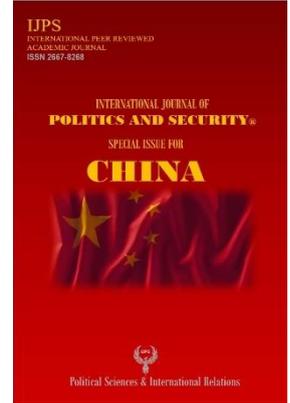


# International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)

ISSN: 2667-8268

<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/ijps>



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## Prospects of CSTO and SCO in Regional Politics of Central Asia

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**Source:** *International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)* / Vol. 2 / No. 4 / July 2020, pp.30-50

**Received Date** : 30.05.2020

**Accepted Date** : 24.07.2020

### How to cite this article:

Rauf, Sarwat, Adam Saud, "Prospects of CSTO and SCO in Regional Politics of Central Asia". *International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2020, pp.30-50

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## Prospects of CSTO and SCO in Regional Politics of Central Asia

Sarwat Rauf\*  
Adam Saud\*\*

### Abstract

*This paper examines the coordination between the two organizations in Central Asia viz. the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It identifies the priorities of the members of the CSTO and SCO and their likely actions towards each other. Both organizations are headed by non-Western powers and they claim to be security providers in Central Asian region. However, the security puzzle is still unresolved and this pertinent problem invokes scholars to research the issue. There is growing skepticism that Russia has leaned toward hedging of China in Central Asia and some scholars have projected a clash between great powers in Central Asia. In this background, this paper seeks to study the actions and policies of Russia and China concerning regional integration and security bequests. It offers the account of security threats in Central Asia and the functioning of SCO and CSTO to cope up challenges. The focus is on the efforts of SCO and CSTO to conjure up local leaders of CARs to take collective problem-solving actions and their responses. Overall, an analysis of the functioning of CSTO and SCO and member states' efforts over countering terrorism, coordination and intelligence sharing has been presented.*

**Keywords:** CSTO, SCO, Regional Security, Security, Central Asia, Russia, China.

## Orta Asya Bölgesel Politikasında CSTO ve SCO'nun Beklentileri

### Özet

*Bu makalede, Orta Asya'da yer alan Kolektif Güvenlik Anlaşması Örgütü (CSTO) ile Şangay İşbirliği Örgütü (SCO) arasındaki koordinasyon incelenmektedir. Ayrıca bu makalede her iki örgütün üyelerinin öncelikleri ve birbirlerine yönelik olası eylemleri tanımlanmaktadır. Her iki örgüt de Orta Asya bölgesinin güvenliklerini sağladıklarını ileri süren Batılı olmayan güçler tarafından idare edilmektedir. Bununla birlikte bölgenin güvenlik bulmacası hala çözülmüş değildir ve bu durum akademisyenleri bu konuyu inceleme konusunda teşvik etmektedir. Ayrıca Rusya'nın Orta Asya'da Çin'i engellemeye yönelik eğilimi olduğu yönünde şüpheler bulunmaktadır ve bu doğrultuda bazı araştırmacılar büyük güçler arasında bir çatışma beklentisi içindedirler.*

*Bu arka plan kapsamında, bu makalede Rusya ve Çin'in bölgesel güvenlik ve entegrasyonla ilgili eylem ve politikalarının kalımları incelenmektedir. Orta Asya'da ki güvenlik tehditleri göz önüne alınarak CSTO ve SCO'nun bu tehditlere yönelik tepkileri incelenmektedir. Çalışmanın odak noktası ise CSTO ve SCO'nun ortak sorunları çözmek için yerel liderlere yaptığı çağrılar ve onların cevaplarıdır. Genel anlamda bu çalışmada CSTO, SCO ile üye devletlerin terörizm, koordinasyon ve istihbarat paylaşımı çabalarının bir analizi sunulmuştur.*

**Anahtar Kavramlar:** Kolektif Güvenlik Anlaşması Örgütü, Şangay İşbirliği Örgütü, Bölgesel Güvenlik, Orta Asya, Rusya, Çin

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## 1. Introduction

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet states underwent a challenging transition in order to construct their new national governments and to provide security to their societies. The geographical setting and distribution of resources has made it difficult for Central Asian Republics (CARs) to acquire sustainable economy and security without engaging in regional cooperation.<sup>1</sup> The ripple effects of Central Asia's vulnerabilities can easily be felt by neighboring powers and it is equally challenging their security too. Moreover, looming peril of terrorism could halt transport corridors and economic activities. Thus, Russia as well as China have sought to upturn their political, economic and military influence in Central Asia. The regional powers have started to secure their borders with newly independent states because they know that regional integration and security would not be possible without the security of CARs.

Given the instability of Central Asian region, the national interests of the neighboring countries have meddled and countries like Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey became part of the new great game of Central Asia. Three Central Asian states viz. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan appeared more fragile due to the porous borders with Afghanistan and the state of insecurity there. In this milieu, the Kremlin promised to provide security to its post-Soviet States and provided a new podium i.e. Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to tie them together. Later, the new arrangements of collective security were in form of Collective Security Treaty (CST) which became Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Just like Russian efforts, China also established good relations with neighboring Central Asian States and signed agreements to ensure collective security and sustainable development. Thus, Russia and China came forward to ensure regional security, settlement of border disputes and harness new regimes in Central Asia. It can be maintained that China's economic interests and Russia's security concerns tied them with weak but important bordering states of Central Asia.

