

China's Regional and Global Policy Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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China, as a new global power, is expanding its influence across the globe and regions through various strategies and means, including regional and global organizations, in the post-Cold War era. As a result, since the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001, China, as one of its major founders, had attempted to use the SCO as a platform for influence beyond its borders. This paper aims to investigate China's growing influence and diplomatic prowess through the SCO.

Keywords: China, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, foreign policy, multilateralism

Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, the world is facing a new emerging global order with the rise of multiple actors in the international arena. China as a rising global power has a tremendous amount of leverage in international relations. In particular, China has rapidly transformed its economy into a global leader in advanced technologies during the last two decades.

As a rising power and as one of the two major founding members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has tried to use this regional organization, which has the potential to become an important politico-economic and security organization of the major states located in the vast Eurasian landmass, for its "go global" strategy. In fact, the SCO represents a new and unique cooperation model for Beijing, reflecting its vision of a multipolar world order.

China has used the SCO umbrella as a multilateral platform to address external threats posed by non-state actors on its vulnerable western border; to gain a strong economic and political foothold in Central Asia without putting the Sino-Russian strategic partnership at risk; and to enhance its energy security through large-scale infrastructure investment in, and trade with, the Central Asian member states. In other words, the SCO is one of the successful outcomes of Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. The SCO became a new model of cooperation that was formed on the remains of collapsed Soviet system and predetermined China's geopolitical role in the region. As the fast developing effective regional mechanism, the SCO now has more of an external impact on the international system and forms a new type of interaction for promoting China's grand strategy of a 'peaceful rise'.

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This paper aims to answer this question: How the Chinese government has manipulated the SCO for its foreign policy and global and regional influence? To answer this question, the main discussion is that with regard to the SCO capabilities and politico-economic potential, this organization has been used by China as a platform to expand influence beyond its borders.

Trends in Chinese Foreign Policy: Multilateralism

Multilateralism is the embodiment of the democratization of international relations after the Second World War, the basis for the operation and development of multilateral mechanisms, an inevitable requirement for promoting global governance, and an effective way to maintain world peace and promote common development (Moreland, 2019). The basic principle of multilateralism is that international affairs should be handled by all countries through consultation and in accordance with the rules agreed upon by all, taking into account the legitimate interests and legitimate concerns of all countries. Accordingly, multilateral diplomacy refers to the interaction of several international relations actors in permanent or special global or regional international organizations, conferences, and forums, which frequently appear in the diplomatic game of great powers in modern international relations, but the real attention is after the Second World War, marked by the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and with the great expansion in the number of states (Srivastava, 2014). In today's world, great powers are paying more attention to supporting and safeguarding their strategic interests through multilateral diplomacy.

There are four main reasons why major powers attach great importance to multilateral diplomacy: First, their comprehensive strength is strong, and their strategic interests will expand to a wider area; second, it is necessary to acquire the ability to operate peripheral and lead regional cooperation; third, it can propose and practice new cooperation concepts and initiatives to win wide recognition from the international community; the fourth is to seek international discourse and rule-making power and be able to participate in the agenda of major global and regional issues (Mahbubani, 2022; Höne, 2020). Modern multilateral diplomacy begins with the co-founding of international organizations, especially the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the European Union (EU).

In particular, in the post-Cold War era, the international pattern has undergone major changes, multilateral cooperation and regional cooperation in the context of globalization have become a new international trend, and various multilateral mechanisms, frameworks, diplomacy, and platforms have continued to emerge. Generally speaking, multilateral cooperation tends to form a relatively stable international pattern, which helps participants accept unified rules of conduct and coordinate foreign policies, thereby enhancing the certainty of global and regional governance systems.

When New China was first established, China adopted a "one-sided" foreign policy towards the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union. This was New China's fundamental position within the then-prevailing international political framework of a polar opposition between the East and the West (Fairbank, 1969). Yet, soon China focused on getting rid of this transitional diplomacy and the Chinese elite pursued a policy of cooperation with the world. Beijing advocated independent nonaligned diplomacy based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and actively participated in multipolar efforts to promote the world order through the Bandung Conference. After China resumed its lawful seat in the United Nations in 1971, it began multilateralism diplomacy with the United Nations as the stage, including the exposition of Chairman Mao Zedong's "three

worlds” theory and the idea of changing the unequal international order at the sixth special session of the General Assembly in 1974 (Jiang, 2013; Yee, 1983).

China's independent peace diplomacy underwent glaring modifications and innovations in concepts, strategies, and policies in the 1990s at the turn of the century. China has clearly stepped up its multilateral diplomacy under the idea of partnership diplomacy. As a result, the foundation of this strategy has been developing and maintaining partnership relationships with significant developing nations as well as major global powers (Papageorgiou & Cardoso, 2021). China has continuously enriched and improved its theory and practice of promoting multilateralism, displaying distinctive Chinese characteristics, injecting strong vitality into the development of multilateralism, firmly supporting the mainstream voice in the world that opposes unilateralism and adheres to multilateralism, and playing a significant role in advancing global governance and upholding the international order. In order to persuade people, consultation on an equal footing, morality first, faith and righteousness, harmony and difference, and openness are the main characteristics of multilateralism with Chinese characteristics.

