



COMMENTARY

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A New Eurasia?: The Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Five years ago, four Central Asian states (without Turkmenistan) teamed with regional powers Russia and China to institutionalize a set of earlier agreements on border security, and to extend the new organization's writ into additional spheres. These included security cooperation, against what was termed the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and the facilitation of regional trade and investment.

In its first half-decade, the SCO attracted little attention from the outside world. Now, however, SCO members have made an impressive effort to re-introduce the SCO as a leading regional organization. The SCO has thrust itself into the spotlight with anniversary festivities in Shanghai and a gathering of the heads of state of all its members, plus those of SCO observer nations, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Iran (India, a fourth observer, sent another state official).

Future plans for the organization include new military exercises, including anti-terror and counternarcotics efforts; the establishment of new economic organizations including an inter-bank association and a Moscow-based business council; and the implementation of a host of new agreements on investment and trade.

What was the original impetus for establishing the SCO? From China's perspective, the organization was an opportunity to project political and economic influence into Central Asia, historically a more integral part of China's neighborhood. The prospect that new partnerships with Central Asian states could provide China with "strategic depth" to handle future instability in its western Xinjiang province, home of the Uighurs (ethnic cousins to Central Asia's Turkic peoples), also contributed to Chinese interests in the SCO.

From Russia's perspective, the SCO was not necessary as an entry point into Central Asia, where Russian influence was well established and could be perpetuated through a variety of bilateral agreements and multilateral institutions. But it was useful as a way to institutionally track Chinese interest and activity in the region. Better to invite China into the tent than encourage it to pitch its own.

Finally, for Central Asian states, acute awareness of their dependency on Russia and their position between two powerful and potentially unpredictable neighbors made the SCO a way to balance Russian influence, accommodate increased Chinese interest in the region, and channel the competition of the two powers in ways that were beneficial to the region rather than debilitating.

From the start, the SCO's security goals were uncontentious to the United States, particularly in light of the post-9/11 global campaign against terror and extremism. The U.S. had also begun to make its own significant inroads into Central Asia, with the establishment of a military presence to help fight in, and stabilize, Afghanistan. Finally, the prospect of sustained Russian and Chinese cooperation appeared dim in a region where strategic interests could easily be expected to clash, and when most of the talk surrounding Russian-Chinese relations centered on Russian fear of a Chinese demographic and economic "takeover" of Siberia.

Now, with anti-American sentiment relatively high, and prospects for U.S. withdrawal from Central Asia more realistic, there are several potentially negative implications of a more consolidated SCO. The prospects of an alliance of mostly authoritarian states led by two nuclear powers, and with a combined population of almost 1.5 billion (a quarter of the world's population), is bound to set off warning bells.

...and, while economic strength remains a critical factor, the SCO represents the potential pooling together of an enormous amount of military and economic strength, sufficient obstacles remain in the way of the emergence of a full-scale alliance between Russia and China that this should hardly be a source of much anxiety.

Moreover, to the extent that the SCO's economic projects can promote economic development in Central Asia and facilitate regional trade and communication, the organization will achieve goals for the region that the United States warmly welcomes.

The SCO's most troubling characteristic, perhaps, is the authoritarian political worldview uniting Russia, China, and many of the SCO's other members and prospective members. They believe that a strong state apparatus and economic development should precede (or substitute for) democracy – not the other way around. As such, the SCO represents the promotion of a “Eurasian” political model that diverges from institutions of democracy and human rights the United States (and European states) value and seek to promote.

In particular, although the United States shares SCO members' concerns with “terrorism, separatism, and extremism,” the hardline law-and-order policies that follow from these concerns, and which negatively affect hundreds of thousands within SCO member-states, are antithetical to U.S. values and goals (acknowledging, of course, the faults in the United States' own domestic security policies). Regardless of the SCO's capacity to pose a military threat or economic challenge to the United States, it still stands as a challenge to the United States' vision of global political order.

Or does it? Regardless of U.S. commitment to promoting its political values abroad, Eurasia is a region where the United States has cautiously tread. This is mainly because of interests in energy, security, and trade that Washington fears could be jeopardized by too emphatic a policy of democracy promotion, either by alienating regional governments or by inadvertently causing bad regimes to be replaced by even worse ones. This attitude is bolstered by a belief that U.S. leverage in the region would be limited anyhow, even if national interests were not at stake.

Hence, the SCO does not so much pose a challenge to U.S. policy toward Eurasia as it does reinforce one of that policy's leading strands and, in doing so, strengthen existing political tendencies in the region. While the SCO as such does not pose a new threat to the United States, it is still bad news for those who seek to promote democracy in the region, Central Asia in particular, where outside actors continue hoping to encourage states to move toward ever more democratic futures.

The sight of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad linking arms with the Russian and Chinese presidents should also not be cause for much concern. Iran will probably not become a member of the SCO anytime soon, and Ahmadinejad's presence at the summit will not substantially affect Russian or Chinese positions toward nuclear negotiations. If anything, it allows Russian and Chinese leaders an opportunity, if they so desire, to press Iran a bit harder in return for the status gains it has acquired by participating in this high-level gathering. However tempting it is to characterize the SCO as a newly burgeoning “axis of evil,” the temptation should be avoided.

Finally, the development of the SCO could eventually lead to a potentially welcome development in Eurasian geopolitics. With the SCO shifting Eurasia's center of gravity eastward – and assuming the SCO's security and economic components rise in importance relative to its political one – the consolidation of the SCO could further encourage Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to reorient themselves westward, out of Eurasia and into Europe. It could also exert a similar influence on Russia's last western regional allies, Belarus and Armenia.

With Russia's prospects of remaining a respected and influential great power on the Eurasian landmass ever more secure, Moscow may become less concerned about the efforts of these former dependencies to stake out their own geopolitical paths. Such a development would be a worthy tradeoff for the unfettered development of the SCO.

You can go to the [Central Asia Initiative](#) webpage for more information on the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program's work on related issues.

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