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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Quo Vadis?

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Abstract---The article discusses the initial role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia and the latest development trends within the, as well as possible scenarios for its transformation in the future. The enlargement of the SCO in 2017 enhanced its geopolitical weight and expanded opportunities for further multilateral cooperation. It has a chance to transform into a Eurasian organization. Nevertheless, these perspectives remain unclear.

Keywords---Central Asia, geopolitics, regional integration, regionalism, transformation of the SCO.

Introduction

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On June 15, 2001, the leaders of Russia, four Central Asian countries, and China signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Shanghai. The SCO is a product of the new geopolitical situation in Central Asia as a result of the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations. It was formed based on the Shanghai Five, which was formed in the 1990s to find solutions to border problems inherited from the Soviet Union to the Central Asian republics. Originally operating as an ad-hoc mechanism with the active support of China and Russia, this format has become a full-fledged regional organization by the beginning of the 21st century. Until recently, the SCO's main focus was on Central Asia (Aris, 2009; Aris, 2013; Kawai, 2005). However, the entry of Asia's large but long-time rival countries into the SCO in 2017, such as India and Pakistan, as well as the ongoing geopolitical shifts in Eurasia, pose several serious challenges to the organization.

SCO profile: "hegemonic regionalism" or "new model" of regional cooperation

Before India's and Pakistan's accession to the SCO, experts used to describe the organization as a platform for cooperation based on "competition and cooperation" between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia. The approaches here are significantly different and contradict each other. This dichotomy is reflected by the critical views of Western scholars and experts on the organization on the one hand, and by the assessment of the SCO as an example of a new regionalism by representatives of Chinese and Russian schools of political science, on the other hand. Neo-realists in the West (Allison, 2018) see the emergence of the SCO as a "model of dominance in Central Asia" developed primarily by Russia and China. According to them, within the SCO, the two countries have shared "responsibilities" in the region: Russia is responsible for the security and military-political issues, while China has chosen to develop economic cooperation (Bailes, 2007; Contessi, 2010; McClellan, 2013; Lubina, 2017). According to this approach, the SCO is a bloc formed against NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (Roberts, 2006).

According to another Western school - the normative approach, the SCO aims to "limit democracy and human rights and protect authoritarian political regimes" (Kaczmarek, 2017). For example, according to Roy Allison, a British expert, the nature of SCO became obvious in the early 2000s following the "Color Revolutions" supported by the United States and other Western countries. The British scientist describes the organization as a "security integration" project that seeks to ensure the security of Central Asia's ruling elites and the current political regime

(Allison, 2018). So supporters of this view have described the SCO as a "club of authoritarian states whose goals and objectives are directed against Western and democratic values." (Obydenkova)

Another group of Western scholars believes that the SCO is a clear example of "hegemonic regionalism (Mittelman)". According to their theory, integration associations emerging outside the Western world are formed mainly under the "patronage" of the major powers in the region (Mittelman & Falk, 2018; Obydenkova & Libman, 2015). Regional hegemony uses such structures to strengthen their position in relations with other regions of the world and power centers (Fawcett). It needs to be highlighted that the views of Western researchers on the SCO, based on skepticism and concern, were formed in the late twentieth century and the first decade of the XXI century. At the time, the United States and Europe were particularly concerned about the organization's potential to become an alternative "center of power" that could jeopardize the Western-led world order.

Russia was initially more optimistic about the SCO as a means of shaping a new security system with its participation in Central Asia. This issue is also widely discussed in the approaches of Russian researchers (Gordienko (2015); Nikitina (2011); Borisov (2011); and others). At the heart of their views is the idea that the SCO is a mechanism for securing Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia. This includes not only the SCO's competitiveness with the United States and NATO but also the need to strengthen the partnership between the SCO and other regional security mechanisms in the Russian-led region (Nikitina, 2011). Moscow has always been a supporter of the development of security and political-military cooperation within the SCO. An example of this is the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation and Interaction between the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of SCO, the CIS Anti-Terrorism Center (ATC), and the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), signed in 2018 at the initiative of the Russian Federation (Memorandum).

Chinese researchers are very positive about the development of the SCO, its importance for China's foreign policy, its place in the processes in Central Asia, and the system of international relations in general. First, their research provides a conceptual basis for Beijing's official position and strategy towards the SCO. In the early 2000s, Zhao outlined the following six priorities of China's strategy towards the SCO: (1) the fight against the "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, and separatism); (2) to ensure the security of border areas; (3) to contribute to regional stability; (4) participation in the economic development of the region; (5) to prevent Central Asia from falling under the influence of states or military blocs hostile to China; (6) access to energy resources in the region (Chjao, 2005).