China has vigorously promoted the democratization of international relations, protected the rights and interests of developing nations, and disseminated Chinese ideas and demands on international relations through multilateral diplomacy. In addition to actively promoting its own and regional economic development through multilateral diplomacy, China has also upheld regional and global security and stability (Wuthnow, Li, & Qi, 2012). Furthermore, it can be said that Beijing's multilateral diplomacy has overcome a number of obstacles while also making great advancements.

Today's world frequently degenerates into a game of regional alliances, with Europe having the European Union, Southeast Asia having ASEAN, Arab countries having the Arab League, Africa having the African Union, etc. (Patrick, 2019). Due to China's increased multilateral contributions, its voting power has increased across the multilateral system, giving it more influence “over the norms and working procedures of international organizations” (Nantulya, 2023). China is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second-largest economy in the world. As a result, through regional organizations like the SCO, China has actively promoted new ideas for cooperation and adhered to and protected true multilateralism.

The Post-Cold War Trend and the Formation of the SCO

The international context of the post-Cold War trend of peace, development, and cooperation and the process of economic globalization is “evident in expanding links between countries in economic, technological, demographic, and cultural areas” (Paul, 2023, p. 5). Based on such notion, relations between China, Russia, and Central Asia have rapidly and healthily grown beyond ideological and social system differences, and the shared need for national renewal and economic development necessitates a stable environment. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was founded in June 2001 with the upgraded “Shanghai Five” mechanism, with security cooperation as the main axis, in order to respond to changes in the global and regional situation and to deepen cooperation among countries in the region.

In fact, the creation of the SCO was a response to the immediate demands of the neighboring nations for multilateral cooperation, while also recognizing and addressing urgent regional economic and environmental issues. The SCO is a comprehensive regional cooperation organization that includes the largest area and population in the world, as noted by Xi Jinping. With the UN and other international and regional organizations, it has strong cooperative ties. The SCO has grown increasingly influential internationally and is now a significant

force in advancing world peace and development as well as upholding international justice and fairness (Xi, 2018).

It can be said that the SCO's multilateral cooperation serves as a model for a new regional cooperation mechanism in the age of globalization because it is comprehensive, establishes cooperation goals in all areas, and plays a special role. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization came into existence in the political region of Eurasia as a result of numerous political, historical, cultural, economic, and security factors, the most important of which are:

- A. The demise of the bipolar system in international relations;
- B. The emergence of a new world order as a result of the Soviet Union's demise and the end of the Cold War;
- C. The emergence of new challenges and threats, the most dangerous of which were terrorism, extremism, and separatism;
- D. Realization of the principles of a just world order, dominated by the desire for joint development, taking into account the experience of relations developed among the region's countries within the framework of the "Shanghai Five";
- E. Joint pursuit of new effective mechanisms to improve country regional integration;
- F. Development of a new regional cooperation model, with security and economic interaction as top priorities (MFA, 2021).

The birth and development of the SCO have always been intertwined with the process of adjusting the global order and the geopolitical and economic reorganization of the Eurasian region in the post-Cold War era. The Shanghai Five, the organization that preceded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was strongly shaped by the rapid changes in the external environment, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The SCO's Dynamics and Development

The formation of the SCO can be attributed, on the one hand, to the warming of relations between China and Russia in the final years of the Cold War and continuing after the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, a process in which settling disputes over border demarcation played a significant role. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization came about as a result of a significant revision to the framework for international relations at the turn of the 21st century (Zhang, 2020; Efremenko, 2019). In addition to not getting any safer since the Soviet Union's fall and the end of the Cold War, the world is now facing brand-new, unpredictable threats. However, it goes without saying that in the 21st century, global security cannot be guaranteed solely by one or a few states.

The key goals of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are spelled out as follows:

1. Strengthening neighborliness and mutual trust among the member states;
2. Fostering productive collaboration in the fields of education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, politics, trade, research, and technology;
3. Working together to uphold and ensure regional peace, security, and stability; the SCO places great importance on fostering and maintaining "stability" in the region; and
4. Progress in the creation of a new, logical, democratic, and fair international political and economic order (ASPIRE IAS, 2021).

For the purpose of establishing institutions, the SCO has created a large number of multi-level and multi-field meeting and consultation mechanisms, including gatherings of heads of state, prime ministers, ministers, presidents of the Supreme Court, and prosecutors general, as well as two permanent bodies: the Secretariat (in Beijing) and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (in Tashkent, Uzbekistan). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has gradually “spilled over” its cooperation areas to the economic, trade, energy, cultural, and other fields related to security cooperation and established appropriate cooperation mechanisms and institutions to promote cooperation in these areas. When considering security, starting from solving the most pressing security problems of its member states, focusing on cracking down on the three evils, terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and proceeding from the long-term interests of the region, however, the SCO's primary duties at this point are to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism as well as against transnational crimes like drug trafficking, exchange information, and intelligence, and conduct joint exercises (Pradt, 2020a). Additionally, the SCO places a high priority on creating emergency response systems and pays close attention to how to address fresh challenges like network information security, global pandemics, and food security.