Later China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) got recognition, Moscow and Beijing become more committed to jointly work in Central Asia. Currently, they are willing to co-own

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<sup>1</sup> Mihail P<sup>ˆ</sup>aduraru and Claudia-Iohana Voicu, "Security Risk Analysis Perspectives on Central Asia Dynamics," in *Transformation and Development*, ed. Anja Mihr (Bishkek: Springer, 2020), 57.



Central Asia, where China takes the lead in economic development and Russia leads when it comes to regional military affairs.<sup>2</sup> China has been in quest of peaceful neighborhood and energy resources. Therefore, it wanted to increase its political, economic and military influence in the adjacent region of Central Asia. On account of this policy, Beijing successfully formed an organization which will not only boost its trade relations but will work for the security of its borders. The formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was not only meant to engage Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan but to prepare all members to bring down any external aggression under the leading role of China.

In this regard, Russia also supports SCO's objectives and joins its plans in Central Asia. The most important document namely Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2016 indicates Central Asia solidifying the SCO to promote partnerships in the region. It states "Russia stands for increasing the SCO's political and economic potential, and implementing practical measures within its framework to consolidate mutual trust and partnership in Central Asia, as well as promoting cooperation with the SCO member States, observes and dialogue partners."<sup>3</sup> However, the same document also maintains "Russia seeks to facilitate the development of the CSTO into a prominent multifunctional international organization."<sup>4</sup> It means SCO does not oppose Russia's security initiatives, undoubtedly it is CSTO, which operates in Central Asia as an instrument to sustain Moscow's enduring military presence in the region.

Official records of Russia and China show their intents to work together for regional integration and security, largely because of common interests. Both organizations are struggling to address the ways to get collective responses to certain regional issues such as terrorism, extremism, and transnational organized crimes. However, it is being realized by scholars that collective security initiatives are direly needed to counter local and regional security threats. In this context, CSTO and SCO are trying to develop a sustainable capacity to encounter additional security requirements. Hence, this paper seeks answers these questions; first, whither cooperation CSTO and SCO are making to preserve peace and security in Central Asia? Second,

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<sup>2</sup> Arkady Dubnov, "Reflecting on a Quarter Century of Russia's Relations with Central Asia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/19/reflecting-on-quarter-century-of-russia-s-relations-with-central-asia-pub-76117>.

<sup>3</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, (2016), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



how will Central Asian Republics (CARs) achieve an efficient collective security system and regional stability without Western powers?

This paper is structured into three sections; the first section highlights the distinctive features of CSTO and SCO. The second section addresses the subject of security collaboration between the member states of two organizations. The third section uses scenarios to discourse possible future trajectories of CSTO and SCO. The study also analyzes the arrangements of CARs to manage their responses to the two regional organizations namely SCO and CSTO. In this regard, evocative patterns are sought in the official statements, documents and scholarly texts.

## 2. Integration amid Regional Dynamics

While looking at Central Asian region, one cannot overlook the overall security situation. The region is fragile due to its geostrategic setting as a buffer between major powers.<sup>5</sup> The geographical proximity of CARs with Russia and China makes them dependent on these two powers. Cultural and historical links of CARs with Russia and somehow with China have brought them close to two powers after their independence. Russia and CARs had been working under one political system so their cooperation appears natural; however, China's connection with the governments of CARs is a startling phenomenon. This cooperation would have never been possible without Russia's involvement in regional integration projects. Interestingly, China's soft power has been multiplying day by day in Central Asia, yet it cannot contest Russian media presence in the region because of its old attachment with CARs. Russian universities in Central Asia, mainly in Siberia, have more popularity than Chinese Universities.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Russia brought China's economic growth forth in Central Asia and provided ground on China's security involvement there.<sup>7</sup>

Yet there is growing skepticism on Russia-China alliance and their mutual efforts to find solutions of regional snags. Contrary to the hegemonic competition thesis on Russia and China's race in Central Asia, both states smartly managed their priorities and combined

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<sup>5</sup> Mihail Paduraru and Claudia-Iohana Voicu, "Security Risk Analysis Perspectives on Central Asia Dynamics," 63, REF:1.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, "Cooperation and Competition Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (Washington DC, 2018), 09.

<sup>7</sup> Marcin Kaczmarski, "Russia-China Relations in Central Asia: Why is there a Surprising Absence of Rivalry?," *The Asian Forum* 8, no.2, (2019), <http://www.theasanforum.org/russia-china-relations-in-central-asia-why-is-there-a-surprising-absence-of-rivalry/>.



struggles. After 9/11, many of the international security agreements have become inadequate and several states preferred regional security structures. To earn substantial collective response to the new threats, CARs have joined two regional organizations for security and regional stability. CARs have been facing several security threats such as drug trafficking, terrorism, trans-border crimes and illegal migration. Considerably, terrorism has become a serious concern for all the members of SCO and CSTO. The transnational nature of terrorism has led member states to solve the issue through regional organizations rather than finding individual solutions.

Another serious security issue is emanating from the troubling situation across Afghanistan's border, which is a litmus test to regional security. These security challenges necessitate an effective collective security system and a common platform to address and solve issues with joint efforts. Going forward with this scenario, the need of collective security system becomes indispensable for the post-Soviet states.

