



Shanghai Cooperation Organization logo and member flags (Photo courtesy of the Russian Embassy in India)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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In 1996, the first meeting of a group calling itself the “Shanghai Five” convened in that city. Its stated purpose was to settle border disputes among

nations in Central Asia.¹ Since then, the Shanghai Five has evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an international organization

that has grown in membership and ambition since its founding. Its members include China, Russia, five Central Asian ex-Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, known as CARs), India, and Iran. Given the growth in power and ambition of China under Xi Jinping and Russia under Vladimir Putin, the union of these nations in the same organization has aroused concern, even outright fear, in Western security agencies.

The membership of the SCO encompasses 60 percent of Eurasia's total land area and nearly two billion people, about 25 percent of the world's population. The combined gross domestic products (GDP) of its member states make up 15 percent of the world's GDP.² The organization could be considered a political, diplomatic, and economic threat to the United States even if its members were ostensibly friendly to America. The organization's leading members are America's two most powerful adversaries. Iran, another U.S. adversary, recently received full membership. The true nature and potential of the SCO is required knowledge for those charged with analyzing possible security threats to the Western world.

It is even more urgent to understand the intentions of the SCO given the resources enclosed within its borders. Large percentages of the world's remaining untapped oil and gas reserves exist under the soil of SCO members. China possesses a troublingly high percentage of rare earth minerals, such as lithium, that are vital to the transition from fossil fuels to batteries. When the resources of the other member states of the SCO are added, the possibility of serious economic rivalry with the United States looms large. Given the concern in Western foreign policy circles for the protection of human rights, the suppression of China's Uyghur population, centered in Xinjiang Province (which borders three CARs), must occupy a significant place in Western foreign policy discussions.³

Yet the perceived threat of concerted anti-American action by the SCO may be overblown. A strong argument exists that the organization has produced more promises, claims, potentialities, and plans than concrete successes. The following analysis of the establishment of the SCO, the motivations of its member states, its activities, and its prospects will permit a cool-headed assessment of just how threatening the SCO might be to U.S. interests in Asia and throughout the world.

Regional Organizations and Central Asia

Many analysts wonder why the CARs have not formed their own regional organization. Latin America, Southeast Asia, North America, and Pacific Rim nations have all maintained reasonably effective regional economic groupings. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Central Asian leaders had high hopes for the prospect of regional cooperation.⁴ The five "stans" are geographically proximate, share moderate Islam as a common religion, share a number of economic assets, speak a common second language (Russian), and have a common history as part of the Soviet Union.

