

Rethinking the Regime Security and Democratic Development through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü Üzerinden Rejim Güvenliği ve Demokratik Gelişmeyi Yeniden Düşünmek	Rethinking the Regime Security and Democratic Development through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization
Öz Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü (ŞİÖ), Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde Avrasya'da ortaya çıkan ve Batılı liberal örgütlerden farklı olarak farklı önceliklere sahip bölgesel bir uluslararası örgüttür. Bu açıdan ŞİÖ, geleneksel olmayan tehditlere karşı geleneksel olmayan bir uluslararası entegrasyondur. ŞİÖ'nün kurumsal yapısı, rejim güvenliği olarak da anlaşılabilir şekilde üç şeytan olarak adlandırılan tehditler terörizm, aşırılık ve ayrılcılığa karşı mücadele edecek şekilde şekillendirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, ŞİÖ'nün önceliklerinden birinin üyelerinin rejim güvenliğini sağlamak olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. ŞİÖ'nün rejim güvenliği, istikrar ve ekonomik kalkınma gibi katkılar ile özellikle de, Orta Asyalı Türk Üyelerine (CATM) ulus inşası ve demokratik kalkınma için bir temel sağlayabileceği sonucuna varabiliriz.	Abstract The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a regional international organization that emerged in Eurasia in the post-Cold War period and has different priorities, unlike Western liberal organizations. In this respect, SCO is an unconventional international integration against non-traditional threats. SCO's institutional structure has been functionalized to serve security, understood as regime security against the threats of three evils: terrorism, extremism, and separatism. This study argues that one of the priorities of the SCO is to ensure regime security for its members. We can conclude that SCO can provide an essential basis for nation-building and democratic development among Central Asian Turkic Members (CATM).
Anahtar Kelimeler: Rejim Güvenliği, Üç Şeytan, Karşılıklı Tanıma İlkesi, Demokratikleşme, CATM	Keywords: Regime Security, Three Evils, Mutual Recognition Principle, Democratization, CATM,
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Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı	Bu çalışma bilimsel araştırma ve yayın etiği kurallarına uygun olarak hazırlanmıştır.
Yazarların Makaleye Olan Katkıları	Çalışmanın tamamı iki yazarında eşit oranda katkısıyla oluşturulmuştur.
Çıkar Beyanı	Yazarlar açısından ya da üçüncü taraflar açısından çalışmadan kaynaklı çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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1. Introduction: Emerging of SCO as a Security Bloc

This study asserts that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides regime security for its members. Furthermore, in the long term, this type of security promotes democratic development among some of its members, primarily the Central Asian Turkic members (CATM). It is also essential to recognize that there are many forms of democracy in today's world. Are liberal democracies the only valid or legitimate democracies? It may be possible to answer this question with illiberal democracies or alternative understandings of democracy. Numerous nations seek to safeguard themselves from the disruptive influence of the West. This situation can be evaluated in terms of regime security. The establishment's main priority is to protect and maintain its existence, which includes explaining each political regime's primary actors, factors, basic principles, and accepted practices. Thus, regime security is a priority for all types of regimes, including both democratic and authoritarian ones.

Interestingly, the issue of regime security is discussed more in authoritarian regimes than in democratic ones. The term "authoritarian regime security" may imply political violence, reinforcing this perception (Dodlova & Lucas, 2021, p. 2). A relationship between political systems and security priorities is generally accepted. The regime type determines security priorities (Rensburg et al., 2022, p. 31–32). In the context of the SCO, while the primary priorities of each member are discussed, it can be argued that all members benefit from the SCO in terms of regime security.

SCO is seen as an organization that maintains the established order by defining threats and prioritizing the security of its members. For CATM, it serves as a barrier against color revolutions and opposition to what is perceived as democratic demands in liberal democracies (Ambrosio, 2008, pp. 1321-1344). The SCO is vital in helping Central Asian members maintain independence, enhance regime security, and prevent isolation from the two superpowers, China and Russia. For these nations, joining the SCO also means seizing the opportunity presented by the ongoing rivalry between these superpowers, which the SCO facilitates. At the same time, Central Asian members value the participation of new members.

The new members—India, Pakistan, and Iran—expect regime security to be at the forefront of their expectations from the SCO. For instance, although India is regarded as a democratic country, it has taken steps to establish a Hindu right-wing regime, especially during the Modi era. The target audience is Muslim Indians (Mohsina, 2019). Through the SCO, India aims to build good relations with China, gain legitimacy for its domestic political practices, and strengthen ties with Russia to counter Chinese supremacy in the region. China primarily views Pakistan's membership as a move against India's membership (Rajagopalan, 2019, pp. 71-85). China's backing of Pakistan counters Russia's push for India's involvement. Iran primarily sees the SCO as a way to manage American sanctions and explore energy markets. As a state prioritizing regime security, Iran has not only ensured its regime but also reduced its strategic isolation through the SCO. Therefore, it can be concluded that the SCO is an evolving and expanding integration capable of meeting the diverse expectations of all its members.

