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Maria Raquel Freire

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THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

*Maria Raquel Freire*¹

UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA, PORTUGAL

Introduction

This chapter looks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and what has been Russia's role within and towards it. Centered around the idea of multilateralism sustained on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and mutual non-interference (Hantke, 2016), the 'Shanghai Spirit' became the cornerstone to the SCO's functioning, together with consensus decision-making and the politically binding character of decisions. The 'Shanghai Spirit' underlines a non-western approach to cooperation reinforcing its distinctive character in Eurasia. Russia's relative economic weakness has made the Kremlin initiatives to focus on the objectives of stability and security, whereas the Chinese agenda is more ideologically driven (Danilovich, 2013: 20).

The development of the SCO shows two interlinked trends, as argued here. Russia's positioning within the SCO is motivated mainly by considerations of regional stability, with a strong emphasis on the security agenda. However, Russia is only partially successful in advancing its stability-driven agenda given China's growing economic weight and preferences. In fact, Russia's enlargement policy, which has been part of the strategy to counter China, has revealed serious limitations. The chapter begins by mapping the literature on the SCO and Russia, identifying main approaches and issues, analyzing the role of Russia within SCO, as well as its expectations and limitations, and concludes by suggesting avenues for future research.

Mapping SCO-Russia relations

The literature available on the SCO generally touches upon Russia, as they are one of the big players within the SCO together with China, the latter often being described as the leading member state. Most of the works available take on a systemic or actor-oriented approach, though the works are not usually theoretically oriented. Geopolitics, regional security and integration, and the promotion of non(anti)-western values and norms, are the main axis around which the study of SCO-Russia relations has been organized.

Geopolitics are an overarching theme in approaching SCO-Russia relations. Several authors mention the balancing act against the west, in particular NATO enlargement and US involvement in Central Asia as a major drive. Some have labeled the organization as the "NATO of the East" (Stakelbeck, 2005) or "Eastern NATO" (Felgenhauer, 2011), whereas others have referred to it as having the potential to be a "counterrevolutionary alliance" (Silitski, 2010: 349),

having an “anti-foreign influence” (Song, 2014: 86) or refusing US unilateralism (Eisenbaum, 2011: 152). However, as some underline, this does not mean ‘against’ the west, but instead constitutes an ‘alternative’ to western hegemony in international dynamics (Ambrosio, 2017: 133). Russia has itself voiced that the SCO is not developing in opposition to the west or as a rival to NATO (Hansen, 2008: 7; Lukin, 2015). Despite often being compared to NATO, some authors argue this comparison is not easy as “the SCO is described by both China and Russia as a partnership instead of alliance” (Economy and Piekos, 2015).

In this regard, some authors highlight the benefits arising from the composition of the SCO as allowing it to “streamlin[e] the emergence and development of Greater Eurasia” (Yefremenko, 2017). This has been the Russian approach. Russia has been promoting the idea of an “arc of stability in the north of Eurasia”, which clearly contrasts with the “arc of instability along the SCO’s southern rim – from the eastern Mediterranean through Iraq and Afghanistan to Pakistan and northern India” (Troitskiy, 2007: 44). This is most relevant in terms of stability promotion in the region, and understood by Moscow as the result of US “flawed policies of interven[tion]”, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan (Troitskiy, 2007: 44). Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov commented on the “added prominence and appeal” (PressTV, 2017) of the SCO and its role in the new “polycentric world order” (Economy and Piekos, 2015). Lavrov further added that “Russia is not fighting against someone but for the resolution of all issues in an equal and mutually respectful manner” (Lavrov, 2016).

