

*Research Article*

# The rise of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Central Asia: a tool of cooperation or competition between Russia and China over the Turkic States?

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**Abstract:** The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is gradually increasing its power and influence in the region through the addition of new members, and new states with observer or dialog status, including NATO-member Turkey. The main question is whether the organization will achieve its blurring policies and compete effectively with the West in the region. Will we see a new era of cooperation or competition in Central Asia between Russia and China in the upcoming period? And how will the regional politics of the Turkic states be affected? The SCO's economic, energy and security policies have been especially effective in dominating the region to date. This paper presents an analysis of these policies with focus on the regional competition among the member states. It argues primarily that the SCO has grown in strength as a result of the convergence of Russian and Chinese interests and politics, turning regional competition into regional cooperation, and that the organization will come to dominate the region, especially politically and economically, with the accession of new members Pakistan and India, and the imminent accession of Iran.

**Keywords:** SCO, Russia, China, Turkic States

## **Şangay İşbirliđi Örgütü'nün Orta Asya'daki yükselişi: Rusya ve Çin'in Türk Cumhuriyetleri üzerindeki işbirliğinin mi yoksa rekabetinin mi aracı?**

**Öz:** Şangay İşbirliđi Örgütü, yeni üyeler, gözlemci devlet ya da NATO üyesi Türkiye dahil diyalog üyeliđi gibi devletlerin katılımı ile kademeleri olarak bölgede gücünü ve etkisini artırmaktadır. Ancak esas konu söz konusu örgütün muallak politikaları sorununu çözüp çözemeyeceđi ve bölgede batılı devletlerle etkin bir şekilde mücadele edip edemeyeceđidir. Önümüzdeki dönemde Rusya ve Çin arasında işbirliđi mi yoksa rekabet mi göreceğiz? Bu durum Türk Cumhuriyetlerinin bölgesel politikalarını nasıl etkileyecek? Şangay İşbirliđi Örgütü'nün ekonomik, enerji ve güvenlik politikaları bu zamana kadar bölgede etkin bir rol oynamıştır. Çalışma bölgedeki rekabeti de vurgulayarak bu politikaları ele almaktadır. Çalışma esas olarak Rusya ve Çin'in çıkarlarının ve işbirliğinin aynı yönde olduđu durumlarda bölgesel çatışmanın bölgesel işbirliğine dönüşerek ŞİÖ'nün güçlenmesini sağladığını, Pakistan, Hindistan ve İran gibi yeni üyelerin katılımının örgütün bölgede özellikle siyasi ve ekonomik anlamda baskın güç olmasına imkan verdiđini ileri sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Şangay İşbirliđi Örgütü, Rusya, Çin, Türk Cumhuriyetleri

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### **Introduction**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resulting power vacuum transformed Central Asia into a new chessboard in which regional and global players found themselves in major competition in their efforts to dominate the region and control its vast energy resources. The United States regarded the political and security importance of the region to be of secondary importance, focusing mainly on gaining control of its energy resources through soft power. Accordingly, it opted to revise its containment strategy of the Cold War based on the theories of Spykman and Kennan in order to engage Mackinder's Heartland directly and bolstered its political and economic presence in the region through the deployment of troops to military bases in the Central Asian states.

Struggling to challenge Western dominance in the wake of the post-Cold War era, Russia at first tacitly supported the US “War on Terror” in Afghanistan, but then hardened its stance against US dominance in its backyard. Opting to cooperate with its regional competitor China, which was also concerned about the US presence in Asia, Russia sought to confront US hegemony in the region as well as its monopolistic policies around the world. Subsequently, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was founded as a multinational confidence-building and cooperation forum for the discussion and resolution of border problems among the regional states, became a major vehicle for Russia and China through which the Central Asian states were brought into efforts to challenge US dominance in the region.