Influential members like China and Russia might not need the SCO's direct presence, but they gain legitimacy and solidarity from other members in their actions against Uyghur Muslims and Chechens (Rothacher, 2008, pp. 68-73). China mainly seeks legitimacy through the SCO, both in the region and globally, regarding ethno-religious separatist issues,

particularly concerning the Uyghur and Tibet matters, which ties into regime security and the "One China principle" (Yuan, 2010, p. 858).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is central to the Chinese establishment. The effectiveness of practices in the Chinese system compared to written laws, along with the equivalence of the state and the party, highlights the CCP's decisive position (Saich, 2004, p. 126). The decisive role of the CCP is evident within the unitary structure of the state, which encompasses multi-ethnic and autonomous regions with varying levels of economic development (Guo, 2013). This role also reflects the CCP's understanding of cultural, economic, and political integrity (Shih, 2007, pp. 1-14). The "One China policy" or "One China principle" is often discussed about the potential for conflict (Wei, 2016, pp. 67-95) or the Taiwan issue, particularly in workshops with the U.S. (Chen, 2015, pp. 319-321). This principle symbolizes the unity of all of China (Dreyer, 2008, p. 20). Within China, which is home to various ethnic minorities totaling over 120 million people (Legerton & Rawson, 2009, pp. 1-5), the primary challenges are seen as economic and political issues arising from autonomous regions (Mackerras, 2003, p. 176; Gunaratna et al., 2010). Therefore, Chinese officials frequently emphasize harmony and peaceful development in their daily political discourse.

It is possible to view the CCP as functioning like today's Chinese dynasty. The CCP has the power to determine every detail in the country much more effectively than the old dynasties. With collective leadership and a relatively small number of elites and cadres (Liu, 2009, pp. 105-125), the CCP plays a significant role in shaping the country's fate. These cadres express that China's primary goal is to become a substantial power under the CCP's leadership, which they attribute to socialist democracy (Hu, 2014, pp. 1-12). During the Tiananmen events, The CCP took harsh and preventive measures to secure the political regime (Liu, 1992, pp. 45-60). For China, regime security means safeguarding the CCP's highest position within the hierarchy and the system.

While China labels its system as a socialist democracy, Russia emphasizes the concept of "sovereign democracy." Sovereign democracy represents state-building and sovereignty without Western intervention, addressing the real needs and demands of the people. Especially during Putin's tenure, it has become an ideology for various sectors, including the elite, business, the arts, government, and opposition. In short, all domestic parties compete politically, socially, and economically to achieve a single purpose: being free from external interventions. This also implies that, instead of adopting Western-style liberal democracy, Russia can develop a unique model of democracy (Krastev, 2006, pp. 113-117). Sovereign democracy also highlights the state's interventionist policies in these areas within the context of self-determination (Kranz, 2014, pp. 205-221).

According to the SCO Charter, each state has one vote in decision-making. Decisions are made based on consensus, except for the termination of a member's membership (Chung 2006: 5). The SCO emphasizes that it does not officially target third parties and that the sovereignty of member states is prioritized above all else (Crosston, 2013, p. 284). The sovereignty of member states in decision-making and in recognizing threats is clear. When mutual recognition is included in consensus-based decision-making, SCO solidarity becomes more evident. This principle, particularly significant in the fight against terrorism (and other threats), leads Western academics to view the SCO as a protector of authoritarian regimes (Norling & Swanström, 2007, p. 442). When ignoring the issue of authoritarianism, it is also believed that the SCO's approach is more effective in combating terrorism. Member countries

argue that, contrary to criticisms from Western writers, the SCO acts as a safeguard against the interventionist initiatives of NATO and the United States (U.S.) in Central Asia (Aris & Snetkov, 2013, p. 2010).

The SCO emerged on June 15, 2001, as a regional security organization (Fawcett, 2008, p. 321) before the 9/11 events, identifying the "three evils"—terrorism, extremism, and separatism—as the main threats. Its journey began with five states forming the Shanghai Five in 1996. Since then, the SCO has expanded both its agenda and membership. Today, with the inclusion of Iran, the SCO has nine full members. Throughout this journey, the SCO has also sought to enhance its effectiveness by granting different status levels to various countries, leading to full membership in its activities. Currently, the SCO consists of nine full members, three observer states, and 14 countries as dialogue partners (<http://eng.sectesco.org> 2024), comprising 26 nations within the SCO framework. Is the SCO a security bloc for this region? Different perspectives may yield different answers to this question.