To adopt efficient methods for coping with the security problems, an understanding of collective gain and loss was largely fostered by Russia and China in Central Asia. Notwithstanding readiness of CARs for regional cooperation, the problem of regional leadership, the unsettled border and territorial differences and interests of the heads of state have been barring states to act sincerely. It would be right to say that attainment of regional integration was not as smooth as it appears. Identifying the fact, Kremlin offered a platform by using political means to rectify oversights, proclaiming strengthening of security, stability, collective protection and sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. So, at a first stage, closer military and political integration of CARs had been assured in Collective Security Treaty (CST) led by Russia to improve and strengthen the military component of its member states. Moreover, to strengthen political-military cooperation, Russia has been striving to shore up a regional alliance.

Certainly, Russia's prime interest in Central Asia has been large to maintain its influence by ensuring the security of its nearby Central Asia. Russia thought that Central Asia's security is not possible without keeping out Western influence and securing region from the instability emanating from Afghanistan. While taking the military lead in Central Asia, Russia has to recognize the growing influence of China in the region as it could not confront two powers simultaneously.



On the other hand, Beijing also sensed the situation and managed to cope with the emerging situation. Presently, China neither makes demands for the political modifications from the governments of CARs, nor does it use political force to keep the region in its general orientation.<sup>8</sup> China's political agenda is to ensure the stability of the region through economic development, making China popular in Central Asia particularly alluring to local governments. Thus, Russia has agreed to accept China in Central Asia and Russian authorities also welcomed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from the very start.<sup>9</sup> As BRI penetrates deeply, the Russia-China show commitment to work together for regional integration in Central Asia. "They have agreed on a de-facto duopoly: Russia takes the lead in regional military affairs and political stability, and China leads when it comes to economic development."<sup>10</sup>

The present coexistence between Russia and China has become more visible when they announced that BRI would be linked with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Russia and China take similar positions on international issues in International Organizations such as the United Nations (UN). Suffice to say that they are united in their opposition to the US, this factor makes them de-facto partners. Indeed, the economic asymmetry between the two is visible as China's economy is eight times the size of Russia's,<sup>12</sup> yet Russia is taking advantage of China's economic position. Similarly, China is taking advantage of strong historical ties of Russia with CARs and using Russia's influential position for the efficacy of the SCO. Therefore, cooperation between regional organizations headed by either side is likely.

The Russian and Chinese led organizations, CSTO and SCO were purposefully formed to get the support of participants to deal with common snags without the help of the West. The intended purpose of these multilateral institutions was to advance China and Russia's interests rather than broader organizational resolutions and priorities.

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<sup>8</sup> David Ceasar Wani, "Russia-China Relations: Engagement abilities in Managing their Differences in Central Asia," *Modern Diplomacy*, (2020), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/04/russia-china-relations-engagement-abilities-in-managing-their-differences-in-central-asia/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 91, (2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/integrating-the-eurasian-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road-a-bridge-too-far/>.

<sup>10</sup> Arkady Dubnov, "Reflecting on a Quarter Century of Russia's Relations with Central Asia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/19/reflecting-on-quarter-century-of-russia-s-relations-with-central-asia-pub-76117>.

<sup>11</sup> Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far?" (Ref. 9).

<sup>12</sup> Paul De Grauwe "Why Russia is economically weak and politically strong," *London School of Economics and Political Science*, (2018), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/04/28/why-russia-is-economically-weak-and-politically-strong/>.



### 3. CSTO in Central Asia

Russia has been trying to strengthen its economic and military position in Central Asia through multilateral initiatives including Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In order to avoid external aggression against post-Soviet states, Russia formed CIS in 1992 and further offered CST to the members of CIS. The CST was largely regarded as a Russian security assignment, an apparatus to elevate its influence throughout the region. Russia has become the engine of the CSTO and supplies an array of resources in in the support of organisation.<sup>13</sup> Putting itself as an open grouping in 2002, the CSTO has started processes to take partners and observer to the group. Therefore, the CSTO became a strong defense structure of the former Soviet states. Notwithstanding contradictions among member states of CSTO over important regional conflicts, they are striving together to fight against terrorism.

The 9/11 incident had essentially changed the whole scenario in which the US earned the support of all states in its global war against terrorism. Threats emanating from Afghanistan in 2001, made the members of CST vigilant and the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF) was formed to respond discernable security threats to CARs, forces included task force from Russia and three member states. Almost after eight years, another force namely the Collective Quick Response Forces (CQRF) contain contingents from all CSTO members was prepared as the CRDF was meant to provide security only in the Central Asian region.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, Russian led CSTO has brought its member states to a new stage of cooperation leading to a collective security system. Overall, CSTO forces have been prepared with the intent to fight. “Two regional groups (Russia-Belarus and Russia-Armenia) able to react to external military aggression; one, 4,000-head CRDF for Central Asia; two, 20,000-head Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), both of which are designed to react to situations short of

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<sup>13</sup> Elena Kropatcheva, “Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Multilateral Policy or Unilateral Ambitions?,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 9 (2016): 1527.

