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THE SCO: A REGIONAL ORGANISATION IN THE MAKING

Anna Matveeva and Antonio Giustozzi
Crisis States Research Centre
LSE

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The Editor, Crisis States Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE.



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The SCO: a regional organisation in the making

Anna Matveeva and Antonio Giustozzi
Crisis States Research Centre

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was established in 2001,¹ comprises six Eurasian states (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and covers territory hosting a quarter of the world's population. Two of its member states – Russia and China – are permanent members of the UN Security Council and have nuclear weapons. The SCO has progressed fairly quickly from its inception to become a relatively prominent regional player, whose significance is widely discussed. In December 2004 it gained official observer's status at the UN General Assembly.

The SCO's charter, adopted in 2002, defines the main purposes of the organisation as “strengthening mutual trust, good neighbourliness and friendship among member states; developing effective co-operation in political affairs, economy, trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transport and environmental protection; and working together to maintain regional peace, security and stability”.²

The SCO is still grappling with its role as a regional organisation, balancing security, economic and geopolitical dimensions. It has yet to prove itself as something more than a forum for high-level networking among leaders. To date, it does not have a record of effective conflict prevention. Still, it appears to be useful as a forum for Central Asians to re-align themselves with Russia and China. The SCO's distinctive features have been its determination to combat terrorism in the region, speed up security cooperation in strategic areas and provide a platform to express a thinly-veiled irritation with the role of the US.

This article examines the rapid growth of the SCO. The study is structured in the following way: it first assesses the recent history of violence and potential for conflict in the region, and then outlines the SCO mandate, balance of power and internal and external dynamics. It discusses the SCO's shared values, and how they facilitate or impede the development of common action. It then proceeds to outline the SCO's main activities in the security sphere and its 'alternative model' of statehood and covers the role of observers and other actors in the region vis-à-vis the SCO. Finally it concludes with reflections on the SCO's effectiveness. Some of our judgements are tentative because the SCO is a new organisation. It might well become a major player in Central Asia and beyond but it could also limp along with little impact if Sino-Russian relations deteriorate.

Characterisation of violence, conflict and security in the region

The region's recent history of violence dates back from the attempts at reform in the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev. The first clashes of the perestroika period occurred in Kazakhstan

¹ Its predecessor – the Shanghai Five Group – was set up in 1996.

² <http://www.sectSCO.org/html/00026.html>

with the Almaty riots of December 1986.³ They were followed by fierce interethnic clashes in 1989 in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks, and in 1990 in Osh and Uzgen in Kyrgyzstan between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. The end of the USSR in December 1991 brought extreme violence to Tajikistan, which descended into a civil war in 1992. Although major fighting subsided by 1994, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) controlled large territories in the highlands until 1997 when a peace agreement was signed.⁴ Thereafter, the uncompromising remnants of UTO merged with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a religious movement determined to overthrow the secularist government of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, and fled to Afghanistan. Episodes of violence in Tajikistan persisted until 2001 when the last banditry formations were destroyed by government troops. The government/ UTO conflict has subsided since then.

Currently, three categories of security challenge affect the region, with varying degrees of transborder implications. First and potentially most serious is the threat posed by Islamist/ jihadi militant groups with ties across the wider region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. All attacks have been sporadic, separate incidents and none has marked the start of a sustained campaign. IMU appears to be the main protagonist. In 1999 its militants crossed from their bases in Afghanistan and Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan's Batken province, took Japanese hostages and clashed with Kyrgyz troops before launching attacks on Uzbekistan. In 2002 bomb explosions took place at the Osh market in Kyrgyzstan, and in March and July 2004 in Tashkent and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, followed by shoot-outs with the police. In the Uzbek case suicide bombers have been used, and the July 2004 attacks targeted the US and Israeli embassies. More attacks occurred in cross-border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Ferghana Valley in 2006 and 2007. Other notable Islamist protagonists include Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose relationship to terrorism is disputed, and other less prominent groups.

The most dramatic violence to date was associated with the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan, in May 2005 when an assault by a militant Islamic group led to an uprising that merged with wider social-economic discontent and its brutal repression by government troops. Interpretations of the Andijan events are a subject of bitter disagreement among experts: while some portrayed the events as a massacre of innocent civilians by the government's troops (International Crisis Group 2005), others defended the right of the state to protect itself from Islamist insurgency.⁵

China's western Xinjiang province, home to the Uyghurs⁶ and other Muslim Turkic ethnic groups akin to those in Central Asia, has also experienced violence for which Islamist groups claimed responsibility. In the 1990s bombings, shootings at police stations and administrative buildings and murders of civil servants and loyalist mullahs have occurred, but stabilisation has taken place over the last five years. The Chinese government has managed to eliminate

³ Riots occurred over the appointment of an ethnic Russian Gennadii Kolbin to replace the ethnic Kazakh head of the Communist Party Central Committee of Kazakhstan Dinmuhamed Kunayev.

⁴ The series of talks between the President Rahmon's government and the UTO ended in June 1997 with the signing in Moscow of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord, after which a Commission for National Reconciliation was created to implement it - see Abdullaev and Barnes (2001).

⁵ Interview by Shirin Akiner, 'UK academic says interviews corroborate Uzbek official death toll,' Uzbek Television first channel, Tashkent, 29 May 2005.

⁶ Uyghurs are Muslim people of Turkic origin, closely related to the Uzbeks. Xinjiang (formerly known as Eastern Turkestan) is their homeland where about 8.8 million live. Uyghurs were formally incorporated into the China after the Second World War.

most of the underground militant cells and there is no sense of a united liberation movement of Eastern Turkestan.⁷

Secondly, connected to Islamist extremism is violence related to internal political causes that include discontent over living standards, repression, weak government and irredentism. In China much of the Uyghur Islamic militancy is closely related to ethnic separatism. Violence in Uzbekistan, at least the Andijan events, is attributable to both internal discontent over repression and living standards as well as Islamism. Continuous turmoil in Kyrgyzstan unleashed by the flawed 2005 parliamentary elections and the subsequent ouster of the president is rooted in the inability of the regional elites to arrive at a power-sharing arrangement that would make the country more governable.⁸ The internal fragility of states in Central Asia means that they are vulnerable to external and cross-border threats, and are susceptible to external offers of protection and outsourcing of security to larger powers. For example, Tajikistan had Russian Border Troops guarding its border with Afghanistan until 2005 and currently hosts the largest Russian military base in Central Asia. Following the withdrawal of Russian border troops, the US and the EU took responsibility for building the capacity of Tajik border forces, rendering extensive assistance from training and equipment to emergency food rations. Parallel to this, Russian experts and advisers stationed on the border continue to provide advice and supervision.⁹

Lastly, there is a security threat posed by the proliferation of drug trafficking and competition among drug networks, which is unsurprising given the region's location on the borders of Afghanistan. Drug trafficking has not led to armed violence apart from clashes between drug traffickers and the Russian border troops when the latter were stationed on the Tajik/Afghan border until 2005. However, bomb explosions in Dushanbe (capital of Tajikistan) and in the south of Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that stability can be easily disrupted.

Despite these challenges, the region is largely stable. The viability of the new states has been ensured and the worst effects of the post-Soviet transition period are over. The region experiences a modest economic growth (Asian Development Outlook 2007). Basic security exists and crime is not a major problem for society. Tajikistan recovered after the civil war remarkably quickly and the conflict did not spread to its neighbours. At present, the major security threat to the region is presented by Afghanistan, where drugs originate and which might return to being a sanctuary for militant Islamist groups that operate in Central Asia and China. Remnants of such movements are scattered in villages of north-eastern Afghanistan, while recently some active elements were reported to be trekking back to Central Asia from Pakistani hideouts. If instability in Afghanistan cannot be contained, it could spill over to the north across Central Asian borders.

The SCO's mandate

As noted in the Introduction, the official purposes of the SCO are to strengthen 'mutual trust, good neighbourliness and friendship among member states', develop effective co-operation in political affairs, the economy and a host of other sectors, and co-operate to maintain regional peace, security and stability.¹⁰ The charter lists basic principles such as the sovereign equality of states and the rejection of hegemony and coercion in international affairs. The SCO

⁷ Anna Matveeva's field research in Xinjiang, China, May 2005, see more in Matveeva (2006).

⁸ SCO Secretariat contemplated moving the August 2007 SCO summit from Bishkek to another country because of fears of instability in Kyrgyzstan - see Luzyanin (2007)..

⁹ For a stark case of security outsourcing see Matveeva (2005).

