



## ANALYSIS

### **THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: AN EVOLUTION IN THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE**

By Christopher C. Harmon

Even two decades after its founding, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has remained nearly unknown to Americans, including many at work on international security. Yet it has tremendous breadth and could well become an organization of consequence. Some three billion people are represented by the SCO's member states. The group includes the two largest rivals to U.S. power, Russia and China—both more adversarial than they were just a few years ago. Remarkably, the SCO has four nuclear-armed powers. One of those, the most benign, is the democratic regional actor to which the U.S. drew nearer during the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations: India.

China, Russia and Central Asian states built this “permanent intergovernmental international organization.”<sup>1</sup> It opened for business in June 2001. With South Asian accessions in 2017, the membership now stands at eight which together have great geographical reach: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. All of these states see challenges which are internal, or cross borders, or do so potentially; founders spoke of “three evils” they believe justify the creation of the partnership: terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

As the Kazakh analyst Murat T. Laumullin noted at the time of the SCO founding, Islamist militants were living openly in large communities in the region.<sup>2</sup> This was most brazen in the Fergana Valley--on territory of Uzbekistan but beside lands of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and only two hundred miles west of China's Uighurs for whom the pull of Islam is marked. China spoke out often against the prospect of any movement for an “East Turkistan” carved from Xinjiang and worried over conflict between the Muslim Uighur peoples within the borders of the People's Republic of China and the vast popular majority of Han. Russia, for its part, had been repeatedly wounded by Chechen terrorists and felt threatened by armed Salafists. Pakistan has never been able to suppress insurgency in Baluchistan. Certainly, separatism is a grave concern for the members.

A “Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure” was thus created early on by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It has boasted of neutralizing hundreds of terrorist training camps, pre-empting outright attacks, arresting many militants, extraditing some, and sentencing others.<sup>3</sup> Such claims are not well co-substantiated, and naturally there are fears that governments are using “counterterrorism” to repress peoples of different cultures or political views. The “RATS” headquarters is in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; staff come mainly from

<sup>1</sup> Website of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: <http://eng.sectsc.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Murat T. Laumullin, *The Geopolitics of XXI Century in Central Asia* (Almaty: Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007), p. 138 and more generally chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> Data reported by SCO Secy. Genl. Rashid Alimov to the United Nations and quoted by Australian scholar Christopher Snedden, author of an excellent unpublished 14-page paper “Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” created in July 2018 at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies [Honolulu]. Alimov's original article may be found at: <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-shanghai-cooperation-organization-counteracting-threats-peace-and-security>.



Kazakhstan, Russia and China—also the three major financial donor of the SCO's early years. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure publishes task lists that include data collection, coordinating counterterror capabilities, joint work on collective response, and counterterrorist exercises.

Russia is enjoying insider advantages with leadership. Russia's Yevgeny Sysoyev has been one of those to hold charge of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure's top post between 2016 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, a Russian national controls the new, elevated United Nations (U.N.) position of Under Secretary General for Counter Terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Initiatives to integrate the older Commonwealth of Independent States post on counterterrorism with both the U.N. and SCO may follow naturally for Russia, the dominant CIS power. Said differently: SCO may not be dazzling the world with innovations in global thinking on terrorism, but Moscow may be tightening its own trap lines and tracking everyone else's work, with all the advantages it has in intelligence, etc. Moscow now coordinates more-than-national-level bureaucracies.<sup>6</sup> And their work is mostly un-exceptional to nearly all world countries; it is rare for a state to protest at others collaborating against international terrorism.

