

# Merve ERKAN AYDIN



Candidate, Liberal Arts, Insistute of Global Studies, Shanghai University, merve.erkanaydin@gmail.com



Prof. Dr., Liberal Arts, Department of History, Shanghai University, liuyi1980@shu.edu.cn.

#### Citation

Erkan-Aydın. M. & Liu Y. (2025). Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Origin, Transformation, and Discussions on Expansion(s). Bölge Çalışmaları Dergisi, 4(1), 28-57.

#### Article Type

Research Article

#### Article History

Submitted: 6 January 2025 Accepted: 16 February 2025

# Plagiarism/Ethic

article has been reviewed by at least two referees and and it has been confirmed that it plagiarism-free and complies with research and publication ethics.

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# **Publisher**

Social Sciences University of Ankara

# **Abstract**

This article mainly examines the establishment, transformation, and expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In this respect, the article focuses on the four cumulative steps. The first of these investigates the security concerns of the states that paved the way for the Shanghai Five meetings. The second one reveals the organization's horizontal and vertical expansions have taken shape since 1996. The third of these concerns the opportunities, challenges, and controversies arising from the expansions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Relatedly, the fourth step questions Türkiye's potential membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, based on the discussions about expansions. The article's main argument is that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was initially organized with security concerns, has transformed into a more comprehensive and geopolitical-oriented international organization over time. The article supposes that this situation has brought new opportunities, challenges, and discussions to the organization, including Türkiye's potential membership.

Keywords: Shanghai Five, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Security, Transformation, Expansion.

# Introduction

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 through an agreement signed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization's origins date back to the first Shanghai Five meeting in 1996, when the leaders of the five countries, except Uzbekistan, came together. The initial aim of SCO was mainly to ensure border security by peacefully resolving border disputes and combating transnational radical, separatist, and terrorist elements together. Over time, the organization has experienced intense transformation and expansion in terms of its focus areas and the countries it includes. Thus, on the one hand, member states have sought to deepen their cooperation in several fields by going beyond the concept of security. On the other hand, over the past twenty years since its establishment, SCO has accepted new observers, dialogue partners, and members.

The sharing of knowledge, experience, and resources among states is an important part of modern international relations. Dealing with various problems or developing their capacities in any field alone may sometimes be impossible or extremely costly for states. Therefore, states often cooperate with other states in various fields to overcome a negative situation or to improve the opportunities provided by a positive situation. Functionalist and neofunctionalist views argue that cooperation efforts among states, which start in a technical field, can deepen (ramification) and spread to other fields timely (spill-over). Burley and Mattli offer that cooperation in technical fields may increase the communication and interdependence of members of the organization and thus reduce the possibility of war. Names like Mitrany, Keohane, and Nye, on the other hand, state that increasing interdependence and benefits may go beyond national interests over time and weaken the concept of sovereignty (Şehitoğlu and Karakuş, 2023: 300-303).

In terms of the establishment, transformation, and expansion of SCO, there are compatible and incompatible aspects with these perspective. On the one hand, it can be argued that the concepts of ramification and spill-over are in line with SCO's horizontal (diversification of areas and focus) and vertical (increase in the number of members and geography) expansion. SCO's cooperation story, which initially started in the field of security and with only five members, has expanded over time to include many different areas, ten members, fourteen dialogue partners, and two observers. Moreover, Shanghai Five's border security attempts, which were largely successful, have laid the foundation for SCO's further cooperation efforts. However, unlike the mentioned approaches, SCO is ultimately not an integration effort that aims to distance itself from national identities and transfer their



members' sovereignties, but a quest for cooperation and solidarity that seeks to strengthen these. The emphasis on "respect for soverignty" and "non-interference in internal affairs" in almost every documents of the organization is the most basic indicator of this claim.

Some concepts in the domestic and foreign policy of China, among the organization's driving forces, are also in line with SCO's transformation and expansion. For example, comprehensive national security and collective security focus not only on traditional security issues, but also on wide range of non-traditional issues from economy to terrorism, from culture to natural resources, from environment to technology (Kwan, 2024). Accordingly, SCO's rapid horizontal and vertical expansions point out not only a shift away from security, but also a more extensive perception of it. Coming economic issues to the fore in SCO, especially after the announcement of One Belt One Road (OBOR), has strengthened this argument. Also, partnership diplomacy emerges as a concept that is more flexible, mutually beneficial, and offers a wide range of cooperation, unlike traditional alliance relations (Men and Liu, 2015). This concept can help make sense of SCO's expansions to include countries with different interests and even conflicts. Moreover, the discourse of a "community of shared future for mankind", which is addressed by President Xi Jinping frequently, encourages noninterference in internal affairs and envisages equal rights and responsibilities for all member states (Jiang, 2018). This perspective enables SCO to realize its horizontal and vertical expansions in a way that strengthens the sovereignty of member states, contrary to expectations of functionalist/neofunctionalist approaches.

Therefore, this article will focus on the establishment, transformation, and expansion processes of the organization, to understand the cooperation efforts of SCO better. In this context, the article consists of three parts. The first section will examine border problems and other regional security concerns, which brought the leaders of the five countries together in the Shanghai Five meetings. In the second part, member states' efforts to diversify and expand cooperation areas and actors they interacted with, in Shanghai Five and SCO will be revealed. The third part will interpret the expansions of SCO and Türkiye's possible membership in light of the discussions in the literature. The article's main argument is that SCO, which initially set out with security concerns, has transformed into a more comprehensive and geopolitical-oriented international organization timely. It is assumed in the article that this situation has led to new opportunities and challenges, which are specific to the organization.