With four nuclear power members and two members with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the SCO wields important political power and is one of the most important organizations in the region. It has been enhancing its influence in Central Asia in terms of policy, security, economy, energy and culture, making itself more attractive for regional states that prefer regional cooperation rather than global partnerships with Western states. The security assurances provided by Russia and the economic incentives brought to the table by China, combined with the vast energy resources of Central Asia, have allowed the SCO to expand its influence in the region. Consequently, regional states, including nuclear states India and Pakistan that were traditionally politically close to the United States, opted to join the organization despite the historical competition between them, while Iran's upcoming membership is also expected to allow the SCO to diversify its sphere of influence. Russia's hesitations regarding China's influence over the region, especially the Turkic states, however, is affecting the relationship between the Turkic states and the SCO, as well as China, which they see as the primary resource for economic development.

### **The Grand Chess Board and the birth of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

The Shanghai Five – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – was founded in 1996 upon the initiative of China with the signing of the “Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions”, with the goal of finding peaceful solutions to demarcation problems among the members. The organization became the SCO in 2001 with the participation of Uzbekistan, and India and Pakistan became members in 2017. Iran's application for membership was accepted in September 2021 and is expected to be finalized within two years of its application after the conclusion of technical and legal procedures. There are also four Observer States (Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) and nine

“Dialog Partners” (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey). The enlargement of the SCO has been a fragile and delicate issue since its establishment due to the competition between Russia and China.

The addition of India and Pakistan to the members’ list has been one of the most controversial issues in the competition for dominance between Russia and China. China considers India to be a developing country with a large and rapidly increasing energy demand, and thus as a great rival in energy politics in the region, and therefore linked India's full membership to the entry also of Pakistan, while implementing policies to contain India's influence in the region (Patnaik 2016, 128). Russia, on the other hand, supported India's membership to counter China's evolving influence, given the possible membership of China's staunch ally Pakistan. However, the participation of both states has raised the prestige of the organization while facilitating better access to Central Asia, which is no small matter given the two major transport projects in which they are involved (Mazumdaru 2006).

Iran's membership has also been a sensitive issue in terms of the regional politics of the organization. Granted observer status in 2005, Iran submitted its application for accession in April 2008, and at its 2010 summit the SCO drafted a paper defining the criteria for membership that excluded states under UN sanctions, which allowed the organization to avoid granting membership to Iran due to the UN sanctions over its nuclear policy. The SCO members, especially China, remain wary of Iran's membership due to its nuclear standoff with Western countries, while Russia supports Iran's application as a counter to China's energy politics in the region, especially considering Iran's offer to form an oil and gas arc (Marketos 2008, 115).

The conclusion of a nuclear deal between Iran and the West, as well as Russia, allowed the initiation of a new stage in Iran's membership process, facilitated by Russia's support. In February 2016, the Russian presidential envoy to the organization stated that the implementation of the Iran nuclear agreement had eliminated the barriers preventing Iran's membership of the SCO, signaling a shift in policy (Sputnik News 2016). Attending the Tashkent summit in June 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that since Iran's nuclear problem had been resolved and the UN sanctions had been lifted, no obstacles remained to Iran's membership (Reuters 2016). China, though, remains cautious about Iran's membership, and has repeatedly declared its opposition to Tehran's imminent accession. While visiting Uzbekistan in Amy 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Beijing wanted to focus on the ongoing accession processes of India and Pakistan before moving on to Iran's accession, (Sputnik

News 2016) yet China may play its membership card to increase its share of Iran's energy trade.

In the end, membership status was granted to Iran in September 2021, thanks primarily to its recent cooperation with Tajikistan. Iran's ascension to full SCO membership was widely considered to be inevitable, considering the comprehensive strategic partnership and energy agreements signed with China, and the similar agreements with Russia (Eguegu and Aatif 2002).

Going forward, Iran's membership is expected to enhance Tehran's influence in the region, particularly in efforts to challenge Western, and especially US, policies. Iran considers the SCO to be an ideal organization in which it can play an active role, providing it with the opportunity to escape its Western-imposed isolation and the means to serve as a possible counterweight to US influence in the region (Song 2014, 88). As the membership process facilitated cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan, it would also provide an opportunity for Iran to improve its relationships with the Turkic states in the region.