On a different tone, there are authors that highlight the limited reading coming out of this exclusionary approach being very much centered in advancing the SCO as a counter-weight exercise to the west or NATO. These works focus on the possibilities and limits of regional integration, looking at the need for an institutionalized forum to deal with matters of common concern, and the build-up of relations among the SCO’s members, particularly China and Russia (Aris, 2009; Bordachev, 2016). Some authors talk about “shared hegemony” (Villalobos, 2012) and the benefits arising particularly for the biggest powers – China and Russia – from further integration in this format (Alvarez, 2009: 311). Others point to the convergence of views on the peaceful development of the Central Asian space (Vorobyov, 2012). Internal balancing between Russia and China is put forward as an element to be considered, and that might be parallel to the western counter-weight argument (Freire and Mendes, 2009). Others also point to the containing exercise of China and Russia by the other SCO members (see Song, 2014: 86).

On the normative debate, as Ambrosio (2017: 132) notes, in all SCO documents the only mention of ‘democracy’ pertains to the members’ willingness to promote “a more democratic international order”. However, this does not mean democratic order in the western liberal sense, but instead the normative shared understanding of equality in the international system as requiring a less hegemonic and unbalanced system. So, it refers to “a set of rules by which no state has the right to impose its interests and values on any other” (Cooley, 2015). This is pursued through the promotion of “development paths” that follow different avenues from the democratic ones – Ambrosio (2008), again highlighting the non-democratic nature of the regimes and how stabilization becomes in this context a key concept in cooperation as a way to avert any attempts at regime change. The recent addition of India to the Group, however, changes this regime approach. According to a Russian view, this enlargement shows that the SCO can “hardly [be] portrayed as a ‘dictator’s union’” (Lukin, 2015). In this same line, the ‘colorful revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space have been studied as part of externally induced processes for regime change, with the involvement of western powers, and particularly the US (Silitski, 2010). However, the idea moving Russian and Chinese policies is not that of “transforming” the states in Central Asia, but instead “stabilizing” the political regimes in these countries (Bordachev, 2016). When asked if the SCO was turning “anti-orange”, Russian Foreign

Minister Lavrov answered that the organization was dedicated to political non-interference and the socio-economic development of the region (Lanteigne, 2007: 618).

The following section looks at the evolving agenda of the SCO and how Russia has been both an agenda-promoter and at times an obstacle to integration. It also links Russia's options within and towards the SCO with the broader Russian foreign policy agenda, particularly in the context where after the crisis in Ukraine relations with the west are still strained, and the 'Asia pivot' discourse has gained increased prominence.

Agenda-setting and -contesting: SCO's evolution and Russian politics

The institutional development of the SCO has been steady, and Russia has been a firm advocate of political consolidation.² The institutionalization of procedural rules such as decision-making by consensus, "informality" and the pursuit of "open regionalism" attest to the goals of "inclusiveness and nondiscrimination" (Lanteigne, 2007: 610). One of the first goals of the SCO as explicit in its Charter (SCO Charter, 2002) is to "maintain peace and strengthen security and confidence in the region", and this principle is enshrined in SCO documents, declarations and statements. This also points to the establishment of a formal structure where Russia and China might pursue collaboration instead of competition (Ambrosio, 2017: 131). Moreover, SCO documents make explicit reference to the UN principles as the overarching rules to be followed, particularly those on non-intervention and respect for the territorial integrity of states. This means the conservative trend in terms of the non-interference and sovereignty principles goes hand-in-hand with the radical trend of countering western hegemony in the international system.

Also, the "transformation into a political bloc" (Shibutov, 2016) includes the accession of new members, as well as the status of observer states and dialogue partners.³ However, this was a process that took a long time to be defined, with the mechanism to formalize accession requests agreed only in 2010. The Regulations on the Admission of New Members (SCO Admission Procedures, 2010) included as criteria belonging to the Eurasian region, having diplomatic relations with all member states, having the status of observer or dialogue partner, maintaining active cooperation in all fundamental areas of actuation of the Organization, having no armed conflict with other states or committing to security principles not in line with the SCO ones, observing UN principles, and having no sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. This last criterion was clearly directed at Iran, who has been seeking membership for a long time.