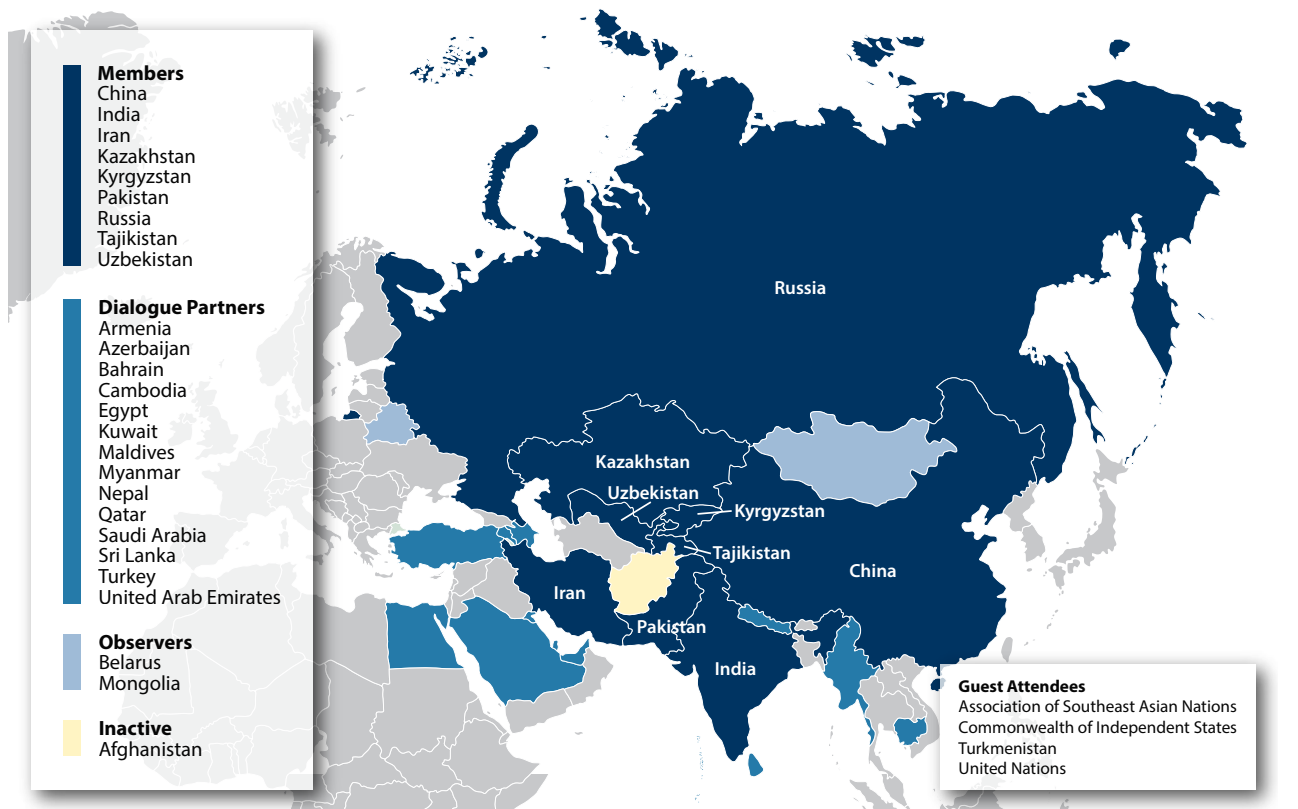
Yet economic integration has been fleeting at best. Even basic areas of cooperation such as water regulation, roadbuilding, and currency transfer have failed to develop despite all the joint communiqués and promises. In 1994, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan formed a Central Asian Union and added a coordinating council and a Central Asian Bank for Reconstruction and Development. However, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were not included, with the former experiencing civil war at the time and the latter having determinedly isolationist leadership.⁵ At the same time, Kazakhstan's president moved to create a "Eurasian Union" consisting of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Although Tajikistan joined in 1998, and the group was renamed the Eurasian Economic Union, it is also all but moribund. A later version of the Central Asian Union, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, existed only from 2001 to 2005.

Thus, Central Asia is a seemingly fruitful area for regional integration, but it is hampered by regional conflicts, weak and dependent economies, and governments focused on sovereignty.⁶ Initiatives for regional integration among the CARs have largely come from

outside the region. The best example of such externally imposed integration is the SCO.

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(Map by Beth Warrington, *Military Review*)

Shanghai Cooperation Organization Members and Dialogue Partners in 2023

Establishment of the SCO

The formal creation of the SCO was preceded by five years of experimentation. As noted, the first summit of the Shanghai Five took place in that city in April 1996. The dissolution of the USSR was accompanied by a need to delineate the new nations' borders, especially borders with China. Before the agreements on the borders could be made, however, there had to be a gesture to build confidence in peaceful cooperation. As a result, the first and forming document of the Shanghai Five was written: *The Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions*.⁷

The treaty regulated member state military movements, limited the size of military exercises, and required states to repudiate aspirations of military superiority. Moreover, the treaty emphasized communication between national armies regarding large-scale troop movements; voluntary reciprocal official visits by military leaders to respective headquarters; information exchange on troop training activity; reports on member state military exercises; and yearly accounts of the precise number of weapons, equipment, and troops on both sides of each border.⁸