The situation in Afghanistan and the overspill of terrorism into the region have also been regarded as a delicate security problem for the member states. SCO-Afghanistan structural relations began in 2005 with the establishment of a Contact Group, and joint SCO operations in Afghanistan to combat the production and transport of opiates are regarded as crucially important for the security of the region. In 2009, the SCO adopted the Moscow Declaration and the related Action Plan aimed at combatting terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime in Afghanistan.

The SCO members, and Russia in particular, have supported the organization's engagement with Afghanistan mainly for security reasons, but also to diminish the Western influence with the gradual withdrawal of NATO troops. At the Astana Summit in 2011, then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that Afghanistan's participation in SCO activities could be closer, highlighting that other leaders also share his view, and pointing out that the security of the SCO states to a large extent depends on political stability in Afghanistan (RT News 2021). With Russia's support, Afghanistan was granted observer status of the SCO in 2012, and China considers its security to be closely related to the future of Afghanistan, and so also strongly favors Afghan membership. In January 2016, Afghanistan stated that they had asked China for full membership (ToloneWS 2016), and Chinese officials stated openly that Beijing was seeking to persuade other SCO member states to vote for Afghan membership (Asia News 2016).

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan, however, has reshaped the security environment, as well as the relationship between the SCO members and Afghanistan. The SCO, for now, prefers to closely follow the developments in Afghanistan rather than getting involved in domestic affairs. During the latest summit in Dushanbe, the leaders called on the international community to help the Afghan people, while no mention was made about Afghanistan's membership of the SCO, nor were any concrete commitments made.

To date, the only NATO member that has established official contacts with the organization is Turkey, having applied for dialog partner status in May 2012, which was unanimously approved by the SCO members in June 2012 just one month later. Turkey's relations with the organization have developed mainly on economic and energy bases. During the signing ceremony, then-Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu declared that the partnership would strengthen ties between Turkey and the SCO, particularly in the fields of economy and transportation, but would also facilitate joint actions against challenges that threaten all countries (MFA Turkey 2021). The decision to approve Turkey's application to chair the SCO Energy Club in 2017 is another important sign of the strength of the relationship between Turkey and the SCO.

Moving forward, SCO-Turkey relations have gradually improved since then, despite the temporary break during the crisis that followed Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet fighter. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has hinted at Turkey's possible application for SCO membership, stating that he has already discussed the idea with Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Russian President Vladimir Putin (Hurriyet Daily News 2016). Some Chinese and Russian officials have responded positively to his remarks, implying that that will be a positive decision for Turkey (Kırıkçıoğlu 2016), although no concrete steps have yet been taken toward full membership.

The SCO has been pursuing a balanced policy in regional politics. When accepting Iran's application for membership, it simultaneously granted dialog partner status to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt. China especially played an important role in both status changes. As pointed out by Cafiero, "that Beijing brought Saudi Arabia, as well as Qatar and Egypt in September 2021, into the SCO as a 'dialog partner' is regarded as the type of balance that shapes Chinese foreign policy in the Gulf".

The SCO member states occupy territory that amounts to around 60% of the Eurasian continent and contains 45% of the global population. Although it was first designed and established to function as a confidence-building and forum for cooperation among the regional states, the organizational agenda has since

expanded to include cooperation in policy, military, security, energy, education, culture and transportation, as well as the fight against terrorism.

The SCO's gradual success in different arenas has increased its attractiveness in the region, and the enlargement process is expected to provide positive momentum to other regional states. Policies related especially to economy, energy and security have played crucial roles in the success of the organization, despite the intense competition among regional states, and regional players have already declared their intention to engage with the SCO in economy- and energy-related matters.

It is worthy of note that while the two leading countries of the SCO – China and Russia – share a common interest in removing the United States from the SCO region, each has its own expectations from the SCO. China sees the organization as a facilitator of regional trade and investment in relation to its Belt and Road initiative, whereas Russia seeks to restore its influence and dominance in Central Asia (Tafazzoli 2021).