¹⁰ <http://www.sectsc.org/html/00026.html>

prioritises the following security challenges: terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, all of which are inspired by China's concerns. These threat perceptions are shared to an extent by other members, but containment of Islamist rebel groups capable of acts of terror is the most relevant for all. To address the threat, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established in 2004. The other threats that the 'Shanghai Six', the name by which SCO is informally known, treat with increasing seriousness are drug trafficking, organised crime, energy security and health epidemic security (Plater-Zyberk 2007).

Russian scholar Mikhail Troitsky describes the SCO purposes in the following terms. The SCO presents a forum on shared security concerns and provides a legitimate moral authority to influence regional politics. It reflects the viability of a Eurasian integration order, counterbalancing previous attempts to construct a regional order. The 'Eurasian integration' includes, among other things, development of infrastructure and possible coordination of regional politics. It also serves the purpose of maintaining the domestic *status quo* in Central Asian countries (Troitskiy 2007).

As far as the maintenance of regional peace and security is concerned, the SCO does not have a mandate for peacekeeping, nor does it offer a collective security guarantee to its members. Its mandate includes cooperation on security matters, such as measures to combat illicit proliferation of conventional weapons and the establishment of a rapid reaction capacity to regional crises, but does not commit SCO member states to collective defence if a conflict unfolds on the territory of one of them. Russian expert Ajdar Kurtov notes that it is hard to imagine Russian troops defending China, for instance (Kurtov 2005).

Evolution of the SCO agenda

China initiated the formation of the organisation, led the process of gradual regularisation and institutionalisation of the SCO's activities and acted to strengthen the role of the secretariat.¹¹ In 2004 the SCO opened a secretariat in Beijing to coordinate the activities of its various bodies, but policy-making remains firmly in the hands of the member-states. The guiding principles serve as safeguards, while each state can find something in its interests in the diverse programme of activities. The institutionalised process of discussion and debate between member states allows difficult issues to be resolved through compromises.

In SIPRI's view, the SCO has demonstrated flexibility and adaptiveness in its rapid growth and the creation of new networks and mechanisms. Its agenda is relatively tightly focussed, it has set up networks and programmes that are logically geared to its priorities and the input-output balance of the SCO as an institution can be seen as positive. The fact that new issues are still being added to its agenda and the keenness of other states to join the club has led SIPRI to predict the organisation's further growth and increasing influence (Bailes et al 2007).

The SCO also has an economic agenda that develops dynamically. SCO established a Business Council to promote Chinese investment in Central Asia,¹² but it turned out that \$900 million provided by Beijing for this purpose was meant to finance credit guarantees for purchases of Chinese goods rather than investment into industries and infrastructure in Central Asia. A free-trade area was proposed by Beijing at the June 2006 Shanghai summit.

¹¹ A Chinese official held the position of secretary-general of the SCO secretariat until 2007.

¹² Dmitri Mezentsev, 'Business Council of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', *Interfax News Agency*, 3 March 2006 http://www.interfax.ru/r/B/0/0.html?id_issue=11473859

However, there is a considerable apprehension among Central Asians that the import of cheap Chinese goods would render domestic manufacturing irrelevant and that an SCO-wide free trade area would remove all protection barriers against the rising economic giant.¹³

Large-scale projects in transport infrastructure are being planned. If actually implemented, they could bind the region more closely. The construction of highways is proceeding well such but there is caution with regards to railways as the volume of goods to be transported does not justify the costs. The same applies to building oil and gas pipelines and electricity grids from and across Central Asia. Unlike the Soviet planners who invested in infrastructure for political reasons, the new states are aware that, given the difficult geographical terrain, construction might not be cost-effective. On closer examination, some projects SCO leaders signed up to proved to be so expensive that they do not make commercial sense.

Although in theory the SCO seeks to create a capacity for investment in regional projects – mainly infrastructure - it has not explicitly engaged with political obstacles to regional cooperation, stemming from bad inter-state relations between Central Asian states and hostile trade and transit policies. Thus, no significant progress is expected towards a common market or a free-trade zone (Antonenko 2007). However, many government departments of the member states prepare proposals for cooperation across a wide range of issues, perhaps to test which areas progress better and concentrate on them in future. These may be regarded as ‘seed projects’ with a ‘learning by doing’ method.

Thus far, an integrated mechanism of economic cooperation has slowly come into being, where China takes the lead and others follow, with varying degrees of caution. At the same time, Russia and China are competitors in the energy field (Norling 2007) and for Central Asia’s raw materials and have already clashed over uranium mining in Kazakhstan (Naumov 2007).

It would be fair to say that the SCO mandate is still evolving. It grew out of a necessity to solve tangible border issues and security problems in border zones, and evolved organically, capitalising on its success. Having started as an intergovernmental network led by annual summits and meetings between high officials (Bailes. et al. 2007: 5), it has become increasingly multi-dimensional. Analysts from the SCO region frequently present the SCO as an Asian OSCE.¹⁴ A ‘track two’ SCO Forum has been established to allow for informal discussions within the academic community on strategic issues regarding the evolution of the SCO. Expert group meetings take place frequently, as do parliamentary exchanges. Cooperation on energy security grows, prompted by Moscow. The idea of establishing an SCO Energy Club was proposed by President Putin at the Shanghai summit in June 2006, and at the August 2007 summit in Bishkek the SCO leaders agreed to create a ‘unified energy market’. The Chinese side actively promotes cooperation in culture, sports, tourism, science and technology, in the words of President Hu Jintao, ‘to consolidate the social basis of growth of the SCO.’¹⁵ A document on educational cooperation was signed at the Shanghai summit. Film festivals and cultural and educational exchanges involve more and more people from the member-states, raising the public profile of the regional organisation.

¹³ Konstantin Syroejkin (Kazakhstan), presentation at the conference on ‘China and countries of Central Asia in modern geopolitical realities’, Almaty, 12 September 2007.

¹⁴ For instance, (Maitdinova 2007),

¹⁵ Hu Jintao’s speech at the SCO summit, Tashkent, 17 June 2004, quoted by Guang (2007), p. 53.

The establishment of a mechanism for dialogue between parliaments and experts from SCO states implies that the political and ideological dimension may be growing in significance according to the maxim that ‘particular models of social-political development cannot be subject to export’.¹⁶ Electoral observation has become a new front of ideological struggle. When it became politically convenient for the Russian leadership to use regional organisations for ‘alternative’ election monitoring in order to counterbalance the OSCE’s role, an SCO Foreign Ministerial meeting adopted a stipulation in May 2006 decreeing that the SCO can dispatch electoral observation teams at the invitation of member-states. An SCO observer mission was invited by Moscow to oversee the 2007 parliamentary elections and counter the OSCE claims of unfair play.¹⁷

The SCO has been a learning experience for its members, especially for China. Pan Guang notes that the SCO process shows the transformation of Chinese diplomacy from its traditional focus on bilateral relations towards multilateral interactions. Previously China chose bilateral rather than multilateral channels for resolving its disputes with other parties, but the SCO has given it greater confidence to participate in, and in some cases initiate, multilateral processes (Guang 2007). China’s inclination to use the SCO’s military exercises as diplomatic statements of its ability to intervene in the region can be read in this light.

There is also an argument that the political agendas in Beijing and Moscow are uncertain, that they could move in different ways, and that external reactions to the SCO’s development will be crucial to its future geopolitical stance (Olcott 2005). Unlike the OSCE and the European Commission which have relatively independent bureaucracies, the SCO is entirely dependent on the regional powers to drive it forward. Thus, the evolution of the SCO mandate will be greatly influenced by the way Russia and China steer it.

Power Balance within SCO and Geopolitics

Internal Dynamic

The two regional hegemonies of China and Russia dominate the organisation, while the SCO also provides an institutional base for the Russian-Chinese partnership. Central Asian countries serve as an arena for this partnership to be tried and tested.

In China’s Central Asian policies, the initial problem was the possible impact of the independence of Central Asian countries on the Turkic population of the province of Xinjiang. Eventually, China’s interests in the region became more complex and in order of priority consist of three levels. The most important priorities are anti-terrorist measures and the acquisition of stakes in energy development in order to bring supplies to China. The second tier priorities are economy and the development of the SCO, and the third tier relates to geopolitics and border security (Zhao 2007a).

In its foreign policy paradigm, China employs a ‘peripheral strategy’ to Central Asia, the aim of which is to form friendly relations with the contiguous countries in order to construct a good security environment, improve China’s strategic position, augment its diplomatic resources and expand its international influence (Ibid: 153). On a practical level, Beijing is interested in the development of its western Xinjiang region, which is relatively poor in comparison with the coastal provinces. The states of Central Asia provide an opportunity for

¹⁶ SCO Shanghai summit declaration dedicated to the first five years of the organisation’s development, Shanghai, June 2006, <http://infoshos.ru>

¹⁷ <http://www.sectosco.org/home.asp?LanguageID=3>

economic interaction. One of the main successes of the SCO was to allow China to establish a diplomatic foothold in Central Asia. With the passing of time, diplomatic and economic concerns seem to have risen further in terms of Chinese priorities within the SCO. Particularly from 2006, China's interest seemed to be shifting towards regional economic development as a main focus for the SCO (Huang 2006).