<sup>14</sup> Yulia Nikitina, Security Cooperation in the Post-Soviet Area within the Collective Security Treaty Organization,” *Instituto per GLI Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*, no. 152 (2013): 3, [https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis\\_152\\_2013.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis_152_2013.pdf).



interstate conflicts. There is also a collective peacekeeping force, including around 3,500 soldiers and officers and more than 800 civilian police officers.”<sup>15</sup>

Parallel to its engagement with the US in multilateral security initiatives, Russia was cognizant with the vulnerabilities of its neighbouring CARs. Therefore, it had offered the US to join CSTO to fight against the common threat of terrorism which remain ineffectual. The primary objective of CSTO was to thwart external aggression against its affiliates; however, the CSTO has started to counter emerging transnational threats, such as illegal migration, terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and cyber-attacks.<sup>16</sup>

Gradually, the CSTO has become the main peacekeeping force in Central Asia capable to conduct peacekeeping operations. The contribution of CSTO in countering terrorist threats has been acknowledged in the report of United Nations Security Council (UNSC)’s 8626<sup>th</sup> meeting, it maintains “Security issues in Central Asia are reflected in the updated plan of the collective activities of CSTO States aimed at implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy for the 2019-2021 period.”<sup>17</sup> President Putin in a meeting of the Collective Security Council in Bishkek in November 2019 vowed to continue its fight against terrorism, it states “the practice of joint operations to identify and eliminate international terrorist groups in the CSTO countries, including their bases and sources of funding will be continued.”<sup>18</sup> It has also convened many joint training exercises in 2019. According to CSTO official website “creation and activity of the CSTO became the important political event for all Member States of the Treaty, strengthening their political authority and positions on the international stage, providing stability and security on the international and regional levels.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Karena Avedissian, “What is the Collective Security Treaty Organization?,” *EVN Report*, (2019), <https://www.evnreport.com/understanding-the-region/fact-sheet-what-is-the-collective-security-treaty-organization>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Weitz, “Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities,” *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College* (2018), 7.

<sup>17</sup> “Cooperation Between the United Nations and Regional and Sub regional Organizations,” United Nations’ Security Council Seventy-fourth year 8626<sup>th</sup> Meeting, (2019): 6, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_pv\\_8626.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8626.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> “Russia to Help CSTO Countries Make More Friends: Putin,” *Xinhua Net*, (2019), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/28/c\\_138590694.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/28/c_138590694.htm).

<sup>19</sup> *Official website of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)*, [http://www.odkb.gov.ru/start/index\\_aengl.htm](http://www.odkb.gov.ru/start/index_aengl.htm).



Notwithstanding strong support of CARs, CSTO has been facing some internal challenges related to the responses of member states impacted on its efficacy. For instance, Uzbekistan has been a reluctant party to the CSTO; it has left CST and CSTO two times<sup>20</sup> and is not its member currently. The pattern is precarious and likely to have geopolitical repercussions for regional security structure of Central Asia. Nevertheless, Russia prefers to develop bilateral security cooperation too particularly with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Russia also takes the post-Soviet space an exclusive sphere of influence to guard it against external intrusions. Hence, bilateral concord is purposeful as Uzbekistan can purchase military equipment from Russia at rates close to Russian domestic prices. Besides, Tashkent has inked a strategic cooperation deal with Moscow in the defence sector.<sup>21</sup> Although Uzbekistan is no more member of CSTO but its bilateral relations with Russia effects on the organization's decisions and actions. Such a contention is elaborated by Farkhod Tolipov in these words that Uzbekistan's existing strategic relationships with Russia can disqualify any action of CSTO.<sup>22</sup>

Another snag in the way of CSTO is to guard fragile borders. The CSTO members are also apprehensive over the vulnerable border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan. Due to the security situation in Afghanistan, the CSTO has formed CRRF to guard borders and ensure peace in Central Asia. It is claimed that Tajikistan's border to Afghanistan is greatly defended through the security assurances provided by Russian led CSTO.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, several operations have been conducted with good results such as operation Kanal designed to curb drug trafficking, operation Нелегал (nelegal) intended to stop illegal migration from non-CSTO States and Proxy operation was to boost cyber-security cooperation and to dismantle extremist websites.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the CSTO holds joint military exercises with its members from time to time. Certainly, Russia tends to prove to protect the costly infrastructure built by China under the BRI auspices.

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<sup>20</sup> Uzbekistan has joined the CSTO twice and left twice, 1994-1999 and 2006-2012.

<sup>21</sup> Fabio Indeo, "Russia-China Military Cooperation in Central Asia: A Temporary Convergence of Strategic Interests," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, (2018), <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/russia-china-military-cooperation-central-asia-temporary-convergence-strategic-interests-21832>.

<sup>22</sup> Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan without the CSTO," *The Central Asia-Caucasus (CACI) Analyst*, (2013), <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12652-uzbekistan-without-the-csto.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Helena Rytövuori-Apunen and Furugzod Usmonov, "Tajikistan's Unsettled Security: Borderland Dynamics of the Outpost on Russia's Afghan Frontier," in *The Regional Security Puzzle around Afghanistan*, ed. Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2016), 134.

<sup>24</sup> Elia Bescotti, "The Collective Security Treaty Organization and its Limits on Integration," *Analytical Media: Eurasian Studies*, (2018), <http://greater-europe.org/archives/3965>.