Bölge Çalışmaları Dergisi



# 1. The Background of SCO: Border Issues and Three Evil

On April 26, 1996, the heads of state of China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan met in Shanghai, China. This meeting was a significant milestone as the first step of Shanghai Five and its successor, SCO. The content and scope of this meeting revealed traces of a security-centered understanding among the participating states. Therefore, two main agendas dominated the first summit of Shanghai Five: Long-standing border problems and multidimensional security concerns among neighboring countries. Accordingly, leaders' main objectives were to resolve the border problems inherited from the Soviet Union peacefully and to establish a cooperative and trustworthy environment in the border regions. From this perspective, it is reasonable to argue that security concerns in the post-Soviet environment, especially border disputes and perceptions of security threats, represented the initial step in the formation of SCO.

The border problems among the Central Asian countries, Russia, and China can mainly be classified into two categories. The first was the border disputes between The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China, dated back to the late 17th century and were particularly acute in the 20th century(Liu, 1967: 18-25; Robinson, 1972: 1175-1177). Some of these disputes emerged as issues to be resolved among the newly independent states and the Beijing government after the collapse of the USSR. The second was the disputes among the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, declared independence in 1991. It could find intense traces of the Soviet administration in the source of these disputes among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Some of these border disputes were resolved peacefully and expeditiously. However, others caused deep disagreements among states, sometimes leading to bloody conflicts.

Border disputes and conflicts played a significant role in Sino-Russian relations over the past few centuries. These disputes, dating back to Tsarist Russia and the Qing Dynasty, were largely ignored at the beginning of the Cold War thanks to the harmonization in the communist world. However, the tensions in relations from the mid-1950s onwards and the disputes on the Xinjiang border in the early 1960s brought the border issues back into the table(Cheng, 2013: 3; Tang, 1969: 409). The border negotiations, beginning in 1964, focused on the 52,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land on the Pamir Mountains on the Xinjiang-Tajikistan border in the west and the disputes in the Manchuria region, including the Wusuri (Ussuriysky) River and its surroundings in the east. However, the negotiations, in which Beijing argued that the Soviets should return more than 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of land acquired through unfair treaties during the



Qing Dynasty to China peacefully, failed. Even, by March 1969, border disputes escalated into low-intensity armed conflict in parts of Xingjiang and Manchuria, particularly on Zhenbao (Damanski) Island in the Wusuri River (Haines, 2014: 585; Tang, 1969: 409-412).

The conflict on Zhenbao Island ended when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and USSR Premier Alexei Kosygin agreed in September 1969 to hold new border negotiations (Mott and Kim, 2006: 168-169). Although the border negotiations, took place between October 1969 and June 1973, did not produce any official results, they significantly reduced the conflicts in the border regions (Tagirova, 2022: 131-133). The development that partially resolved the border disputes was the call of USSR Leader Mikhail Gorbachev for renegotiation in July 1986 and Beijing's positive response in February 1987 (Rosen, 1987: 50). After approximately four years of negotiations, an agreement was signed in May 1991 on the determination of border disputes. This agreement largely resolved the dispute over the eastern borders, with a few exceptions such as Wusuri Island and Abagaitu Islet. Whereas, the disputes over the western borders led to negotiation -and sometimes conflict- between China and the post-USSR countries after the USSR (Cheng, 2013: 10-14).

Border issues after the dissolution of the USSR can be analyzed from two perspectives. The first was the border disputes that post-Soviet countries, including Russia, had with China, inherited from the USSR. Accordingly, the May 1991 border agreement between the USSR and China was ratified by the relevant authorities of Russia and China in 1992 and entered into force (Dmochowski, 2015: 68). However, the dispute over Wusuri Island and Abagaitu Islet remained unclear throughout the 1990s. The complete resolution regarding the eastern border occurred in 2004, when the disputed territories were divided equally as a result of negotiations led by Presidents Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin (Cheng, 2013: 13-15). On the other hand, in the 1980s, efforts were initiated between the USSR and China to resolve problems not only on the eastern border but also on the western border. Nevertheless, after the collapse of the USSR, China's western border problems with this country were divided into four countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

In contrast to the western border, the dispute on the eastern border between Russia and China was a rather limited area, just over 50 km (Cheng, 2013: 11). To resolve this issue, the parties established a joint border demarcation commission in 1992, and a draft agreement was prepared in June 1993. The agreement, signed by the foreign ministers in 1994, was ratified in 1995, and the commission determined the final shape of the western border on September 10, 1998 (Zinberg, 1996: 78; Dmochowski, 2015: 67). Unlike with Russia, China's

border disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan covered a wider area. For example, the disputed areas between China and Kazakhstan, such as the Baimurz Pass and the Sary-Charndy River, totaled more than 2,400 km<sup>2</sup> (Fravel, 2005: 57; BBC News, 1998). Even though Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan denied the existence of border disputes with China at the beginning, Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan became the first country to sign a border agreement with China. The agreements signed in April 1994 and September 1997 ceded 22% of the disputed territories to China and 78% to Kazakhstan (Zheng, 2003; Fravel, 2005: 57).

Similarly, the total area of disputed lands between Kyrgyzstan and China, in Boz Aigyr, Zhanyzher, Erkeshtam Pass, Khan Tengri Peak, and Uzengi-Kush Basin, was almost 4,000 km<sup>2</sup>. This dispute was resolved by two separate agreements signed by the heads of state on July 4, 1996, and August 26, 1999. Thus, despite the reaction of the Kyrgyz opposition, 30% of the disputed areas were left to China and 70% to Kyrgyzstan (Tagirova, 2023: 363; ICG, 2002; Marat, 2012: 128). China's most difficult border dispute with post-Soviet countries was on the Sino-Tajik border. This disagreement mainly involved three disputed territories: The Great Pamirs, the Markansu River, and the Karazak Pass. The disputes over the latter two were resolved by the 1999 border agreement that ceded the entire Karazak Pass and 32% of the Markansu River to Tajikistan (Bitabarova, 2015: 71-72). However, a full resolution in the Greater Pamir Region, which is approximately 28,000 kilometers, was possible in 2010 (Kim and Blank, 2013: 777).