Although the treaty was technically binding, any of the five had the right to terminate it by quitting the SCO or insisting the entire document was no longer valid or binding for all parties. This provision highlights the nature of the Shanghai Five relationship and the accompanying "Shanghai spirit." The agreement's success is predominantly dependent on nations' confidence in one another. Nonetheless, the treaty was a productive measure toward border resolution. Only three months after the founding treaty, an agreement clarifying part of the Kyrgyz-China border was signed.⁹

The second Shanghai Five summit took place in Moscow in 1997. The nations reiterated the importance of demilitarization and expanded upon it via the Agreement on Mutual Reductions of Armed Forces in the Border Area.¹⁰ The Moscow Agreement, very similar to the treaty preceding it, committed member states to reduce their respective military presence near border areas. Signatories agreed that military force along borders would not go beyond their individual need for defense. Russia agreed to reduce the force on its border with China by 15 percent.¹¹ However, such a reduction



Leaders of (from left) India (Prime Minister Narendra Modi), Kazakhstan (President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev), Kyrgyzstan (President Sadyr Japarov), China (General Secretary Xi Jinping), Uzbekistan (President Shavkat Mirziyoyev), Russia (President Vladimir Putin), Tajikistan (President Emomali Rahmon), and Pakistan (Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif) at the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on 16 September 2022. (Photo courtesy of Prime Minister's Office of India)

was likely already planned since Russia's post-USSR, postsuperpower status required curtailment of forces along the Sino-Russian border.¹²

More ominously, one month after the summit, China and Russia officially endorsed the "multi-polarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order."¹³ The joint declaration noted that the Cold War is over, and there is no longer a need for the bipolar system of international relations. Additionally, it highlights the importance of nations respecting the sovereignty of one another as well as their noninterference in domestic affairs. The joint declaration also references the Shanghai Five's confidence-building demilitarization measures and the Moscow Agreement as a "model for the achievement of regional peace, security, and stability in the post-Cold War era."¹⁴

The third summit in 1998 marked three major shifts in the power dynamics of the organization. First, the summit was in Almaty, Kazakhstan, a nation that has a more dominant presence in Central Asia than Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, but glaringly less than previous summit hosts China and Russia. Second, conversations undertaken at the Almaty summit took on a multilateral approach in stark contrast to the first two, when China

and Russia could dictate outcomes. There was significantly more intercommunication among all parties.¹⁵ Third, conversations went beyond the immediate goal of secure border resolutions. Regional security threats were discussed for the first time, including weapon smuggling, drug trafficking, extremism, and terrorism. Also discussed was the potential of economic cooperation as a vehicle for peaceful stability. The consequent Almaty declaration acknowledged the expanding scope of concerns by including a statement of intent to combat all threats to regional security. The Almaty summit was also influential on the foundation of the SCO via the new emphasis on combating the so-called three evils: separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism.¹⁶

The fourth Shanghai Five summit was in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in August 1999. In the final communiqué, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to their original goals and willingness to coordinate a regional response to fundamentalism, separatism, and terrorism. Following the summit, China and Kyrgyzstan signed their final border settlement agreement, resolving the disputed area. Still, concrete progress was slow and uncertain. Tajikistan signed a border-demarcation agreement in 1999, but it was not fully ratified by the Tajik

parliament until 2011 because of domestic opposition to the Chinese demand for disputed territory potentially rich in rare minerals and water resources.¹⁷

The fifth summit, held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in 2000, was the first to include Uzbekistan, which attended as an observer state. The topics discussed among leaders continued to expand. Key items discussed included China's right to Taiwan, rising tensions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Province, Russia's claim to Chechnya,

with their giant and powerful neighbors. The combined population of the CARs is fifty-five million, with a total GDP of less than \$100 billion, requiring the multiplier effect for a more equitable relationship with a stronger power or two.²¹ Moreover, the CARs, on the one hand, cannot address even such basic problems as a lack of usable infrastructure. On the other hand, energy and rare earth resources give the CARs leverage in diplomatic negotiations they are eager to employ.