This study argues that, despite Western countries perceiving the SCO as a security bloc, it primarily focuses on maintaining the non-traditional security of its members. The SCO is widely recognized as a unique regional international organization. While Western organizations are seen as pro-democracy, non-Western organizations are often viewed as less committed to democracy. The SCO has faced criticism for allegedly supporting authoritarianism in its region. According to Western democratic indicators, the SCO and its members generally do not promote democracy within their countries or the region. Non-Western countries have expressed concerns about the selective application of "democracy," "freedom," and "rule of law" by Western nations, particularly when enforcing sanctions against non-Western countries. The SCO highlights terrorism, extremism, and separatism as critical threats to the region. These threats and others are significant issues that member states can subjectively define based on their sovereignty. To address these threats, the SCO advocates for mutual recognition in identifying them, and its consensus-based decision-making process also reinforces the narrative of regime security and critiques of authoritarianism.

Since its establishment, the developments and changes in the SCO's agenda have been closely tied to the priorities of its members. In this regard, it is acknowledged that China's main priority has been to foster friendly relations with its Central Asian neighbors and to ensure border security with CATM and Russia, especially in light of developments in Xinjiang-Uyghur. The roles or claims of CATM within the SCO should be noticed. The CATM situation in the SCO primarily relates to its relationships with China and Russia (Dadabaev, 2014, p. 103). In this context, the SCO also addresses the traditional security needs of CATM, either directly or indirectly, against China and Russia. Additionally, the organization's effectiveness is believed to diminish since the SCO's enlargement policy does not sufficiently deepen integration. This issue arises from Russia's and China's differing priorities regarding the SCO and their competition.

This study is divided into three chapters, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter evaluates the SCO's identity. The second chapter discusses the main agendas influencing the SCO's identity and development concerning its membership. The third chapter examines regime security, or the non-Western and non-traditional security perspective, through relevant examples. The conclusion offers a general and comprehensive evaluation that answers the questions raised throughout the study.

2. Who Is The SCO?

The importance of Regional International Organizations (RIOs) has rapidly increased since the 1980s, fueled by globalization, the decline of American hegemony, and various global economic crises (Cooper & Stubbs, 2017, p. 616). Efforts to address financial problems have become increasingly essential, as they offer a protective mechanism by keeping customs gates open (Gurbunova & Komarov, 2017, p. 230). In this context, Asia has recently been equipped with more multilateral institutions and mechanisms than ever before (Bisley, 2019, p. 221). The SCO can be included in this process.

The countries leading the SCO share similar priorities and have developed areas of cooperation stemming from the Shanghai Five. China has played a pivotal role in the historical journey of the SCO (Yuan 2010: 857-859). Additionally, the SCO was perceived as a means to address practical and traditional threats faced by its founding states. The positive development in Russia-China relations (Samokhvalov, 2018, p. 35) has facilitated the emergence of the SCO and allowed it to expand into other areas. Furthermore, the pursuit of multilateralism by both countries can be interpreted as a form of anti-American sentiment. In this context, American unilateralism and its opposition to NATO's expansion have accelerated the SCO's development. It can be argued that the American stance, characterized by the "new world order" policy or discourse, compels or encourages China and Russia to collaborate closely. This dynamic has been a critical driving factor for the SCO (Komaiko, 2009, p. 42).

The SCO is a RIO that emerged in Eurasia during the post-Cold War period when the Soviet Union lost its military and political control over Central Asia states. The security gap resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union created new opportunities for the West, Turkey, China, Iran, and India, sparking a new race for influence over the Eurasian landmass. Western countries, particularly the United States, made significant strides in engaging with the region until the launch of the war against the Taliban in 2001. Russia and China perceived the American war on terrorism as a new threat to the region and agreed to enhance cooperation (Russo and Garich, 2017, p. 331). Thus, after the American operation in Afghanistan, the development of the SCO has accelerated.

The main organs of the SCO are the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of State Ministers or Heads of Institutions, the Council of National Representatives, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), and the Secretariat. Among these central bodies, RATS and the Secretariat are recognized as the two permanent bodies of the SCO (SCO 2022). The Secretariat's headquarters is in Beijing, while RATS's is in Tashkent. If we examine RATS's structure in more detail, it was established to combat the "three evils" during the Shanghai Five Process (Chung, 2006, pp. 5-7). RATS, reflecting the SCO's perspective on security, is considered the main body facing criticism for allegedly supporting authoritarian regimes, particularly from Westerners. Through RATS, member states have developed a unique method of collaboration by sharing information and intelligence and cooperating on issues such as identification, location, and punishment (Aris, 2009b, pp. 467-468). Therefore, RATS serves as the SCO's apparatus for regime security.