During this period, the border problems among Central Asian countries were more complicated than China's problems with Russia and other Central Asian countries. This was largely due to the USSR's border arrangements ignoring ethnic distinctions and parties' claims on each other's territories after independence. In this process, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan resolved border problems with their neighbors more easily (Zhunisbek, 2018). However, disputes among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, were more complex and even led to armed conflicts sometimes. The disputes in the Fergana Valley and border ambiguities were the focal point of the border problems and provided illegal groups, especially terrorist organizations, with a wide and comfortable field of activity (Baizakova, 2017: 231). This endangered the security of not only these three countries, but also the entire Central Asia and its surroundings.

For example, the main problems between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, sharing more than 1,300 kilometers of border, were border vagueness in the Fergana Valley and western



Tajikistan, the existence of the Tajik-owned Sarvak Enclave in Uzbekistan, the ownership of the Forhad Dam, and the intermingling of the ethnic populations (Gulomov, 2023: 12-13). Tajikistan Civil War (1992-1997), increasing security threats due to the border permeabilities and Uzbek and Tajik leaders' incompatibilities exacerbated the border disputes and made it resolution difficult (Kraudzun, 2012: 182-183; The Monitor, 1998). The resolution attempts, mostly intensified after the Tajikistan Civil War, could be accomplished with three different border agreements signed by leaders in 2000, 2002, and 2018 (CABAR Asia, 2021; Karinbayev, 2020: 119-120). Similarly, Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border problems, which remained unresolved for many years, deeply affected their relations. These problems revolved around the Fergana Valley, enclaves<sup>1</sup>, leased lands/businesses including natural resources and water resources (Baizakova, 2017: 223-225). The weakness of the borders and the flexible nature of the enclaves provided ease of movement for terrorist organizations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and led to disputes among the states. Accordingly, the border negotiations, which first began among the parties in February 2000, could not conclude until January 2023 (Toktogulov, 2018: 100; Imanaliyeva, 2023; ICG, 2002: 16).

As another example, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also had disputes over the sovereignty of the Vorukh Enclave, the West Qalacha(Qayragach/Kayragach), and the Tortgul Reservoir of the Isfara River (Tutumlu, 2021; Mira, 2022: 5). For resolving the problems, the Dushanbe government took the 1924-27 border arrangements as a basis, while the Bishkek government emphasized the 1958-59 arrangements (Baizakova, 2017: 228). Issues such as illegal migration, terrorist activities, and the use of water resources also incited border disputes. In this context, following an inadequate attempt in 1990s, a joint border commission was established in 2000 for the first time and 90% of border problems were resolved by 2024 after many years of efforts (Putz, 2023; ICG, 2002: 18). However, the clashes between citizens and security forces of the parties on the border areas in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2021, 2022, and 2023 openly demonstrated the severity of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border disputes (Baizakova, 2017: 229; HRW, 2023).

In addition to border problems, the need to combat radical elements, especially terrorist organizations, was initially an incentive for Russia, China, and Central Asian countries to come together in SCO. Indeed, while Central Asian countries engaged in economic and political nation-building efforts in the 1990s, they also tried to counter radical elements in their countries. Similarly, Russia and China also faced religious and ethnic-based attacks within their

Sokh, Shokhimardon, Jani-Ayil/Jangail, and Chon-Kara/Kalacha in Kyrgyzstan and Barak in Uzbekistan.

territories. During this period, political instabilities, weak governments, ethnic-religious diversities, economic problems, insecure borders, the spill-over effect of Afghanistan, and the spread of extremist ideologies were effective in strengthening radical/terrorist organizations in the region. In this context, these organizations were in close relations with each other and they posed a security threat not only for one country but also for many countries in and around Central Asia. Therefore, it is natural that combating radicalism, extremism, and terrorism was one of the initial objectives of Shanghai Five, and later SCO (SCO, 2001).

For example, according to the Global Terrorism Database, there were 133 terrorist attacks in China between 1989 and 2001, killing 216 people and injuring 968 others (START, 2024). In the same period, 162 people were killed and 440 people were injured in attacks by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which aims to establish an independent Islamic state in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (Kam, 2016: 481). Considering the allegations on ETIM-Taliban relations throughout the 1990s, Beijing's desire to cooperate on border security and counterterrorism under Shanghai Five (later SCO) can be understood better. Similarly, Russia faced intertwined ethnic and religious threats throughout the 1990s. Most of these threats were the separatist activities of ultranationalist and Islamist groups in the Northern Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria) (Sinai, 2015: 96). Muslim communities that demanded independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially in Chechnya, described these activities as a struggle for independence with religious and national dimensions. However, Russia has defined these as movements with separatist goals, adopting terrorism as a method, and having connections to transnational terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda (Hughes, 2007: 20).

In the 1990s, the biggest security threat to Uzbekistan came from the IMU. This organization, dated back to the Adolat (Justice) Movement founded in 1991 and transformed into a transnational militant group in 1998, had close ties with radical/terrorist organizations such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-i Taliban Party, Haqqani Network, and ETIM (Hanks, 2007: 212). The organization's bloodiest attack in the 1990s was the bombings targeting President Islam Karimov on February 16, 1999, which caused 16 deaths and over 100 injuries (Polat and Butkevich, 2000: 541-542). Moreover, The Islamic Jihad Union, separated from IMU in 2002, had its finances from drug trafficking, human trafficking, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and the Central Asian diasporas (Parker, 2003: 55-56). Likewise, Kyrgyzstan, which includes part of the Fergana Valley, also suffered from radical/terrorist activities. During this period, the biggest security concern for Kyrgyzstan was the IMU militants, who carried out violent

attacks in this country with Taliban and Al-Qaeda support. For example, while IMU militants tried to infiltrate Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1999 and 2000, dozens of Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens and over 100 IMU militants lost their lives in clashes (Weitz, 2004: 512-513).