“Uzbek National Security Service shot and killed at least two hundred protesters, although some witnesses claim this number exceeds one thousand.”

and the possible ramifications of Afghan instability in the region.¹⁸ At this summit, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin proposed a more institutionalized organization among the existing five members. Uzbekistan, which does not share a border with China, was also offered membership to underscore the shift from border resolutions to region-wide issues.

Uzbekistan was formally admitted to the organization in June 2001, and the six members signed the Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2002.¹⁹ At the time, Western diplomats called the SCO a “stillborn” organization and an alliance made irrelevant by the significant U.S. presence in Central Asia.²⁰ Since 2004, the SCO has also added several observer states and dialogue partners, primarily Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian nations. The Commonwealth of Independent States, the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and Turkmenistan were guest attendees to the SCO summits. In 2017, India and Pakistan became full members, and as noted, Iran joined in 2023. Belarus also hopes to join, having applied for membership in 2022.

Why Do Member States Support the SCO?

For the CARs, SCO membership brings security, regime stability, legitimacy, and opportunities for economic growth. CARs may also be motivated by the knowledge that they have little choice but to cooperate

Because of the emphasis on security and stability, deterring revolutionary activities is a high priority for CARs. In the early 2000s, so-called “color revolutions” took place in several Eurasian nations and were characterized by large protests brought about by a desire for further democratization. Only one “color revolution” took place in a SCO member state, Kyrgyzstan, but the concept of government protest is not foreign to the region nor overlooked.²²

The incentive of regime stability and legitimacy is further demonstrated by the rift between Uzbekistan and the United States in 2005 following the Andijan massacre when Uzbeks protested inequality, a rise in authoritarianism, and government corruption. The primary methods of protest were nonviolent demonstrations and civil disobedience, although conflicting reports claim there may also have been rioting. In response, the Uzbek National Security Service shot and killed at least two hundred protesters, although some witnesses claim this number exceeds one thousand.²³ The Uzbek government blamed the events on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), but that claim remains widely disputed.²⁴ The decision to respond violently to the protests was quickly condemned by many nations in the West, including the United States, which had previously had a friendly relationship with Uzbekistan. Russia and China, for their part, sent messages of public support for the Uzbek government and reiterated the claim of IMU involvement.

In a state visit to China following the massacre, then Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov was greeted with a twenty-one-gun salute in the infamous Tiananmen Square and was told by then Chinese President Hu Jintao that he “honor[ed]” Uzbekistan’s “efforts to protect its national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.”²⁵ Additionally, the pair signed an oil deal reportedly worth \$600 million.²⁶

At the SCO summit for heads of state five months

SCO as an instrument for maintaining some semblance of stability near China’s western frontier.

To emphasize its fear of instability, China made a point to suppress opposition in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of western China. The XUAR is home to roughly eleven million Uyghurs, an ethnic group of primarily Turkic-speaking Muslims.³⁰ In the late 1990s, China adopted strict rhetoric regarding the XUAR with its “One China” policy. This termi-

“ Serious human rights violations have been committed in XUAR in the context of the Government’s application of counter-terrorism and counter-‘extremism’ strategies. ”

later, members unanimously supported the Uzbek government’s response to the event and the claim that the IMU was to blame. At that same summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, leaders signed seven agreements targeting the three evils.²⁷ The SCO presented the protests in Andijan as the result of extremists rather than peaceful protesters, thus, legitimizing the violent Uzbek response.