The atmosphere generated by the Color Revolutions facilitated RATS' swift development. Each member country defines terrorism and threats based on its own ideology. A unique aspect of the SCO is that these threats are grounded in the principle of mutual recognition (Wallace, 2014, p. 220). This principle means that what one member defines as terrorism

becomes terrorism for all members. In line with the task assigned by SCO members, RATS collaborates with the security forces and bureaucracies of member countries to create terrorist lists and identify terrorists and terrorist activities. To ensure the efficiency of these tasks, regular exercises must be conducted at various levels (Ward & Hackett, 2006, p. 1). In principle, all decisions within the SCO are made according to the consensus procedure. However, there can be exceptions to this principle. For example, according to Article 16 of the SCO Charter, a decision to terminate a member's membership is the only exception to the consensus procedure (Chung, 2006, p. 5).

The search for solutions to security needs against non-traditional threats has been crucial to the SCO's purpose. In this regard, the SCO acts as an RIO to address these threats. Populist politicians from both the right and left criticize international organizations as being undemocratic, politically biased, and harmful to national sovereignty. Additionally, as public perception of international organizations declines, the democratic deficit may increase, resulting in diminished trust in authority and legitimacy (Dellmuth & Tallberg 2021, pp. 1292-1295). In this regard, the SCO has multiple identities encompassing rivalries, interests, and specific issues rather than a singular identity (Aris and Snetkov, 2013, pp, 202-226). While the SCO does not address human security in the same way that Western nations do, it can still be viewed as a peacekeeper in the Eurasian region within its operational scope (Aris, 2012, pp. 451-476).

The SCO has a different security perspective from most Western countries. Russia and China see the region as their backyard, believing that no external power should be allowed there (Çolakoğlu, 2004). The concept of "regime change" disguised as democracy promotion has been a significant source of distrust among China, Russia, and the West. Consequently, countries in the region, particularly the CATM, tend to exercise caution when implementing disruptive reforms, favoring stability. While Russia extends a security umbrella to its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (see CSTO 2024) members, the SCO provides greater political and institutional security (regime security) to its members. The SCO has gradually expanded to include India, Pakistan, and Iran without significantly compromising its consensus-building mechanism. Despite initial reservations about this expansion, the SCO has become more relevant in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. In practice, the SCO represents the most extensive and distinct security cooperation in the non-Western world, grounded in a classical realist understanding of international politics. This approach positions the SCO as a new model for the developing world in light of the declining liberal international order, which remains an open question. The SCO's enlargement policy demonstrates that the SCO can serve as an alternative illiberal international order, at least in Eurasia.

3. SCO Enlargement Implications

The SCO has geographically limited itself to the region known as Eurasia. Since its establishment, the SCO can be regarded as a significant RIO due to the increased number of members with various statuses and the expansion of the agendas included in its integration. The SCO influences global policy as an RIO that comprises four nuclear powers and nearly half of the world's population and economy. China and Russia played a decisive role in the enlargement of the SCO. While Russia supports enlargement, China prefers a gradual approach, advocating for the completion of integration among candidate countries before full membership is granted. Those who defend the Russian perspective against the Chinese argue that any enlargement will diminish the organization's effectiveness, claiming that it will

remarkably reduce China's influence (Roy, 2012, pp. 645-648). Expansions illustrate the competition between China and Russia within the organization (Haas, 2016: 380). This study addresses the issue of enlargement at two levels: first, in terms of fulfilling new agendas, and second, regarding membership enlargement.

The aims of the SCO can be evaluated through its agendas and official documents. It is emphasized that the SCO is not an organization established against third parties. Instead, it represents Asian integration that facilitates the functioning of authoritarian regimes, broadens and deepens its agendas and membership, and differs significantly from Western examples (Aris 2009a: 451-467). Initially, the SCO had a narrow security agenda, officially expanding in 2003 to include commercial and development issues (Ward & Hackett, 2006, p. 2). These issues began to transform into concrete projects in 2004 and 2005. Various countries have been granted observer status, and over 120 concrete projects have been implemented, such as establishing the Inter-Bank and Business Council (Norling & Swanström, 2007, pp. 431-432). Additionally, the Energy Club, initiated by Russia, has taken on responsibilities including resource extraction, distribution, energy diplomacy, coordination of infrastructure investments, collaboration on energy security, and management of energy issues (Movkebaeva, 2013, pp. 80-87).

China's energy demands and Russia's energy surplus influence the relationship between the two countries. Relations with China are crucial to Russia's foreign policy strategy, often termed energy diplomacy (Xu & Reisinger, 2018). Specifically, Russia's Western embargo due to its actions in Syria and Ukraine significantly fosters these positive relations. Without this situation, it is argued that Russia would compete with China instead of cooperating with Central Asia (Skalamera, 2017, p.124). Conversely, some in Russia believe poor relations with the West are only temporary (Lukin, 2016, p. 580). In this context, China and Russia describe their relationship as a multidimensional partnership, which is not an alliance. China traditionally resists forming alliances to avoid antagonizing third parties. Therefore, interpreting the SCO as an alliance is merely an interpretation. The SCO serves multiple purposes simultaneously, and official documents prefer the terminology of partnership or cooperation over alliance. Unlike most Western organizations, the SCO does not establish a new dominance pool (Ambroiso, 2017, pp. 110-156).

