

**THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND CENTRAL ASIA: THE
TRANSFORMATION OF THE REGIONAL ORDER BETWEEN MULTIPOLARITY
AND ASYMMETRIC INTEGRATION**

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the transformation of the regional order in Central Asia under the conditions of an emerging multipolar international system. Drawing upon the methodological approaches of critical geopolitics and the theory of new regionalism, the author examines the dual nature of the SCO as a platform that simultaneously ensures regional stability and reproduces power asymmetries between the Central Asian states and their larger neighbors—China and Russia. The article identifies the key vectors of the organization's development, including the expansion of membership, the institutionalization of economic cooperation through the linkage between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the evolution of the security agenda. Particular attention is paid to the strategies of Central Asian states, which employ multivector foreign policies as a tool for preserving autonomy amid intensifying competition among major powers. The study concludes that a hybrid model of regionalism is emerging in Central Asia, in which formal institutions coexist with informal practices of interest coordination, while the SCO functions as a platform that minimizes the transaction costs of regional interaction without transferring sovereignty to a supranational level.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, new regionalism, asymmetric integration, multipolarity, Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union, multivector foreign policy.

Introduction

Relevance of the Study

Central Asia has once again emerged as a focal point of global geopolitics. After two decades of relative marginalization in the post-Soviet space, the region is acquiring the status of a key hub of Eurasian integration and an arena of both competition and cooperation among major world powers. This process has largely been institutionalized within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which since its establishment in 2001 has evolved from a mechanism for resolving border issues into an influential regional organization encompassing countries that account for approximately 42% of the world's population and 36% of global GDP.

In the contemporary international environment, characterized by the crisis of the liberal world order and the emergence of a polycentric system of international relations, the SCO has acquired particular significance. Unlike Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO, which promoted universalist models of cooperation, the SCO offers an alternative, non-

Western framework based on the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit” — respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and consensus-based decision-making.

State of Research

Academic discourse on the SCO has developed unevenly. As bibliometric analyses demonstrate, the majority of influential studies originate from scholars in the United States, China, Russia, and the United Kingdom, while the voices of Central Asian researchers remain insufficiently represented. The literature generally focuses on several major thematic clusters: regional security and the fight against the “three evils” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism); economic cooperation, primarily within the framework of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and geopolitical rivalry among Russia, China, and the West.

However, as many scholars have rightly noted, Central Asian states are often portrayed in these narratives as passive recipients of external influence rather than active agents shaping the regional order.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this article is to overcome such reductionism by offering an analysis of the SCO that takes into account both the structural constraints imposed by power asymmetries and the strategic agency of Central Asian states. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following tasks:

1. To reconstruct the evolution of the institutional structure and agenda of the SCO;
2. To identify the mechanisms through which the Organization influences the distribution of power in the region;
3. To analyze the strategies employed by Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in utilizing the SCO to advance their national interests.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The study is based on a synthesis of New Regionalism Theory and the concept of asymmetric integration. Unlike classical Eurocentric approaches such as neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, New Regionalism Theory allows regionalization to be examined as a multidimensional, bottom-up process involving not only states but also non-state actors, while regional identity itself is understood as a discursively constructed phenomenon.

The theory of asymmetric integration, in turn, focuses on the relationships between “centers” and “peripheries” within a single integration framework, explaining how weaker states utilize institutional mechanisms to hedge risks and derive benefits from cooperation with stronger partners.

1. The Evolution of the SCO: From a Border Mechanism to a Universal Platform

The institutional origins of the SCO can be traced back to the “Shanghai Five” (1996–2001), established to delimit borders between China and the post-Soviet republics. This initial stage, which may be described as a “confidence-building phase,” established a fundamental norm:

cooperation is both possible and effective where the primacy of state sovereignty over supranational obligations is recognized.

The formal establishment of the SCO in 2001 took place against the backdrop of the emergence of American military bases in Central Asia following the events of September 11. Although the United States was not officially identified as a threat, the formation of the Organization represented an implicit response by Russia and China to the growing Western military and political presence in the region. This circumstance determined the SCO's initial security-oriented focus, reflected in the creation of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and the conduct of joint military exercises under the "Peace Mission" framework.