From Russia's perspective, China is the main driving force behind the SCO's development. In fact, the rationale for Russia joining the organisation in 2001 was to keep an eye on China's expansion in Central Asia. The SCO has turned out to be a structure for the mutual containment of its two leading countries (Maslov 2007). The SCO summits and other fora provide spaces for political networking, informal discussions and resolution of practical problems on ministerial level, such as the migration of Han Chinese into Russia and Central Asia. The aim is to strengthen mutual trust.

The four states of Central Asia find themselves in a position of recipients of the SCO's favours and general political strategy. Modernisation, security and stability of the region are the main points on the SCO's current agenda. This agenda is attractive for national elites in Central Asia because it does not imply radical democratisation, overwhelmingly supports them and provides an opportunity for poorer countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) to boost their economic development with resources from the more developed states of China, Russia and Kazakhstan (Luzyanin 2006b).

The Central Asian members are in a highly asymmetric position as *demandeurs*, but the SCO gives them symbolic recognition and equality (Bailes and Dunay 2007: 28). The Central Asian states are not mere pawns in the others' game and are capable of launching initiatives to their advantage, e.g. Uzbekistan's lobbying to base the RATS in Tashkent. According to Maslov, 'Indeed, SCO are two separate projects – a Russia's project and a China's project where each, trying not to violate parity, steadily moves towards one's own goal. However, there are also projects of other states, not so explicit, but quite free-standing.' (Maslov 2007).

At the same time, relationships between Central Asian states are notoriously bad,¹⁸ and the SCO has not ventured into power brokering among its members. It is unlikely that SCO will deal directly with the issues of improvement of bilateral relations, since Moscow has far more influence than Beijing over the Central Asian leaderships, and would rather exercise it via the structures it controls directly, i.e. the Eurasian Economic Community (*Eurasec*) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), than spend its political capital on the SCO.

The SCO members are 'united' by a mutual distrust which renders useful a forum from which to watch each other's movements. As noted by Bailes and Dunay, 'the participants want to avoid their differences spilling over into warfare, getting in the way of potential joint profits or encouraging outsiders to 'divide and rule' the region.' (Bailes and Dunay 2007: 8). The states of Central Asia have a considerable apprehension of China as a rising – and possibly expanding – giant on its borders, which increasingly exports more of its goods and people into the region. They look at Russia to provide a counterbalance to China through the SCO. Russia's involvement has alleviated some of the anxieties that the Central Asian countries had regarding China's pressure (Troitskiy 2007: 31). However, the reverse is also true: for Central Asians the SCO can convey more transparency in their dealings with Russia and more chance

¹⁸ For example, tensions between Kazakhshtan and Uzbekistan have played up again in the run up to the Bishkek August 2007 summit – see Luzyanin (2007).

that Russia follows through on the commitments it makes. As one Central Asian diplomat remarked: 'with the Chinese in the room, the Russians cannot resort to their usual tricks'.¹⁹

The dilemma for Russia is to find an agenda for the SCO that is attractive to China but in which Russia would have a comparative advantage, and that simultaneously would not undermine the Russia-led organisations of *Eurasec* and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In the assessment of Mikhail Troitskiy, 'Russia faces a dilemma: should it work for the SCO to become more militarised, or rather seek to focus it on a 'soft' security and economic agenda? In the former case, the SCO might overshadow the CSTO or at least create confusing choices for Central Asia states. In the latter case, China may gain additional leverage within the SCO and the relative importance of *Eurasec* might decline.' (Troitskiy 2007).

Stabilisation of Afghanistan may be an issue in which all SCO member states could be interested, but where Russia could have an upper hand, while China could contribute economically, militarily (more in theory than in reality so far) and diplomatically through its close relationship with Pakistan. If neither country has been very active in Afghanistan after 2001 so far, it is probably because they are waiting for Washington's position to weaken to the point where their diplomatic intervention would have a serious chance of success. Pakistan's own ambiguous position also contributes to caution, especially for the Chinese.

External Dynamics

There is an implicit understanding behind the SCO's development that it can evolve beyond its current regional remit to acquire a global significance more like the EU, which started with a West European agenda and emerged as a global player. President Putin has dubbed the SCO the 'new model of successful international cooperation'.²⁰ The importance of the SCO is that it reflects a 'new type' of international relations, i.e. a Sino-Russian alliance that potentially can unleash geopolitical competition and challenge a unipolar world order. From the Chinese perspective, the SCO has shaped a new model of state-to-state relationships based on partnership but not alliance (Guang 2007: 47). Irrespective of its concrete activities, the organisation already carries a huge symbolic weight because of the political significance of both China and Russia in global and regional affairs. By its sheer presence, even without much activity, it projects an image of strength – or of a 'grandiose geopolitical bluff'.²¹

There are various possible options for the SCO's future evolution. It does not necessarily have to develop into an anti-western coalition. However, given the legacy of the Cold War, large armed forces and energy resources, Russia and China have the potential to engage in geopolitical rivalry against the US, for which the SCO could provide a platform (Luzyanin 2006a). There are already moves by the SCO major powers that are intended to challenge the US domination of world affairs. In the account of Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Center, China challenges the US through the very fact of its phenomenal economic growth and the gradual formation of a China-centred pole of gravity. Meanwhile, Russia takes up the following roles: ideologue and spokesman of a 'new

¹⁹ Quoted in Olcott (2005: 335).

²⁰ http://www.president.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/06/14/1202_type63382_107004.shtml

²¹ Laumulin (2006) quoted by Fedorov (Forthcoming).

wave' of defiance against the US-led world order; chief protagonist in the energy sphere (i.e. the Russian concept of energy security and regional energy clubs); leader of geopolitical opposition to the West (e.g. Kosovo, post-Soviet space, the Middle and Near East and the Arctic region); and independent military arsenal (e.g. modernisation of nuclear weapons and resumption of strategic aviation patrols) (Trenin 2007). According to Zevelev and Troitsky, "Beijing eagerly passes on to Moscow the leading role in rebuffing US policies that both find unacceptable. Meanwhile, China has secured a less turbulent and more pragmatic interaction with the US. China benefits when Russia is seen as the main critic of US policies and assumes the full force of retaliation for its stance." (Zeglev and Troitskiy (2007).

At the same time, the prospect of a closer anti-Western alliance is unlikely given the mutual distrust between Russia and China, and their lack of desire to wreck their relationship with the US. MacFarlane comments that 'Prospects for the evolution of the Sino-Russian relationship into anything resembling an alliance are very limited. There is ambivalence in Russian policy towards China: is China a friend to be supported and strengthened, or is it a threat to be contained?' (MacFarlane 2006). Despite high-level rhetoric to the contrary, there are doubts in the Russian political establishment that a close rapprochement with China is really in Russia's strategic interests, especially if this partnership is to undermine transatlantic relations.²²

Common Values

Common values are important because they are the 'glue' that binds member states with diverse interests. Initially, the value discourse was largely a prerogative of the Chinese, who attached significance to it, while the other members were rather passive. However, as the organisation progressed, the member states began to think about values more seriously. The SCO values are reflected in the 'Shanghai spirit' and are deliberately different from those promoted by the USA and its allies. The Shanghai spirit is a concept originating from Beijing and was defined by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 2001 as 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for different civilisations and common prosperity'.²³ It serves a dual function: the inward-looking one of providing a basis for members to work together productively, and the outward-looking one of challenging strategic and philosophical unipolarity in international relations (Bailes and Dunay 2007:6). It is in particular a Russian aim – but one to which other SCO members have acquiesced – to promote the organisation as a counterpart and a source of alternative 'values' for a world system that Russia sees as dominated by US power and ideas (Ibid:28).

China's political values emphasise that common state interests make the basis of good relations, not ideology or choice of regime. This approach guarantees stability over the long term. Beijing rates regional stability very highly, as it forms a precondition for predictable political and economic relations with other countries in the region. Any instability involves the risk of chaos and harms China's interests (Zhao 2007a: 160). In the assessment of the Chinese expert Zhao Huasheng, Chinese diplomatic culture has great affinity with the Central Asian countries, with the emphasis laid on non-interference in internal affairs, treatment of others as equals, respect for their autonomous political choices and avoidance of indiscreet remarks and criticisms. Chinese diplomatic culture traditionally emphasises the 'golden

²² For instance, see Zlobin (2007).