Kazakhstan was less affected by terrorist threats in the 1990s compared to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, the presence of radical elements like Tableeghi Jamaat and Hizb-ut Tahrir in this country and the destabilizing influence of terrorist organizations in Central Asia pushed the Astana government to be sensitive to transnational radicalism/terrorism (Soliyev, 2016A: 443-444). On the other hand, after independence, Tajikistan emerged as the post-Soviet country where religiously motivated violence was used by radical groups the most. In the Tajikistan Civil War, IMU and Al-Qaeda militants fought together with the Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which aimed to overthrow the government and establish a religious-based regime. Although the IRPT disarmed after the peace agreement in 1997, the party maintained its ties with IMU until the 2000s. Even, some IMU members, who did not accept the peace agreement and wished to continue the armed struggle, later established Jamaat Ansurallah in 2006. This organization eventually collaborated with leading transnational terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida, Taliban, and ETIM (Soliyev, 2016B: 429-430). As can be understood from all these, border disputes were a regional concern not only because of the possibility of inter-state conflicts, but also the risk of giving space to radical groups.

# 2. The Transformation of SCO: Regional and Comprehensive Security

As mentioned, security-related issues dominated the agenda of the first meeting of Shanghai Five and afterward. For instance, at the first summit in Shanghai in April 1996, leaders signed the Agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Field in Border Area. Under this agreement, it was agreed to increase security measures, prevent aggressive activities, limit military operations/exercises, inform each other about these previously, and enhance the information exchanges among security forces (Bakshi, 2001: 165). About three months after the first summit, China and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on the resolution of border problems and this demonstrated the concrete contribution of Shanghai Five meetings to preventing conflicts and stabilizing border regions. Similarly, at the second summit in Moscow a year later, the parties signed the Agreement on Mutual Reductions of Armed Forces in Border Areas. This agreement stipulated that the parties limit their forces in the border areas so that they could only defend themselves and not allow any aggression (Jia,

2001: 26-28; Akman, 2015: 313). Thus, leaders addressed the security relations in border regions with a defensive approach rather than an aggressive manner.

Since the third summit in Astana in July 1998, leaders have emphasized more on economic cooperation and international relations cooperation, in addition to security. As the functionalist and neofunctionalist approaces pointed out, this paved the way for Shanghai Five's transformation into a comprehensive international organization. In this context, firstly, China-Kazakhstan border problems were resolved at this summit (Özdaşlı, 2012: 111). Secondly, as an important step towards the common development goal, it was decided to implement a 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> pipeline project extending from Kazakhstan to Western China (Hansen, 2008: 224). Thirdly, separatism, radicalism, terrorism, and other transnational crimes like drug and arms trafficking were highlighted for the first time as common security threats (De Haas and van der Putten, 2007: 65). Similarly, at the fourth summit in Bishkek, the China-Kyrgyz border issue was resolved, the Bishkek Declaration attributed special importance to counter-terrorism, the establishment of the regional anti-terror structure was decided, and further cooperation on economic issues was stated. This summit's one of the most notable developments was the leaders' shared determination that human rights and other domestic issues should not be a tool for external intervention, in light of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia and the conflict in Afghanistan (Hansen, 2008: 219-220; Bakshi, 2001: 166).

In 2000, with the acceptance of Uzbekistan as an observer to Shanghai Five at the fifth summit in Dushanbe, the organization and expansion phase of these meetings began. Parallelly, unlike the main argument of the functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches, leaders highlighted in the Dushanbe Declaration that Shanghai Five should transform into multidimensional regional cooperation without compromising the sovereignty of members (Shanghai Five, 2000). Indeed, with a joint statement signed on the first day of the summit in Shanghai on June 14-15, 2001, Uzbekistan became the sixth member of Shanghai Five. The next day, leaders of the six countries signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO and officially transformed Shanghai Five into an international organization. In the 11-article establishment declaration, it was pointed out that the purpose of SCO was not to oppose any actor/organization, but to ensure regional security and cooperation based on the security agreements of 1996 and 1997 (SCO, 2001). On the same day, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism was signed and the idea of establishing a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to implement this convention was once again



included in the declaration. Thus, providing member states' security and stability was also the main priority of SCO's first summit.

Accordingly, SCO Charter and Agreement on RATS were signed at the second summit in St. Petersburg in July 2002. Although international security issues, especially counter-terrorism, were the main agenda due to the 9/11 effect and double standards were opposed by pointing to the UN principles in the fight against terrorism, the priorities of further economic cooperation were not ignored either. Also, the Afghanistan conflict, stability of Central Asia, commitment to the one-China policy, dialogue between two Koreas, and India-Pakistan Dialogue were St. Petersburg Declaration's prominent topics (SCO, 2002). Similarly, at the third summit in Moscow in May 2003, steps were taken to strengthen the organization's internal coordination and to establish a common position on international issues. Therefore, SCO bodies' working procedures were regulated, symbols such as the emblem and flag were determined, the organization's first budget was established and increased cooperation among the ministries of transport, economy, culture, foreign policy, and defense was encouraged. Beyond that, it was emphasized that the UN should be restructured in a more pluralistic and fairer way to keep up with the changing world order (SCO, 2003).

The fourth and fifth summits also showed that member states gave increasing importance to diversifying their partners, security, economic cooperation, and international prestige efforts. At the summit in Tashkent in 2004, Mongolia was accepted as an observer, some legal documents regarding the operation of RATS were adopted, a cooperation agreement to prevent drug trafficking was signed and the establishment of economic institutions such as SCO Development Fund and SCO Business Council was envisaged. As a striking emphasis, the Tashkent Declaration underlined the region's stability and security depends on members' economic development and meeting their people's basic needs (SCO, 2004A; SCO, 2004B). Correspondingly, the fifth summit in Astana in 2005 came across the time of the organization's growing international prestige. Indeed, SCO obtained observer status at the UN General Assembly in December 2004 and signed a memorandum of understanding with ASEAN and CIS in April 2005 (Giustozzi and Matveeva, 2008: 1, 20). Also, at this summit, India, Iran, and Pakistan were accepted as observers. Moreover, SCO leaders called on non-regional countries, especially the United States of America (USA), to accelerate their troops's withdrawal from Central Asia and to set a date for this (SCO, 2005).