A major turning point occurred in 2017, when India and Pakistan became full members of the Organization. Although seemingly technical in nature, this expansion had far-reaching consequences. First, it diluted the dominance of the Moscow–Beijing partnership by introducing Indo-Pakistani rivalry into the Organization, transforming the SCO from a consensus-oriented platform into a venue for more complex negotiations. Second, the expansion shifted the focus from a purely Central Asian agenda to a broader Eurasian context, raising concerns regarding the marginalization of regional interests. Nevertheless, the strengthening of the SCO's southern dimension through the involvement of Pakistan and Iran has provided Central Asia with new transportation and logistical opportunities, reducing dependence on northern routes.

In the contemporary period, particularly after 2020, the SCO has demonstrated considerable adaptability to emerging challenges. The admission of Belarus as a full member in 2024, together with the intensification of cooperation in the energy and food security sectors amid the geopolitical crisis surrounding Ukraine, indicates the Organization's transformation into one of the key pillars of the emerging multipolar world order.

2. Economic Dimension: Integration Without Absorption

Some of the most significant developments within the SCO have occurred in the economic sphere. Formally, the Organization does not seek to establish a free trade area or customs union, unlike the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Instead, its economic influence is exercised through a project-based approach and the coordination of investment flows.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the principal catalyst of economic activity. In this context, the SCO serves as a political umbrella that provides legitimacy and security for Chinese infrastructure projects, including roads, pipelines, and logistics hubs across Central Asia. For example, Kazakhstan's trade turnover with China increased by 30 percent in 2023, reaching USD 31.5 billion, largely due to the synchronization of the "Nurly Zhol" strategy with the BRI through SCO mechanisms.

A key institutional development has been the linkage between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union. Central Asia has thus found itself in a unique situation of "dual integration," where Russia influences customs and labor-market integration through the EAEU, while China shapes investment flows and transport corridors through the SCO and bilateral arrangements.

For the countries of the region, this configuration—often described by scholars as a "new Great Game"—creates both risks, including debt dependence and concerns regarding Chinese

economic dominance, and opportunities to benefit from strategic competition among major powers.

The multivector foreign policy strategy pursued by Central Asian elites is reflected in efforts to diversify international partnerships. Alongside participation in the SCO, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have intensified relations with the Gulf states and the Organization of Turkic States while maintaining channels of communication with the collective West. In this context, the SCO functions as a strategic safety net, ensuring that closer relations with one external power center do not result in political isolation from others.

3. Central Asia as an Actor: Hegemony and Hedging

Contrary to the widespread perception of Central Asian states as passive actors, the region has demonstrated increasing agency within the SCO framework.

During its chairmanship of the SCO in 2023–2024, Kazakhstan exemplified the behavior of a middle power. Leveraging its advantageous geoeconomic position, including shared borders with both Russia and China and access to European markets, Astana acted as an institutional entrepreneur by promoting the adoption of twenty-five framework documents at the 2024 Astana Summit, including initiatives related to environmental protection and transportation.

At the same time, significant internal constraints persist. The cultural and informational space of Central Asia remains fragmented. Language reforms, competition over historical narratives, and unresolved border disputes, particularly in the Fergana Valley, continue to generate tensions that the SCO, as an intergovernmental organization, lacks effective mechanisms to resolve.

Consequently, regionalism in Central Asia within the SCO framework possesses a hybrid character. It represents neither liberal supranational integration, as seen in the European Union, nor a purely realist balancing strategy. Rather, it constitutes a form of pragmatic institutionalism, in which formal structures provide a framework for informal practices of interest coordination, while sovereignty remains a fundamental barrier to deeper integration.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become an indispensable component of Central Asia's regional architecture, assuming functions that were previously performed through bilateral agreements or inherited Soviet-era institutions.

First, the SCO contributes to “regional stability without hegemony” by creating an inclusive space in which Russia and China coordinate their actions while avoiding direct confrontation. Second, the Organization serves as a platform for reducing transaction costs for Central Asian elites, enabling them to legitimize their political systems through participation in prestigious international forums while simultaneously attracting investment from diverse sources. Third, the SCO has facilitated the emergence of a new type of regional order—an “asymmetric concert system,” in which major powers acknowledge one another's spheres of special interest while smaller states retain room for maneuver through multivector foreign policy strategies.

The future development of the Organization will depend largely on its ability to address internal contradictions. Growing geopolitical tensions between permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Western actors may strengthen centrifugal tendencies within the region. Furthermore, for the SCO to become a genuine driver of development, it will be necessary to shift attention from security issues and large-scale infrastructure projects toward humanitarian cooperation and the removal of barriers to direct interaction among citizens of member states.

Nevertheless, the SCO has already demonstrated the historical resilience of a non-Western model of regionalism based on the primacy of practical geopolitics over normative idealism.

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