²³ Jang Zemin, 'Deepening unity and coordination to jointly create a bright future', speech at the SCO inaugural ceremony, St. Petersburg, 15 June 2001, quoted in Guang (2007: 48).

mean' and eschews the drastic and extreme. Peace and harmony hold the highest value (Ibid 161-162).

The Chinese foreign policy establishment is very cautious and risk-averse, and has difficulty handling unforeseen events and unconventional challenges. It feels more comfortable with everything planned and agreed in advance. This is almost diametrically opposed to the Russian foreign policy culture, which thrives on crisis, feels comfortable with assertive or controversial positions, and has a capacity and inclination to react quickly to unprecedented developments.

A proclaimed shared value of the SCO member-states is non-interference in each other's internal affairs. This was evidenced by their reaction to the events in Andijan in 2005, which was largely supportive of the Uzbek leadership's actions to put down the revolt. The same applies to the reaction of the SCO members to the riots in Tibet in China in March 2008, the crackdown on which caused dozens of civilian deaths. Marat observes that in suppressing the riots in Tibet, Chinese authorities acted within the organisation's primary purpose; namely, fighting against the three evils of "terrorism, separatism, and extremism." (Marat 2008). Another related value is the belief in a strong central state. Following this logic, the national leadership is the most effective vehicle to maintain stability in its own country, which is a precondition for regional stability. The role of the neighbouring states is to support the regime in power and not to provide sanctuary to dissident groups. Although there are variations between national systems, all SCO members demonstrate authoritarian instincts in internal politics.

Gradually, the domestic politics of the SCO members has shifted towards greater uniformity. Former President Akayev's decision not to use force against street protestors in Kyrgyzstan, followed by his overthrow and flight to Moscow, made clear to other rulers that violent repression of the opposition was necessary if the *status quo* was to be maintained. The shared fear of growing internal opposition has pushed the SCO leaders closer together (McGlinchey 2006). A powerful consideration is a shared fear of 'colour revolutions', i.e. protest demonstrations believed to be backed by external forces, which deposed the ruling regimes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). China had its own experience of popular protests in the capital on Tan Yan Myn Square in June 1989 and shares the same threat perception. The Kyrgyz leadership, which came to power as a result of a 'tulip revolution', tries hard to distance itself from this legacy.

Anti-Americanism is another feeling shared by the member-states. Opposition to the US role and presence in Central Asia was reflected, for example, in the SCO Astana 2005 summit statement on limiting the presence of troops from outside the region in Central Asia²⁴, which prompted the US military withdrawal from Uzbekistan.²⁵ This statement led the US observers to interpret the SCO as an anti-Western organisation on thin evidence. However, this stance was not repeated at subsequent meetings despite the presence of the US military base in

²⁴ 'Central Asia summit declares war on terror,' *Indo-Asian News Service*, 5 July 2005, <http://www.eians.com/stories/2005/07/05/05ast.shtml>

²⁵ The story of the declaration seems to be one of a last-minute deal. The journalists present at the SCO Astana summit had been given a concluding statement for the press that which made no reference to foreign troops. Suddenly a great deal of activity between the Uzbek and Russian delegations followed, and the statement was withdrawn. Some journalists were reluctant to surrender the old document. After a while consultations re-started and a new communiqué appeared that mentioned the desire to see the western troops out of the region. The impression was that the decision was *ad hoc* and made on the spot (Anna Matveeva's interview with Arkadii Dubnov, *Vremya Novostei* CIS Editor, Almaty, March 2007).

Kyrgyzstan. Rather, the SCO stance has been ambivalent: it has not formulated a collective response and definite attitude towards US policies. It is also fair to say that the US ran into problems with individual Central Asian states rather than with the SCO *per se*. (Zhao 2006b).

Anti-Americanism is a growing sentiment globally, and both the leadership and population of the SCO region are affected by it. The aspiration is to show to the US the limits of its power and influence, and encourage it to treat the interests of others with respect. Still, this stage may not last long (since a change of power in Washington can make a big impact) and the formation of a 'regional identity' on the basis of anti-Americanism is unlikely. Moreover, the Russian establishment feels that culturally and socially it has more in common with the Americans than with the Chinese.

This perspective is shared by Central Asians. Proficiency in the Russian language and the legacy of Russian education and culture, upon which the Central Asian military and political establishment has been brought up, mean that when it comes to collective action in security sphere, Russian is a *lingua franca* for the rank-and-file cadre of five of the Shanghai Six. The language and cultural barrier is very real, and is an obstacle for interaction between the Chinese military and the rest. Symbolically, at the Bishkek summit in August 2007 the speech of President Hu Jintao in Chinese was lost on the audience due to the Kyrgyz organisers' failure to provide an interpreter.²⁶

Culturally and socially, Central Asians have much more in common with the Russians than with the Chinese. Zhao Huasheng notes that this deep influence of "Russianisation" presents a challenge for Chinese policies in the region. In terms of geopolitical affiliation, Central Asian countries are more inclined to follow Russia in geopolitics and the view of history, have no political and psychological reservations about accepting Russia's security guarantees, and do not fear Russia's military presence in the region. But their attitudes toward China are quite different. In terms of political culture and identity, Central Asian countries have a sense of identity shared with Russia rather than with China. Their infrastructural connections are also mostly directed towards Russia. In terms of a sense of social belonging Central Asians find it easier to have exchanges with Russia but feel somewhat uncomfortable with China. The perception in the region is that Russia is the purveyor of civilisation and security protector, while China is a country that harbours territorial claims. China is aware of these factors and seeks to gradually change this situation (Zhao 2007b).

The values of non-interference, isolationism and suspicion vis-à-vis the outsiders are shared by all SCO members to a certain degree. These values are more likely to be conducive to holding a united front on a global arena than facilitating collective action in the region itself. At the same time, there are concerns over internal stability in Kyrgyzstan and over possible regional implications of a crisis should the situation in the country get out of control. Such a crisis might present the SCO with a dilemma on whether to act politically or militarily, and will test the limits of the non-interference principle. Chinese scholar Zhao Huasheng recognises this tension: if stability in Central Asia is jeopardised by sharpening disputes between states or the domestic political strife in a member state relating to issues other than terrorism, the SCO would have a hard choice. It would have to intervene diplomatically or, as a last resort, militarily if a threat is posed to the security and stability of the entire region or if the matter in question is internationalised (Zhao 2006a).

²⁶ http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=6&lang_id=ru&elem_id=10791&type=event&sort=date_desc

The SCO in relation to the prevention, management and resolution of violent conflict

In the view of the Russian scholar Gennadii Chufrin, the SCO has undergone three stages in its formation. The first was dedicated to the settlement of the China/ Central Asia borders, and the second was dominated by anti-terrorism. The third and current phase, starting from 2005 and prompted by the events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is forming around the agenda on how to prevent conflicts in the region, especially those internal to the member-states.

SIPRI assesses the SCO's contribution to regional security according to the following criteria (Bailes and Cottey 2006): (a) avoiding, containing or sublimating armed conflict, (b) positive military cooperation both for 'old' (allied defence) and 'new' (peace missions) tasks; (c) the promotion of security sector reform and democracy or good governance and (d) combating of non-traditional security threats. It gives the SCO a minus on (c), and is positive but ambivalent on the other criteria. SIPRI's argument can be summarised as follows: on (a) avoidance of conflict it is argued that the SCO and its predecessor have managed to reduce the risks of open conflict between the six participants. While historical forces and shifting power balances might have achieved much of this effect, the existence of the SCO as an institution has arguably consolidated the results and created channels for addressing, or at least easing, intra-regional state-to-state tensions through dialogue. On the other hand, the doctrine of non-interference suggests that its leaders would avoid a military role for the SCO such as in Afghanistan.

On (b), the SCO never characterised itself as a traditional military alliance comparable to NATO. Russia cannot guarantee China's entire territory against an attack and vice versa, let alone bring their forces and nuclear weapons under a single command. A distinct role in the military sphere was played in disengagement and confidence-building along shared frontiers. Under confidence-building arrangements the parties carry out reciprocal bilateral inspections, while other members may send representatives at their own cost.

On (c), while all SCO members badly need expertise and material inputs to raise their forces to international standards in efficiency and norms of behaviour, many of their most basic shortcomings can only be addressed with help from outside the region.

The SCO has worked hardest on (d) to establish its profile and expand activities to combat 'new threats', defined as 'terrorism, separatism and extremism', but also including problems of drug trafficking, cyber-sabotage and aspects of WMD proliferation. Still, the ambiguity lies in the distinctly militarised approach to combating 'new threats' that the SCO members demonstrated through their anti-terrorist exercises using military forces. The RATS can be only as good as the information contributed by its members, and the really important matters are more likely be handled nationally or bilaterally (Bailes and Dunay 2007: 20-25).

