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Cooperation Organization and
China

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the ascendant influence of the United States in Central Asia was perceived as a threat by China, which prompted Beijing to seek collaboration with Russia. The objective of both countries was to establish a multipolar international system in opposition to the prevailing unipolar order led by the United States. In this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established under China's leadership, with the objective of strengthening regional cooperation for the purpose of promoting stability and security. This article will examine the evolution of relations between China and SCO, as well as the impact of this cooperation on the regional balance of power.

Key Words: China, SCO, Relations

Introduction

The post-Cold War US pursuit of military, political and economic hegemony in Central Asia has attracted the attention of China, which views the region as strategically critical. China has identified the stability of Central Asia as a priority, particularly in terms of ensuring its own security and access to energy resources. China perceived the growing influence of the United States in the region as a threat, prompting China to act in partnership with Russia. Both countries espoused opposition to the prevailing unipolar world order and articulated the objective of fostering a multipolar international order.

Russia and China have intensified their collaboration with the objective of counterbalancing American influence in the region and developing an alternative order to US hegemony in Central Asia. This collaboration was formalised with the establishment of SCO in 2001. The SCO was established by China with the objective of ensuring peace and stability in Central Asia, combating terrorism and facilitating economic cooperation. The establishment of the SCO constituted a platform through which the power vacuum in the region could be filled and US influence countered.

Table 1. SCO Members and Partners

Category	Countries
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Full Members	China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Belarus
Observer States	Afghanistan, Mongolia
Dialogue Partners	Azerbaijan, Armenia, Türkiye, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kingdom of Bahrain, The Republic of Maldives, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait

Source: <https://eng.sectsco.org/>

China also views the SCO as a strategic platform for advancing regional economic collaboration under the Belt and Road Initiative. The SCO allows China to enhance its influence in Central Asia and reinforce both its economic and political influence. This article will examine the strategic relations between China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and assess the regional and global implications of this cooperation in Central Asia.

The Establishment of the SCO and China's Role

The independence of Central Asian countries following the dissolution of the Soviet Union has resulted in the emergence of both promising prospects and potential security concerns, particularly for China. The geopolitical position of Central Asia is of significant importance to China, as it is situated in close proximity to the Xinjiang region in western China. China has initiated the formation of close relations with Central Asian countries with the objective of stabilizing the region and guaranteeing its border security. In particular, the maintenance of border security and the suppression of separatist movements within the region have constituted the most significant foreign policy priorities for China.

In the early 1990s, countries in the region, particularly China and Russia, initiated diplomatic contacts with the objective of resolving border disputes and strengthening security cooperation. China sought to conclude agreements on border security and cooperation with the newly independent Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. As a consequence of these initiatives, on [April 26, 1996](#), Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan convened to establish an alliance designated the Shanghai Five. This alliance constituted the foundation for the subsequent formation of SCO. The inaugural meeting was held in Shanghai, where the "Agreement on Enhancing Military Confidence in Border



Areas" was signed. The objective of this coalition is to enhance border security, reduce military forces, and promote regional stability.

[The founding objectives of the SCO](#) extended beyond the resolution of border disputes and the enhancement of security cooperation. The organization's principal objectives are as follows:

One of the initial objectives of the Shanghai Five was to find a resolution to the border disputes that had arisen in Central Asia. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, border disputes emerged between Central Asian countries and China. These issues had to be addressed through diplomatic channels. The Shanghai Five facilitated the peaceful resolution of these [disputes](#).

Of particular concern to China were the separatist movements in Xinjiang and the threat of terrorism. [One of the principal objectives](#) of the SCO is to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism in the region. In order to address these concerns, China, Russia, and the Central Asian countries have agreed to collaborate in addressing these [challenges](#).

Another significant rationale for the formation of the SCO was to establish a counterbalance to the increasing [US influence](#) in Central Asia. In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the United States endeavored to bolster its strategic influence in Central Asia, pursuing a series of initiatives to secure access to the region's energy resources. However, Russia and China were disinclined to allow the United States to become a dominant power in the region and sought to reinforce regional cooperation through the SCO. The SCO has served as a regional control mechanism, particularly to deter the United States from interfering in the region's internal affairs under the pretext of promoting human rights and democracy.

