



## THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: NAVIGATING BETWEEN "HEGEMONIC" AND "NEW" REGIONALISM IN MODERN GEOPOLITICS

Rakhmatulla I.Nurimbetov

Phd In Politics Tashkent State University For Oriental Studies, Tashkent,  
Uzbekistan

### ABSTRACT

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has a unique history that sets it apart from other international organizations. It began in the late 1990s as the "Shanghai Five," a confidence-building group involving China and four post-Soviet countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. By 2001, this group evolved into a full-fledged multilateral organization, with Uzbekistan joining as the sixth founding member, despite not being part of the original "Shanghai Five" due to its lack of common borders with China.

The SCO operated with these six members until 2017, when a new chapter began. India and Pakistan, after lengthy discussions, were admitted as full members. This expansion significantly altered the nature of the organization. Originally envisioned by China and Russia as a way to foster a new type of regionalism in Central Asia, free from external rivalries, the inclusion of India and Pakistan has brought about substantial changes, reflecting the SCO's ability to adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, regionalism, China, Russia, Central Asia, India, Pakistan, multilateral organization, geopolitics, international relations, confidence-building, post-Soviet countries, new members, global influence.

### INTRODUCTION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (the SCO) emerged under conditions that are significantly different from other international organizations. Initially, in the late 1990s, the "Shanghai Five", a confidence building mechanism between China and 4 post-soviet countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) in 2001 became a full-fledged multilateral organization. Uzbekistan, which didn't participate in the "Shanghai Five" due to the absence of common borders with China, became the sixth founder-ember of the SCO too.

The Organization developed in the "six-format" until 2017m when the new page in its' history began. Two newcomers - India and Pakistan, after long internal discussions, were allowed to get the status of full members.As was foreseen, this produced significant changes of the very essence of the Organization, which foundation was once inspired by China and Russia to shape new kind of regionalism in Central Asia without engagement of external rivalry powers.

Since the early 2000-s theoretical discussions on the model regional cooperation, which provides the SCO, have been continuing. The scientific and analytical approaches are different and sometimes seriously contradict each other. This dichotomy is reflected by the critical views of mainly Western scholars and experts on the organisation on the one hand, and by the assessment of the SCO as an example of a new regionalism, on the other hand. Neo-realists in

the West see the emergence of the SCO as a “model of dominance in Central Asia” developed primarily by Russia and China. According to them, within the SCO, the two countries have shared “responsibilities” in the region: Russia is responsible for security and military-political issues, while China has chosen to develop economic cooperation. According to this approach, the SCO is a bloc formed against NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). According to another Western school – the normative approach, the SCO aims to “limit democracy and human rights and protect authoritarian political regimes”. For example, according to Roy Allison, a British expert, the nature of SCO became obvious in the early 2000s following the “Color Revolutions” supported by the United States and other Western countries. The British expert describes the organisation as a “security integration” project that seeks to ensure the security of Central Asia’s ruling elites and the current political regime. So supporters of this view have described the SCO as a “club of authoritarian states whose goals and objectives are directed against Western and democratic values”. Another group of Western scholars believes that the SCO is a clear example of “hegemonic regionalism”. According to their theory, integration associations emerging outside the Western world are formed mainly under the “patronage” of the major powers in the region. Regional hegemons use such structures to strengthen their position in relations with other regions of the world and power centres.

In turn, the Russian and Chinese theoretical approaches significantly differ from the positions of their Western colleagues.

According to Russian scholars, the SCO is a mechanism for securing Russia’s strategic interests in Central Asia. This includes not only the SCO’s competitiveness with the United States and NATO, but also the need to strengthen the partnership between the SCO and other regional security mechanisms in the Russian-led region. But recently more and more Russian believe that the SCO should be one of the most relevant multilateral institutions to promote the idea Kremlin’s creating “The Greater Eurasian Partnership”, alongside with BRICS, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the CIS, ASEAN and the CSTO. These changes regarding the essence of the SCO in strategic context by Russian academicians should be seen as a Moscow’s reaction to the Chinese attempts to use the Organization to back Beijing’s economic expansion throughout the Eurasia.

Meanwhile, from the very beginning the SCO was seen in China as a product of China’s evolving foreign policy thinking since the early 1990s, particularly Beijing’s formulation of “new regionalism” and “new security concept” to promote China’s “peaceful rise” in international affairs. For Beijing, the organization has been an example of “new regionalism” in that it is defined by “open, functional, interest-based cooperation among contiguous states” that is underpinned by a mutual respect for the member states’ sovereignty. But in the West this concept of China was seriously questioned, as some western scholars believe that it practically reflects imperial China’s “vassal” relationships with neighboring states. But, in our opinion, such kind of assessments are too exaggerated, as the very norms of the SCO - the “Shanghai Spirit” (mutual trust, mutual interest, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, the desire for common development), in contrary, has been served for mutually beneficial and equal relations between China and Central Asian countries.

Following two new trends should be noticed in regard with the recent evolution of the Chinese approaches towards the SCO. First, the Organization is accepted not only as the example of “new

regionalism”, but as well as “new model of international relations. For example, Zhou Huasheng emphasizes that “The SCO is the main experimental and practical platform for Chinese concepts of a new international order. The SCO embodies a number of China's core international political concepts - opposing hegemony, unilateralism, Cold War mentality, bloc politics, unilateral sanctions, adhering to the UN Charter and international law, supporting multilateralism and promoting multipolarity. The main ideas proposed by China are reflected in the practice of the SCO, and we can say that this Organization is the prototype of a new international order.”