Martial exercises are another major category of SCO's business. This is true even though the organization's web site guides readers to other topics, including humanitarian aid. Jane's information services report on Shanghai Cooperation Organization exercises and have noted how many of them look quite conventional as to arms and maneuvering forces, suggesting they do not suit Special Operations against a few armed terrorists so much as methodical wide operations against separatist areas. Those indeed have their place in the view of the founders: the initial "Shanghai Five" states of the pre-2001 decade were most eager to resolve border differences (and conflicts) on the continent exposed by the shrinking away of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>7</sup> More recently Inner Mongolia, Vladivostok, and Shandong have all hosted combined SCO country military exercises. Kyrgyzstan was a host in 2016. A "Peace Mission-2018" military exercise ran in the Ural Mountains.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sources here include a news story of February 16, 2022: "Joint Position of the SCO RATS, the CIS ATC and the CSTO Secretariat on Combating Terrorism and Extremism was signed," available at [https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news\\_odkb/sostoyalos-podpisanie-sovmestnoy-pozitsii-rats-shos-atts-sng-i-sekretariata-odkb-po-voprosam-protivo/#loaded](https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/sostoyalos-podpisanie-sovmestnoy-pozitsii-rats-shos-atts-sng-i-sekretariata-odkb-po-voprosam-protivo/#loaded).

<sup>5</sup> Recent speeches by Vladimir Voronkov include remarks in Tajikistan in April 2022: "Opening Remarks by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT)," available at [https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/opening\\_statement\\_usg\\_tajikistan\\_nap\\_event\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/opening_statement_usg_tajikistan_nap_event_as_delivered.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> This year has seen at least one coordinating effort between the SCO (RATS) and the Russian leading U.N. efforts, which was reported by the SCO as follows: "CONVERSATION WITH UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM MR VLADIMIR VORONKOV. On 7 February 2022, Mr. Ruslan Mirzaev, Director of the Executive Committee had a video call with Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, UN Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT). During the conversation, the parties exchanged views on bilateral cooperation issues, in particular, the possibilities of organizing and conducting joint events, as well as potential areas for further interaction. The parties paid special attention to the situation in Afghanistan and discussed the current military-political situation in this country. Expressing satisfaction at the current level of cooperation between SCO RATS and UNOCT, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen interaction in organizing and conducting practical events within their respective mandates. The meeting took place in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and partnership. SCO RATS Executive Committee."

<sup>7</sup> "History of Development of SCO," *China Daily*, June 12, 2006, available at [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-06/12/content\\_6020347.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-06/12/content_6020347.htm).

<sup>8</sup> The SCO's website reports on such exercises. There is a useful table with some details presented in Matthew Southerland et. al, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,

Economic issues take a place well behind security issues for SCO, but their presence is marked nonetheless. SCO's Business Council, located in Moscow, labors to coordinate trade, and an Interbank Consortium with a presidency that rotates among SCO members helps with the international funding such trade requires. Recent items on the SCO web site indicate efforts to enhance food security and agriculture and to collaborate on rail and other transport systems—highly sensible propositions. Crucially, to Western interests as well as Chinese, nearly all members pledge support to aiding the Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative.” And so (as with Moscow's lead on counter-terrorism) this is one of many ways that Beijing's geopolitical ends are furthered via organizational tools of the twenty-one year old SCO. Economic projects are also safe, suitable for initiatives by the newest members. Pakistan has pushed an SCO initiative against poverty, while India adds to the agenda some objectives in innovation and business start-ups.<sup>9</sup>

No one doubts that China sits at a central place in all this work. Beijing's stature is enhanced by the “new” organization. China knows that an SCO structure, up and running, inherently reduces some options of Washington in the region and may parry American “intrusions” on Central Asian affairs—a clearly-expressed aim of many SCO members from the beginning. Given the collapse of America's limited efforts to help Burma politically,<sup>10</sup> and the catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the region tilts in Beijing's direction. China is also doubtless wary of any gains Russia may seek in the region. By “hugging the belt” of its partner and rival, China might find ways to contain Russian influence in the former Soviet states too—or at least balance any initiative Russia undertakes there. In economics, Chinese dynamism has waned somewhat, yet it still swamps its regional rivals in economic power. The SCO may expand the ways in which Beijing seeks out energy sources—a near-obsession for Chinese planners. Finally, the Secretary General of the SCO is Zhang Ming, and Beijing also has one of the Deputy Secretary General slots.

What are the limits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization? What issues are not addressed well by these eight countries working together? They are many.