Iran submitted its application for membership in 2008, but the UN sanctions blocked any discussion about its eventual integration for many years. Russia has been supportive of Iran's application whereas China has been more cautious. In April 2017 Lavrov stated, "We hope that during their June summit in Astana, the heads of our states will be able to discuss the possibility of launching the procedure for admitting Iran into the organization as a full member" (RT News, 2017). But the SCO leaders were only able to agree on a declaration of support on the implementation of the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to resolve the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme between the Islamic Republic of Iran and six international mediators plus the European Union" (SCO Press Release, 2017). Tajikistan was the main opponent to the Iranian bid after Teheran invited the leader of the banned Tajik Islamic Revival Party to attend a conference in 2015 (IFP, 2017). There are several issues on Teheran's motivation list to join the SCO, namely the understanding of the SCO as a counter-weight to the US, the fact that among Islamic countries it might raise its status, and the economic opportunities, particularly in energy terms this membership offers (Song, 2014: 99). Also, it is understood in

Moscow that “Iran blocks the western border of Afghanistan, and therefore it could become an outpost of the organization on the border with the militant groupings of ISIS” (Ibragimova, 2016), reinforcing the security agenda the SCO promotes.

In 2011, one year after the admission procedures were agreed, the SCO adopted a memorandum that concluded the procedures for membership request. Russia was one of the most active members in assuring all formalities for membership application were regulated. According to Lukin (2017, 2011) it was after Iran’s membership request denial that this more proactive approach was developed. Moscow proposed the establishment of an experts’ group to consider matters related to membership expansion to be discussed at the 2008 Summit, and it was this group that drafted the accession documents. This proactive approach shows Russia’s commitment to reinforcing SCO’s membership. In 2010, then President Medvedev was clear when he stated the relevance of enlargement as a way for the SCO to avoid becoming an “elite club” (Ferghana News Agency, 2011). Russia’s understanding that the integration of a country like India would bring more balance to the growing economic weight of China was well-known. The policy of enlargement has been favored by Russia to respond to the “increasing gap between Russia and China’s position in the world” (Davis, 2015) by bringing more countries to the table and in this way diluting China’s influence (Davis, 2015). Moreover, expanding the group brings more room for balancing and diversification, especially for the Central Asia states. This might play favorably in terms of reinforcing multilateral dealings in parallel with the bilateral dynamics that have always been present in the region (see Hantke, 2016). It might also reveal limits by turning the SCO into a ‘talk shop’ with limited room for agreement (Gabuev, 2017).

According to Russian sources, “the advantages of accepting new members outweigh the drawbacks”, and President Putin added that the inclusion of India and Pakistan marked the “beginning of a new chapter” (Maverick, 2015). These two new members will turn the SCO into a “much more powerful and influential international organization . . . represent[ing] a major portion of the non-Western world” (Lukin, 2015). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov commented that the inclusion of India and Pakistan “will improve the six-member grouping’s economic and defense potential” (Financial Express, 2017). In fact, a free trade area “that involves China and India, let alone Russia, Pakistan and others is going to be of huge significance. It also absolutely determines where the bulk of China’s Overseas Direct Investment is going to be heading – to Eurasia” (Romanova and Devonshire-Ellis, 2016). However, the Chinese ‘go-it-alone’ policy in financial terms has clear implications in this reading, as further analyzed later.

Despite Russian commitment to the enlargement policy, in Russian official documents the SCO does not get as much space as other regional organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is the preferred arrangement for military-security cooperation, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) which Moscow has been promoting as the economic driver of integration in the post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, the SCO has been gaining relevance in Russian official documents, in line with the changes in policy Russia had to operate in order to accommodate the growing power of China, as further analyzed in the next section. The 2000 Russian Foreign Policy Concept (Russian FPC, 2000) refers to the ‘Shanghai Five’ as a group created with active involvement from Russia. In 2008 when the new foreign policy concept was adopted, the SCO had already been established for a few years, but the mention it gets is brief and quite broad: “Further strengthening of the SCO, promoting its initiative for setting up a network of partner ties among all the integration associations in the Asia-Pacific Region occup[ies] a special place” (Russian FPC, 2008). The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept frames the SCO differently. It refers to the SCO as part of Russia’s strategy of participation in different organizations for global development, along with the G20, the BRICS and