In line with the functionalist and neofunctionalist approach, SCO, which started out primarily as a security cooperation organization, continued also its efforts to diversify its focus

in the sixth and seventh summits. At the sixth summit in Shanghai in June 2006, a special declaration for the fifth year, an agreement on cooperation in education, and a statement on information security were issued. This summit also prioritized cooperation opportunities in energy, information technologies, transportation, agriculture, infectious diseases, and environment (SCO, 2006: 1). Similarly, at the seventh summit of SCO in Bishkek in August 2007, issues related to peace and security intertwined with the agenda of economic, social, and cultural cooperation. In this context, on the one hand, leaders signed the Treaty on Long-term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation and supported the development of ties with CSTO (CSTO, 2023). On the other hand, issues related to energy cooperation stood out, based on the idea that energy cooperation is the basis for members' sustainable economic growth and security and the Energy Club initiative established in 2007 (SCO, 2007). Moreover, the participation of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, CIS Executive Secretary Vladamir Rushailo, ASEAN Deputy-Secretary General Wilfrido V. Villacorta, and Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov as guests in these summits was a reflection of SCO's quest to expand its international cooperation circle (China Daily, 2006; De Haas and van der Putten, 2007: 68).

A similar situation was also present at the eighth summit. Accordingly, India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia, and Afghanistan participated as observers in SCO summit in Dushanbe in August 2008. Although an agreement was signed on counter-terrorism exercises and a declaration was issued on the smuggling of explosives, arms, and ammunition, the Dushanbe Declaration emphasized that security measures alone are not sufficient for regional stability and highlighted the necessity of diplomacy (SCO, 2008). The declaration's pointing out the balance between economic growth and environmental sustainability and the signing memorandum between SCO Interbank Consortium and Eurasian Development Bank were tangible examples of non-security cooperations. As expected, the agenda of the ninth summit in Yekaterinburg in 2009 was mostly shaped by the global economic crisis that broke out the previous year. In this context, leaders made suggestions to minimize the crisis's side effects in SCO region and to ensure economic recovery. Some of these were "bolstering trade, economic and investment cooperation", "expansion of transport potential", "improving access to world markets", "construction of new factories" and "introduction of innovative and energy saving technologies" (SCO, 2009A). Beyond that, the personnel training agreement for counter-terrorism, the international information security cooperation agreement, and the convention against terrorism showed the ninth summit also focused on new efforts for security cooperation (SCO, 2009B).



Afterward, the summit held in June 2011 in Astana issued a declaration assessing the organization's past decade. In this context, SCO was defined as a bloc-free, transparent, and equality-based organization aiming to ensure multilateral cooperation and security in the Asia-Pacific (SCO, 2011A). Also, the declaration emphasized that cooperation in areas ranging from security to economy, from humanitarian issues to science and technology was deepened in these ten years. Application of Türkiye, which has been part of the Western alliance, to SCO as a dialogue partner was one of the leading developments of the eleventh summit. Moreover, the gathering of member states' premiers in November 2011 to discuss economic developments in SCO region and the world demonstrated once again that SCO is not only a security-centered organization (SCO, 2011B). At the twelfth summit in Beijing in June 2012, the leaders presented a vision for developing cooperation in economic relations, energy security, transportation integration, and food security, to improve member states' prosperity (SCO, 2012). Likewise, the acceptance of Afghanistan as an observer member and Türkiye as a dialogue partner constituted a notable example of the organization's efforts to expand and deepen its sphere of influence. Besides, a strong call for a diplomatic and peaceful resolution to the Arab Spring protests was voiced at both summits.

The quest for security and deepening economic cooperation was also the main agenda of SCO leaders at their thirteenth and fourteenth summits. In the thirteenth summit in Bishkek, leaders drew attention to terrorism and other non-traditional security threats, sought to prevent the use of developments in information and communication technologies by radical ideologies, and declared support for multilateral efforts to end the Syrian conflict (SCO, 2013). As another example, the Joint Statement on Future Development of Cooperation in Transport was released and the Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation was signed. The accreditation of over 350 local and foreign journalists to the thirteenth summit was also an indication of SCO's expanding international influence (AKI Press, 2013). Similarly, the ISIS threat and the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative came to the fore at the fourteenth summit in Dushanbe in 2014. For SCO leaders, the biggest security concern stemming from the ISIS threat and the conflict in Syria was that jihadist militants, who went to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, could return to their home countries and destabilize Central Asia and XUAR (Karmon, 2017: 83-84). On the other hand, China's declaration of the Silk Road Economic Belt (then OBOR) was also welcomed at the summit, and leaders expressed the need for further consultation and cooperation on it (SCO, 2014A). The Agreement on Creating Favorable Conditions for International Road Transportation was

another product of the efforts to enhance economic cooperation within the SCO (SCO, 2014B).

In 2015, the fifteenth summit in Ufa witnessed three important developments for deepening cooperation and expansion. Firstly, membership procedures of India and Pakistan, which applied for membership in 2014, were initiated and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Nepal were granted dialogue partner status. Secondly, as China's collective security and comprehensive national security approaches envisaged also, with the adoption of "Development Strategy of the SCO until 2025", leaders expressed their desire to enhance cooperation in areas like development, foreign policy, security, economy, culture, information, and humanitarian affairs (SCO, 2015). Thirdly, SCO leaders signed an agreement to increase interaction on border security and supported the further development of RATS activities. In parallel, at the sixteenth summit in Tashkent in 2016, the South China Sea dispute was mentioned for the first time. Accordingly, it was pointed out that the parties should resort to the basic principles of international law, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, for a peaceful settlement of the dispute (SCO, 2016A). Beyond that, this summit paid special attention to efforts for economic and cultural cooperation, such as the adoption of "Programme for Expanded Tourism Cooperation" (SCO, 2016B).