The globe might well be relieved to see quiet on the first front, the nuclear. As yet there are no public suggestions of cooperation on nuclear affairs. Given Pakistan's past in proliferating bomb technology, the disturbing characters of Russian and Chinese foreign policies, and the new growth in the Chinese arsenal, it seems best (for the West) if the nuclear-armed states in SCO stay clear of arms discussions. Perhaps they have. Certainly, there are anti-proliferation slogans that sometimes issue from SCO meetings. But given energy hunger, will there be a later stage when collective work on nuclear energy is opened?

At the far end of the standard--the polar opposite where power is softest--the eight participants of SCO talk of controlling political extremism—one of the root issues for which

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November 12, 2020, available at [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/Shanghai\\_Cooperation\\_Organization-Testbed\\_for\\_Chinese\\_Power\\_Projection.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization-Testbed_for_Chinese_Power_Projection.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly little has been published about the 2017 accession of the two new South Asian members (who are mutual nuclear rivals) in SCO.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. “track two” diplomacy offered limited counsel to Myanmar's National Security Council. The White House and the State Department sought to support democratization more widely in Myanmar. All that now seems swept away in the military seizure of power, succeeded by despotism. This *coup d'etat* is still contested by brave souls in the cities today and growing insurgency in the countryside.

SCO was founded. For example, there is a “Joint Appeal to Youth,” and effort towards their “spiritual and moral education.” But thus far no especially creative solutions have resulted from the discussions. It may be difficult to imagine Prime Minister Modi’s BJP (India) colluding well with Sunni Muslim leadership (in Pakistan) when New Delhi correctly identifies Islamabad as a state sponsor of some attacks by politico-religious zealots upon India, as in Mumbai, 2008. Major cultural differences also divide many of the SCO members. Finally, there remains the serious problem, apparent in the West where we have fumbled on this issue for two decades, that knowing violent extremism is bad does not get one down the road to a remedy by government.

This raises the related question of what the United States, its allies and partners, might wish for the SCO.

The present author has long-argued that opposition to Salafist Muslim international terrorism is an excellent ground for Washington to collaborate with Beijing—especially as there are so few other bilateral prospects. Horrific and totalitarian measures against the Uighurs have made this more difficult politically for persons not of the PRC, but it still is possible, as before, in dealing with international terrorism *at international levels*. The full SCO membership has intense concerns about Islamist extremism,<sup>11</sup> and the U.S. shares them. Perhaps India, acting via business councils and aid societies, could offer help, education, and technology to people in Baluchistan, that heated and violent Pakistani region, in some quiet bargain by which Pakistan holds back separatists against India in Kashmir and militants among Indian Muslims. It is unlikely, and yet *with Pakistan and India joining SCO, this is the right time for them to think creatively*.

Afghanistan has been heartbreak and disaster for the Western world, which devoted to it endless aid, good will, and martial assistance. No less than five SCO countries border on Afghanistan, which holds official “observer” status. The Shanghai group must work on the Afghan problem now, in its latest iteration, which is the return of Taliban tyranny a second time around. Never has it been so obvious that imagination and assistance are needed for this neighbor, and that regional self-interest and mutual security will be the beneficiaries.<sup>12</sup> U.S. policy makers would be smart to press SCO for action—and there is little down-side to Washington doing so.

The drugs problem follows realities in Afghanistan. The Taliban’s scandalous, anti-Muslim practice of furthering and heavily taxing the export of illegal narcotics must cease,<sup>13</sup> and while the perpetrators never cared about Western victims, perhaps now the SCO membership can force upon them some new directions. Neighbor countries have rising drug problems—even India does (although India’s rise is not due to Afghan exports). All the

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<sup>11</sup> Two decades after 9-11 I hope it goes without saying that “Islamism” is hardly the same thing as the Muslim faith. U.S. concerns spoken of here include not moderate faith but Islamist extremism and terrorism.

<sup>12</sup> While some of us may hope the SCO will move on Afghan problems, consider the pessimism about that from academic Eva Sewart in a September 30, 2021 article: “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan,” available at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/09/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-will-not-fill-any-vacuum-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>13</sup> Early evidences of this were marshalled by journalist Gretchen Peters, especially in the second edition of her book *Seeds of Terror* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2010). Since that appeared, the published literature documenting Taliban malfeasance has been powerful. In modern times, no other insurgency but FARC in Colombia has made as many hundreds of millions in the dope trade.