others. The document recognizes the role of the SCO as one of “constructive influence on the situation in the region”, committing to enhancing the SCO’s regional role (Russian FPC, 2013: §77), including in relation to Afghanistan. The last foreign policy concept, from 2016, is clearly more inclusive, bringing together the partnership dimension that the security concepts highlight (Russian NSS 2020, 2009: §15; Russian NSS 2015), with the multilateral frameworks emphasized in the foreign policy documents. The document highlights Russia’s goal to “strengthen SCO’s role in regional and global affairs and expanding its membership”, promoting trust and partnership and further cooperation among all states, independent of their status within the SCO (Russian FPC, 2016: §79). It also underlines the equal nature of cooperation and integration in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasian contexts (Russian FPC, 2016: §82) signaling discomfort with the big player that China has become in these contexts.

The reading of Russia’s policy documents provides a brief mapping of how its relations with the SCO have been evolving. Clearly there has been an increased interest with the institutionalization process, including the SCO’s enlargement. According to Moscow, the latter embodies the projection of the SCO’s potential, particularly in security and economic terms, whilst assuring a more balanced membership. However, and despite this increase in interest, the rationale that has been present from early on of containing China and playing a counter-weight role to the west remains unchanged. Russia’s effectiveness has thus been mixed, having managed to push forward the security agenda within limits, whereas failing in its attempts at containing China’s rise.

The SCO agenda: a ‘cart with two wheels’

The main issue on the agenda from the early days of the SCO has been security, with the very initial concern about settling border issues aligning with the non-traditional security agenda that has evolved. After the Andijan events in 2005 in Uzbekistan, the SCO quickly moved forward the anti-terrorist agenda and the non-interference principle, responding to what was understood as US involvement. Uzbekistan became a member of the SCO after these events, further underlining the relevance of regime stability and of the role attributed to the SCO in these political and security matters. The ‘three evils’ became a cornerstone of SCO’s actuation, giving teeth to the Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2001), later reinforced by the Convention on Counter-Terrorism (2009) and the Convention on Countering Extremism (2017) (see Julien, 2016: 10; SCO Press Release, 2017). Despite not having enforcement mechanisms, the SCO established formal instruments that have promoted cooperation in this area, and according to reports prevented hundreds of potential terrorist attacks. The creation of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in 2004 to coordinate information-sharing and promote confidence-building measures in the combat against the ‘three evils’ attests to the relevance of this dimension.

Russia has prioritized from day one this security-oriented agenda, in a context where US deep involvement in the region is not welcomed, and NATO maintains its enlargement strategy, regarded for long as a ‘containment’ strategy of an aggressive nature. Moreover, the fight against terrorism is in line with UN activities, with Russia promoting the role of the SCO as a multilateral forum contributing to international security (Facon, 2006: 29). In general, Moscow has been successful in pushing forward the security agenda, but has suffered a backlash with the SCO decision not to support its actions in Georgia in 2008. The wording of the Declaration is clear when urging the parties “to resolve the existing problems peacefully”, including references to the territorial integrity principle and the condemnation of separatism, but not endorsing Russian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Antonenko, 2008;

Saivetz, 2012: 405). The same applies to Crimea, with no recognition of the territory as Russian by any of the SCO states. These interventionist moves from Russia challenged the ‘Shanghai spirit’ and the sovereignty-first principle, resulting in a mixed record for Russia as expressed in the lack of explicit support for its moves.