The values of the Shanghai Spirit have significantly influenced the agendas and activities of the SCO. These values, which form the foundation of the SCO's development story, are based on five key concepts: trust, communication, solidarity, coexistence, and common interest (Chung, 2004, pp. 990-993). In fact, as with other organizations, cooperation in new areas has become more achievable as successes are recognized. Since the establishment of the SCO, the pursuit of security cooperation and later economic and commercial initiatives has begun yielding tangible results. For instance, in 2003, targets were set to ensure the free movement of goods, services, capital, and technology within the SCO region (Ward & Hackett, 2006, p. 2).

Although agenda expansion concerns all organizations when aligned with shared interests, the reasons for boosting membership can vary. This also applies to the SCO (Roy, 2012, pp. 645-648). Despite differing opinions, reforms led to the establishment of the SCO dialogue partnership status in 2009 and new membership rules in 2010. To become a full member, candidates must meet several conditions: they must be an observer or dialogue partner, be located in Eurasia, maintain diplomatic relations with existing members, have active

commercial, economic, and humanitarian ties with those members, not be subject to UN sanctions, and not be involved in a war. Based on these criteria, India and Pakistan, observers since 2005, applied for full membership. By 2017, the process was complete, and they became full members of the SCO (Müller, 2018, p. 200). China balanced Russia's support for India with the backing of Pakistan. The CATM also welcomed adding new members to SCO (Haas, 2016, p. 380). Initially, Iran was not granted full membership. In 2023, during the summit hosted by India, Iran completed the process and achieved full membership status

4. Promotion of Regime Security and Stability

It is emphasized that authoritarian regimes have been rising recently due to global economic crises, indicating a concerning trend. The SCO has been criticized for acting as a "protector of authoritarian regimes," particularly under the leadership of China and Russia (Kneuer et al., 2018). India's membership, despite being a democratic country, has not changed the perception that the SCO is a club of authoritarian regimes. The SCO lacks priorities or agendas for democratizing regimes, unlike Western or liberal organizations (Aris, 2009a, pp. 451-467). Although not explicitly stated, the idea of the SCO as a protector of authoritarian regimes can be viewed as a criticism of China's and Russia's dominant roles, primarily established in opposition to American or Western supremacy. The attitude of the SCO and its members can also be viewed as a reaction against attempts like NATO's expansion, the US presence in Central Asia via Afghanistan, support for the Color Revolutions, and the identification of an 'axis of evil' (Baubek, Anna & Adil, 2015, p. 512). The principle of mutual recognition is a key reason why the SCO is often seen as an authoritarian club. Through this principle, any group or event recognized by one member as terrorism or a threat is treated similarly by other members (Aris, 2009b, pp. 467-468). RATS, the body responsible for ensuring regime security within the SCO, is tasked with fostering cooperation among its members to address threats, especially terrorism, as defined by the organization (Aris, 2009b, pp. 469-470). RATS can be viewed as a response to the color revolutions that gained traction with American support, which are seen as Western interference in the illiberal regimes of Eurasia.

The SCO provides effective governance as a regional and functional organization combating terrorism. RATS participates in various activities, including joint military exercises and academic conferences, to develop the skills of SCO members. For instance, the SCO's efforts against terrorism are viewed as quite successful (Xianghong, 2019, p. 105; Finley, 2019, pp. 4-6; Rodríguez-Merino, 2019, pp. 27-28). The CATM of the SCO is backed by China and Russia, which helps maintain their authoritarian governance due to the SCO's influence. Evaluations suggest that the 'three evils' represent Uighur Muslims for China, separatists like those in Chechnya for Russia, and opposition groups against primordialism for other minor members (Rothacher, 2008, pp. 68-73). In particular, China's Central Asian policy, including investments and diplomatic relations, has promoted authoritarianism (Sharshenova & Crawford, 2017, p. 454). Some Western observers perceive the SCO as a way for China and Russia to counterbalance the U.S., serve as an exit strategy for China, and pursue an illiberal order without American influence (Aris, 2009b, pp. 458-460; Zhao, 2018, pp. 1-17).

The primary function of the SCO is its role as a mechanism for security, which has continued to evolve since its establishment. However, there is concern regarding the SCO's distancing from issues like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and human security (Aris, 2012, pp. 451-476). The R2P perspective of the SCO, particularly that of China and Russia, is

currently being tested in the context of the Syrian crisis. Both Russia and China reject an interventionist approach, relying instead on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to prevent potential intervention in Syria, viewing the crisis as an internal matter. Additionally, the SCO can be regarded as a regional peacekeeper. Through the SCO, CATM benefits from protection against external threats, which helps safeguard against internal threats. The Shanghai Spirit, or principles adopted by the SCO, enables these relatively small member states to balance against China's influence compared to Russia, which often displays an interventionist attitude. Although China's primary focus is not on democratization, it emphasizes mutual respect for political regimes in various contexts. It can be seen as the most critical assurance for potential steps toward democratization.