In regard to economic cooperation, the SCO has put forward the goal of trade and investment facilitation, and through the Multilateral Economic and Trade Cooperation Programme and its implementation plan, it focuses on promoting cooperation in the fields of transportation, energy, finance, customs, agriculture, and border areas; at the same time, it pays attention to the combination of multilateral and bilateral to promote bilateral economic and trade cooperation among member countries (Yan, 2021; Pradt, 2020b). In the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Council of Foreign Ministers' Meeting, in Goa, India, on May 5, 2023, they agreed to foster cooperation in the sectors of transportation, energy, finance, investment, free trade, and digital economy, as well as in the protection of the environment and joint efforts to address climate change (Wang & Fan, 2023).

The main actions taken by the SCO in terms of political cooperation include: issuing political statements and advancing legal development; mutual support in domestic and international affairs; actively taking part in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction process; expressing shared views on UN reform, arms control, and other issues; helping to resolve the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan; and sending observers to the member states' general elections.

It is one of the troikas promoting the growth of the SCO in terms of people-to-people cooperation. The SCO has gradually expanded its areas of people-to-people cooperation beyond science, technology, culture, and education to include health, sports, tourism, environmental protection, women, youth, the media, and the reduction of poverty (Xue & Makengo, 2021). The cooperation model has also changed from government-led to public-private cooperation. People-to-people contacts and cooperation within the SCO have grown stronger and more successful thanks to the combined efforts of the member states. The SCO has set up the most meeting mechanisms in this area, carrying out flexible and diverse activities: establishing SCO universities, and launching a ministerial meeting mechanism for educational cooperation, youth exchanges, and think tank exchanges. Exchanges and cooperation in the fields of culture, health, disaster mitigation, science and technology, tourism, sports, and media have also been continuously expanded.

Other regional countries, such as India, Pakistan, and most recently Iran, have participated in the SCO as official members over the course of its development in addition to its six founding members. Additional nations that are SCO observers include Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Belarus (see Table 1).

Table 1

The SCO Involved Countries 1996-2001-October 2022 (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2023)

Shanghai Five 1996-2001	SCO members	SCO observers	SCO dialogue partners
China	China	Mongolia	Turkey
Russia	Russia	Afghanistan	Azerbaijan
Kazakhstan	India	Belarus	Cambodia
Kyrgyzstan	Pakistan		Sri Lanka
Tajikistan	Uzbekistan		Nepal
	Kazakhstan		Armenia
	Kyrgyzstan		Saudi Arabia
	Tajikistan		Egypt
	Islamic Republic of Iran		Qatar
			Bahrain
			Kuwait
			The United Arab Emirates
			Maldives
			Myanmar

After Iran's¹ membership in 2021, the nine-member countries' combined land area would be 35.72 million square kilometers or 27% of the world's total area. They would also cover more than 60% of the Eurasian continent and have 3.3 billion people or 42% of the world's population. It can increase its global influence. Furthermore, the SCO has nuclear power potential thanks to the inclusion of the four nuclear-armed states China, Russia, India, and Pakistan. And now that Iran has nuclear capability, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization may be thought of as a "Nuclear OPEC", comprising the vast oil and gas reserves of the world (Ajnoti, 2023).

China's Contribution to the Growth of the SCO

China's diplomacy has produced a number of successful outcomes in the bilateral sphere over the past three decades, and its contribution to regional and global affairs is being recognized more and more. The SCO has gradually grown into one of the most significant regional cooperation platforms as China has started to actively work to maintain regional peace and stability, promote mutually beneficial cooperation among nations, and simultaneously clarify its position on international affairs and hotspot issues.

China is the birthplace of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Beijing has always viewed the SCO as a top diplomatic priority. China has always placed a high value on SCO political cooperation over the past 20 years of development, from promoting the "New Security Concept", "Shanghai Spirit", and "Harmonious Region" to suggest the creation of an SCO community with a shared future (Xie & Lin, 2022).

From proposing to convert the "Shanghai Five" meeting mechanism into a cooperation mechanism to actively promoting the institutionalization of the SCO; from advocating the formulation of a long-term treaty of good neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation among member states to actively promoting the implementation of the SCO's long-term development strategy, China has consistently provided "Chinese wisdom" to the SCO political cooperation and "Chinese solutions".

¹ Iran's full membership took effect from April 2023.