In this regard, countries linked to BRI project such as Pakistan is nowadays being engaged by China and Russia because of their serious concerns over the situation of Afghanistan. CSTO is seeking stability in Afghanistan through some counteractive measures to bar the likely penetration of ISIS from Afghanistan to CSTO member states. “For this purpose, Russia is interested to install CSTO military along Afghan borders, especially on Tajikistan”.<sup>25</sup> Since ISIS is active against the Taliban in Afghanistan to spread its sway in the region, adjacent states such as China, Pakistan, Iran and Russia are equally fearful and trying to weaken the sway. Therefore, Russia is ready to offer the CSTO platform, to thwart the new threat of militancy with the help of China’s SCO.

#### 4. SCO in Central Asia

Central Asian region has huge resources, it serves as a transit area where the crucial highways and the infrastructure for the transfer of natural resources lies. Thus, the region not only allured powerful states to get resources but great powers’ competition has made this region a chessboard. Amid great power politics in Central Asia, SCO appears a platform bringing together two patrons and CARs for regional integration and security of member states. Therefore, CARs are taking SCO as a promising platform for their security and economic prosperity.

The SCO has been functioning as the main regional economic and security platform of cooperation since June 2001. The organization has successfully brought CARs with Russia and China and set precedent in mitigating interstate tension. To acquire regional security, the cooperation of states is necessary therefore, SCO membership has been extended in recent past. Its regular annual meetings have brought significant changes in the region, the regular participation of member states in yearly joint military exercises has become staggering. In this regard, the “Peace Mission 2018” has gained fame because it manoeuvred all members including arch-rivals such as India and Pakistan to send their forces for joint military exercise.<sup>26</sup>

Since SCO has taken new security initiatives with the help of its members and observers, the proposal of regional integration has become discernible. Conspicuously, SCO has become

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<sup>25</sup> Tayyab Baloch, “NATO Challenges SCO and CSTO in Afghanistan,” (2016), <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/nato-challenges-sco-and-csto-afghanistan>.

<sup>26</sup> Fabio Indeo, “Russia-China Military Cooperation in Central Asia: A Temporary Convergence of Strategic Interests”, REF: 21



instrumental to persuade leaders of CARs to collaborate with China and Russia not only for regional integration but for better trade and increased cooperation in the energy sector. “The informal level of cooperation in the energy sector is performed through the activities organized by the two main institutions, the SCO Business Council and SCO Forum, non-governmental actors who “accompany” the work of the official bodies. The SCO Energy Club will become a new institution for the organization of informal contacts between SCO member countries in the energy sector.”<sup>27</sup>

Since terrorism has increasingly become a concern for each individual member of SCO members, it was decided that this problem should be solved at the SCO level rather than individually. Going forward with this context, SCO has successfully managed to prevent terrorist attacks and it is claimed that “SCO has averted 650 crimes of terrorist and extremist nature, and neutralized 440 terrorist training camps and 1,700 members of international terrorist organizations.”<sup>28</sup> The progress shows that SCO is becoming an Asian giant noticeably as its members are growing.

Currently, many states have shown their interests to become either members or observers, however, no new membership is given after 2017. Instead, it has offered a new category of association namely “dialogue partners” for the aspirant states.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars have anticipated that with the entry of new states, SCO will not be able to focus on regional security rather new regional tension will take its attention. However, presently it appears that the big number of states as observers, members and dialogue partners have amplified the potential of SCO for useful cooperation in many areas.<sup>30</sup> Yet there are challenges such as Pakistan-India hostility and instability in Afghanistan appear as serious challenges.

Just like CSTO, the members of SCO also believed that the security of Central Asia is directly linked to the peace process in Afghanistan. Therefore, members of the SCO openly

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<sup>27</sup> Maryna V. Shavaliyova, “Energy: Cooperation and Competition within the SCO,” in *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia’s Security Challenges*, ed. Anatoliy A. Rozanov (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2013), 51.

<sup>28</sup> Rashid Alimo, “The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Counteracting Threats to Peace and Security”, *UN Chronicle*, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-shanghai-cooperation-organization-counteracting-threats-peace-and-security>.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Weitz, “Eurasian Security Institutions: The CSTO and SCO”, *World Politics Review*, (201), <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/5916/eurasian-security-institutions-the-csto-and-sco>.

<sup>30</sup> Akbarsho Iskandarov, “Security and Integration in Central Asia: The CSTO and SCO, Central Asia and the Caucasus,” vol.14, no. 2 (2013): 24.



supported the international coalition busy in the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. It is not a secret that some members of SCO provided their lands to the coalition states for the establishing military bases in the interests of the anti-terrorist set-up.<sup>31</sup> In order to boost collective efforts for peace, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established in 2005 but it became dormant in 2009. Interestingly, while granting the membership of SCO to Pakistan and India, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group became operative in 2017 and after a seven-year break, the SCO restarted its Afghanistan Contact Group meetings. In 2017, Moscow and in 2018 Beijing hosted the meeting of SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group.<sup>32</sup> The third meeting, held in Bishkek, in 2019 is reflecting the growing concerns of Russia and China in the regional security.