# 3. The Expansion of SCO: Potentials and Controversies

During SCO's seventeenth summit in Astana in June 2017, the organization's expansion, new counter-terrorism measures, and other multi-dimensional cooperation efforts stood out. For instance, India and Pakistan were officially admitted as full members. Thus, the first integration process was completed with these two countries, which have nuclear powers and a total population of over 1.5 billion. Moreover, India's and Pakistan's membership, despite potential problems, was relatively compatible with the philosophical background of China's partnership diplomacy. As another example, the "SCO Convention on Countering Extremism" was signed and the "Statement on Joint Counteraction to International Terrorism" was issued to enhance cooperation in the fight against extremism, separatism, and terrorism. Moreover, leaders set forth their goals to strengthen cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, transportation, investments, finance, agriculture, customs, telecommunications, environment, and health (SCO, 2017). Supporting member states to formulate their own economic plans and implement long-term development strategies, and the increased focus on the use of renewable and alternative energy sources were also concrete examples in this regard. Overall, from the beginning of Shanghai Five meetings to the admission of India and Pakistan



as full members, SCO leaders, who mostly concentrated on security-centered objectives initially, diversified their focus areas and the actors they cooperated with over time.

Acceptance of Pakistan and India, which had been observers since 2005, as full members at the 2017 summit brought new possibilities and discussions regarding SCO's expansion(s). In this context, at the summit in Dushanbe in 2021, it was announced that Iran would be the next member and this country's full membership process began. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar were recognized as dialogue partners at the same summit (MFA of Türkiye, 2024). Accordingly, Iran's membership process was completed with the online summit on July 4, 2023, under the chairmanship of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Moreover, membership procedures of Belarus, announced to join the organization at this summit, were finalized expeditiously, and officially approved at the 24th summit in Astana in 2024 (State Council of PRC, 2024). Thus, the Minsk government became the ninth member of SCO. Considering the organization already has two observers and 14 dialogue partners, it can be argued that attempts and discussions on expansion(s) will not be out of the agenda soon.

From this perspective, it can be argued that SCO's expansions could serve as a catalyst for the organization's evolution from a regional security cooperation to a multi-dimensional geopolitical actor. SCO, which initially consisted of some countries in East Asia, Central Asia, and North Asia predominantly, has expanded its borders to include countries from the West and South Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Broadestly, 74% of Eurasia is countries that are SCO's members, observers, or dialogue partners (Aydın, 2024: 156). This may allow both to obtain more prestige in international relations and to diversify the geographies and issues of interest. Similarly, SCO's expansions can also contribute to the increase of its economic potential. In its current form, this organization is a huge market of over 35 million km2, including over 40% of the world's population and 30% of the world's GDP (Tu, 2024; Bellaby, 2023). More specifically, two of the world's five largest economies, China and India, are members of SCO. Likewise, 10 of 25 countries with the largest oil reserves and gas reserves (separately for each) are this organization's members or dialogue partners.

The organization's expansion also has the opportunity to make a diversified contribution to SCO's efforts toward its cooperative approach in international relations. It is highly possible that the expectation of more equitable and multilateral international relations would be placed at the center of these efforts. For example, despite having good relations with the USA, India is not distant from the reform idea in the international system, especially the UN Security Council (Dabhade, 2022: 63-79). Similarly, Iran, which is otherized by Western

actors of the system, seeks to diversify its foreign policy alternatives and overcome its isolation through SCO (Mousavi and Khodaee, 2013: 204). It is likely that Belarus, which has close relations with Russia, and Pakistan, one of China's leading cooperation partners, may also desire a new type of international relations based on "respect for sovereignty" and "noninterference in internal affairs" principles. At this point, SCO can bring these countries, which have different characteristics and interests, closer together under a similar foreign policy paradigm. On the other hand, SCO's expansion process is also not contrary to the organization's initial goal of security cooperation. Accordingly, India's, Pakistan's and Iran's nuclear capacities and counter-terrorism experiences can contribute to new quests for developing and deepening security cooperation.

There are also various concerns and criticisms regarding SCO's expansions. The most prominent one is related to the organization's decision-making and agenda-setting processes. As a custom, every SCO member has equal voting rights, and decisions are taken unanimously without any objection. However, it is thought that an increase in members may make the decision-making and agenda-setting processes more difficult than before (Liang and Kozinets, 2022: 17-30). Also, it is argued that China's and Russia's decisive positions within the organization may diminish due to the expansions (Guo, 2023: 50-68). Indeed, although decisions are taken consensusly, Beijing and Moscow, which are economic and political driving forces of the organization, had more dominant weight in SCO compared to other countries, before expansions. With new members, it is worried that this situation called the "2+4" balance may be disrupted and the positions of China and Russia may face significant challenges. Accordingly, some authors claim that the new situation may limit the setting agenda, operation of the decision-making mechanism, and effective functioning of SCO (Liang and Kozinets, 2022: 17).

On the other hand, according to some authors, these expansions also point to China's and Russia's conflicting interests. China's rising economic and military power, increasing influence in Central Asia, and global strategic orientations pose a challenge for Russia and this may limit cooperation in SCO (Hamilton, 2024). The reflection of this situation on the organization was most clearly seen in the SCO membership of India and Pakistan. According to common belief, Russia's desire to include India, one of the emerging economies of Asia and having problematic relations with China, in this organization stemmed from the goal of balancing Beijing. In return, the Beijing government also suggested the acceptance of Pakistan, which is one of the significant allies in South Asia, to SCO. In the end, both countries were



accepted into the organization, and this situation brought about new discussions about the stability of the organization. Furthermore, some believe that the Kremlin tries to balance China's increasing influence more both in the organization and region by integrating countries like India, Belarus, and Türkiye into SCO also. (Maduz, 2018).