By contrast, the U.S. government strongly criticized the massacre. To retaliate, Uzbekistan gave the Americans six months to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad air base, then a logistics center for Operation Enduring Freedom in nearby Afghanistan. Russia also benefited from this realignment in Uzbek foreign policy. In the wake of the United States leaving Karshi-Khanabad, Russian troops were granted access to an air base in Navoi and, consequently, a stronger foothold in the region.²⁸ In this way, Russia’s participation in the SCO serves two critical aspects of Russian foreign policy in Central Asia: limiting American influence in the region and preserving pro-Moscow regimes in the CARs.²⁹

The motivating factors for China to remain in the SCO have changed since the early 2000s. Then, it seemed that Russian influence in the region following the end of the USSR was permanently declining. The demise of the Soviet Union seemed to open a power vacuum China was eager to fill. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent U.S. presence in Afghanistan, China had a stronger motivation to assert its presence in the region. In addition, China sees the

nology continues to be a cornerstone of China’s activity in the XUAR and the SCO as a whole.

China rejected the notion that violence in the XUAR came from ethnic conflict or opposition to Chinese governance. Instead, China blamed all unrest on the three evils. One specific organization named by China during this time was the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. In January 2001, the Chinese government reported that East Turkestan forces were responsible for over two hundred “terrorist incidents” in the 1990s.³¹ It is important to note that the numbers provided in the report are unsubstantiated and that there is an apparent conflation between organized terrorism in the region and standard criminal activity.³² Nonetheless, the report successfully inflated the terrorist presence in Western China. In fact, China’s branding of any opposition movement in the XUAR as a product of the three evils was so effective that the United States placed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement on the list of terrorist organizations at China’s insistence in 2002.³³

China has used the rhetoric of the three evils to demonize genuine grassroots opposition movements in the XUAR. Uyghurs continue to be oppressed by the Chinese government, with one 2022 human rights report by the United Nations stating, “Serious human rights violations have been committed in XUAR in the context of the Government’s application of counter-terrorism and counter-‘extremism’ strategies. The implementation of these strategies, and associated policies in

XUAR has led to interlocking patterns of severe and undue restrictions on a wide range of human rights.³⁴

In the context of the SCO, the three evils rhetoric is extremely appealing. Following the Tajikistan Civil War in the late 1990s and the color revolutions of the 2000s, SCO member states are eager to squash opposition movements. As the SCO has adopted the rhetoric of the three evils, CARs have been able to count on Chinese and Russian support for their repressive actions.

Activities of the SCO

One of the more consistent realities of the SCO is its penchant for grand announcements followed by considerably less impressive achievements. The heads of state of the SCO nations hold a yearly summit, rotating the meeting among the national capitals. Each summit produces a final communiqué and often a set of commitments to advance the SCO's core goals of opposing the three evils, facilitating trade, and ensuring that no outside power (like the United States) effectively competes with the SCO for leadership in Central Asia. Implementation of such agreements is spotty at best.

One of the few concrete results of any SCO summit came from the 2004 meeting held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The members agreed to form the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), with its headquarters in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital.³⁵ Even this venture into genuine action seemed somewhat hedged and uncertain. The term antiterrorist structure, as opposed to "agency," "commission," or even "office" suggests that RATS is just the outline of a policy, with the SCO leadership giving itself plenty of opportunity to redefine or repurpose the "structure."

More typical of the group are the statements from summits in 2009 and 2010. An accord signed by the members in 2009 defined "information war," partly as an effort by a state to undermine another's "political, economic, and social systems."³⁶ It would be a year later, at the 2010 summit, before the SCO clearly opposed cyberwarfare, saying that the dissemination of information "harmful to the spiritual, moral and cultural spheres of other states" should be considered a "security threat."³⁷

The SCO has had more success in staging joint military maneuvers. While committing themselves to intelligence sharing, military cooperation, and counterterrorist activities, the members simultaneously insisted the SCO was not a military alliance. Formal

alliance or not, SCO militaries have spent a good deal of time wargaming together since 2003. In that year, the organization oversaw its first joint maneuvers, first in Kazakhstan and later in China. Since 2005, China and Russia have regularly staged joint exercises they call the Peace Mission war games. Peace Mission 2010, conducted at Kazakhstan's Matybulak training area, saw over five thousand personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan conduct joint planning and operational maneuvers.³⁸ Following the successful completion of the war games, Russian officials began speaking of India joining such exercises in the future and the SCO taking on a military role.