The SCO's major spheres of activity in relation to regional security are discussed below.

Border Security

The SCO history is rooted in China's changed attitude towards border security in the 1990s when a policy of stabilisation of borders - a 'new approach to neighbourhood security' (Guang 2007: 46) - was adopted. Beijing first launched its 'new security concept' in 1996, which could be summed up as an effort to drop the old rhetoric and stress the need for cooperation and mutual benefit (Mattis 2005: 37). The previous strategy of the Chinese leadership was to abstain from making binding commitments on border delimitation and

territorial disputes with neighbours, in the hope that the power equation would eventually change in favour of the Chinese and better terms could be negotiated. These policies have altered, as the Chinese government realised that framework treaties with neighbouring states are useful since they make regional relationships more predictable.²⁷ Borders with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been delimited, with all Central Asian states ceding territory to China. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this led to violent protests leaving six people dead in 2002.

Border agreements have been signed with Kyrgyzstan,²⁸ Kazakhstan,²⁹ Russia³⁰ and Tajikistan (2002). The treaties have created a more favourable environment for solving border problems. As border crossings became numerous and the movement of people increased, controls had to be put in place that meant an increase in cooperation between security structures (Matveeva 2006). In the same period agreements on border delimitation were signed between Russia and China.

Anti-Terrorism

Already in 1998 the Shanghai Five issued a statement that they would combat terrorism and would not allow their territories to be used against each other. This was also the main goal of the SCO at the time of its establishment in 2001. The timing of the launch (before 9/11) allowed the Chinese to later frame the new organisation in the context of the 'war on terror'; they subsequently started releasing to the press long withheld information about violent incidents in Xinjiang.

The key component of the SCO's activities in the security field has been the establishment of the RATS, launched in June 2004 after a decision taken two years earlier.³¹ The RATS is led by a Council composed of officials from anti-terrorist organisations of the member states. Initially a 'hub of information exchange' (Bailes et al 2007: 5-6) and an analytical centre with a modest budget of US\$3.1 million in 2004, its tasks included:

- ❑ coordinating anti-terrorist activities such as extradition and information exchange, and disrupting the financing of terrorist groups;
- ❑ coordinating security force exercises and jointly processing information provided by the members; and
- ❑ monitoring and assessing joint anti-terrorist activities.

RATS was not meant to have an operational role. Its staffing at the headquarters in Tashkent has only 30 officials, including 7 Chinese, 7 Russians and 16 Central Asians. In 2005 it was decided to expand the role of RATS to the coordination of investigations (including the consolidation of a list of wanted terrorists and organisations), anti-terrorist operations and anti-terrorist exercises, as well as to the training of specialists (Oresman 2005). Although the

²⁷ Anna Matveeva's interview at the Russian Embassy in China, Beijing, May 2005.

²⁸ China and Kyrgyzstan signed the Border Agreement in 1996. Then, in 1999, both sides signed the Additional Agreement. In 2004 both sides agreed on the Protocol of Border Demarcation, which confirmed the resolution of all border problems (Anna Matveeva's correspondence with Zhao Huasheng, March 2008).

²⁹ According to Zhao, 'by 1998 the two countries [ie China and Kazakhshtan] had fully resolved border issues. In 2002 they signed the 'Good Neighbour Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation', 'Agreement on Cooperation Against Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism', and 'Agreement Between the Chinese Government and the Kazakhshtani Government on Preventing Dangerous Military Activities' (Zhao 2007a: 172).

³⁰ The eastern section of Sino-Soviet border was agreed upon in 1989 and in September 1994 the parties reached an agreement on the western part of the Sino – Russian border (Zhao 2007a:139).

³¹ For more details about the origins and 'politics' of RATS, see Plater-Zyberk (2007); Bin (2007); de Haas (2007b)...

SCO summit in Shanghai in 2006 attached high priority to the further expansion of RATS' capabilities, doubts about the effectiveness of the RATS have been raised, including concerning the willingness of member states to contribute high quality intelligence information (Bailes et al 2007: 24; 54).

While the initial slow start could reasonably be ascribed to the need to learn how to operate in a multilateral framework, as of 2007 RATS had fallen short of several of its tasks. Although its database of terrorists and extremist organisations expanded between 2004 and 2007, from about 600 wanted 'terrorists' and 30 organisations to 944 individuals and 47 organisations, there was still no consolidated list of wanted persons and organisations suspected of terrorism. It is also not clear to what extent the initial problems in exchanging information have been resolved, despite the fact that by 2005 the member states' security services had produced guidelines on how to make such exchanges possible (Karniol 2005). Still, RATS could claim some achievements by 2007, including a counter-nuclear terror exercise at the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Tashkent in 2006 and the capture or elimination of 15 leaders of terrorist groups (Norling 2006; Antonenko 2007; Bailes et al. 2007: 56). It also claimed to be working on the harmonisation of anti-terrorist legislation in the member states and on tracing the financing of terrorist bodies (Tolipov 2006).

Military Exercises

China was behind the initiation of military exercises via the SCO. These exercises featured a sizeable movement of China's troops outside its borders for the first time. This suggests that China is using the SCO as a vehicle to learn new skills on security cooperation with foreign militaries that may also be applicable elsewhere, not necessarily in Central Asia alone.

The SCO conducted a series of military exercises in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2007. The size of the exercises gradually grew, with 7,000 troops participating in *Peace Mission 2007*. The character of these exercises has been widely discussed, particularly as the first ones could not be classified as 'anti-terrorist' operations. *Peace Mission 2005*, for example, involved the use of heavy equipment, including strategic bombers, ill-suited for counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism, and relied on conventional operational plans. Several observers drew the conclusion that the exercises were a display of military strength and meant to warn external powers against interfering in the region (McDermott 2007). However, it is also possible that the SCO wanted to deliver the message that it is ready for large scale interventions should one of the member governments be challenged in a large-scale uprising or subversion.

At Russia's urging, *Peace Mission 2007* showed a greater effort to make the exercise credible as an intervention against a local insurrection, despite Chinese insistence that heavy equipment be used again. The scenarios of the exercise were clearly inspired by such events as in Andijan in 2005 and the Chechen incursion into Dagestan in Russia's Northern Caucasus region in 1999.³² Central Asian armies were expected to secure the borders of a troubled area, while the Russian and Chinese militaries were to deal directly with the insurgents.

The exercises demonstrated that the Chinese military in particular still has a long way to go to develop credible long-range counter-insurgency capabilities, even if progress was made between 2002 and 2007. Moving the 1,700 participating Chinese troops and their equipment from Xinjiang proved quite a challenge, while other major problems included communications

³² For a more detailed assessment of the exercises, see de Haas (2007a).

(due to language differences and technical incompatibilities), disparities in tactics and lack of experience in operations in the mountain terrain. It should be added that Kazakhstan did not allow Chinese troops to cross its territory, forcing them to take a 10,000km detour (officially, Kazakhstan's legislation bans foreign troops from its territory), despite the fact that the exercise had been carefully planned in advance.

Improvements have been evident in the field of command and control, with six different armies being involved for the first time. However, there is a distinct feeling among external observers that more energy has to be devoted to improve the ability of the SCO armies to coordinate their activities. For example, the Kazakhs have been reducing the resources dedicated to teaching Chinese to their officers (McDermott 2007: 9). The Chinese in fact looked the keenest to enhance the ability of their soldiers to operate in Central Asia (Ibid: 13), but the Russians were driving the effort to develop the basis of effective military cooperation within the SCO, starting from the 'conceptual foundations'. The lack of a unified military command structure within SCO remains a major problem to be addressed.

It is interesting to observe how the security culture of a young organisation evolves. Sources of security culture in the SCO reflect a combination of traditional notions from Russia and China (i.e. respect for centralised command and control, supremacy of the civilian authority over the military, big conscript armies developed for a large-scale land warfare), and modern concepts and methods aimed at addressing unconventional challenges (e.g. rapid reaction capacity, dealing with civilians and with random acts of terror, and anti-drugs and -arms smuggling operations). The new challenges require different means to address them, such as small, highly trained and quickly deployable contingents, use of unmanned technology, a high degree of coordination and exchange of intelligence and civil-military cooperation. The effort to combine the old and the new brings a 'creative tension' to the SCO.

At present, NATO-type collective action is not on the agenda. According to Ajdar Kurtov, the 'military sphere demands discipline and a singular approach. SCO and CSTO members can show solidarity in their assessments of current events in global affairs. But this is not sufficient for [the] formation of a military bloc. SCO has substantial disagreements even in [the] economic field.' (Kurtov 2007) This is also true, perhaps even more so, in the military sphere.