In addition, the SCO may be regarded as an initiative that contributes to the establishment of a multipolar world order, a concept that has been advocated by Russia and China. Both countries espoused opposition to unipolar hegemony by the United States and advanced arguments for greater balance and cooperation in the international system. In alignment with this objective, the SCO sought to enhance collaboration at the regional and global levels.

From 1996 to 2000, the Shanghai Five held regular summits, during which border disputes were peacefully resolved. During this period, the region witnessed a strengthening of security cooperation and the implementation of measures designed to enhance stability in Central Asia.

Table 1. Summits held between 1996-2000

Date	Location	Participants	Summit/Agreement	Objectives and Outcomes
April 26, 1996	Shanghai, China	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Establishment of the Shanghai Five and First Summit	The "Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field in Border Areas" was signed. This agreement aimed to reduce military tensions



Date	Location	Participants	Summit/Agreement	Objectives and Outcomes
				and build trust in border regions.
1997	Moscow, Russia	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Second Summit	The "Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Areas" was signed. The parties agreed to reduce military forces and equipment in the border areas.
July 3, 1998	Almaty, Kazakhstan	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Third Summit	Border security, regional cooperation, and economic development were discussed. A consensus was reached on enhancing regional stability and cooperation.
August 24, 1999	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Fourth Summit	Issues of terrorism, separatism, and extremism were highlighted. Agreements were worked on to deepen security cooperation.
July 5, 2000	Dushanbe, Tajikistan	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Fifth Summit	Uzbekistan participated in the summit, marking the start of Shanghai Five's expansion. Cooperation on counter-terrorism, joint exercises, and security was emphasized.

China's involvement in the formation of the SCO is of significant consequence. China's objective was twofold: to guarantee its own border security and to curtail US influence in Central Asia through collaboration with other regional powers, particularly Russia. Although the SCO was initially established with the objective of resolving border issues and enhancing security cooperation, it has subsequently



evolved into a much broader structure that promotes economic cooperation and regional integration.

[In 2001](#), with the accession of Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Five evolved into the SCO, thereby further expanding regional security and economic cooperation. The main organs of the SCO were defined at the Moscow Summit in 2003 and activated in 2004. The principal organs of the organization are as follows: The SCO is comprised of several principal organs, including the Council of Heads of State, Council of Heads of Government, Council of Foreign Ministers, Council of National Coordinators, SCO General Secretariat, and the Regional Counter-Terrorism Center in Tashkent. The official languages of the SCO are Russian and Chinese.

The principal objectives of the SCO are to guarantee regional security, combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism, and facilitate collaboration among member states. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the organization's focus on combating terrorism intensified, leading to Pakistan's acceptance as an observer. Subsequently, India and Pakistan were admitted as full members in 2017. In 2021, Iran was admitted as a full member.

Additionally, the SCO facilitates economic collaboration. A number of agreements have been concluded between member states with a view to facilitating trade, energy and infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the organization engages in military cooperation with the objective of enhancing regional security.

The SCO continues to expand, having recently admitted Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Belarus as observers. Additionally, countries such as Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have been designated as "Dialogue Partners." In 2021, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar were also granted this status. Türkiye's status as a Dialogue Partner is a notable indication of a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member country's engagement in cooperative activities with the SCO.

SCO and China

[In the 21st century](#), China has developed a multifaceted strategy aimed at sustaining its economic growth. One such strategy is the fight against terrorism. China has implemented measures in anticipation of the potential negative impact of terrorist incidents on its economy and the possibility of the United States intervening in its internal affairs under the pretext of human rights. Furthermore, China sought to enhance its diplomatic ties with the newly independent states in Central Asia, offering them a model of economic growth that remained consistent with the principles of the Communist system. These strategies were designed to serve two distinct yet complementary objectives: to enhance China's regional influence and to curtail the U.S.'s regional influence. The region's abundant natural resources have also been a significant factor in these policies.