Second, Chinese researchers note that the conceptual elements of China's foreign policy define the doctrinal and ideological foundations of the SCO, first and foremost in the SCO Charter, which defines the ideas and concepts of the struggle against the "Shanghai spirit" and "three evils." "The SCO was established at the same time with the implementation of socialist modernization and policy reforms in China. That is why its formation is directly linked to the development of China and changes in diplomacy. The SCO is a discovery of Chinese diplomacy", says.

Third, further developing the above views, in recent years there has been a significant increase in Chinese diplomatic and expert circles' attempts to interpret the SCO as a "new model" in international relations (Xiaoquan, 2007) and to substantiate it scientifically. Wang Xiaotsuan, another leading expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that the SCO, based on the basic principles of the "Shanghai Spirit" (mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the desire for common development), is a unique international organization that includes states from different civilizations and political systems. This, Wang assumes, allows promoting inclusive cooperation and "harmonious order" within the SCO, in contrast to other international structures (Xiaoquan, 2007).

SCO mission in Central Asia

Despite the differences in the approaches listed above, there is no doubt that the SCO is a regional organization initiated by China and Russia and supported by Central Asian countries. However, it raises the question of how much the SCO has contributed to the development of stability and cooperation in Central Asia, and how this is reflected. This requires clarification of another conceptual issue. Is the SCO itself a real security organization? This again leads to the same dichotomy. A group of experts interprets it as a "guarantee of stability in Central Asia" (Van, pp. 54-59). In particular, the former SCO Secretary-General R. Alimov notes "even though the SCO is located near-global hotbeds of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, the SCO has not allowed the region for which it is responsible to become a hotbed of instability, to fill the gap created here on the threshold of a new century by radical ideologies and extremists, to absorb false values" (Alimov, 2017). Other observers, mostly Western experts, say the SCO has failed to find a solution as a classic regional security organization, which will mainly serve to ensure the security of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia (Boland, 2011). As a clear example of the SCO's failure to become a real regional security tool, Western observers cite its "empty" position on the Afghan conflict (Weitz, 2015). Although

Afghanistan has observer status in the SCO and the issue is constantly discussed within the organization, there is still no single "Afghan strategy" within the structure.

However, in our view, the SCO has always been, in essence, not classical security or military organization. First, a more comprehensive analysis of the SCO's contribution to strategic stability and security in Central Asia is needed. Sustainability and security are very broad concepts, covering not only the issues of ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country but also issues of economic development and social stability. It is this approach that allows for a full and objective disclosure of the organization's stabilizing role in the region (Bobojonov & Aw-Hassan, 2014; Soloaga & Wintersb, 2001).

Second, the main founding documents, the Shanghai Declaration and the Charter show that the Organization aims at "strengthening cooperation in the political, security, economic, cultural, humanitarian and other spheres of the SCO." In other words, the founding states have not initially planned to create the SCO in the form of "collective security" or military-political alliance. In addition, in recent literature, the SCO has been classified not as a "collective security organization" or "economic integration structure", but as a trans-regional organization with a new kind of universal agenda (Alimov, 2018).

Third, analysts who are increasingly critical of the SCO's role in Central Asia and its activities, in general, do not pay enough attention to the deep essence of the concept of "Shanghai spirit" and its place in the life of the organization. The "Shanghai Spirit" embodies the following principles: "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the pursuit of common development." The practical application of these principles is of great importance for the Central Asian states. As Amit R. Saxena, an Indian researcher, points out, the "Shanghai spirit" - the SCO's main doctrine - has created the principles of non-interference to internal affairs and the sovereignty of member states, created immunity for Central Asia from the threat of Russia and China (Saksena, 2014). In turn, as the authors of the analytical document "Regional organizations in Central Asia: peculiarities of cooperation, efficiency-related dilemmas" pointed out, "despite the strong position of Moscow and Beijing, the governments of the Central Asian republics promote their interests, by "vetoing" the consideration of issues raised by the two large countries. As a result, projects that have been pushed forward by Russia and China, despite their superiority, have not been implemented due to a lack of support from the organization's Central Asian members (Laruel & Peyruz, 2013).

