises serve “counterterrorism” purposes, and indeed, the exercises are based on scenarios involving terrorist or insurrectionary violence, rather than state-to-state conflict.

In addition, the principle of “non-interference” in domestic affairs is at the heart of the SCO, and this inhibits the development of a common military force and restricts any cooperative military operations within the territory of any of its members unless expressly authorized by that government. This is unlikely to happen, given that the Central Asian leaders are fiercely protective of their national sovereignty, and a lack of trust between the region’s elites is still evident. Also, the persistence of mistrust between the armed forces of Russia and China, who continue to view one another as potential long-term foes, creates an unfavorable environment for substantive military coordination.

Growth of economic collaboration

On the back of the perceived success of security cooperation, the SCO is developing an economic component. It has established a Business Council and an Interbank Association, and efforts to form an SCO Energy Club continue. Most of the SCO’s economic aspects are focused on large-scale infrastructure and communications projects, such as the Andijan-Torugart-Kashgar railway. However, the Chinese leadership’s interest in creating a free-trade zone amongst SCO member states is resisted by the other members. Their concern is that the strength and size of Chinese economic power would overwhelm their economies and erode their national sovereignty. This fear has limited the scope of economic trade cooperation.

The prospect of an SCO Energy Club is generating the greatest excitement in the region and also attracting the attention of the West. The initial aim is to establish an internal pattern of energy relations amongst its membership that would unite supplier, transit, and consumer states, with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan acting as major suppliers of oil and gas to China, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China in particular is looking for secure access to energy supplies to fuel its economic growth, and represents a huge market for suppliers. Additionally, there is discussion about expanding the Energy Club idea into an Asian Energy Club at a later stage by including SCO observer states as well as Turkmenistan. This would bring in Iran and Turkmenistan as major energy-producing states and India and Pakistan as large energy consumer markets, and would create an extremely powerful group that would have implications for the supply of oil and gas to Europe. However, at present, the prevailing political sensitivity about energy security is delaying negotiations on the Energy Club, and even though it seems to serve all parties’ interests, the plan may yet take some years to come to fruition.

Potential cooperation with the West

On the basis of a few high-profile statements and infrequent military exercises, many Western analysts have painted a picture of the SCO that is not very nuanced and overly adversarial. On closer inspection, it appears that the focus on the counter-Western aspect of the SCO is excessive, and ignores the more fundamental value of the organization to its members’ domestic security. The primary motivation driving its member states to participate in the SCO is the desire for a coordinated regional approach, which is considered by its leaders as contributing to their domestic security

against the manifest “non-traditional” security challenges in the region.

There are elements in the SCO’s rhetoric that are contrary to Western values, and the West may face competition from the SCO in Central Asia. However, this competition is based more on what the SCO can offer the Central Asian republics that the West cannot than on an overt anti-Western agenda within the organization. The SCO facilitates a more integrated approach to addressing security in the region and allows regional leaders to uphold the principle of “non-interference” and to deflect criticism of their domestic policies. Also, Russia and China are better placed than the West to provide sustained economic investment to their neighbors. Nonetheless, the Central Asian republics are keen to maintain positive relations with the West and thus seek cooperation with the West in addition to participation in the SCO, viewing these approaches as mutually compatible. Therefore, the Central Asian leaders ensure that the SCO continues to function as an open organization without a sustained anti-Western agenda.

Taking this into account, the West should not rule out cooperation with the SCO on some of its key objectives in Central Asia. Indeed, many of the West’s interests, as outlined in the EU’s first-ever “Strategy for Central Asia” in 2007, are compatible with those of the SCO. These include reducing the spread of security threats from Central Asia to Europe by addressing the security situation in the parts of Central Asia that are seen as staging posts for exporting extremism and terrorism, as well as stemming the flow of drugs from Afghanistan to Europe via Central Asia. In addition, the SCO is concerned with the security situation in Afghanistan and has expressed a wish to become involved in some capacity. In 2009, the SCO held a “Special Conference on the situation in Afghanistan”, which was attended by representatives of NATO, the OSCE, and the US. This illustrates recognition by the West that the SCO may be able to make a useful contribution to the security effort in Afghanistan.

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