In the view of Roger McDermott, 'the exercises raise significant issues surrounding the circumstances in which the SCO would carry out a counterterrorist operation. Justification for an SCO operation would depend upon Beijing's appetite for involvement, and whether the specific situation seemed more suited to the deployment of Chinese military units. Such a scenario makes sense if the operation in the minds of the planning staff actually involved quelling a rebellion; a joint military response might legitimise an operation that could illicit greater international outcry if undertaken by a single state.' (McDermott 2007: 23).

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a growing security focus for the SCO, since the latter brings together, either as members or observers of the organisation, all the states on Afghanistan's borders. President Karzai is invited to the SCO summits. There is a consensus among the SCO members that the country should be given help in economic rehabilitation and in the fight against drugs, otherwise it might continue to be a source of regional instability. However, there are few concrete ideas on practical measures. In the view of Kyrgyzstan's international relations' expert Muratbek Imanaliyev, there is no alternative for the SCO but to cooperate with the US

on a common strategy.³³ Apparently the SCO members agreed, in keeping with their own values, that the central government led by President Karzai is their sole agent for cooperation and that ties with individual militia commanders in the North, previously maintained by some SCO states, would not be encouraged. Individual SCO states already contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan through the building of national armed forces and energy infrastructure development, for example (Maitdinova 2007)

Already at the time of the SCO's 'second birth' in 2001, Afghanistan was a major concern (Alimov 2005: 110). As the Taliban fell shortly afterwards, Afghanistan's importance eclipsed. By the time of the Tashkent summit in 2004, however, the smuggling of narcotics from Afghanistan had emerged as a prominent issue. President Putin suggested that the possibility of establishing an SCO-Afghanistan liaison group should be explored, mentioning the revival of the Afghan economy and the fight against the narcotics trade as its main tasks (Lanteigne 2005: 124). Afghan President Karzai attended the Tashkent summit, but was not offered formal observer status. In November 2005 the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established in Beijing, with the principal task of establishing an anti-narcotics belt around Afghanistan (Plater-Zyberk 2007). Since the Group's establishment, Afghan officials have regularly attended SCO meetings, although there is no immediate sign that Afghanistan might seek formal observer status. In 2006 the SCO summit decided to hold more regular consultations with Afghanistan on narcotics within the Contact Group framework (Huang 2006). Some SCO officials claimed that Afghanistan continued to be a 'cradle' for extremist activities despite the American occupation.³⁴ In 2007 the SCO still maintained that setting a deadline for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan was premature (Bailes et al 2007).

At the 2007 summit, the SCO agreed to intensify its work on Afghanistan through the Contact Group, with special reference to the smuggling of narcotics (McDermott 2007: 20). Putin explicitly mentioned the need to create 'a belt of counter-narcotics security' and 'a belt of financial security' around Afghanistan to hunt for the financial roots of the drug trade. At the Bishkek summit Putin urged the SCO to convene an international conference on Afghanistan in 2008 with the aim of boosting stability there.³⁵ The idea was supported by all members, including China. Some Russian diplomats argued openly that the CSTO and SCO should help the anti-Taliban effort in Afghanistan by assisting the formation of the armed forces and police.³⁶

In the case of a large-scale security threat within Central Asia that requires a military response, the CSTO is most likely to be the one to respond, not least because it has Collective Rapid Deployment Forces. If instability in Afghanistan spins out of control and affects Central Asia, it is more likely that CSTO than SCO troops would be used to hold the border, with the Russian military leading the effort and contributing most troops. This model was applied to peacekeeping in Tajikistan when contingents from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and

³³ Muratbek Imanaliyev, presentation at a conference on 'SCO in search for new understanding of security', Almaty, 4 October 2007, at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/894542.html>

³⁴ Hu Jian, deputy director of the SCO Research Centre at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, 'Afghanistan has been a cradle for terrorism and extremism since the US invasion'. Quoted in Dyer, G. and McGregor, R., 'Opposition to US inspires "NATO of the East"', *Financial Times*, 22 June 2006

³⁵ Vladimir Radyuhin, 'Setting up SCO as a counter to NATO', *The Hindu*, 21 August 2007.

³⁶ CSTO secretary general Nikolai Bordyuzha, quoted in M K Bhadrakumar, 'SCO is primed and ready to fire', *Asia Times Online*, 4 August 2007.

Uzbekistan were used alongside Russian forces under an overall CIS mandate to maintain security in the border areas.

Stabilisation of statehood

Despite the SCO's official commitment to non-interference in domestic affairs, the summit in Bishkek mentioned that destabilisation due to internal causes can threaten the states and should receive attention from the SCO. The summit's concluding document states that the 'vital significance of implementing the preventive measures against the processes and phenomena causing instability in the SCO territory was noted. The process of creating a mechanism of joint response to situations threatening peace, stability and security in the region will be expedited.'³⁷

The one failing state in the SCO is Kyrgyzstan, which remains poised between serious instability and a fragile recovery. There is a sense that if the state in Kyrgyzstan enters a major crisis, its regional neighbours would not let it descend into Afghan-style chaos.³⁸ But how exactly this would be prevented is unclear.

When the crisis in Kyrgyzstan first unfolded in March 2005, the SCO neighbouring states' immediate reaction was to ring-fence the problem: China and Kazakhstan shut their borders, while Uzbekistan's border had been already closed. Moscow was more concerned with protecting its own servicemen: transport aviation planes were sent to the Kant military base to evacuate Russian personnel and their families in case crowds attempted to overtake the base.³⁹

Since then the SCO members have started discussions on how the situation could be stabilised to prevent deepening of the crisis.⁴⁰ Beijing regards Kyrgyzstan as the weakest link and is apprehensive of state failure on its borders in addition to the crisis state of Afghanistan. However, the SCO struggles with the same dilemmas as the West does in Kyrgyzstan.⁴¹ There is an understanding that development aid needs to be provided, but to whom should it be given to and in what way? The task at hand is to strengthen the central authority of the state, but how should this be done? Before the start of the Bishkek summit President Putin declared that Russia would invest \$2 billion in Kyrgyzstan, adding that 'only good projects' will be funded (Eurasia Insight 2007). But it is unclear who is to judge which projects are considered good.

The region has witnessed an increased convergence of domestic political values since the time when the organisation was originally established. Central Asia's political systems look increasingly alike, moving towards a similar pattern of governance. In the early 1990s they were all affected, to varying degrees, by a process of democratisation. However, from their perspective, the attempts at democratic reforms – both homegrown and externally supported – brought civil war (Tajikistan), interethnic tensions (Kazakhstan), the rise of Islamism (Uzbekistan) and social turmoil (Kyrgyzstan). The overall result was the weakening of the state and its failure to provide security, growth and welfare. In response to state weakness,

³⁷ 'Joint Communiqué of meeting of Council of Heads of SCO Member States', August 2007, Bishkek, http://www.sectsc.org/news_detail.asp?id=1721&LanguageID=2

³⁸ Martha Brill Olcott, lecture at the CORE workshop, Centre for OSCE Research, University of Hamburg, February 2007.

³⁹ Anna Matveeva's interview with Prof. Yuri Fedorov, RIIA, London, March 2006.

⁴⁰ Anna Matveeva's interview at the Russian MFA, September 2007.

⁴¹ Anna Matveeva's interview with Gennadii Chufurin, Deputy Director of IMEMO, Moscow, September 2007.

perceived to be brought about by democratisation prompted by ‘external forces’, an alternative model of governance emerged. Its rests on political monopoly by the ruling group over the system, restricted expression of dissent and freedom of the media, and tightly controlled elections. At the same time, the majority is prepared to get along with the regime. In the eyes of the population, the state has become much better at providing security, growth and welfare, and this is what matters most. Where protests do occur, the state has proved resilient to challenges.

The SCO thus increasingly represents a pact for regime survival and a pro *status quo* coalition. Although the rulers dress their actions in the language of democracy or go through imitation motions, they position themselves as having found a workable alternative model that bears good results. This is evidenced through their public statements and joint policy line in regional organisations, such as the OSCE. The SCO has started to provide a ‘leadership by example’ effect in the region and generate an appeal for this alternative model of statehood. It has already influenced the internal politics of Kyrgyzstan and it would be interesting to see whether there will be other candidates in the wider region.