In the post-Cold War era, China perceived the United States as a hindrance to the formation of a multipolar world order. China has been disquieted by the United States' desire to maintain the unipolar system, its support for [Taiwan](#), the Missile Defense System, and NATO's expansion policies. This situation prompted China to enhance its collaboration with Russia and to establish frameworks to deter US



involvement in its domestic affairs. The SCO serves as a primary example of this mechanism.

There are some principal reasons for China's decision to establish the SCO. The primary objective is to establish a dependable foundation for bolstering economic stability. China has suffered a serious loss of prestige during the period known as the "[Century of Humiliation](#)"¹ which was marked by the Opium Wars² and the Sino-Japanese [War](#). Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, reforms were introduced, though they did not achieve comprehensive success. As a consequence of the improvement of relations with the United States in the 1970s and the subsequent inflow of foreign investment from the 1980s onwards, China underwent a rapid process of modernisation, achieving substantial economic growth as a result.

In the 1990s, as China's economic growth accelerated, the country was confronted with novel challenges pertaining to border security and energy needs. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states of Central Asia moved closer to China's borders. This proximity, coupled with the prevailing instability in the region, posed a significant threat to China's economic stability. Furthermore, China has become increasingly reliant on energy resources from Central Asia to meet its growing demand for oil and natural gas to support its expanding industrial sector. It is of paramount importance for China to achieve stability in Central Asia in order to secure its energy [supplies](#).

Furthermore, separatist movements in East Turkestan have been identified as a significant security concern for China. The region's ethnic and cultural diversity presented a risk to China's national unity, and the Uighur Turks' demands for independence were characterized as terrorist activities by the Chinese government. The strategic importance of the energy resources in East Turkestan has further reinforced the necessity for China to maintain control over this region. China has implemented demographic changes with the objective of suppressing separatist movements in the region. China's approach is analogous to Russia's strategy for combating separatism in Chechnya. These shared challenges were important factor in the formation of the SCO.

¹ [The "Century of Humiliation"](#) (1839-1949) was a period during which China was subjected to significant external pressure, resulting in a series of political, military, and economic setbacks. During this period, China was subjected to a series of conflicts and occupations, resulting in the loss of significant territories and the exploitation of its economy by Western imperialist countries and Japan. In particular, China's defeat to the British Empire in the Opium Wars of 1839-1842 and its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 resulted in a significant decline in its power and led to its submission to Western economic and political pressure. This period was distinguished by the loss of China's national honor and culminated in the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

² [The Opium Wars](#) were a series of two armed conflicts between Britain and China in the 19th century. The first war took place between 1839 and 1842, while the second occurred between 1856 and 1860. The primary motivation behind the outbreak of hostilities was Britain's illicit opium trade with China and China's efforts to halt this practice. The initial conflict commenced with China's prohibition of opium and culminated in a British triumph. The wars revealed China's vulnerability in the face of Western imperialism, leading to the signing of the Treaty of Nanking and other unfavorable treaties that resulted in a significant loss of China's economic and political autonomy.



China and Russia have perceived the proliferation of fundamentalism in Central Asia as a potential threat to regional stability and their own geopolitical influence. China linked separatist movements in East Turkestan with fundamentalism, while Russia viewed the Muslim resistance in Chechnya through a similar lens. Consequently, the two countries identified the fight against fundamentalism as a primary motivation for the formation of the [SCO](#).

China holds the view that the unipolar order imposed by the United States in a multipolar world is both economically and politically unsustainable. In documents such as the New Delhi Declaration, China has underscored the importance of respecting the right of countries to determine their own development paths autonomously. China is opposed to unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the United States and is seeking to reduce the influence of the U.S. dollar in the international financial system by increasing the use of national currencies.

If we look at the relationship between China and the SCO from an economic perspective, it is clear that their cooperation has significantly expanded in recent years. By 2021, trade between China and SCO member states had reached \$343.3 billion, a remarkable 28-fold increase since the establishment of the SCO in 2001. This partnership has significantly benefited key sectors such as industrial supply chains, agriculture, and cross-border [logistics](#).