In this context, it seems that Moscow-Beijing partnership could not only turn CARs in their sphere but their attachment is contingent to make their organizations successful. Certainly, some scholars deemed that Russia is perhaps susceptible after accepting China as a partner in the region, however, CARs dependence on Russia is persuading China to accept security conditions set by Russia.

### **5. Discernable Cooperation between CSTO and SCO**

Chinese led SCO and Russian led CSTO are working together for regional integration and to keep its common enemy at bay. CSTO and SCO vowed to ensure regional security and showed the willingness to counter-terrorism, defeat illicit arms trafficking and to fight against transnational crimes. To illustrate, both organizations assure that they will work together for a common cause. In this regard, Secretary-General of CSTO Yuri Khachaturov maintained “the CSTO takes a serious approach to the development of effective and mutually beneficial cooperation with the SCO.”<sup>33</sup> Since snags attached to borders, neighbors and international competitors are common of Russia and China, their cooperation becomes indispensable.

The member states of the CSTO and SCO, face the menace of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. The leaders of member states are preparing to root out the problem of terrorism, extremism and separatism from their respective states and want to break the association of

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<sup>31</sup> Anatoliy A. Rozanov, “The Issue of Security in the SCO,” in *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia’s Security Challenges*, ed. Anatoliy A. Rozanov (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2013), 39.

<sup>32</sup> “SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group held its Third Meeting with SCO Participation in Bishkek,” *Official website of Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, (2019), <http://eng.sectSCO.org/news/20190419/533099.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Interview: CSTO Head Eyes Closer Partnership with SCO,” (2018), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/08/c\\_137239917.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/08/c_137239917.htm).



active local radical groups from Taliban/ Al-Qaeda. Drug trafficking in the neighborhood is another problem worrying Moscow and Beijing; therefore, their combined efforts are central to gauge the peace process in Afghanistan. It can be anticipated that the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, would put CARs in a new dilemma as they will have to curb drug trafficking and stop nexus of terrorist organizations. Thus, as the leading members of the CSTO and SCO, Russia and China could promote a joint effort of two Eurasian organizations to cooperate with CARs and Afghanistan.

China just like Russia is worried over the growing influence of ISIS in Afghanistan, certainly a formidable threat to the project of regional connectivity. In order to ensure regional peace, CSTO has called the SCO to join efforts on post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> Hence, a peaceful solution of Afghanistan's crisis has become a common agenda of the member states of SCO. The ISIS has become a new common enemy of the member states of SCO and CSTO. Consequently, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, linked directly or indirectly either with SCO or CSTO have formed Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to fight against terrorism the region.<sup>35</sup> Three Central Asian states viz. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan bordered with Afghanistan, perceived security threat, have been expressing their concerns internationally.<sup>36</sup>

#### Member States of CSTO and SCO

Membership Status	SCO Member States	CSTO Member States	Common Members
<b>Full Members</b>	Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India.	Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Belarus.	Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus (ob), Afghanistan (ob).
<b>Observer States</b>	Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia.	Afghanistan, Serbia.	
<b>Dialogue Partners</b>	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey.		

<sup>34</sup> Marcel de Haas, "Partners and competitors" NATO and the (Far) East," (2013): 9, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Partners%20and%20Competitors%20%20NATO%20and%20the%20\(Far\)%20East.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Partners%20and%20Competitors%20%20NATO%20and%20the%20(Far)%20East.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> "Afghan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan form QCCM to Counter-Terrorism," *Pakistan Today*, (2016), <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/08/03/afghan-china-pakistan-tajikistan-form-qccm-to-counter-terrorism/>.

<sup>36</sup> Vlagyislav Makszimov, "Central Asia Leaders Meet Again in a Sign of Increased Regional Cooperation," *Euractiv*, (2019), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/central-asia-leaders-meet-again-in-sign-of-increased-regional-cooperation/>.



Despite the fact that more than half members of CSTO are members of SCO (as indicated in the table), there are some problems making analysts dubious about the collaboration between states because of many reasons. The reluctant protocols of CSTO and SCO in the resolutions of interstate conflicts are big questions. For instance, in 2010, the government of Kyrgyzstan asked Russia for help but Moscow declined to take any military action. However, verbal support and humanitarian assistance were granted by CSTO and SCO to its member state. Additionally, the functioning of these organizations seems different from that of their roles sometimes, there are several instances to quote. First, despite the peacekeeping forces of CSTO and security assurances given by SCO, critics say neither organization is using military and police power in regional conflicts. Second, cooperation between the two organizations remained futile as CSTO together with SCO could not break networking of terrorist organization. Their efforts are belittled by critics as SCO and CSTO could not disrupt the funding of terrorist organizations. However, local rulers had been oblivious to the linkages between transnational crimes and terrorism. Their full cooperation with CSTO and SCO can be productive to break the linkage. According to the CSTO's website organizations had signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2007 which shows that both want to "establish equal and constructive cooperation between the secretariats of the SCO and the CSTO in ensuring regional and international security and stability; countering terrorism; fighting drug trafficking; disrupting arms trafficking; combating organized transnational crime, and other areas of mutual interest."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, collective security arrangement demands all member states to act together to repel the aggressor. With this some differences between states are discernable; for example, Belarus, Russian and Kazakhstan attitude towards the contemporary issues of Karabakh, Crimea, Donbass, Syria, Afghanistan are different from each other but the centripetal force of organizations is uniting them together for regional stability.