For example, some reforms were made in Uzbekistan following the constitutional referendum held in April 2023. The people of Uzbekistan embraced their "new democratic achievements" with a support rate of over 90% (AA 2024; BBC Türkçe 2024). Although this vote and transformation were not driven by a direct request or pressure from the SCO, they contributed to the foundation for such reforms. Additionally, analyses have shown that these reforms will positively impact other Central Asian countries (Pirinççi 2024). This contribution highlights the issue of the SCO's role in enhancing security and welfare for CATM in Uzbekistan. Overall, the SCO can be said to contribute indirectly and positively to the gradual development of democratic progress.

Uzbekistan recognized the importance of SCO's support in the early 2000s. After 9/11, American military bases and pressure on the regime became significant issues. Uzbekistan signed an agreement to support U.S. forces. The Uzbek regime benefited from Western support until the color revolutions. The Andijan Event, during which the Uzbek government severely cracked down on demonstrations, is also known as the Andijan Massacre. During and after these events, the SCO indirectly supported the Uzbek regime (Cooley, 2008, pp. 68-76).

In the same case, we can see the SCO's approach to R2P. In May 2005, Uzbek security forces opened fire on hundreds of demonstrators, causing a rift in Uzbekistan's relations with the West and leading to various sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S. About two months later, the Uzbek government officially expelled the U.S. military from the Karshi-Khanabad base due to this pressure. During this time, Russia and China strongly supported the Uzbek government in response to the events in Andijan. By the end of 2006, the U.S. had withdrawn from Uzbekistan, and Tashkent joined the Russian-led CSTO. The Uzbek government expelled the U.S. military presence and many foreign-funded NGOs operating in the region, including Human Rights Watch, the Open Society Foundation, Freedom House, and the National Democratic Institute. The credibility of U.S.-sponsored NGOs in promoting democracy and human rights has been questioned, as regime-controlled media in Central Asia openly criticized the U.S. for applying double standards (Cooley, 2019, p. 601).

China's approach to R2P is generally based on strict Westphalian sovereignty. For China, the priority of sovereignty remains unchanged in all kinds of international legal discourse (Berelli, 2018). According to China's leadership, collective security initiatives should conform to the UN Charter. Teitt (2008) explains China's perspective: "One of the most outspoken champions of traditional interpretations of sovereignty and non-interference, China might be expected to take issue with a principle that shifts the emphasis from sovereign rights to responsibilities and holds that a state's right to conduct its internal affairs without external interference does not override a population's right to fundamental human rights protection."

A critical security mechanism for the SCO is the "mutual recognition principle." According to this principle, if a member country considers an issue a threat, all other members accept it. Therefore, when any member defines an activity as terrorism or a threat, it also gains the support of other SCO members, directly or indirectly. The SCO addresses the issue of terrorism without adequately examining its transnational nature. Although the terrorist groups that threaten member states are primarily trained abroad and receive financial support from outside sources, the mutual recognition principle can be problematic (Komaiko, 2009, p. 42). Furthermore, it is not surprising that SCO members and other post-Soviet regional organizations often act as protectors of authoritarian regimes, as they are not liberal democracies. It can be argued that SCO members support and protect authoritarian regimes because they are either authoritarian states or countries lacking Western-style democracy (Brownlee, 2017, pp. 1326-1344).

According to Hou (2023, pp. 1-3), Central Asia is not merely a bridge for China or its ambitious BRI project. If we set aside Russia, China is trying to deepen its integration with Central Asian countries, particularly in trade and economics. Hou refers to this goal as the Europeanization of Central Asia. Conversely, China's ambitions regarding the BRI pursue an illiberal world order. Jim and Ikenberry (2023, pp. 1-31) argue that China is a stakeholder in the world order and mainly attempts to integrate institutions organized under U.S. leadership. Chinese leaders consistently emphasize principles such as "never pursue hegemony," "win-win logic," and "logic of differences." In the case of the SCO, these principles and Chinese attitudes can be observed.