Year	Total China-SCO Trade Volume (Billion USD)	Growth in Trade (Since 2001)	Sectors Boosted by Cooperation
2021	343.3	28x	Industrial Supply Chains, Agriculture, Cross-border Logistics
2022	343.3	28x	Industrial Supply Chains, Agriculture, Cross-border Logistics

Source: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1275244.shtml>

A central component of this economic expansion is the China-SCO Local Economic and Trade Cooperation Demonstration Area (SCODA) in Qingdao. In 2022, SCODA facilitated the movement of 279,000 containers, reflecting a 5.4% growth compared to the previous year. SCODA has also been instrumental in launching several international rail routes, connecting China to 23 countries, including SCO [members](#). This growing economic partnership highlights the SCO's potential to foster regional integration and economic stability across its member states, positioning the organization as a critical platform for collaboration in the broader Eurasian region.

China views the SCO not merely as a regional security organization, but also as a global power. The economic and military capabilities of SCO member states afford the organization the capacity to assume a more prominent role in a multipolar world. China, in particular, is pursuing an expansion of its regional influence through the strengthening of economic cooperation within the SCO.



In conclusion, for China, a multipolar world order is a structure that is reinforced by the formation of strategic alliances against US hegemony. The expansion of the SCO and China's economic maneuvers are of pivotal importance in this transition.

Conclusion

In recent years, the evolving diplomatic framework of China has played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The principles set forth in China's "[New Security Concept](#)," "[New Development Approach](#)," and "New Civilization Vision" were formally acknowledged during the SCO summit in Bishkek in August 2007. At this meeting, the heads of member states collectively signed the "Agreement on Long-Term Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation," thereby taking a significant step toward fostering deeper bilateral ties.

China, in collaboration with other SCO members, has effectively addressed traditional border disputes, fostering mutual trust and enhancing counterterrorism cooperation in alignment with the New Security Concept. Economic and energy collaboration has flourished under the framework of the New Development Approach, which emphasizes equality and mutual benefit. Furthermore, initiatives to mitigate cultural and social conflicts among the diverse member nations have been aligned with the principles of building a Harmonious World and advancing the New Civilization Vision.

The development of the SCO has, to date, been based on a foundation of tangible outcomes. The organization's initial focus was on resolving border disputes; however, it has since expanded its scope to encompass economic issues. This uninterrupted progression reflects China's broader diplomatic transformation, which has successfully navigated past skepticism and hostility from non-SCO nations by prioritizing multilateral relations over bilateral engagements. The relationship between China and the SCO is currently characterized by a deepening of ties and an increase in the level of cooperation between the two parties. The organization has become a key actor in the promotion of regional stability, economic growth, and collective security. The SCO serves as a crucial platform for enhancing connectivity and economic collaboration among member states in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative. As China's New Diplomacy continues to evolve, it seeks not only to address existing challenges but also to mature into a

³ [The New Security Concept](#) is a diplomatic framework introduced by China that prioritizes mutual cooperation, non-confrontational approaches, and comprehensive security measures. It addresses both traditional military threats and non-traditional issues like terrorism and cybercrime.

⁴ [The New Development Approach](#) is a strategic framework introduced by China that prioritizes sustainable and inclusive economic growth, social welfare, environmental sustainability, and equitable resource distribution. It also integrates innovation and technology to create a resilient economy.

⁵ [The New Civilization Vision](#), as proposed by the People's Republic of China, advocates for the establishment of a harmonious global community. This vision is based on the principles of mutual respect, cultural exchange, and cooperation among nations. Additionally, it supports the idea of a multipolar world and the pursuit of shared development goals. The overarching objective is to achieve peaceful coexistence and equity in international relations.



more comprehensive framework that promotes sustainable development and stability in the region.

In conclusion, the SCO's trajectory serves to illustrate how diplomatic efforts can facilitate the transformation of regional relationships, thereby underscoring the significance of collaborative frameworks in addressing contemporary challenges. In an era of growing global interconnectivity, the SCO's function in fostering dialogue and collaboration among its member states is of paramount importance. The future of the SCO will depend on its capacity to adapt and respond to the evolving geopolitical landscape, thereby ensuring its continued relevance and influence in regional affairs.