China also values the security dimension – this is clearly a shared issue among all SCO members – but it has been pushing for a bigger role of the economic agenda given the composition and regional span of the members and the potential the SCO offers as a market and as an energy hub – production, transit and supply. Moreover, China sees in the SCO a way to enter an area where Moscow has been the main power through a multilateral format. China positioned itself to promote the idea of an economically integrated project through the establishment of a “free trade zone, bank and fund for development and strengthening of transport cooperation. Of the four elements, only transport cooperation was partially successful; all other attempts to advance economic collaboration to some extent were not supported by Russia” (Shibutov, 2016).

Russia’s resistance to further integration in economic terms, to a great extent motivated by the project of the EAEU, and the drive to restrain Chinese economic domination of Central Asia (Lukin, 2015), along with increased competition between Russia and the Central Asian states for energy supply to China, led Beijing to promote bilateral and out-of-SCO projects. These projects have increasingly become important also for Russia, especially after the 2008 financial crisis and Western sanctions. With Russia “experiencing a 7.9 percent fall of its GDP and an acute liquidity crisis, [it] was unable to give loans to its partners in Central Asia” (Gabuev, 2015). Moreover, with no SCO Bank or financial institution in place, “Central Asian countries have to turn to China for loans and negotiate with it one-on-one” (Gabuev, 2015).

The new international context, unfavorable to Russia, pushed for the ‘Asia pivot’ (Spanger, 2016; Lukin, 2017) approach and made of the Asia-Pacific region a most relevant space for Russia. Moreover, Russia itself has been benefitting from Chinese loans. Thus the accommodation of economic cooperation within the SCO became an imperative. Russia was becoming peripheral to a central project in energy transit, and it basically after “painful internal discussions . . . [had] to come to terms with the Silk Road project” (Spanger, 2016). Also, Moscow was feeling its “political clout in Central Asia could wane” (Economy and Piekos, 2015). This resulted from two differently oriented trends: on the one hand, Russia’s limited capacity to respond to China’s economic prevalence, and on the other, the recognition of the gains that further economic integration might bring to Russia itself. The Russian reasoning was thus that it had more to gain from deeper integration within the SCO than from the development of projects that simply bypass Moscow, such as the Chinese promoted Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Silk Road Economic Belt project. In particular, the latter project is directed at integration of the Eurasian economies, and further bilateral projects with India are being developed under the “Act East policy” (Aneja, 2016).

Also, the SCO offers the potential for Russia to diversify its markets, particularly in face of difficult relations with the west. The suggestion coming from Russia to find a joint formula for the ‘One Belt, One Road’ Chinese project and the EAEU free trade area testifies to this understanding. Following extended talks, Russia and China signed a joint statement on 8 May 2015 on the cooperation of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. According to President Putin, the two projects “complement each other very harmoniously”, and the Joint Declaration “speaks precisely of these possibilities for integrating these models. Essentially, we seek ultimately to reach a new level of partnership that will create a common economic space across the entire Eurasian continent” (Putin, 2015). Yefremenko (2017) adds that the “initiative was partly defensive and designed to ease the tension that would otherwise have developed”. Despite the Russian fears of becoming a “junior partner” or “resource

appendix” of China, it is understood that partnership with China increases “Russia’s position in the international arena as an independent centre of power” (Spanger, 2016). However, the independent course pursued by China in economic and financial terms proves that the SCO is not anymore understood in Beijing as a “useful instrument” (Gabuev, 2017).