SCO Observers and the Wider Region

The issue of granting membership to the SCO observers has been debated perhaps more by outside commentators than by the SCO itself. This could be explained by the fact that the observers – Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongolia – are all, with an exception of Mongolia, very problematic states and come with a heavy political baggage (Troitsky, 2007a). China has been the one in favour of expansion: in March 2007 President Hu Jintao announced that the SCO had been preparing ascension documents, but Russia appeared to be disinclined to take this route, especially with regards to Iran and Pakistan.⁴² The current turmoil in Pakistan renders its chances of joining the SCO in the short term very small. In Russia there is little appetite for accepting new members: the SCO has learnt from the EU experience that expansion is not an easy process and that absorbing new members can transform the organisation itself.⁴³ Criteria for enlargement, akin to those in EU, have not been elaborated.

The only state in the region with a real chance of early entry is Turkmenistan. This has little to do with the SCO evolution, but is rather due to the coming to power of a new president in Turkmenistan who is cautiously leading his country out of isolation. President Berdymuhammedov represented Turkmenistan for the first time at the Bishkek 2007 summit (Yadukha 2007). Turkmenistan has already become a member of the SCO Energy Club, and the next step would be to involve in the SCO’s economic activities.

Pakistan and India

In June 2005 Pakistan and India were recommended for observer status at the SCO and were granted such status in the following July. The role of Iran, Pakistan and India as observer members in the SCO goes much farther than the position of observers in the OSCE, as they were involved in political consultations and discussions about energy cooperation. This may well be due to the far smaller size of the SCO as compared to the OSCE. Some authors go as far as describing observer states as lower level members states (de Haas 2007a: 252). although this seems an overstatement since there is no evidence of any impact of the observer states in decision making.

⁴² Victoria Panfilova, ‘SCO will start to expand in Bishkek’ (in Russian), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 21 March 2007.

⁴³ Anna Matveeva’s interview at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow, September 2007.

Although Islamabad's closeness to Washington was a topic of criticism in Central Asia, that might have been partially offset by Islamabad's relations with Moscow under Putin.⁴⁴ The Russians have however clearly hinted that before any closer involvement with the SCO 'Islamabad should first resolve its problems with India' and 'stop cross-border terrorism against India and eliminate the terrorist infrastructure on its territory'.⁴⁵

Bilateral relations with either China or Russia were not the only factors attracting Pakistan and India to the SCO. In fact at the very time when Russia was supporting the entry of India into the SCO as a full member, India itself did not seem to be enthusiastic, presumably not wanting to endanger its relationship with the US. The dominant inclination in India seems to be one of buying time, officially in order to allow the SCO to finalise its membership rules but in fact awaiting further developments (Zeb 2006: 55; 59-60). Indian views about joining the SCO have been divided. Those favourable to joining the organisation make a case in terms of economic cooperation and 'extended strategic neighbourhood' rather than security cooperation (Huang 2006: 19). Economic cooperation is seen by Indian authors as the winning card in the competition for influence on Pakistan, given their country's much greater capability (Lam 2005). It is significant that at the Bishkek summit in 2007, India was represented by its Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, whereas Iran was represented by President Ahmadinejad and Pakistan was represented by its foreign minister.

In Pakistan's case, its interest in the SCO was also driven by the rapid improvement of its relations with Uzbekistan in 2002-3, which opened the door to prospects of economic cooperation (Zeb 2006: 55; 59-60). Pakistani President Musharraf widely promoted the idea of using Pakistan as an energy corridor for the SCO countries (Ibid: 52). Diplomatic concerns about projecting the SCO as a major forum in world affairs have also been invoked as a rationale for the granting of observer status to Pakistan, as well as to India, both of which are nuclear powers (Lam 2005). Although Pakistan's motivations to bid for SCO membership might initially have included security considerations, it faced strong hostility from the Central Asian countries on this ground (Turner 2005). Among the stumbling blocks were the unresolved problem of the presence of Central Asian (mainly Uzbek) Islamist activists in Pakistan, the adverse demonstration effect of a 'Pakistan model' (moving closer towards a Pakistan-type scenario is what the Central Asian states most dread) and Pakistan's less than convincing effort to distance itself from Afghanistan's Taliban after 2001. These appear to have been the reasons for the initial rejection of Pakistan's bid for observer status and for the hostility of several SCO members towards its full membership (Zeb 2006: 55; 59-60). The unresolved Kashmir issue must also act as a deterrent against the full membership of India and Pakistan in the SCO.

Iran

Iran was accepted as an observer in the SCO in 2005 alongside India and Pakistan and initially was seen as a strong candidate for full membership. However, during Ahmadinejad's presidency and as a consequence of his confrontational attitude, the diplomatic rationale strongly shifted against the inclusion of Iran as a full member. Nonetheless, Beijing and Moscow have remained united in their hostility towards Washington's efforts to isolate Iran. During 2007 they took a number of steps to highlight their support for Tehran in the nuclear

⁴⁴ Rizwan Zeb, 'Pakistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Volume 4, No. 4, 2006, pp. 55, 59-60.

⁴⁵ First foreign deputy minister Trubnikov, quoted in Vladimir Radyuhin, 'Pak. abetting Taliban: Russian Minister', *The Hindu*, 15 September 2003.

dispute with the US and its allies. Brummer therefore speculates that Russia and China might want to trade Iran's acceptance of a proposed deal to rely on Russia for uranium enrichment in return for its admission to full membership of the SCO, which Tehran has been asking for (Brummer 2007). This would represent a major success for the SCO, although as at the end of 2007 there was little sign that it could be achieved. Another motive for considering Iran's membership would be the prospect of increased SCO influence in the Caspian region, where territorial disputes and other sources of tension abound. In general, however, economic interests seem to play a much bigger role than security concerns, as both China and Russia have substantial economic interests in Iran, ranging from oil supply (China) to lucrative contracts in the nuclear and military sectors (Russia). Energy politics might also push Kazakhstan to favour Iran's membership, as the country would provide an ideal conduit for oil and gas (Brummer 2007).

Iran's full membership would, however, certainly be controversial given China's eagerness to see the SCO recognised as a legitimate anti-terrorist organisation, including in American eyes (Brummer 2007; Berman 2006). Indeed, the Chinese seem to have been happy to let the Russians 'take the spotlight' in Iran's defence, while trying themselves to moderate Tehran's attitude through a substantial diplomatic effort.⁴⁶ In March 2008 Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki announced that Iran wanted to move from being an observing member in the regional grouping to being a full member. Russia and China would find themselves in an uncomfortable position if Iran put forward its candidacy for membership at the next SCO summit in Dushanbe later this year. The organisation would be obliged to give an official response to Tehran's request.⁴⁷

From Iran's perspective, membership of the SCO seems to be seen mainly in terms of strategic and diplomatic benefits, as well as favouring cooperation in the energy sector. As far as regional security is concerned, Iran's role in the SCO would likely be limited to combating the trafficking of narcotics (Bailes et al. 2007; Gentry 2005).

Turkey has expressed a tentative interest in joining the SCO, influenced by the EU's reluctance to admit the country into the Union (Cohen 2006). The seriousness of this interest is yet to be proven, but it has a symbolic value in showing Turkey's willingness to turn to an alternative club in case of outright rejection by the EU.

The SCO vis-à-vis other actors

The SCO's founding declaration contains a commitment to the establishment of a 'democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order'.⁴⁸ This can be interpreted as a veiled criticism that the current US-led unipolar world cannot be regarded as satisfying these criteria. The SCO positions itself as a vehicle for the promotion of common interests without interfering in the individual states' foreign policies. It reflects a degree of consensus on external relations that the member states share (Zhao 2006b). At the same time, it seeks to enter the international arena as a body in its own right. As the SCO has developed sufficiently to be taken seriously and gain observer's status at the UN, it has sought to establish relations with other regional groupings. In April 2005 it signed memoranda of understanding with ASEAN and with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

⁴⁶ For details see Bin (2006).

⁴⁷ Farangis Najibullah, 'Russia, China Unlikely To Welcome Iran Into SCO,' RFE/RL, 30 March 2008.

⁴⁸ 'Declaration on the Establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', 15 June 2001, Shanghai, www.sectsc.org/html/00088.html

Although the region of Central Asia has a low level of institutionalisation, it is an arena for the interplay of other actors from both nearby and far away. Firstly, there are structures developed by Russia, such as the CIS, the CSTO and *Eurasec*. Membership of the latter two overlaps considerably with the SCO, but excludes China. The CSTO is not exactly a military bloc, but rather a political organisation designed to promote cooperation in the security sphere among states that are affected by common challenges (Kurtov 2007). It would be premature to assess the impact of the October 2007 cooperation agreement between the SCO and the CSTO on security, crime and drug trafficking. However, Russian analysts foresee more meetings and consultations to be held between two bodies rather than tangible actions, especially in the security sphere (Ibid).