Indeed, as the SCO's most economically powerful and populous country, China unquestionably plays a key role in this regional organization (Xu & Rogers, 2023). Concerning China's ineffective role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "The SCO Yellow Paper: SCO Development Report" in 2016 stated that China, as the world's second-largest economy, largest trade exporter, and founding member of the SCO, should play a larger role within the SCO. Given China's size, its economic development will have far-reaching consequences. According to the report, China's choice to accelerate the construction of the free trade zone and establish closer and deeper economic ties among SCO member states is unquestionably an extremely necessary and realistic option (People.cn, 2016). Indeed, one can assume that from elaborating on China's visions on development, security, cooperation, civilization, and global governance, to calling for the building of "a community of health", "a community of security", "a community of development", and "a community of cultural exchanges", the Chinese government has played an important role in the SCO's steady and long-term development (Xinhuanet, 2022).

To sum up, China has always been a key player in the SCO, evolving into the "twin engine" of the organization's growth with Russia. This is inextricably linked to the strategic partnership of coordination that China and Russia announced in 1996 as well as the expansion of good-neighborly and friendly cooperation between China and Central Asian nations.

The SCO's Effectiveness as a Platform for China's Policy

Chinese foreign policy for the Eurasian region places a strong emphasis on economic growth and regional stability in order to advance its objectives of a "peaceful rise" and a "harmonious world". China further places multilateralism at the core of both the SCO and this because China played a key role in establishing the multilateral platform, giving China significant influence over the organization and allowing China to use it as a tool to further its own political objectives (Battams-Scott, 2019).

For China's foreign policy and diplomacy, the SCO is of particular importance. The creation of an international community with a shared future for humanity and new forms of international relations is China's top diplomatic priority in the new era. The SCO fosters bilateral and multilateral cooperation; on a bilateral level, China and Russia serve as an example of a new kind of great power relationship, and China and the Central Asian republics serve as an example of equal cooperation between large and small countries. As a founding member of the SCO, Chinese leaders summed up the "Shanghai Five" practice and proposed the "Shanghai Spirit" of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations, and seeking common development", which has become the norm and soul guiding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's sustainable development (Perskaya, Khairov, & Revenko, 2022).

The creation and growth of the SCO have a number of unique features when compared to other regional organizations: First, it depends on top-down political decisions of leaders to promote cooperation, and the summit and the resolutions adopted are extremely important to the development of the SCO. The first SCO Summit, which took place in Shanghai in June 2001, established the framework for international cooperation. Second, the maintenance of stability and security in Central Asia was the key direction of cooperation during the "Shanghai Five" period, and the "new security concept", which Chinese leaders have explained on numerous international occasions, is the requirement for cooperation. Third, the idea and foundation of multilateral cooperation are clear, and member states have largely accepted the new regional cooperation model put forth by Chinese leaders, which is characterized by joint advocacy by big and small countries, security first, and cooperation that benefits both parties (Serikkaliyeva, 2017).

The rapid development and notable accomplishments of the SCO over the past 20 years are directly related to China's role in those developments. The multilateral cooperation promoted by China under the SCO framework fully takes into account the unique conditions of the region and puts forward targeted cooperation proposals in light of the constantly shifting international and regional order and situation (Deng, 2021b). China took the initiative to suggest the primary areas and fundamental directions of multilateral cooperation during the early stages of the SCO, while also paying attention to the development of cooperation mechanisms and permanent institutions.

The SCO entered a new phase of development following the 2018 Qingdao Summit, formally launching the "G8 Model", and inviting the heads of 10 international organizations to participate. Xi Jinping emphasized the need to further advance the "Shanghai Spirit" in his speech at the 18th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO member states. He also pushed for innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development concepts, put into action the common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security concept, upheld the idea of open, integrated, mutually beneficial, and win-win cooperation, created a civilizational concept of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusivity, and stuck to the idea of global governance that involves consultation, joint construction, and sharing in order to address risks and challenges as well as the problems of the day. He also suggested a number of fresh cooperation projects, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's member nations cooperating to create a community with a shared future (Xi, 2018).

Regarding Chinese contributions to the SCO's growth, it can be assumed that, unlike other international organizations, the SCO upholds a distinctive concept of cooperation, many of which are Chinese diplomatic initiatives and are closely related to China's role in international and regional affairs. China has proposed a number of significant concepts for cooperation for the growth of the SCO, ranging from the "Shanghai Spirit" and the New Security Concept at the time of its founding to the proposal at the Qingdao Summit to give the "Shanghai Spirit" a new connotation for the times, to the proposal to jointly build a community of interests and a community of common destiny (Perskaya et al., 2022). Other SCO member states, SCO observer states, dialogue partners, and the international community have all praised China's unique role in the organization.

Chinese BRI and the SCO

To advance security, political, economic, and humanitarian cooperation in the SCO, China has proposed a number of initiatives. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one significant duty of China's participation in the SCO (see Figure 1). President Xi Jinping proposed the BRI in 2013, and according to Feldshuh (2018), it is a "multilateral proposal to upgrade infrastructure, improve China's bilateral ties, and international institutions, as well as drive much-needed global development". Because the BRI is founded on historical friendship, mutual respect, and mutually beneficial cooperation, and promotes the common development of countries that uphold traditional values, it has gained the appreciation and support of the majority of SCO member states.