Economic cooperation has also veered between grand promises and less-grand realities. The SCO began its efforts in this area at the 2003 summit, at which members signed a framework agreement to enhance economic cooperation. A far more ambitious goal was put forward by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who suggested an SCO-wide free trade agreement. He followed up with smaller but more immediate steps to remove barriers to the flow of goods in the region. The SCO agreed to one hundred steps toward a regional economic group one year later. Few steps have actually been taken, however. The following year, the SCO leadership met in Moscow and focused on energy projects. Russian officials called for the creation of an SCO "energy club." Almost two years later, Russian officials were still unsuccessfully trying to get commitments to join the energy club.

The 2005 Moscow summit also saw the creation of the SCO Interbank Consortium. Its stated purpose was to fund future joint projects. Almost six months later, the first meeting of the SCO Interbank Association was held in Beijing. On paper, the consortium exists to provide bank services for investment projects sponsored by the SCO member states.³⁹ Its activity level can be judged from the fact that its directors meet only once a year. In 2009, China announced a \$10 billion loan to SCO members still reeling from the 2008 global financial crisis.⁴⁰ Other than Chian's unilateral (and largely self-serving) action, the SCO has produced little more than promises for future cooperation and demands for more money from the International Monetary Fund.⁴¹

U.S. Perceptions and Reactions

Since the disastrous withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021, Central Asia has ceased to be an area



More than four thousand military personnel took part in Peace Mission 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's joint military anti-terrorist command and staff exercise held 11–25 September 2021 at the Donguz training ground in Russia. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Ministry of Defense)

of vital interest to the United States. Official statements from the U.S. State Department and other agencies regarding the SCO have been anodyne. Few official statements provide evidence of a strong focus on the region by policymakers.

Current U.S. interests center around three concerns. First, the area is relatively well-endowed with energy resources. Since oil and gas are likely to be important commodities for the foreseeable future, and since battery power relies on minerals and other resources of which China has a virtual global monopoly, and since America no longer has the energy independence it enjoyed in 2021, Americans cannot afford to take their eyes off Central Asia.⁴²

Second, the SCO's tolerance for political repression means the region will continue to feature human rights violations that will become part of diplomatic discussions between the United States and regional officials. Uzbekistan's expulsion of the Americans from Karshi-Khanabad over U.S. officials' condemnation of the Andijan massacre clearly shows

that human rights concerns can have an outsized impact on U.S. strategic interests.

Finally, Americans are understandably wary of Chinese-Russian collusion in any region, no matter how far removed from vital U.S. interests. Any organization led by America's two most powerful global adversaries warrants close attention from Washington. Both the rhetoric and the actions of the SCO, and especially of the Chinese leadership, leave little room to doubt that supplanting U.S. influence in the region is a central goal of the SCO. The SCO is sometimes referred to as an "Asian NATO" with the United States playing the role of the former Soviet Union.⁴³ With a substantial U.S. military presence in the region and near-constant attention from U.S. officials, CAR leaders could fend off pressure from China and Russia to definitively enter their orbit. Since 2021, however, that counterweight has disappeared.