### **Economic policies of SCO related to Central Asia**

The cooperation among members on an economic level has been an important tool in improving relations within the organization. In 2004, the SCO published a program of multilateral trade and economic cooperation, defining more than 100 projects in areas such as finance, energy, transportation, telecommunications and agriculture. The SCO Interbank Association, established in 2005, and the SCO Business Council, established in 2006, serve as coordinators for the economic projects of the SCO. At the Ufa summit in 2015, the member states adopted the SCO Development Strategy in which they pledged to bolster finance, investment and trade cooperation as a priority until 2025.

China has played a pioneering role in its use of the organization to improve coordination and cooperation, and to resolve border problems with Russia and other Central Asian states. Aware of its political and geopolitical disadvantage against Russia, China has focused primarily on economic and energy policies within the SCO as a means of enhancing its influence in the region, and has used its economic power to disrupt the close relations between Russia and Central Asian countries through economic incentives, for example, in offering \$10 billion in loans to SCO member states amid the economic crisis of 2009.

China's efforts have resulted in an increase in the volume of trade largely through its economic engagement through the SCO. As stated by the Chinese government, trade between China and the Central Asian nations has increased more than 100 times in the past 30 years and China's direct investments in the five Central Asian nations have exceeded \$14 billion (Xinhua 2017).

The Chinese efforts to push the SCO in a more economic and development direction, however, have been met largely with skepticism and hesitation by Russia, which has shown a reluctance in allowing the SCO to develop beyond its current mandate (Pantucci 2015, 8). In addition to the security benefits of the SCO, Russia would like to become the main source of finance in the region and prevent China from dominating Central Asia through its economic and financial policies. This is perhaps the most important reason for Russia's opposition to the establishment of the SCO Development Bank proposed by China in 2010 at the meeting of prime ministers in Dushanbe. Moscow claims that the BRICS Development Bank (established as New Development Bank in 2015) should be launched first, maintaining that there is no need for another development bank in the region as other options exist for the funding of SCO projects, including the Eurasian Development Bank. Where there have been no concrete steps to date in this direction, as stated after the summit of Dushanbe in September 2021, the members have pledged to continue consultations on the establishment of the Development Bank and the Development Fund of the SCO (TASS News Agency 2021).

China's economic activities constitute a major concern for Russia, which has sought to derail China's influence through other organizations from which China is excluded. Russia strongly favors the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) for economic activities in the region, and its cooperation with regional states from which China is excluded, such as through the Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the EEC and the Single Economic Space (SES)/Eurasian Union – is a significant sign of Russia's concern that the SCO will lead to it ceding influence in Central Asia to China.

The increased competition between Russia and the West, however, has compelled Russia to cooperate rather than compete with China in the area of the economy. Russia is recalibrating its position in Central Asia and other parts of the former Soviet Union as the Eurasian Union has not been the success Moscow hoped it would be, and the Kremlin knows Russia won't be able to match China's investments, believing that "Russia simply can't catch up" (Standish 2015). Russia has thus pursued a pragmatic approach to cooperating with China in economic matters. The focus of President Putin's recent op-ed published in Xinhua on economic relations between Russia and China highlights Russia's pragmatic policy, although it is worth noting that Putin openly refrained from mentioning China's economic relationships in Central Asia, as well as economic relations in the framework of the CSO (Putin 2022).

## **Energy policies of SCO in Central Asia**

Energy has been an important area of cooperation in the organization given the considerable US interest in the region's vast energy reserves. Should Iran's membership come to fruition, the territory of the SCO states will be host to some 46% of the world's gas reserves and 21% of its oil reserves (Tirone 2021). Iran's membership is also expected to enhance the organization's reserves of other natural resources and will intensify energy competition among the member states.