The above instances also suggest that cooperation between the two is not enough, leaders of CSTO and CSTO need to manage relations in a competitive setting too to fulfil the commitments they show in their manifestos. The collaboration is good for extensive security assurances however, Russia and China need individual state cooperation for intensive security guarantees.

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<sup>37</sup> The information available on *Official website Collective Security Treaty Organization*, [https://en.odkb-csto.org/international\\_org/sco/](https://en.odkb-csto.org/international_org/sco/)



## 6. Russia-China Partnership: Reshaping the Regional Landscape

Russia and China tend to strengthen their alliance and fostering deeper cooperation. Nevertheless, Sino-Russian partnership is crucial because both states fit in each other's foreign policy framework with many aspects. First, being bordering states cooperation will enhance economic relations in Central Asia because proximity decreases risk by providing the relevant information. Second, there is a common tendency of investment in Central Asia and to increase trade between the countries. Third, both Russia and China focus on natural resource projects in Central Asia and also want to secure supplies of materials. Interestingly, Chinese investment into the Russian economy is not restricted to the energy sector or the border security but Chinese investors are taking interests in real estate, wood processing, agriculture, telecommunications equipment and microelectronics.<sup>38</sup> Fourth, Russia and China tend to root out terrorists' outfits from their borders for the internal security of their states.

Moreover, Russia needs China to counter American influence in Central Asia.<sup>39</sup> Russia has been featuring conspicuously in Chinese plans to build oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia such as Kazakhstan's oil pipeline and Turkmenistan's gas pipeline to China. Hence, energy can also be quoted as a force of convergence in Sino-Russian nearness. Besides, the military and political features of their ties make their regional alliance more secure and the chain of collective security binds them together. However, Sino-Russian military cooperation can be taken as a hesitant rapprochement because both states have struggled against historical obstructions while discerning prospects for a lucrative partnership. Indeed, China was a new market of arms sale for Russia soon after the Soviet Union and the development of a technical-military relationship with Beijing was natural. China and Russia recognized that their interests intersect on security matters in Central Asia, as they do in global politics. Hence, their partnership has become a serious threat to the West as both are trying to adjust the international system to their advantage.<sup>40</sup>

Both Moscow and Beijing generally see a rationale behind regional integration which are co-founded in the last twenty years. Russia's emphasis on establishing institutions in Eurasia

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Lotspeich, "Economic Integration of China and Russia in the Post-Soviet Era" in *the Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Hu Bin, "Oil and Gas Cooperation between China and Central Asia in an Environment of Political and Resource Competition," (2014): 599. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs12182-014-0377-7.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, "Cooperation and Competition Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (Washington DC, 2018), 02. REF: 6.



has been based on its regional and global schemes. Moscow had envisioned coming erosion in the post-Soviet space, evident in a worsening security situation surfacing in the adjacent states of Afghanistan. The wave of colored revolutions in the Post-Soviet States, civil war (Tajikistan) and the border clashes between CARs were putting Russia in a worrisome situation. In addition, the rise of the non-traditional threats such as terrorism, environmental issues and smuggling raised new concerns. Consequently, Russia felt a loss of its influence over the post-Soviet space. In order to resuscitate its influence in the region, a network of organizations including CIS, CSTO, EAEU and SCO (with China) was promoted in different periods. All these organizations have important functions in Russia's foreign policy and Moscow is using different international channels including Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN and the SCO to improve the status of the CSTO.<sup>41</sup>

Unequivocally, some Sino-Russian disagreements transpired in the past which galvanized assessors. For instance, a group of scholars is taking SCO as a Chinese project to exert its influence over Central Asian states which was formed to just to enter into the zone of Russian influence with the cooperation of Russia. Moscow decided to join it to strengthen its declining position in Post-Soviet Central Asia, yet no clear support of China was observed in critical matters related to Russia. For example, the SCO summit of 2008 was mostly on Georgia-Russia clash but Russia's recognition of the independence of the regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not receive any support from the other SCO member states.<sup>42</sup> Chinese reluctance subsequently slowed down the process of open collaboration. Against this background, the Chinese military presence in Central Asia was portrayed as a threat to Russia's strategic interests.

Conversely, Russia line ups its relations with China and other powerful states to make blocs and alliances, and powerful international organizations which would manifest Russia's strong defense. China holds an extremely important position on Russia's agenda in Central Asia.<sup>43</sup> Russia's willingness to join hands with China over Central Asian march is also linked with the effects of the worldwide economic slowdown and economic sanctions. Russia is trying to improve its commercial relations with a powerful neighbor to overcome obstacles created by

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<sup>41</sup> Elena Kropatcheva, "Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Multilateral Policy or Unilateral Ambitions?," 1527, REF: 13.

<sup>42</sup> Marcel de Haas, "Partners and competitors," REF: 34.

<sup>43</sup> Arkady Dubnov, "Reflecting on a Quarter Century of Russia's Relations with Central Asia," REF 2 & REF 10.



the West. Russia fears insecurity in its southern border that could undercut the efficacy of Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in Central Asia, and the discernible inability of Tajikistan to inhibit threats originating from Afghanistan is also a pushing factor for Moscow to join hands with Beijing. As far as China is concerned, it is worried about the ethnic affinity of the people of CARs with its Xinjiang province, the problem can be sorted out with the help of Russia.