With Afghanistan back in the hands of the Taliban and rumors already circulating that the Taliban is planning to offer haven to anti-Western terrorist organizations, the possibility that the United States might wish

to intervene in the region again is not far-fetched. The Taliban arguably has more motive to attack American interests after twenty years of fighting American forces than the movement had in 2001. After the 9/11 attacks, all five CARs offered assistance to the United States, with three offering military base rights. If the SCO leadership successfully develops an anti-American slant to the organization, a direct response to some future terrorist attack on the United States may be out of the question.⁴⁴ At the same time, U.S. officials cannot help but be wary that Iran's newly approved membership in the SCO will only assist Russia and China in their efforts to help the Islamic Republic evade Western sanctions.⁴⁵

Even without such an eventuality, the United States has no interest in seeing a rival diplomatic behemoth rise anywhere in the world, including Central Asia. This is especially true if the behemoth is likely to be unfriendly. Beijing's use of the SCO apparatus to call for a "new security concept" and a more "just and fair" multipolar international order is a strong signal that China hopes to reduce U.S. influence in Central Asia as part of China's broader effort to present its foreign and security policy as a preferable alternative to the U.S.-led security order.⁴⁶

In sum, American perceptions and interactions with the SCO members will shift over time, depending on a particular administration's perception of the larger relationship between the United States and Russia and between the United States and China. Under President Donald J. Trump, the U.S. government regarded China as an adversary, and wariness about the intentions of the SCO grew during his administration. At the same time, Trump's efforts to increase U.S. gas and oil production and his stated determination to end the "endless war" in Afghanistan allowed the United States to adopt a more detached attitude toward the region.

Since 2021, the Biden administration has sought to downplay the dangers of China but has adopted a more belligerent attitude toward Russia, even before the latter's invasion of Ukraine. Thus far, Biden's hostility to Russia has not meant any particular hostility toward the SCO. A survey of State Department statements that refer to the SCO shows that virtually all such statements are simply notations that certain nations belong to the organization.⁴⁷ There is little evidence of a strong U.S. government effort to use soft power to bolster the American position with SCO members. There is no open-source evidence that

Biden tried to persuade Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that there was any disadvantage to SCO membership during the latter's state visit to Washington in June 2023. Indeed, the two leaders' joint statement did not mention the SCO or the People's Republic of China.⁴⁸

Conclusion: Prospects of the SCO

In 2015, the European Parliamentary Research Service published a study of the SCO. The researchers concluded, "The SCO's main achievement thus far is to have offered its members a cooperative forum to balance their conflicting interests and to ease bilateral tensions. It has built up joint capabilities and has agreed on common approaches in the fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism. However, major shortcomings, such as institutional weaknesses, a lack of common financial funds for the implementation of joint projects, and conflicting national interests have prevented the SCO from achieving a higher level of regional cooperation in other areas."⁴⁹

Other than a symbol of unity, it is hard to point to specific SCO achievements. No fewer than twenty specialized bodies supposedly promote economic cooperation, but these bodies are "more declared than real."⁵⁰

Yet, U.S. policymakers would be mistaken in dismissing the SCO. The founding document of the SCO defines as a core institutional objective the promotion of "multipolarity," a code word for the supplanting of the United States as the world's sole (or even dominant) superpower.⁵¹ An early SCO summit opposed a U.S. plan to build a missile defense system in the Asia-Pacific.⁵² American influence in the region is also hampered by the wholly legitimate concerns American diplomats express about human rights violations by the CARs. Chinese and Russian diplomats make it clear that they are not interested in human rights violations in the CARs so long as the superpowers' economic interests are protected and, in the case of China, the relative stability in Xinjiang is maintained.⁵³

Although Central Asia is not at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy, authoritarian governments, a breadth of salient resources, and proximity to Russia, Afghanistan, and China mean the region must not be overlooked. The SCO has grown from five nations solely based on border resolutions to nine nations with a widening focus on symbolic unity, regime stability, and economic growth. Although the SCO is far from realizing its potential, its

capacity and expanding membership make it a worthy subject of ongoing analysis. ■

Support for this research came from the Hollins University Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship program.

Notes

1. For this article, Central Asia refers to the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and their immediate neighbors (China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). Central Asian Republics (CARs) refers only to the former Soviet republics.
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