Secondly, there are organisations such as the OSCE, which technically include Russia and Central Asian states but are widely seen as reflecting a Western agenda. Most of the post-Soviet states have taken a joint ideological position in their dealings with OSCE. Whether Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010 will modify this trend and make the organisation more inclusive remains to be seen. It is also possible that in two years time the SCO will fill the ideological void left by the retreating OSCE. Thirdly, there are organisations external to the region but involved in its security sphere, such as NATO and its International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan; the EU with its border management and drug reduction programmes; and the US, which implements security cooperation programmes in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and has a military base in Kyrgyzstan. The record of security engagement of all these actors is far more prominent than that of the SCO.

The Western organisations are in a process of assessing what kind of beast the SCO really is. The argument that closer cooperation between the SCO and the EU would be in the interests of both organisations seems to have been accepted by the EU Special Representative, Pierre Morel, who has been willing to explore avenues for such cooperation on an *ad hoc* basis.

The US position has become increasingly sceptical, moving from initial mild curiosity (McGlinchey 2006) to enmity. The rapid pace of the SCO's development, the military exercises and the inclusion of Iran as an observer have given the US Administration a feeling of unease. Evan A. Feigenbaum, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, remarked: 'To be candid, we do not fully understand what the SCO does – is it a security group? A trade bloc? Or something else?' He further claimed that the SCO in the 1990s had a clear criterion for membership - states that share a border with China - and was meant to resolve border disputes. However, as it developed, the SCO's goals became broader and murkier. According to Feigenbaum, 'we in the United States are still struggling to sort fact from fiction, to distinguish statements from actions, and to differentiate what is "good" for our interests from what might be rather less productive. We're trying to gauge how Russia and China view the future of the SCO, and their view of the American role in Central Asia. We look to Russia and China, too, to respect America's interests, our presence, and our role in Central Asia.' (Feigenbaum 2007).

There is also an argument that the SCO's development undermines the impact of international development aid and weakens threats of political sanctions (McGlinchey 2006). The resources which the SCO brought via its Business Council, and which Russia and China provide as individual investors in the region, make Western aid look meagre in comparison. As Uzbekistan learnt after the EU imposed sanctions following the Andijan crackdown in 2005, it could easily turn to Russia and China for support, as well as to the SCO observer

states. Thus, a fear of international isolation in the absence of domestic political reform would not exist if the SCO provides an alternative home.

The biggest challenge is how the SCO develops vis-à-vis *Eurasec* and the CSTO. Two options are open: Russia may seek to prioritise non-security aspects for development of the SCO, such as economic cooperation, energy and consensus-building over common strategy in global affairs. This would avoid the risk of a strong SCO undermining the chances of the CSTO evolving into an effective institution. Alternatively, Russia may steer the SCO towards the wider region, for example by encouraging deeper involvement in Afghanistan, addressing turmoil in Pakistan or nuclear proliferation issues in Iran. In this latter case the CSTO and *Eurasec* could play the role of a sub-regional grouping, while the question of enlargement, currently on hold, would acquire more urgency.

Conclusion

Despite the SCO's brief history and slim record of achievement to date, its members display enthusiasm for participation and more countries are queuing to join the club. The states appear to have various motivations for participation, some but not all of which are shared by every one of them. One is the financial resources that Russia and China bring to the region, which reflect both countries' economic success translating into revivalism in regional and global affairs. From the Central Asian perspective, a very worthwhile purpose for this money is the revival and development of regional communications infrastructure, in which Western donors were reluctant to invest in the earlier period of international assistance. Since both Russia and China invest heavily in Central Asian natural resources, it is in their long-term interest to have large-scale infrastructure projects going. The additional benefit is that both countries bring their companies and management in to organise work in Central Asia, which also creates opportunities for local employment.

The other reason is anti-terrorism, which is a concern for all of the Shanghai Six and a sphere in which they have matching threat perceptions and understanding of the need for security cooperation. Afghanistan might emerge a bigger item on the SCO agenda if the international intervention there runs into more difficulties, but it is highly unlikely that the SCO or its member states would commit their troops to fight there. However, state capacity-building and developmental and security assistance to Afghanistan could generate more impetus for further development of the SCO.

Although the SCO emerged out of the pragmatic need to resolve border issues and had no far-reaching political goals apart from maintaining stability in the border zones, common political values began to play a more prominent role as the organisation progressed. They are expressed as regional solidarity on matters of controversy where individual member-states are criticised by the West. Thus, the SCO members support the 'strong state' approach in dealing with domestic instability and despatch missions of observers to parliamentary elections (e.g. Russia and Kyrgyzstan in 2007) to legitimise polls that the OSCE condemned as neither free nor fair. Therefore, since the institutional platform provided by the SCO is so flexible and had little pre-determined agenda from the start, it can be filled with substance as it evolves.

The SCO's effectiveness in conflict prevention has been only marginally tested. There are doubts about its military capabilities, but the organisation has invested in building up its institutional and operational capacities, which potentially could make it an effective force. While some of its member states are still quite hostile to each other (for example Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), the SCO presents a mediation forum with an institutionalised process of

discussion and decision-making, which could potentially iron out differences over time. The question of political will, or of the battle of different wills, has however not been tested, as the SCO has chosen a conflict avoidance path so far.

The main potential of the SCO is not military or security-related, but diplomatic. It represents a partnership of two neighbouring but extra-regional powers in relation to Central Asia. They can potentially intervene robustly in crises in Central Asia itself, or (which is more likely) in wider regional crises, for example in Afghanistan or Pakistan, as far as those affect Central Asia. The weaker a state is, the more it is likely to become a target for intervention. The SCO's extra-regional impact is however likely to remain limited, as the consensus on which it is based would probably become increasingly fragile should the SCO expand much beyond its current scope, as illustrated by the lack of developments on the issue of new members and the sluggish development of a security component.

There is no doubt that the SCO's rise has been facilitated by a series of setbacks that the West has suffered in the region, and tension among its different interests that lead to disarray in Western policies. Although the SCO is a relatively young organisation and has so far produced few tangible results, an alliance between Russia and China provides fertile soil to anticipate a replay of Great Power rivalry. For this reason the SCO has inspired a great deal of attention from external political commentators. There are three main schools of thought:

- (1) The *normative* school, which emphasises Western-style liberal values of democracy and criticises the SCO for either having no values or at least no values compatible with the West, such as respect for human rights and the self-determination of peoples. For example, SIPRI judges the SCO to be 'relatively effective, but not generally regarded by other institutions, outside powers and some elements in its own member states - as legitimate.' (Bailes et al. 2007: 3)⁴⁹ It proclaims the SCO to be an organisation that 'has chosen to define its members' shared concepts of multilateral interaction in terms that consciously and significantly deviate from the principles of almost all other extant regional groups, notably on the point of disregard for human rights' (Bailes and Dunay 2007: 8).
- (2) The *instrumental* school, which says that SCO is a fact of life, that Russia and China have lasting interests in the region, that nothing can be gained by confrontation with the SCO while a lot can be achieved with its good will, so it is wiser to give the SCO the benefit of the doubt. In this line of reasoning 'the EU should stop thinking about the SCO purely in geopolitical terms and recognise its contribution to regional stability and development. The EU should avoid the path of opposing the SCO in order to contain Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia. It should recognise that all the Central Asian states view the SCO as a positive and important vehicle for their own long-term interests.' (Antonenko 2007: 11).
- (3) The *geopolitical* school which implies that the rationale for the SCO's existence is to threaten the US and its allies' interests in Central Asia.⁵⁰ For example, a commentary published by the Silk Road Studies Program at John Hopkins University concludes that 'a continued US presence in Central Asia is part and parcel of the glue that keeps

⁴⁹.SIPRI does not refer to which elements it means, and neither does it provide the source.

⁵⁰ This stance is more pronounced in the US. In September 2006 the Helsinki Commission held a congressional hearing led by the Commission's Chairman Senator Sam Brownback (Republican, Kansas) who titled the hearing: "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Is It Undermining US Interests In Central Asia?" cited in Maher (2006).

the SCO together while the conflicting interests in the energy sector are what drive it apart.’ (Norling and Swanström 2007).

The broader extra-regional implications of the SCO are that it has created a powerful image of a regional organisation on the rise that has the potential to develop into a serious player in a region that is important for global security. Different routes are open to the SCO. In theory, it is not impossible that the SCO would turn into an anti-Western organisation, as the US neocon commentators predict. However, a much bigger change would have to take place in international relations for this to happen, such as, for instance, a US military strike on Pakistan or Iran. Thus far, the SCO policy-planners are aware that it is not in the interests of the SCO and its members to become antagonists of the West, that there are limits to geopolitics and the rhetoric that accompanies it, and their interests are, if not identical, then at least parallel to those of the West.

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