The Belt and Road Initiative includes the SCO as a key multilateral platform for cooperation. The BRI is China's most significant global public good, and nearly all SCO member states and observer states are actively involved in its development. Infrastructure-related cooperation has expanded thanks to the BRI, and connectivity is a key area of SCO cooperation. However, connectivity not only has a direct impact on the success of economic and trade cooperation but also ensures that international exchanges of people take place without any problems. Hence, the Belt and Road Initiative would encourage the development of new mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field of logistics and transportation, which is essential for SCO member states,

particularly Central Asian republics (Norov, 2019). Both have entered a new era of development, giving each other new opportunities for growth, utilizing each other's advantages and strengths, and working together to create a community of shared destiny marked by political mutual trust, lasting peace, mutual benefit, win-win outcomes, and cultural tolerance.



Figure 1. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (Bondevalue, 2018).

Nearly all SCO member states and observer states are connected by one of the six Belt and Road economic corridors, which presents significant opportunities for regional development (see Table 2). China has established a previously unheard-of multilateral diplomatic platform around the Belt and Road Initiative, and SCO member states actively participate in the two Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation or multilateral exchange activities centered around policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unrestricted trade, financial integration, and interpersonal ties. Additionally, it should be noted that while the joint construction of the “Belt and Road” has produced a number of positive outcomes in the SCO region, it has also run into a number of challenging issues, such as growing geopolitical and security hotspot issues.

The Belt and Road Initiative's key areas are covered by the SCO, and the two have the prerequisites for coordinated development. The SCO has a fairly well-developed mechanism for cooperation and cooperation successes in the three key areas of security, economy, and humanities, laying the groundwork for the creation of the six BRI corridors.

Table 2

The Chinese BRI Six Corridors (Belt and Road Initiative Website, February 2023)

No.	Corridor	Connection	Purpose	Countries
1	China, Central Asia, West Asia Economic Corridor	Rail	Trade and commercial	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey
2	China, Mongolia, Russia Economic Corridor	Rail links and the steppe road—this will link with the land bridge	Trade and commercial	China, Mongolia, and Russia
3	New Eurasia Land Bridge	Rail to Europe	Trade and commercial	Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland
4	China Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor		Trade and commercial	Viet Nam, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Malaysia
5	China, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor		Commercial and security	China, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar
6	China, Pakistan Economic Corridor	Water port	Commercial and military	Links Kashgar City (free economic zone) in landlocked Xinjiang with the Pakistan port of Gwadar

The SCO's Position in Chinese Foreign Policy: Drives

One of Beijing's foreign policy behaviors that has stood out the most recently is its increased activism in multilateral diplomacy. Many of China's foreign policy objectives were accomplished by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or at the very least made significant headway in that direction. The SCO, in particular, is a reflection of the direction of the country's current foreign policy, which is based on the idea of China's "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) to great power status. One of the most important foreign policy initiatives to come out of China in the past 20 years is its role in the founding and development of the SCO. In essence, the SCO is evolving into a tool for China's foreign policy, which at the moment involves a strategy of accommodating Western interests in Asia while also bolstering Chinese influence in specific regions of Asia.

Furthermore, China's security policy was a major driving force behind its decision to grant the SCO the formal trappings of a regional organization. Since regional security was once at the top of the Chinese policy agenda, regional stability had increased through the reduction of border forces, focus on non-conventional threats like terrorism, and removal of external factors that may disturb the political status quo (Battams-Scott, 2019). Preventing Uighur separatists from using Central Asian republics as a base for separatist activities in Xinjiang was one of the main objectives. China has received guarantees from Muslim Central Asian states that they will not support their religious and ethnic brethren engaged in militant separatist activities in Xinjiang as a result of the SCO states' joint fight against terrorism and threats to national sovereignty. The eight million-strong, Turkic-speaking Uighur ethnic group, which makes up about 45 percent of the region's population, is clearly characterized by Islam. Beijing's commitment to regional security through the SCO to combat separatism and terrorism is thus based on both its fear of a violent Islamic uprising in Central Asia that would affect the Uighurs and its worry that, if it puts down major uprisings in Xinjiang, it will be branded an anti-Muslim nation by Central Asian republics or Middle Eastern states.

China bases its regional foreign policy primarily on four pillars:

1. Strengthening regional economic and trade ties;
2. Reducing mistrust and anxiety in the context of regional security;
3. Getting involved with local organizations;
4. Increasing bilateral ties and strategic collaboration with regional powers. Membership in regional organizations is encouraged (Zhang, 2019).

Based on these pillars, the Chinese government has been very active in the SCO in order to achieve its regional and global goals.

Expanding Influential Role in Asia

China has been the dominant power in Asia for centuries, and after significant economic growth in recent decades and its gradual transformation into military and cultural potential, it now has a significant capacity to play an important role in Asian affairs. On this basis, and in the current situation, China is clearly attempting to expand its influence in the surrounding environment by taking the lead and shaping its developments. China is attempting to play this role through multilateral mechanisms. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a multilateral mechanism that has long been a useful tool for achieving this goal, is a key symbol of China's efforts to play such a role. True development is development for all, and good development is sustainable, according to President Xi, who made this statement via video link at the 20th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO on November 10, 2020. In order to facilitate economic recovery and enhance people's lives, we should be motivated by the vision of innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development (Xi, 2020).