The SCO Energy Club has emerged as one of the most influential coordinators of the SCO's energy policies. Energy appeared on the agenda of the organization for the first time at the 2006 Shanghai Summit, where Putin proposed the creation of an SCO energy club, followed in 2007 by an agreement of the members to establish a unified energy market at the Kyrgyzstan Summit. The club was established with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on December 6, 2013, in Moscow by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, China, Mongolia, India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Sri Lanka, with the stated aim being to develop a common energy policy in the SCO and to foster cooperation between the member states.

At first, the establishment of the Club raised concerns as to whether the increased energy cooperation among SCO nations would result in the exclusion of Western and non-SCO energy interests from the region, as there was more competition than cooperation among the SCO members and the observers that export and import oil and gas, not only in Central Asia, but also in East and South Asia (Malik 2010, 78). The potential of competition to enhance the organization's influence over the region was high, especially with the entry of China into the region's oil market driven by its need for huge energy resources. Any competition between Russia and China for dominance over the vast Central Asian energy resources, however, can be expected to prevent the SCO states from agreeing on a common energy policy in the region.

The economic value of the region is crucial for China, whose development is based on the vast resources of Central Asia, where it has increased its economic activities since 2013 through several agreements. China's projects, including the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, have boosted energy trade between Central Asia and China, and provided Central Asian states with multiple energy routes, and this attempt of China to gain a foothold in the Central Asian energy sector threatens Russia's position in the region as the monopolistic owner of the gas pipeline to Europe, (Marketos 2008, 115). Its economic and financial superiority over Russia, however, has allowed China to enhance its influence in the region and switch the flow of energy to the East, to a great extent. In other words,

Russia's attempt to monopolize energy flows in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea is in conflict with China's energy diversification and independence policies.

The SCO may be seen in part as a new balancing ploy, which on the face of it is more viable and attuned to its 21st-century setting, but in which Russia has had to buy better results at the cost of bringing in and sharing the initiative with China (Bailes and Dunay 2007, 13). The realization of this policy shift has recently been witnessed. In May 2014, Russia and China signed a 30-year contract worth \$400 billion to develop natural gas fields in Russia and to build pipelines from Russia to China involving infrastructure investments valued at around \$70 billion, allowing Russia to diversify its gas exports and China to assure its long-term access to gas imports – a crucial milestone in energy cooperation between Russia and China.

In other areas, at the Ufa meeting in 2015, Russia and China discussed a proposal to combine their two countries' regional economic projects – the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt, respectively – and a framework for the merging of China's multi-billion-dollar network of roads, railways and pipelines through Central Asia with the Eurasian Union (Standish 2015). Both states continue to voice their support of this project and are working on details for its implementation.

The membership of Pakistan, and especially India, whose energy demand is as high as China's, led to another round of energy competition in the short term, although Iran's membership can be expected to increase the SCO's energy assets considerably, allowing the organization to meet increasingly stronger energy challenges. China, for example, has agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran over 25 years in exchange for a steady supply of oil to fuel its growing economy under a sweeping economic and security agreement in March 2021, which paved the way for the membership of Iran, (Fassihi and Myers 2021) while Russia has signed its own energy agreement with Iran.

The SCO Energy Club could be an important vehicle for the enhancement of cooperation between members, as well as with observers and dialog partners. Aside from the SCO member states, the SCO Energy Club members list includes also Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia, Belarus and Sri Lanka. The announcement of Turkey's presidency of the SCO Energy Club in 2017, after Turkey's proposal that all SCO partner countries should take turns in presiding over the Energy Club for a year, makes it the first non-member country (Zengin 2017) to act as president – an important step in enhancing the SCO as an energy giant of the future.

## **Security policies of SCO in Central Asia**

The SCO has been designed to function as a platform for the resolution of border problems among the regional states and to enhance security in the region through cooperation, allowing states to focus on imminent threats. For example, a peaceful border with China and the settlement of Chinese territorial claims over Central Asia have allowed Russia to divert its overstretched forces elsewhere, notably to the North Caucasus, (Bailes and Dunay 2007, 11) while for China, relieving its border problems in the area as allowed China to shift its focus to the East, which has opened doors to cooperation in other areas, such as energy, economy and technology.