In what ways is the stabilizing role of the SCO reflected in Central Asia? In our opinion: First, the SCO prevented the establishment of a clear geopolitical dominance of a major external power center in the region, thereby ensuring geopolitical balance and strategic stability in Central Asia. In particular, the SCO has ensured that Russia and China do not fall under the influence of the United States and NATO in the region, while the Central Asian states have pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, thereby balancing the interests of leading powers and gaining political, military and economic benefits (Pomfret, 2005; Hurrell & Fawcett, 1998).

Second, the organization has been balancing the strategic interests of Russia and China in Central Asia, thereby ensuring their constructive cooperation. Despite the competing interests between the two sides, Moscow and Beijing recognize the organization as an important regional mechanism for communication. From Russia's point of view, the SCO serves China to act by the rules of the "multilateral game" in Central Asia and, consequently, to curb its ambitions in the region. For the PRC, the establishment of the organization "legitimized" its influence in Central Asia, that is, giving it an institutional form (Huasheng, 2013). This has created a very important image for Beijing in its efforts to dispel accusations of pursuing an "expansionist" policy toward the region. The SCO has also acted as a "buffer" in the way of competition between the two major powers, namely in resolving disputes between them peacefully and diplomatically and directing their competition to find mutually beneficial solutions for regional stability.

Thus, the competition between Russia and the PRC has not reached the level of conflict in the region, which could jeopardize the security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the states here. This is a very important factor if we take into account the potential conflicts in Central Asia over the remaining borders, ethnic and water resources, as well as threats around the region (the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, terrorism and extremism, the importance of the "Uyghur" factor for China). Therefore, its success in ensuring the balance of power is considered by many experts critical of the SCO as the organization's "most productive political effectiveness." (www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRI17.pdf)

Some observers say the SCO has served to ease political, military, and economic pressure from Russia, which sees the region as its "sphere of influence" for Central Asia. At the same time, China's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Central Asian states and its economic assistance have helped Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to contain Russia's influence. This means that the Central Asian states have learned to

make effective use of the "competitive cooperation" of their two major neighbors, and the SCO platform has played a very important role in this (Ludema & Wooton, 2000; Koh & Kwok, 2017).

Third, Beijing's "balancing" role with Moscow has strengthened Central Asia's ability to cooperate with the United States and NATO in the military sphere, despite its more liberal foreign policy and its membership in the Russian-led CSTO. Such a "positive" contribution of China to the independent foreign policy of the Central Asian states through the SCO can be seen in the fact that they do not support Russia's interference in the internal affairs of Georgia and Ukraine (Aris). Observers say that with the indirect help of China, Central Asian states have not openly supported Moscow's aggressive policy in the post-Soviet space (Lanteigne, 2018).

Fourth, given that the Central Asian republics have not been able to form a "purely regional" integration organization, the SCO has accomplished this task to some extent. The SCO has been and remains a platform for leaders, ministers, security officials, and even representatives of economic blocs and experts from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to discuss issues of multilateral regional cooperation, even taking into account the participation of Russia and China. Thus, assessing the SCO's role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia based on whether it has been formed as a "collective security organization" or an "integration structure" does not fully explain the organization's role in regional stability and geopolitical processes in general (Grafe et al., 2008; Huh & Park, 2018).

Eying on broader Eurasia?

After India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, the SCO entered a new stage. But its previous essence and profile have changed. At first glance, the SCO has evolved from a "pure" regional organization to the largest Eurasian interstate body. Currently, the total area of its member states is more than 34 million square kilometers. This means 60% of the Eurasian region. The total population of the SCO countries is more than 3 billion, which is about half of the world's population. In addition, four members of the organization (Russia, China, Pakistan, and India) are states with nuclear weapons and have an important position in international relations. But in the post-2017 period, the potential for such a large partnership remains untapped in practice. Cooperation in the fields of economy, transport, and logistics, investment, and finance, promising economic sectors, implementation of infrastructure projects has not reached a qualitatively new level. In recent years, member States' aspirations in this regard are largely limited to the adoption of programs of general nature and declarative documents (Read, 2004; Goyal & Staal, 2004).