In general, it can be said that China's long-term objective of forming and strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the expansion of influence and the role of leadership in the surrounding environment. In fact, China views Central Asia as being in its "backyard" or "sphere of influence", similar to how Russia does to some extent (Daily FT, 2017). But it stands to reason that Moscow would not want to share its traditional sphere of influence with China, which is Central Asia.

Combating 3T: Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism

Combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism has been the SCO's top priority. According to the charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, countering separatism, extremism, and terrorism as "three evils" is one of the main goals of this organization. To combat these threats, particularly terrorism, the SCO member established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Since its inception, RATS has helped SCO members fight against extremism, separatism, and terrorism (Xinhuanet, 2019). In addition, under the framework of the SCO, China and other member states have signed the following documents to fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism: the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, Cooperation Between SCO Member States on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, SCO Convention on Combating Terrorism, SCO Convention on Combating Extremism, SCO Cooperation Program on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2019-2021, and SCO Plan of Action for Cooperation With Afghanistan on fighting terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crimes. In this regard, SCO Secretary General, Vladimir Norov, has proclaimed that:

three months prior to the tragic 9/11 events in New York [and Washington] in 2001, the Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism was signed within the SCO, a document which served as evidence of the organisation's readiness to aggressively fight these "three maligned forces". (Norov, 2019)

In a recent meeting (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held on May 5, 2023, in Goa, India), they expressed a desire to strengthen security cooperation even further and collaborate to combat terrorism, separatism, cybercrime, and drug trafficking (Wang & Fan, 2023). All three of these elements are playing a role in the Xinjiang crisis. Xinjiang rebels seek independence from China, yet, the Chinese government regards them as extremists, and, most importantly, Xinjiang separatists have ties to insurgent forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In particular, China has engaged in many productive counterterrorism exchanges and cooperation with relevant nations through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms like joint anti-terrorism drills, joint border defense operations, and the suppression of terrorist, separatist, and extremist forces' illegal cyberspace activities, as well as security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and judicial cooperation during significant international events. It has been crucial in preserving stability and security on a global and regional scale (China SCIO, 2019). During the SCO Summit on November 10, 2020, via video link President Xi expressed

we should deepen solidarity and mutual trust, and resolve disputes and differences through dialogue and consultation, to cement the political foundation for SCO development. It is important that we forestall terrorist, separatist, and extremist attempts to exploit the pandemic for disruption, curb the proliferation of drugs, crack down on the internet-based propagation of extremist ideology, and strengthen SCO members' law-enforcement cooperation. (Xi, 2020)

Increasing Asia's Stability, Particularly in Central Asia

Certainly, China places a high priority on maintaining regional stability within Asia. Chinese officials emphasized their commitment to cooperative regional development in the most recent white paper, which stated that "a prosperous and stable world would provide China with opportunities" (China SCIO, 2019). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has operated as an international organization since 2001 with the goal of promoting stability in Asia (Tzogopoulos, 2019). In fact, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its two-pronged strengthening have contributed to the development and maintenance of stability in China's security environment. One is that regional governments have issued warnings against escalating the Xinjiang crisis, particularly in the Central Asian countries that have strong ties to the ethnic and religious groups in Xinjiang. It makes sense that China would take action to increase stability in its security environment if it can use this organization to strengthen the ability of the nations in the region to deal with these three powerful forces in the deeply internationalized Xinjiang crisis. Because of its strategic location, China depends on the stability of Central Asia. Since Central Asia is a part of China's security environment, it makes sense that American dominance of the region would pose a long-term threat to China.

Access to the Region's Energy

Fossil fuels have taken over as the world's main energy source since the industrial revolution, especially in industrialized countries. China, a country with rapid economic growth, has seen a sharp rise in its energy needs in recent years, making it the world's top oil consumer. Beijing has a strong interest in gaining access to the energy resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin as a result of its expanding energy needs (Liao, 2019; Zhao & Wu, 2012). China is currently the world's top energy consumer, as shown in Table 3. As a result, Chinese majors like CNPC, Sinopec, and CNOOC are very interested in the oil and gas reserves in Central Asia, and they have made significant contributions to the building of pipelines that connect Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—the region's largest producers of oil and natural gas, respectively—with Chinese territory (Bolonina, 2019, p. 6).