Most analyses concur that Moscow did not have much alternative in face of the growing economic presence of China in global affairs. “Russia is acutely aware that it cannot, and will not try to, compete with China’s growing global economic influence, even if this extends into Russia’s traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia” (Lain, 2015). These developments led to the description of the SCO as a “cart with two wheels”, an expression used by Jiang Zemin to show the relevance of security and economic cooperation within the SCO (Song, 2014: 93). Earlier, as Lanteigne (2007: 619) underlined, “the SCO ‘bicycle’ . . . best resembles a nineteenth-century penny farthing (large front wheel, miniature rear wheel)”. This image clearly pictures the evolution of these issue-areas in the SCO agenda, with security dominating the agenda, but economics gaining increasing weight as pursued by China. Moreover, this direction has shown Moscow’s failure in accommodating China’s power within the SCO multilateral framework. Russia’s disagreement with the establishment of an SCO financial institution and support for the inclusion of India, which meant as a trade off the accession of Pakistan, brings limits to the security role of the SCO on cooperation on counter-terrorism, particularly in view of difficulties regarding intelligence sharing between Delhi and Islamabad. “Moscow has turned a multilateral organization established to develop rules of the game for Eurasia into a useless bureaucracy. Now, the enervated SCO no longer has any sway over Beijing” (Gabuev, 2017). The Russian preference for regional security, where concrete successes have been achieved, has thus been overridden by its drive to contain China that led to options not favorable to Russia. To find a balance Russia became a strong supporter of the SCO enlargement policy and more receptive to economic initiatives, understanding its engagement as necessary so as to not remain outside fundamental processes taking place in the area. However, this approach has proved to be limited in its reach.

Final thoughts: questions and themes in Russia’s relations with the SCO

Russia has always seen the SCO as a political organization, rather than an economic one, and envisaged it as “promot[ing] military and political cooperation through the CSTO”, as the SCO was above all an “ideological symbol of a multipolar world” (Lukin, 2015). This political role for the SCO also means for Russia the legitimacy as a great power that it lost after Crimea in the west, and which SCO expansion might push forward (Economy and Piekos, 2015). The security rationale that was present at the time of the ‘Shanghai Five’ has been understood by Russia as the main focus area, specifically non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism and organized crime, meaning that there would not be room for overlap with the CSTO, a military-security organization led by Russia. Despite Russian efforts to contain Chinese attempts at boosting the economic dimension of the SCO’s actuation, it ceded. However, and despite the institutionalizing process, as Lisa Martin (apud Song, 2014: 101) argues “there might be a well-established multilateral organization, but weak international multilateralism”. This is very much linked to the triple function the SCO took on: as a multilateral forum, as a regional organization and as a vector for Chinese influence in an area that was not traditionally under its influence (Eisenbaum, 2011: 152).

Economic integration was not a priority until recently. Shifts in the international context, particularly in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea, which led to the imposition of sanctions, along with the financial crisis and the lower price of oil, have led

Russia to change its positioning in the light of new Chinese initiatives outside an institutional framework. However, when the SCO describes itself as containing substantial economic potential, particularly in energy-related sources, it is positioning itself in a way that has not been matched by its actuation. Cooley (2010: 8) talks about “meager accomplishments” and failure to translate announcements into regional cooperation (Cooley, 2015). He adds that “despite its self-styled image as a ‘new’ type of regional organization, the SCO continues to be plagued by the perennial political concerns of its two key members, Russia and China, and their growing competition for influence in Central Asia” (Cooley, 2010: 8). But despite the well-known competition/cooperation relationship between China and Russia, and the difficulties that the enlargement process might bring to consensus finding, some claim it will constitute an “opportunity [for the SCO] to revolutionize itself into a more comprehensive institution capable of connecting and integrating a broad swath of Asia” (Economy and Piekos, 2015).

This means that the research agenda will keep focusing on the main players, but now in a different geopolitical context after the last enlargement. Whether this broader SCO is capable of projecting synergies or instead will end up tied up in institutional cumbersome and inefficient decision-making is an issue to be followed. This will determine how the SCO will position itself in Eurasia. In fact, the Greater Eurasia process is one of the most interesting dynamics ahead for Russia’s relations with the SCO. Issues to watch here include Russia’s readiness to promote the multilateral format and how this format will facilitate interests of Russia and other SCO members.

Notes

- 1 This research was conducted while the author was a Visiting Scholar at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Leuven, with a Research Fund from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology FCT SFRH/BSAB/128146/2016. The views expressed are the sole responsibility of the author.
- 2 Eight countries are currently full members – China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
- 3 Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia have observer status and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka are dialogue partners.

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