The same situation is valid also for Central Asian states. Although they were long part of the Soviet Union together, they were suspicious of each other and reluctant to cooperate, and this frostiness severally curtailed the prospect of regional security and economic development. Perhaps the most tangible contribution of the SCO to Central Asia has thus been to put local states into regular contact and comprehensive dialog – an indispensable condition for confidence building and cooperation (Marketos 2008, 45). As Reeves (2014, 6) points out, no other organization or institution has achieved anywhere near this degree of participation from the Central Asian states, all of which play a critical role in regional stability. More importantly, no other organization has been able to draw these disparate states into a single body in which they can discuss and work together on the implementation of security policies.

Described as part of a chess board between Western nations and Russia, Central Asia is also a field of competition between China and Russia. A report prepared for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated, “the SCO’s main achievement arguably lies in its successful role in providing Russia and China with a degree of mutual reassurance in Central Asia” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2005). As such, the organization has become a useful tool for balancing the interests of Russia and China, each of which is apprehensive of the other’s domination (Mazumdaru 2006). Unlike other regional organizations, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the Eurasian Economic Union, the SCO has placed Russia and China at the same table for cooperation rather than competition and will prevent the domination of the Central Asian states by a single regional or global power.

It has been argued that the SCO has been designed to function as a new European Union that will impose Russian or Chinese policies on other members. Unlike the charters of the European Union, the African Union, or the Organization for American States, though, the SCO does not call for cooperation based on democratic values, but instead highlights the importance of non-

interference in the member states' internal affairs (Reeves 2014, 7). This has allowed the member states to focus on cooperation to resolve problems among themselves, rather than dealing with the domestic politics of other members.

The organization has been also described as a military organization, with allegations that the intention is to compete with NATO, although some scholars oppose this idea, arguing that the SCO was not designed purely for military purposes. Additionally, NATO's weak engagement in the region, except for its military operations in Afghanistan, counters this argument. As Mearshimer (2016) argues, largely for geographical reasons the SCO was not designed to compete with the Alliance, concerned as it is with Europe, but has instead been designed to deal mainly with issues in Central Asia that concern China, Russia and the countries in the locality.

One of two permanent organs of the SCO – the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) – was established in 2006 with its headquarters in Tashkent, and promotes the cooperation of SCO member states against terrorism, separatism and extremism, which they refer to as “the three evil forces”. Under RATS, military officials from the member states work together to enhance the SCO's interoperational capabilities, and the engagement with Russian and Chinese troops within RATS provides valuable training opportunities to the Central Asian states' domestic armies, many of which rely on multilateral venues for their military training (Reeves 2014, 7). RATS has further established the structural basis for possible multinational joint operations by the member states in the future.

Military cooperation was regarded as a low priority for the SCO when the organization was first founded, however, the change in US policy as regards Central Asia after the September 11 attacks has led to increased US military activity in the region and a war in Afghanistan, during which the Central Asian states allowed the United States to use their military bases. Russia tacitly supported the deployment of the US military in its backyard in the wake of the attacks, but was reserved in its contributions, and pressured regional states not to support the United States beyond its war on terrorism, the latter with the intense support of China.

The Color Revolutions in Central Asia and the Caucasus threatened regional stability and Russia's influence in the region and resulted in increased military and security activities by the organization. China strongly supported this policy, as both Russia and China feared that the Color Revolutions would destabilize Central Asia and weaken their influence in the region (Ziegler 2010, 245) while bringing pro-Western leaders to power. As Shlyndov (2006, 76) noted, one dimension of the concept of security for the SCO member states was the potential

instability of their governmental and political systems in the face of the US-inspired Color Revolutions – “stability” being reliant on a combination of military, economic, political, social and cultural strength, among other factors that enhance the resistance of states and provide them with adequate strength and viability.