The slowdown of the cooperation in the SCO began to manifest itself before its expansion in 2017. For some ten years, Beijing has been promoting two economic initiatives: the establishment of the SCO Development Bank and the Development Fund, as well as the creation of a Free Trade Area (FTA) within the organization. Russia has opposed these Chinese attempts to institutionalize economic and financial cooperation within the organization. In response, Moscow has pushed its Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) and its subsequent "Greater Eurasia" concept as a top goal of its reinvented geopolitics towards Eurasia. The reason for such a strategic shift was not only the deterioration of Moscow's relations with Europe but also its fear of the growing influence of China in Central Asia. In turn, by 2013, there was a radical shift in the global strategy of the PRC, which was partly due to the situation in the SCO. In the belief that Moscow would now allow the potential transformation of the SCO into the bloc with an economic nature the country's "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Faces a Strategic Choice" China's new leader, Xi Jinping, announced the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. China has decided to create a mechanism to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and Eurasia in general, without the "assistance" of the SCO.

Lunching of the OBOR embodied China's Eurasian grand strategy without having a deal with Moscow at multilateral formats (i.e. the SCO). In this way, Beijing's dream of turning the SCO into a mechanism of economic integration has lost its meaning. It seems the SCO has fulfilled its main mission within Beijing's strategy towards Central Asia, at least for coming years. As the OBOR has been realizing most assertively, the SCO remains in its shadow. The OBOR is essentially a project based on China's previous strategy towards the SCO. In this sense, it is a continuation of Beijing's initiatives aimed at creating financial institutions and international transport corridors within the SCO, but for some reason did not materialize. In particular, the principles of "mutual consultations", "mutual benefit", "common development desire" declared by Beijing's OBOR language derive from the "Shanghai spirit", which is the cornerstone of the SCO's doctrine.

In the future, China's influence in Asia and the world, in general, is expected to increase, which raises the question of what role the SCO may play in its strategy. For now, there is no doubt that the OBOR is the main foreign policy priority for Beijing. In general, both Russia and China see the SCO as a more "support mechanism" in the implementation of their regional order concepts - "Greater Eurasia" and the OBOR respectively. There are some

speculations that the Moscow-Beijing tandem may become a "trio" with the addition of Delhi. The RIC (Russia-India-China) is actively promoted mainly by Moscow, as it wants to "curb" rising Chinese influence in Eurasia. This was the main reason why Russia openly lobbied Delhi to join the SCO. In this sense, what are India's approach to the SCO and its future? Is Delhi ready to participate in building the future of the organization within the RIC format? If the RIC would develop with success, the chances of these three major powers to improve their relations within the SCO will increase. As such, it could strengthen the organization itself too. However, if the "trio" fails, would it hurt the SCO future?

Shortly, the following developments may hinder the effective operation of the RIC. First, it seems that the territorial dispute between China and India will remain as a "ticking bomb", which can turn into grave diplomatic and even military conflict at any time. The military clashes in 2020 in Ladakh province revealed a potential for such a scenario. Second, as a result of the further deterioration of "West-Russia" and "West-China" relations, the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing may worry India and cause its distancing from the RIC format. Third, India's growing competition with China in Southeast Asia may chill the dialogue between Beijing and Delhi and even indirectly affect India's relations with Russia (Tripathy, 2018; Nneka et al., 2016).

Thus, the question of the RIC's role as a potential "pillar" for the future of the SCO remains open. It is clear that the other members of the SCO - Central Asian countries and Pakistan - will certainly affect the future development of the organization, too. However, unlike the "big three", they do not seek to establish their geopolitical concepts in the region.

The future of the SCO

Regardless of what way the SCO will develop in the coming years, it will face the dilemma of expansion. The organization claims its openness to the membership of other Eurasian countries and some of them have been knocking on the door for some years. For example, Iran and Afghanistan, among others. However, current permanent members are well aware that in light of the worsening of the international situation and further aggravation of the global economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is superfluous to discuss this topic. Moreover, the full adaptation of India and Pakistan to the organization is also a time-consuming process. For this reason, hardly worth expecting that SCO will accept new members shortly. As such, we do not consider the expansion as the factor of an influence on the development trajectory of the organization in short term.

On the other hand, the growth of member states' numbers without addressing the institutional gaps may lead the SCO to fragmentation, provoking the emergence of "tactical alliances" within itself. This experience may be applied to other universal international organizations as well. For example, in the SCO case, unresolved bilateral issues among the members could lead to a scenario like that. As mentioned earlier, border issues between India and Pakistan, China and India remain pending. Disagreements between Russia and China, China, and India over strategic topics are also unlikely to disappear any time soon.

Thus, marking its 20th anniversary the SCO is facing a serious strategic challenge. It needs to address tough issues: from internal institutional developments to strategic competition among major members. Its member states, primarily Russia, China, and India, have the common answer to the question of what role this mechanism should play key role in shaping the future fate of the organization.

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