On the part of China, it can also be assumed that instability in Central Asia would be dangerous for China's internal security and will have a potential impact on the Muslims residing in the Chinese region of Xinjiang. Uyghur ethnic identity was threatened when economic development brought a large influx of Han Chinese. Thus, Muslims of Xinjiang get connected with the local population of Central Asia which was no more under Soviet control. With the growing trend of separatism in Xinjiang since the mid-1990s, Russia along with China and CARs have been involved in military cooperation. More so, after the 9/11 attacks, China declared Uyghur activists as terrorists and reiterated that terrorism, extremism, and separatism are the three evils. In 2002, the US and the UN called, in the support of China that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization and claimed that it had a close financial relationship with al-Qaeda.<sup>44</sup>

Security is also the preoccupation of the leaders of CARs, the economic, political, and security developments are indefinite and hard to predict perfectly in Central Asian region.<sup>45</sup> Mostly threats are inherited from Soviet past and became uncontrollable after the independence of CARs. In this regard, both Russia and China have understood this enigma and presented podiums to address the common problem of CARs. Moscow not only opted SCO but helped Beijing in persuading local governments of CARs to cooperate in regional integration. Now the SCO has become a good platform to mollify strains between arch-rivals of the cold war era by resolving border clashes. Due to CARs' inclination toward the SCO and CSTO, Central Asia has become a standpoint of great power posturing. In this situation, regime survival and its legitimacy are crucial, so Central Asian leaders are an integral part of the coordinated efforts of Russia and China.

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<sup>44</sup> Charles E. Ziegler, "Russia and China in Central Asia" in *the Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 236.

<sup>45</sup> Mihail Paduraru and Claudia-Iohana Voicu, 53, REF.1&5.



Despite all the differences, both Russia and China want to join hands for the maximization of their security and to contain their common contender namely the US. The current developments in military cooperation between Russia, China and CARs such as “Cooperation military exercises in 2006, 2015, 2016 and 2019”<sup>46</sup> spot an improved security collaboration. It is also clear that Moscow-Beijing will work together to prevent drug trade and fight terrorism. Russia wants to curb mass insurgency whereas China wants to earn the cooperation of bordering states to extend its area of trade. Suffice to say that regional instability will have a negative impact not only on CARs but it would equally effect on the efficiency of economic projects such as EAEU and BRI.

Hence, there are several avenues of cooperation between Russia and China such as securing borders, curbing separatism, fighting terrorism, shunning influence of the US, working on regional integration and certify peace in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan and the presence of terrorist groups have become the formidable threat disturbing the architecture of regional security.<sup>47</sup> In this regard, the CSTO would be focusing on the emanating security threats from Afghanistan, whilst the SCO can engage Afghanistan in economic activities which would ultimately be helpful to solve Afghanistan’s perennial issues.

## 7. Conclusion

The simple but clear lesson can be drawn from the above details that the formation of the CSTO and SCO is the part of the larger context of emerging regionalization in international relations.

Regional groupings such as the CSTO and SCO are meant to help developing Asian countries in global competition, as they make member states able to open up to the external world while shielding the interests of its allies. These two organizations are also becoming tools of “securitization” as well as regional integration in Central Asia. The security concerns are not limited to form a military alliance but social, economic, political, and environmental safety is needed for regional stability. Evidently, efficient regional security structure is needed by Russia, China and CARs amid traditional and nontraditional security threats. The CSTO is

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<sup>46</sup> Lu Peng and Wu Shike, “China and Tajikistan Kick off Joint Counter-Terrorism Exercise”, *China Military*, (2019), [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-08/12/content\\_9587478.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-08/12/content_9587478.htm).

<sup>47</sup> Fabio Indeo, “Russia-China Military Cooperation in Central Asia: A Temporary Convergence of Strategic Interests”, REF 21 & 26.



primarily a political and military organization serving Russian interests, whereas the SCO is claiming to be a political and economic organization assisting China in geographical connectivity. Both organizations are visibly moving to develop their strategic influence in Central Asia. And neighboring Afghanistan.

There are several factors pushing CARs to join both organizations headed by Russia and China. However, the significant convergence points the perennial instability in Afghanistan and long stay of US forces have become explicit causes to seek cooperation of neighbouring powers for CARs. The military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has been adjusted in this regional settings and new regional dynamics have also created a new alignment between states. Presently, the balance of power seems tilting towards China which is magnetizing Russia. Moreover, China's economic moves and aspirations attracts Russia's EAEU to join BRI in the region. These economic fancies will be augmenting Sino-Russian economic cooperation and their strategic partnership will grow. In this scenario, their border vulnerabilities can obstruct their economic capacity.

To sum up, it can be said that Russian led CSTO and Chinese led SCO have been cooperating with regional states through participation to manage interstate tension and troubled borders of CARs with Afghanistan. However, potential risks are attached to harmonious approach and it is difficult to get states' collaboration over the issues of terrorism, to end the border disagreements, mitigation of interests' priorities and to stop external power influences over Central Asian states. Conspicuously, China alone cannot manage security issues of CARs and Russia's position is not stout to compete Chinese commercial activities. In this situation, the local governments should not work in individual capacity as peace-building and regional security can only be attained through harmony of interests.

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