The regional states, especially Russia, openly and harshly criticized the Color Revolutions, suggesting that they were an outcome of US efforts to diminish Russian influence. Russia is the only significant world power for which Central Asia is not a remote and obscure area, being something more like an intimate strategic extension of its own homeland. Any breakdown of security or anti-Russian sentiment there would threaten Russia both in general terms, and due to the approximately 5 million ethnic Russians who live in the region (Bailes and Dunay 2007, 10). Russia could thus not afford hegemony by any other global player in the region, and the fall of a pro-Russian government there would have been regarded as a major threat to Russia’s national security and sovereignty. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov noted that Russia would react negatively “to exports of revolution to the CIS states, no matter [where] and what color – pink, blue, you name it” (Ivanov 2005).

China, likewise worried about the US containment policy in the region, but also Russian dominance, also reacted harshly to the events, and described the Color Revolutions openly as a US plot. The People’s Daily, the unofficial gazette of the Chinese Communist Party, also claimed that the United States was working behind the scenes of the civil disturbances (People’s Daily 2005), supporting Russia’s view. The SCO had been a crucial vehicle for China in allowing it to deal with problems created by the United States against Chinese interests.

Since the September 11 attacks, and even more so following the Color Revolutions, China and Russia have largely converged in their anti-Western policies. As Ziegler (2010, 233) argues, the leadership of these two major powers approached foreign policy in largely realist terms, seeking to maximize their power, jealously guarding their national sovereignty and seeking balance against a superior adversary. Both China and Russia believe the organization can serve as a vehicle for strengthening their power, and for countering the growing US presence and influence in their geography, thus preventing the full domination by Washington of their neighbors, and stopping any further NATO expansions by preventing the membership of Central Asian and Caucasus nations in the US-dominated military alliance (Peimani 2009, 325).

While Moscow perceives NATO actions as limiting Russia’s options to the west and south, Beijing sees US and NATO involvement in Central Asia and

Afghanistan as part of an encirclement plan, when combined with the strong US-Japan alliance in the east (Ziegler 2010, 245). The US containment policy of deploying US troops in military bases in Central Asia, which constitutes the greatest change from the containment strategy of the Cold War, has thus become a major concern of both Russia and China, and has prompted them to pursue common security policies against the United States.

The 2005 SCO Summit in Astana became a cornerstone in the organization's explicit challenge to US attempts to dominate the Central Asian region, signing a Declaration stating that "the heads of the member states are convinced that a rational and just world order must be based upon the consolidation of mutual trust and good-neighborly relations, upon the establishment of true partnerships with no pretense to monopoly and domination in international affairs". The heads of state further called upon Western powers (the United States) to set "a final timeline for their temporary use of the [military bases]" and to remove their forces from SCO members' territories", (China Daily 2005) and heralded the withdrawal of US troops from military bases in Central Asia.

The SCO is not a military alliance per se, although its main objectives of fighting extremism, terrorism and separatism require military cooperation, aside from collaboration among the law enforcement agencies of its member states (Peimani 2009, 321). The new security environment in the region has compelled the regional states to intensify their military and security activities, and the first military exercise was held in 2002 with participation of Chinese and Kazakhstan troops. With the 2007 signing of the SCO Member States' Agreement on Organizing Joint Military Exercises, the SCO decided to hold regular military exercises, known as "peace missions", with scenarios based on the challenges of any security crisis created by the "three evil forces", such as armed uprisings against an existing regime in Central Asia – in other words, "Color Revolutions".

The SCO members have since held several exercises aimed at improving the abilities of the group, especially the Central Asian states, in countering terrorism, and at promoting political significance by strengthening their cooperation in political and security matters, while demonstrating their common determination to fight terrorism. The exercises have served also to enhance the interoperability and capabilities of the member states' armies.