In the SCO, member states do not have military bases in each other's countries (Schobell, 2023, p. 3). The CATM benefits not only from the rivalries and balance of power between China and Russia but also from the rivalry between China and India (Jash, 2023). For the CATM, the threat recognition procedure guarantees their sovereignty, and it seems unlikely that sovereign equality can be achieved in any other way. In Western organizations, cooperation mainly occurs under the leadership and objectives of great or hegemonic powers. While the SCO does not significantly deviate from this pattern, its ability to recognize and identify threats provides advantages for the CATM. Initially, SCO's role was primarily focused on counterterrorism. However, as it developed, the SCO has incorporated many new agendas to become a leading RIO. The major powers in the SCO, Russia and China can address their concerns about security and survival. For example, China engages with the SCO primarily as a strategy for economic penetration into Central Asia (Pantucci & Yau, 2022, pp. 28-41). Conversely, the SCO's roles in counterterrorism and security are significantly more critical for the CATM. Central Asian leaders are less concerned about sovereignty and regime security (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022, p. 618) and confidence stemming from the resources obtained through the SCO.

Alternatively, Russia has established the CSTO, a security and defense organization of which the Central Asian states are also members. In January 2022, Russian military intervention in an internal issue in Kazakhstan was observed within the scope of this organization. Russia has soft power superiority due to its strong ties with Central Asian countries (especially Kazakhstan) through historical, language, education, media, culture, and similar factors (Hodson, 2022, pp. 469-494).

When considered both within and outside the context of the SCO, this situation offers advantages for Central Asian leaders in balancing Russia and China, and vice versa, while

aiding in nation and state-building. The mutual recognition, the subjective nature of recognition, and the meanings that China and Russia assign to the SCO may instill confidence in the CATM, providing a foundation for improving welfare levels and initiating political reforms in the future, as seen in Uzbekistan. For regime security, the SCO primarily promotes internet policies, trade policies, and stability for its member states. The SCO region is emerging as a new economic development center, leading to increased welfare levels among its members. When considered alongside regime security, this rise in welfare may also bolster democratic demands. Furthermore, the Western interventionist approach has, in many instances, prompted an increase in authoritarian tendencies, particularly noted in Afghanistan and the aftermath of the color revolutions.

5. Conclusion

The SCO serves as a security bloc for its members and beyond. This bloc should be assessed alongside the SCO's unique identity. In this context, the SCO is recognized as a different RIO than its Western counterparts when addressing non-traditional threats. Discussions surrounding the SCO often revolve around regime security and promoting authoritarianism. It is widely accepted that SCO member states are, to some extent, authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies. Especially Western interventionist democratic promotion pushes the SCO to develop a unique "regime security" framework agenda. This agenda is closely interconnected with other agendas. The SCO is expected not to prioritize democratic expansion or promotion. The SCO has crafted a response to regime security in light of U.S. initiatives during and after the color revolutions. As with all government types, authoritarian regimes' primary security concern is undoubtedly preserving their administration and protecting their achievements.

It is widely accepted that assessments viewing the SCO as a protector and supporter of authoritarian regimes have some validity. In response to these criticisms, it is also true that SCO members do not prioritize democracy or any other political regime. The values that enabled the establishment of the SCO, starting with the Shanghai Five and articulated by the Shanghai Spirit, emphasize non-interference in internal affairs, respect for diverse social, political, and economic systems, and the importance of sovereignty. Additionally, values emerged during the SCO's development process, such as mutual recognition, independence, and autonomy in defining threats and establishing the RATS. In this regard, we can see that the foundational principles of the SCO have never focused on democratic values. However, the SCO can create a secure and stable environment for nation-building, which could enhance the democratic aspirations of people, especially in Central Asia. This study uniquely highlights the indirect role of regime security in promoting democratization, as briefly evaluated in the case of Uzbekistan.

Even if we recognize the SCO's role in protecting authoritarian regimes, we must acknowledge that this reflects a reactionary attitude. Thus, the SCO's behavior can be seen as providing regime security for its members. The policies and discourses of the New World Order, initiated by the U.S. immediately after the Cold War, had already alarmed the founding members of the SCO before its establishment. In the early 2000s, direct Western support for the Color Revolutions contributed to the revitalization of the SCO, which was losing its momentum and significance for Russia and China. This expansion of democracy is also viewed as American expansionism and hegemony. Russia prioritizes halting NATO expansion, while

China focuses on the absolute dominance of the CCP through the one-China policy. Additionally, the leaders of CATM seek to preserve their status quo against external attempts.

We can understand the SCO's roles in democratic development through the CATM, as in the Uzbekistan case. While regime security is a priority and common interest for all members of the SCO, it receives relatively more emphasis from weaker or smaller members such as CATM. The CATM within the SCO can develop politically and economically by leveraging rivalries among SCO members. Due to Chinese investments, we can identify sovereignty, political stability, and economic development as the most crucial factors for CATM's democratization. The SCO emerges as an organization that addresses these concerns. Thus, we can conclude that some aspects of the SCO that may initially appear harmful could contribute to medium and long-term democratization.