Table 3

The Top Oil Importing Countries (Workman, 2020)

Rank	Importer	Crude oil imports (US\$)	% world total
1	China	\$238,707,061,000	22.6%
2	United States	\$132,370,663,000	12.5%
3	India	\$102,306,491,000	9.7%
4	Japan	\$73,085,389,000	6.9%
5	South Korea	\$70,193,489,000	6.6%
6	Netherlands	\$46,414,486,000	4.4%
7	Germany	\$40,737,628,000	3.9%
8	Spain	\$30,499,660,000	2.9%
9	Italy	\$29,615,998,000	2.8%
10	United Kingdom	\$24,542,383,000	2.3%
11	France	\$24,446,306,000	2.3%
12	Singapore	\$24,224,539,000	2.3%
13	Thailand	\$22,284,239,000	2.1%
14	Taiwan	\$21,326,199,000	2%
15	Belgium	\$18,784,563,000	1.8%

Since the Central Asian region has significant oil and gas reserves, Beijing is very interested in the region's energy as China tries to secure and diversify its energy sources. Energy resources from Central Asia also benefit China's neighbors, like Japan. Since the United States Navy controls a large portion of it and it is largely maritime, China has always been concerned about the security of its energy supply. The United States can use this control as a lever to exert pressure on China when necessary. However, the land-based oil and gas pipeline routes from Central Asia to China are poorly regulated. As a result, China entered the region's energy market quickly and was able to take a sizable portion of it.

There are currently two major pipelines running from Central Asia to China: the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline (see Figure 2). The Turkmenistan end of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline connects to Xinjiang in western China. This pipeline allows gas to be transported roughly 7,000 km from Central Asia to Shanghai by joining the Republic of Turkmenistan to China's domestic grid. Over 500 million people in 27 provinces of China benefited from the importation of 294.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas through the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, according to the PetroChina West Pipeline Company (Wang, 2020). The 988-kilometer Kazakhstan-China pipeline, which cost a total of USD 700 million to build, was finished at the end of 2005 and started operating in May 2006 (see Figure 2) (BBC Monitoring—Energy, 2006). It runs from Atasu in Kazakhstan to Alashankou at the border with China.

The Kazakhstan-China pipeline, with a final capacity of 200,000 barrels of oil per day, is a representation of the energy cooperation between China and Central Asia. Additionally, in 2009, China and Turkmenistan reached an agreement regarding the gas pipeline, resulting in a 30 billion cubic meters annual capacity of Turkmen gas for China. Meanwhile, China and Kazakhstan are currently in negotiations for China to purchase gas from Kazakhstan through the construction of a new pipeline that will run from Ishim to Alashankou on the Kazakhstani-Chinese border. As part of a USD 600 million agreement, China National Petroleum Corporation has also agreed to extract oil from 23 small oil fields in Uzbekistan with the aim of acquiring gas.

In addition to the Central Asian republics, China has been able to reach significant energy-related agreements with Russia, which is also one of its most significant western neighbors; the strategic pipeline from Russia to the nation is currently under discussion, and a number of them have already been put into place. The Russian-Chinese oil pipeline, which begins in the Russian city of Skovorodino in the Amur region and travels to the Chinese city of Daqing in the northeast, was inaugurated in early 2011 as the most recent development in this area. The pipeline's construction started in 2010 and was finished quickly. It is 1,000 kilometers long, with 927 kilometers of it in Chin territory and 72 kilometers inside Russian territory. Between 2011 and 2030, 15 million tons of Russian oil will be transported annually to China via this pipeline, according to the two countries' agreement (Simes, 2020).



Figure 2. Central Asia oil and gas pipelines to China (Chen & Fazilov, 2018).

Combating the Pandemic

The novel coronavirus pneumonia outbreak in 2020 highlighted the importance of SCO health cooperation, with China being the most active participant in this field. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact, Beijing has attempted to persuade the SCO to contribute to coronavirus prevention efforts. As a result, the SCO's countries stepped up anti-epidemic cooperation and established a health community. President Xi believed "to fight the virus that respects no borders, we must take up the most powerful weapon of solidarity and cooperation, and rise up to the most imperative task of saving people's lives". President Xi emphasized that we should put the SCO's health cooperation mechanisms into full use, and deepen exchanges and cooperation in epidemic monitoring, scientific research, and disease control and treatment. China proposes that hotline contacts be created between SCO members' Centers for Disease Control (CDCs) for timely updates on cross-border transmission of communicable diseases. The unique value and important role of traditional medicine have been highlighted in the battle against COVID-19, and we should continue to hold the SCO Forum on Traditional

Medicine to enhance exchanges and mutual learning in this field. He stressed that vaccines play a vital role in defeating the virus. China has joined the COVAX facility, and will actively consider SCO countries' need for vaccines to help protect people's safety and health in our countries. President Xi said we can better coordinate the SCO's cooperation agenda with the necessity for a long-term fight against COVID-19, employ new working methods and flexible cooperation forms, and keep relevant mechanisms running effectively (Xi, 2020). According to Cui Li, vice president of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's good-neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation commission, member countries of the SCO have made tangible contributions to the fight against COVID-19 by banding together to counter the threat (Mo, 2022).