While the agendas of Russia and China for the region differ, their conflicting policies do not heavily undermine the future of the SCO. For China, the economic value of the region is more important than political and security concerns, while Russia regards the region as its sphere, and sees its political and military dominance in the region as crucial for its national security as well as its international prestige, as was the case during the Cold War. Russia is seeking to

retain its influence as the guarantor of security in the region, and to hold sway in the region through its military bases in Central Asia, its arms deals and the Collective Security Treaty Organization – a security bloc comprising the former Soviet states. This formula satisfies both China, which is wary of deploying troops beyond its borders, and Central Asian countries, accustomed as they are to the Russian military presence, (Standish 2015) and so the differing security policies result essentially in cooperation rather than competition.

## **Conclusion**

Russia has founded several organizations to address economic or security concerns in Eurasia, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as a means of bolstering its influence over the former Soviet Union territories, which it considers its backyard, among which the SCO is the most comprehensive, being engaged in activities encompassing security, economy, energy, technology, culture and education. Furthermore, it is the only major regional organization that has brought regional competitors Russia and China to the same table.

The founding declaration of the SCO defined the organization's main purpose as being to facilitate cooperation in a wide variety of areas, ranging from security to education, although policies related to economy, energy and security have emerged as crucial activities enhancing the SCO's influence in the region. The variety and effectiveness of activities as well as the success of the economic, energy and security policies have enhanced the organization's attractiveness, making possible a greater enlargement of the organization than initially envisaged.

China's membership has allowed the organization to improve its economic effectiveness and influence in the region, and to reduce subsidized Western economic incentives. This reversed the orientation of the Central Asian states to the West, and bolstered the position of existing governments engaged in anti-Western rhetoric. On the other hand, China's successful economic activities in Central Asia compelled Russia, which had been concerned about the economic dominance of China in the region, to cooperate rather than compete with China, further boosting the economic power of the SCO.

Energy policies, which previously sought to reduce US influence in the region, have been another area compelling Russia and China to cooperate rather than compete. Bringing the world's largest energy exporters and importers into the same club, the SCO has become one of the most important organizations with an impact on energy policies in the world, and the membership of India and the potential addition of Iran to the list can be expected to alter the energy dynamics not just in the region, but also globally.

When the SCO was founded in 2001, the prediction was that it would act as a counterforce to NATO, and in particular the United States, in Central Asia. This narrative gradually decreased as the progress in resolving domestic problems was not as rapid as predicted. The problems among the member states preclude the establishment of an effective and unified organization that can compete with and challenge Western domination in the region. The historical competition between Russia, which sees Central Asia as its backyard, and China, which depends on the vast resources of Central Asia for its economic and political power, was expected to impair cooperation in the organization, while the political orientation of Central Asian states toward Western countries, attracted by Western economic incentives, was also seen as diminishing Russia's efforts to guide and lead Central Asian states in the wake of the US war in Afghanistan.

As things turned out, however, the Color Revolutions in the region, and the negative security perception in the regional states, including Russia and China, led the SCO members to focus on cooperation rather than competition for reasons of security. The SCO has thus functioned as the main means by which Russia and China can challenge US dominance in the region, as well as the monopolistic policies of the United States.

In short, having emerged as a platform for confidence building and cooperation, and then becoming a loose alliance with conflicting interests, the SCO evolved into a global player that brought regional competitors Russia and China to the same table in the face of the common threat of US dominance in the region. The Russian security assurances, the Chinese economic incentives and the vast energy resources of Central Asia have been combined under a new organization that has gained the ability to change the fate of the region, and to make a strong opening move on the great international chess board.

Turkey, as the only NATO member to have a dialog partnership with the SCO, has also increased its influence in Central Asia, such as through its leadership of the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States or its close cooperation with Pakistan, and has thus emerged as another competitor in Central Asia alongside China and Russia. Turkey's close affinities with the Turkic states and with Pakistan can be expected to compel China and Russia to cooperate rather than compete with Turkey, providing Turkey with the power to tip the balance against Western states, considering its recent crises with both the United States and the European Union. Turkey's membership of the SCO would not harm its relations with NATO, considering the SCO's low involvement in security matters.

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