“stans” should come together around this most obvious of human problems. SCO may or may not markedly reduce “the three evils” but the fourth is surely illegal drugs. SCO may indeed sense the significance in the opportunity; recently it has been discussing building out an international center in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

United States policy as to the SCO lacks definition. A February 2020 paper from the Department of State on “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025”<sup>14</sup> never mentions the organization. Nor does the February 2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy from the White House.<sup>15</sup> The creation of the SCO was not in U.S. interests for the region, yet it exists, and it has grown recently, so a policy paper guiding U.S. officials is overdue. Probably the United States is not in position—especially given the war in Russia—to move the Shanghai group on policy. But as indicated with Afghanistan, and drug exports, the United States can work, overtly or quietly, at limited objectives and at other levels.

It is apparent that the United States hopes its limited economic and environmental assistance to the region, and border security initiatives and counterterrorism training, somewhat offset the influence of Russia and China and will create new friends in the “stans.” Washington speaks of some 70 projects conducted over the region—although the time frame on these is unclear.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps within the State Department there are discussion of how to use “The Quad” (India, Japan, Australia, United States) and other U.S. partnerships to *counter* SCO influences. Relatedly, it might be possible for Washington to obtain Indian liaison, indirectly, to influence a few of the SCO’s activities and deter it from untoward action. By its work inside The Quad and also the SCO, perhaps India may help better inform the U.S. on what actions can be taken to *deter* aggressiveness by China or Russia.

Certainly, there will be opportunities for the United States to try to widen the differences between Beijing and Moscow. On the macro scale, few objectives could be more useful strategically; even minor gains would be important. Some of the smaller states might well quietly help with this—for their own reasons.

The most *disturbing* prospect, as suggested above, is that SCO will lead to closer Russian-Chinese cooperation. Another unpleasant thing to ponder could be possible admission of either of the two official “observer” states now linked to SCO: Afghanistan, or Iran. To have both on the inside would change the tenor of SCO discussions on many a subject. Today the SCO declarations are often bland expressions of the value of a “multipolar” world or a “polycentric” world—the meanings of which begin with a soft poke at the decline of U.S. power on the global stage. Adding one or two rogue states run by religious extremists would

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<sup>14</sup> Department of State, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview),” February 5, 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>.

<sup>15</sup> The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, February 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> This author had the honor of participating in several of the counterterrorism education efforts in Central Asia launched from the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. The DoS paper of 2020 as referenced takes pride in “over 200 training activities” on border security involving over 2600 Central Asian border officers.

harden the organization's positions vis-à-vis Washington, the West, and liberal interests world-wide. Fortunately, neither Iran nor Afghanistan is likely to be admitted soon; authoritarians in charge of many SCO states might be even more worried by those bordering states than are thoughtful Americans.

An altogether different path for the SCO is unlikely but possible: irrelevance. Consider the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which does not prevent wars, was never strong in many respects, and now cannot even manage a full summit on schedule. SCO is no real powerhouse today, and hypothetically it could lose rather than gain influence during its third and fourth decades. Greater tension between Russia and China could cause that, as one example. Or a religious difference over proper Sunni positions on Shia issues could over-heat a future congress and thus cool collaboration.

The United States has paid virtually no attention to this massive, relatively new organization. It would be wiser to begin making serious assessments of its character and of U.S. opportunities. Rather than treat the SCO as an irrelevant and ineffective grouping of members with an overall anti-American bias, perhaps it is time for U.S. leaders and decisionmakers to consider options that might influence the organization's decisions in ways that favor U.S. foreign and national security objectives.

*Christopher C. Harmon is lead author or editor of eight books, including Statecraft and Power: Essays in Honor of Harold W. Rood. Uniquely, Dr. Harmon has run counterterrorism studies programs for the U.S. at both the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (Honolulu) and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (Garmisch).*