Another concern about SCO's expansion is the organization's main focus might change. In his speech at the 2015 SCO summit, Uzbek leader Islam Karimov pointed out that a possible expansion could reduce the weight of Central Asian issues (Tolipov, 2015). Also, It should not be ignored that the expansion of the organization means an increase in its problems as well as in its prestige in international relations. Accordingly, the increase of members and the expansion of geographical reach may cause to focus on various new problems and issues, such as instabilities in South Asia (Kaleji, 2023). For example, the Kashmir issue, which has continued for many years between India and Pakistan, was not among SCO's priorities previously. However, after expansion, this became a vital problem that has caused serious conflicts between the organization's two notable members. Therefore, as Karimov and other experts emphasized, this situation threatens to confront SCO with serious problems and limit its effectiveness. Moreover, SCO's expansion has made some countries that are at odds with each other, like India-Pakistan or China-India, members of the same organization (Liang and Kozinets, 2022: 17-18). Even, with possible membership of dialogue partners such as Saudi Arabia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Egypt, and Qatar, the number of disputing members is likely to increase.

It can be mentioned two main scenarios on SCO's expansion to include disputing members. Firstly, SCO can create a favorable platform for the resolution of disputes among the new members, as it did in the past for the border problems of Central Asian republics, Russia, and China. However, some experts are skeptical about this scenario (Yefremenko, 2019: 77). This is because the nature of the problems and countries' capacities are different from those in the past. For example, the Kashmir issue is more lethal than the border problems in Central Asia in the 1990s. Moreover, it seems more difficult to convince Pakistan and India to compromise than newly independent post-Soviet republics. The second scenario points out that states with divergent interests and conflicts in SCO may vague decision-making processes or complicate the implementation of decisions (Denisov and Safranchuk, 2016: 498). To overcome this, it is emphasized that the organization's institutional basis should be strengthened and decision-making procedures should be reviewed. For example, some Chinese experts suggest that decisions should be taken by a simple or qualified majority to

maintain SCO's effectiveness and enhance its response capacity, especially in times of crisis (Liang and Kozinets, 2022: 17-30; Zeng and Yang, 2017: 34-62).

The risk of undermining Shanghai's spirit is among the main concerns about the expansion. According to Article 4 of SCO's founding treaty, members must not join any grouping/alliance targeting other members or supporting hostile actions against them (SCO, 2001). However, India's presence in QUAD, the ongoing Kashmir-related disputes, and recent border conflicts between China and India are incompatible with this article (Avdaliani, 2024). Based on this point, some Chinese experts even argue that India should be expelled from SCO (Karan, 2024). Beyond that, it is also discussed whether the horizontal and vertical expansion of SCO is taking place too intensively or rapidly. As the functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches pointed out, SCO, which started with five members and focused mainly on security issues initially, has increased its members over time and diversified its focus to include areas such as trade, transit, industrial cooperation, innovation, start-up projects, poverty reduction, digital transformation, tourism, and public diplomacy (Kaleji, 2023). This is also compatible with China's collective security and comprehensive security approaches. On the one hand, this is crucial in terms of transforming SCO into a multidimensional international organization and increasing its international influence. On the other hand, this excessive and rapid expansion may make it difficult to coordinate and manage the organization's agenda, commitments, and activities. Therefore, new reforms may come to the agenda in other institutional and administrative areas soon, as in decision-making processes.

# 4. Türkiye's Potential Membership: Is A New Expansion Possible?

Accordingly, the most striking discussion for the new expansion projections of SCO is Türkiye's possible membership. After an unsuccessful membership application in 2005, the Ankara government was accepted as a dialogue partner at SCO's Beijing summit in 2012 (Işık, 2016: 152). Thus, Türkiye has become the only NATO member to establish an official tie with this organization. The Ankara government's growing interest in SCO membership is mostly driven by expectations of increasing influence in regional/global equations, benefiting from the economic, political, and military potential of SCO, balancing deteriorating relations with Western actors, improving interaction with Turkic-origin countries in Central Asia, and diversifying foreign policy alternatives. In return, especially according to Turkish experts, Türkiye's membership can contribute to SCO in several ways. Some of these are Türkiye's rising effectiveness in foreign relations, its support for global reform demands, its unique



geographical, economic, and political position between the East and the West, and its longstanding experience in security (Aksu, 2022: 947-950).

In particular, Türkiye's long-standing experience in counterterrorism can be useful for SCO, whose one of the pillars is security cooperation. Also, combating other non-traditional and transnational security threats like drug and arms trafficking is a potential cooperation area between Türkiye and SCO members (MFA of Türkiye, 2024). Moreover, Türkiye, which has a strategic position in energy transportation, assumed the chairmanship of SCO Energy Club in 2017 (Aydın, 2024: 161). This shows the cooperation will not be limited to security and can be expanded to other areas. However, despite this positive outlook, Ankara's possible SCO membership faces intense debates and dilemmas from various perspectives. The most important of these is about the country's political position and foreign policy orientations. As mentioned, Türkiye has been one of the leading allies of Western countries, especially since the Cold War. Although this country's SCO membership has recently been on the agenda as a result of its deteriorating relations with Western actors, this has led to the emergence of two main -and somehow contradictory- criticisms of Türkiye.

On the one hand, Türkiye's possible SCO membership brings with it discussions of an axis shift at domestic and international levels. The most fundamental argument is that Türkiye is moving away from the West and redesigning its foreign policy based on anti-Western sentiment (Tüysüzoğlu, 2023: 83). The Turkish government, however, interprets this process not as an axis shift but as a multidimensional and proactive foreign policy quest. Even, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's emphasis during the announcement of the Asia Anew Initiative in 2019 is in line with Türkiye's perspective. In this respect, Çavuşoğlu highlighted that this initiative was not a shift, but rather the completion of Türkiye's axis (MFA of Türkiye, 2019). Nevertheless, Türkiye's positive statements regarding SCO membership, the reflection of this membership as an alternative to the EU, and the participation of Turkish officials in SCO events, especially during times of crisis, can be the target of criticism from Western actors. For instance, the Turkish government's first presidential-level participation in SCO summit held in Samarkand a few months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a great impact. Despite growing criticism, some Western experts see Türkiye's SCO membership aspirations as a trump card against Western actors and argue that Ankara cannot distance itself from the West completely (Ellis, 2022).