As a result, it is evident that the SCO has established an order in its own region. This order largely depends on the security services it provides within the SCO principles and regime security context. SCO members can avoid Western interventionist approaches thanks to the Shanghai Spirit and strategic agendas like the economy, trade, energy collaboration, and expansion policy. This process is evaluated within the scope of regime security in this study. In the environment provided by regime security, especially the relatively small Central Asian members, find the opportunity to increase their welfare. The SCO fosters an environment of trust and self-confidence, creating opportunities for democratic reforms, exemplified by Uzbekistan. While it may not yet align with Western standards, one could argue that the SCO has indirectly aided democratization by enhancing regime security in a broader context.

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Extended Summary

Rethinking the Regime Security and Democratic Development through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The SCO is an RIO that emerged in Eurasia during the post-Cold War period. Unlike Western RIO, the SCO is an unconventional international organization focused on countering non-traditional threats. SCO's main priority is to ensure regime security against the threats posed by three evils: terrorism, extremism, and separatism. The three evils and other threats are significant issues that members define subjectively with complete sovereignty. Although the SCO has not yet reached a consensus on traditional security cooperation, it has effectively defended its members from non-traditional security threats. The issue of regime security is discussed more among authoritarian regimes than democratic ones. Generally, a relationship exists between political systems and security priorities, with regime type determining these priorities. While the primary priorities of each SCO member are discussed, all of them benefit from the SCO in terms of regime security.

The SCO is recognized as an organization that maintains the established order through its threat definitions and the security priorities of its members. For CATM, it acts as a shield against color revolutions or any opposition to what are considered democratic demands in liberal democracies. According to the SCO Charter, each state holds one vote in decision-making. Decisions are made based on consensus, except when terminating a member's membership in the SCO. The SCO emphasizes that it does not officially target third parties and prioritizes the sovereignty of its member states above all else.

Additionally, when the principle of mutual recognition is included in consensus-based decision-making, the SCO's solidarity regarding regime security becomes more evident. This principle, which plays a more significant role in combating terrorism and other threats, leads Western academics to view the SCO as a protector of authoritarian regimes. This study argues that the SCO maintains non-traditional security (or regime security) for its members. The SCO is widely accepted as a unique and different Regional International Organization (RIO). While Western RIOs are often seen as pro-democracy, non-Western organizations are perceived as less interested in protecting democracy. The SCO identifies three critical threats: terrorism, extremism, and separatism. These three threats and other issues can be defined subjectively by member states, each exercising full sovereignty.

The search for solutions to security needs against non-traditional threats has been crucial to the existence of the SCO. In this context, the SCO is a regional organization that is against these challenges. Populist politicians from both the right and left criticize international organizations as being undemocratic, having double standards, or being politically biased and harmful to sovereignty. The SCO has multiple identities, encompassing rivalries, interests, and various specific issues, rather than a single identity. Although the SCO does not approach the issue of human security in the same way as Western countries, it can be regarded as a peacekeeper in Eurasia.

Not all SCO members share the same motivations for enlargement. China favors deeper integration, while Russia aims to weaken the Chinese influence in the SCO by including new members. China argues that the enlargement should be based on the candidate states' statuses within the SCO for some time. Additionally, while China believes it will bear the cost, Russia expects new members to help reduce China's burden by sharing expenses. Despite differing opinions, reforms facilitated the SCO's dialogue partnership status in 2009 and established a new membership category in 2010. To become a full member, candidates must meet several conditions: being an observer or dialogue partner, being located in Eurasia, maintaining diplomatic relations with other members, having active commercial, economic, and humanitarian ties with them, not being subject to UN sanctions, and not being at war. Based on these criteria, the SCO continues to expand its membership and influence. CATM also welcomes the participation of new members.

When considered within and outside the SCO context, this situation offers advantages for Central Asian leaders in balancing relations between Russia and China while advancing their nation and state-building efforts. Mutual recognition, the subjective nature of that recognition, and the differing meanings attributed to the SCO by China and Russia can enhance confidence in the CATM. This, in turn, may provide a foundation for increasing welfare levels and implementing political reforms in the future, similar to what has occurred in Uzbekistan. This is mainly due to the SCO's role in offering internet policy, trade policy, and stability for its member states. As the SCO region evolves into a global center for economic development, member states are experiencing improvements in their welfare levels. When assessed alongside regime security, increased welfare can potentially lead to rising democratic demands. However, it is noted that a Western interventionist approach has often counterproductively heightened authoritarian tendencies, particularly in Afghanistan and following the color revolutions.

Although regime security is a priority and common interest for all members of the SCO, it is emphasized more for the CATM, which are relatively weaker or smaller members. The CATM in the SCO can develop politically and economically by benefiting from rivalries within the organization. Thanks to Chinese investments, we can identify sovereignty, political stability, and economic development as the most essential factors for democratization in the CATM. The SCO positions itself as an organization that addresses these issues. Therefore, the SCO will lay the groundwork for democratization in the medium and long term, primarily through its contributions to economic development and stability.