The SCO's Role in Rejecting US Global Hegemony

Generally, China's commitment to countering US influence within the region is both recurrent and thinly veiled. In 2015, CCP leaders wrote, "China [would] In ... pursue an independent foreign policy of peace and a national defense policy that is defensive in nature, [and] oppose hegemonism and power politics in all forms" (Grace, 2016, p. 2). In addition to China, Russia is also pursuing more or less the same policy to counter US global hegemony, and indeed the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine can be regarded as part of Moscow's anti-American hegemony stance. Accordingly, China and Russia as two major powers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have tried to use this organization as an important vehicle to prevent US global hegemony and influence.

It was conceived during an era of US unipolarity when Moscow and Beijing were increasingly concerned about the American growing influence in the Central Asian region in the immediate post-Cold War era. Russia wanted to maintain its influence in its "near abroad", and it believed that bringing in China would help keep America off balance in Central Asia. When Shanghai Five was founded in 1996, Beijing saw it as a means for capitalizing on economic opportunities in the region (Pant, 2023). Indeed, SCO was a tool for both major founders of the organization to keep the United States out of Central Asia.

In principle, Beijing's concern about American global hegemony, and regional influence in particular, go back to the events of September 11, 2001, and the occupation of Afghanistan in 2002 at the end of the "war on terror". This has become a major concern for the Chinese government and has led Beijing to pursue more serious institutional cooperation with neighbouring countries in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to balance Russia's growing influence with the United States. Of course, this does not mean that the interests of China and Russia are completely at odds with those of Washington in the region, but that the balance of the historical logic of relations between the great powers is balanced (Southerland, Green, & Janik, 2020; Rumer, 2006).

One can assume that China and Russia have used the SCO to counter American policies of economic penetration of the oil-rich Caspian Basin and to facilitate a global balance of power through a multi-polar order that would frustrate US global hegemonic goals (Bhatty, 2000). It is believed that the SCO is becoming an anchor for stability in the Eurasian heartland and is mainly a response to the growing Western presence in the region. It is also believed that worries about the ability of the United States to project its power deep into the Eurasian heartland also helped to bring together Moscow and Beijing to move ahead with the transformation of the more informal Shanghai dialogue into an actual international organization in 2001 (Simha, 2015). America had maintained bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Khanabad and Manas) since late 2001, in support of the anti-terror operation launched in nearby Afghanistan after the events of September 11 in Washington and New York.

In response to such military influence in the region, the 2005 summit produced one highly publicized communiqué. This SCO Communiqué called for the United States to establish a timetable for the redeployment of its forces from Uzbekistan (Khanabad base) and Kyrgyzstan (Manas base). The SCO justification was reportedly based on the US-led anti-terrorism coalition's completion of the active military phase of operations in Afghanistan (Turner, 2005). Indeed, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's 2005 declaration requiring the US to vacate bases in Central Asia was a boon to Beijing and Moscow, both of which have been alarmed by the US's growing influence in the region (Goodenough, 2005).

Nevertheless, the major anti-US stance of the SCO can be understood from the final declaration of the 2006 summit in Shanghai: "The SCO will make a constructive contribution to the establishment of a new global security architecture of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and mutual respect". The declaration also asserted: "Threats and challenges can be effectively met only when there is broad cooperation among all countries and international organizations concerned. What specific means and mechanisms should be adopted to safeguard the security of the region is the right and responsibility of countries in the region". The statement went on to indicate that "Central Asian countries must choose development paths based on their needs and interests" (Weitz, 2006). The diversity of civilization and the models of development must be respected and upheld. Differences in cultural traditions, political and social systems, values, and models of development formed in the course of history should not be taken as pretexts to interfere in other countries' internal affairs (Weitz, 2006).

Conclusion

Since the 1978 Reform and Opening Up Policy, China has tried to participate actively in international organizations such as the UN and the UN Security Council, the WTO, the World Bank, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the SCO. However, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a notable departure from other aforementioned organizations. China as one of the two major founding members of the SCO has tried to play a more essential role in this regional organization at the same time Beijing has attempted to use this organization for its regional and global policies. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a regional cooperation mechanism that carries out its activities as an independent international actor with a legal basis and its own norms and norms of conduct. The SCO sets out a broad range of objectives and potential areas of cooperation, although it mostly has focused on fighting against terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism in the region.

The birth of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a landmark event in China's multilateral diplomacy. Unlike other international organizations, the SCO upholds a concept of cooperation that is mostly a diplomatic initiative put forward by China and is closely related to China's role in international and regional affairs. From the "Shanghai Spirit" and the New Security Concept at the beginning of its establishment, to the Qingdao Summit's proposal to enrich the "Shanghai Spirit" with the new connotation of the times, that is, the concept of development, security, cooperation, civilization and global governance, to the proposal to build a community with a shared future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the development of the SCO has fully embodied "Chinese wisdom" and regional and global policy.

One of China's most important foreign policy initiatives from the past 20 years is Beijing's role in the founding and development of the SCO. The SCO would improve Beijing's effectiveness, making increased institutionalization and empowerment of the organization one of the best paths forward for Chinese foreign policy and its regional and global role. In other words, Beijing's preferences have been reflected in the development of

the SCO and have served to advance the interests of other like-minded countries in Chinese foreign policy.

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