On the other hand, it can be said that this view has found a partial response on the SCO side and that Türkiye's position in the Western alliance has led to hesitations regarding

SCO membership. Indeed, various scholars, including some Chinese experts, have debated whether SCO membership is Ankara's ultimate goal or a means to balance the West (Yuan, 2022). In this respect, some academics or experts adopt the second view on Türkiye's possible SCO membership. Moreover, Türkiye's SCO membership requests or discussions are inevitably associated with Ankara's NATO membership. Accordingly, it raises questions about how can a NATO member become a member of SCO, which has emerged as a strong alternative to the Western-centric order. In this respect, Russia and Central Asian countries are relatively in favor of Ankara's SCO membership. However, some Chinese experts claim that Türkiye's membership to SCO is equivalent to accepting the USA and that the Turkish government may act as an extension of the West within the organization (Xu, 2024; Contessi, 2019:106).

From this perspective, these experts argue the provision in the fourth article of SCO's founding treaty, which is mentioned above for India's membership, is also available to Türkiye. Moreover, Türkiye's potential membership may also be controversial due to pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism concerns. Recently, the Ankara government has been strengthening its influence in Central Asia, especially through the Organization of Turkic States. Also, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, of which Türkiye is one of the leading actors, has been seeking to expand its effectiveness in this region. This may conflict with the national and regional interests of China and Russia, which have citizens of Turkic-origin and Muslim (Wang and Yang, 2024). In this respect, to increase the possibility of Türkiye's membership, Ankara should develop its relations -especially- with Beijing and establish more mutual trust (Karan, 2024). In such a situation, in coherent with China's partnership diplomacy, a flexible and mutually beneficial cooperation environment can be possible.

In fact, although it is not prominent in the literature compared to Türkiye, it is possible to bring up similar discussions regarding the possible membership of Saudi Arabia too. For example, the Riyadh government has usually had close relations with the USA for many years on issues such as security and foreign policy. Moreover, like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia has also turned to new opportunities emerging from the East, especially SCO, to diversify its foreign policy alternatives, but it is unclear how permanent this will be (Siddiqui, 2023). Once again, it is a strong question whether Riyadh's membership in SCO will increase intraorganizational cooperation or deepen divisions among its members. For instance, to what extent would Saudi Arabia, which has serious ideological and political differences with Iran, be able to act in harmony with the Tehran government in case of a possible membership? Also, it



should not be ignored that the Riyadh government accused Qatar, another dialogue partner and a potential member of SCO, of financing terrorism just a few years ago (Browning, 2017). Therefore, it is obvious that SCO's existing and possible expansions are both an opportunity to increase the organization's multifaceted capacity and also a source of new controversies.

# Conclusion

Security concerns, especially border disputes and transnational radical threats, played a dominant role in the establishment of the SCO. Indeed, the main agenda of the leaders, who came together in Shanghai in April 1996 for the first time, was to resolve border disputes inherited from the Soviet era peacefully and to improve mutual understanding and cooperation, especially in border regions. In this context, it can be said that Shanghai Five and subsequently SCO meetings made significant contributions to the resolution of member states' border disputes. China's signing of an agreement with Kyrgyzstan at the 1996 summit and with Kazakhstan at the 1998 summit were some examples of this. Similarly, preventing aggressive attempts to each other and cooperating in fighting against rising terrorism, separatism and extremism were among the leading security priorities of member states.

The rapid deepening (ramification) and widening (spill-over) of the organization's areas of focus (horizontal) and actors of cooperation (vertical), especially after SCO's establishment. In light of official documents, security-related issues were at the forefront in early SCO summits. However, in compatible with functionalist/neofunctionalist views and China's collective security and comprehensive national security understandings, several cooperation opportunities such as in trade, investments, energy security, industrialization, agriculture, finance, poverty alleviation, customs, telecommunications, environment, health, digital transformation, tourism have included the agenda of SCO summits in the following years. Similarly, there were only leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan at the founding meeting of Shanghai Five. In the last twenty-three years, SCO has accepted new dialogue partners, observers, and members. Also, this organization has increased its official cooperation in various fields with many regional and international organizations, especially UN. Therefore, SCO has transformed an actor that is constantly increasing its influence in international relations and geopolitical capacity. At this point, unlike the expectation of functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches, the concept of sovereignty has remained SCO's core principle, despite the organization's horizontal and vertical expansions. In this respect, SCO's this attitude has highly consisted with China's "community of shared future for mankind" discourse.

SCO's horizontal and vertical expansions have brought some opportunities and challenges, which are specific to this organization. Some of these opportunities can be interpreted as the expansion of its geography, increase in its economic potential, diversification of cooperation opportunities in security, the strength of its right to speak at international forums, and improvement of its prestige in international relations. On the other hand, the literature highlighted some risks to SCO's expansion such as getting difficulty of decision-making and agenda-setting processes, changing the balance within the organization, over-concentration of focused areas, diminishing the role of Central Asian issues on the agenda, and undermining the Shanghai spirit with increasing members. Beyond the opportunities and challenges, the interest of Türkiye, which has long-standing good relations with the Western world, to SCO membership points to the growing prestige of the organization and its emergence as a strong alternative. However, discussions on Ankara's possible membership are not entirely free of these opportunities and challenges. From this point of view, it would not be surprising that discussions on SCO's further expansions and proposals for reforming the organization's institutional structure will be on the agenda more soon.

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