To summarize, approaches to the SCO among scientists have developed depending on the evolution of the political perception of the role of the Organization in the context of changes occurring within it and the external geopolitical context. At the same time, significant changes in the interpretation of the essence of the SCO on the part of Chinese and Russian political scientists are noteworthy. If in China the SCO is beginning to be viewed as an instrument for the implementation of the OBOR and Beijing’s new concepts for restructuring the global order, then in Russia – as a mechanism for the construction of “Greater Eurasia.” These changes, although they somehow change the methodology for studying the SCO in theoretical terms, nevertheless, in our opinion, it remains an Organization of “new regionalism”.

## REFERENCES

1. Roy Allison, ‘Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: Comparing the SCO and CSTO’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no 3 (2018), 297–338
2. Alyson J K Bailes et al., ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organization’, SIPRI Policy Paper no 17 (2007); Stephen Aris, ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: An Anti-western Alignment?’, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* no 66 (2009); Nicola P Contessi, ‘China, Russia and the Leadership of the SCO. A Tacit Deal Scenario’, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8, no 4 (2010), 101–123; Michał Lubina, *Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience – Stable and Successful* (Opladen–Berlin–Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2017).
3. Sean Roberts, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Is It Undermining U.S. Interests in Central Asia?* Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, One Hundred Ninth Congress, second session, 26 September 2006
4. Marcin Kaczmarek, ‘Non-western visions of regionalism: China’s New Silk Road and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union’, *International Affairs* 93, no 6 (2017), 1357–1376
5. Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, *Autocratic and Democratic External Influences in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Routledge, 2015) // <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315568492>
6. James H Mittelman and Richard Falk, ‘Global Hegemony and Regionalism’, in *The Globalization Syndrome – Transformation and Resistance*, ed. by James H Mittelman (Princeton University Press, 2000).
7. Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press, 2015)
8. Gordienko D.V. Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a platform for dialogue on regional security issues // *National interests: priorities and security*. 2015. No. 37. pp. 32-39.
9. Karaganov S. Ot povorota na Vostok k Bolshoy Yevrazii. // *Jurnal Mejdunarodnaya jizn*. 2017 (5).; Kortunov A.V. SHOS - kamen, otvergnutiy stroitelyami novoy Yevrazii? 14.05.2018. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/shos-kamen->

otvergnuty-stroitelyami-novoy-evrazii/; Luzyanin S.G. Rossiya – Kitay: formirovaniye obnovenno mira: monografiya /otv. red. akademik B.C. Myasnikov. – M.: Izdatelstvo «Ves Mir», 2018. 328 s.; Lukin A.V., Yakunin V.I. Puti i poyasa Yevrazii. Natsionalnie i mejdunarodnie proyekti razvitiya na Yevraziyskom prostranstve i perspektivi ix sopryajeniya. – M.: Ves Mir, 2019. – 416 s.; V.A.Lukin. SHOS mogla bi sigrat vajnyu rol v sfere sopryajeniya Ekonomicheskogo poyasa Shelkovogo puti i YEAES. Agentstvo Sinxua. 2018-06-05.; Safronova Ye.I. Rossiysko-kitayskiy dialog i «Bolshoye yevraziyskoye partnerstvo»: novaya ideologiya otnosheniy? // Problemi Dalnego Vostoka. 2019. № 4. – S. 174- 178; Larin A.G. Ekonomicheskoy poyas Shelkovogo puti»: ekonomicheskoye sodержaniye, struktura, ideologiya // Noviy Shelkoviy put i yego znacheniy dlya Rossii / IDV RAN. M.: DeLi plyus. 2016. S. 38–57; Kulinsev Yu.V., Syutsze T. Transaziatsko-yevropeyskoye ekonomicheskoye partnerstvo kak variant sopryajeniya YEAES i EPSHP // Problemi Dalnego Vostoka. – 2018. № 2. – S. 89-98.; Kulinsev Yu.V., Petrovskiy V.Ye. , Larionova A., Chay Yuy (KNR), Van Chensin (KNR), Szyan Szin (KNR). Sopryajeniye YEAES i IPP: problemi i perspektivi // Analiticheskaya zapiska 29/2020. RSMD, KAON. 2020. – S. 1-15.; Kulinsev Yu.V. Perspektivnie vektory razvitiya SHOS v kontekste stroitelstva Bolshogo yevraziyskogo partnerstva // Yevraziyskoye prostranstvo: novye vektory i prioritety / otv.red.-sost. V.A.Matveyev. – M.: IDV RAN, 2020. – S. 43-53; T.V. Bordachev, A.V. Kazakova, A.S. Skriba. Instituty dlya mira v Yevrazii. // Jurnal “Vestnik mejdunarodnix organizatsiy: obrazovaniye, nauka, novaya ekonomika». 2016. T. 11. № 2. S. 24–39.; Bordachev T. V., Pyatachkova A. S. Konsepsiya «Bolshoy Yevrazii» v povorote Rossii na Vostok. // Jurnal “Vestnik mejdunarodnix organizatsiy: obrazovaniye, nauka, novaya ekonomika», 2018. T. 13. № 3. S. 33–51. ; Kurilev K.P., Barannik M.A., Stanis D.V. SHOS kak nesushiy element konstruksii Bolshoy Yevrazii. POLIS. T.3., №8, 2020. S. 627-632

10. Chung, C. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China Quarterly (2004) 179 (3): 989-1009
11. Swanstrom, N.) China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?, Journal of Contemporary China, (2005)14(45):569-584.
12. Chjao Xuashen : Sovremennye podkhody Kitaya k Shanxayskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva
13. // <https://rus.sectesco.org/20220507/835611.html>

