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Source: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (May/June 2013), pp. 461-483

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2013.53.3.461>

Accessed: 19/06/2014 17:24

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Moscow's Global Foreign and Security Strategy

Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests?

ABSTRACT

Given China's rising power and its growing influence in post-Soviet Central Asia, Russia's active advertising of the merits of the China-inspired Shanghai Cooperation Organization looks surprising. However, when one explores the many geopolitical advantages that Moscow can extract from this young multilateral organization, its interest appears more than justified.

KEYWORDS: Russia, SCO, China, Central Asia, geopolitics

SINCE THE BREAKUP OF THE SOVIET UNION, Western scholars and decision-makers have questioned Russia's ability to completely renounce its former status as an imperial power and to respect genuinely the right of the other former Soviet republics to fully exercise their political, economic, diplomatic, and security sovereignty. Many experts have interpreted this ambivalence as reflecting Russia's "neo-imperialist" instincts or "post-colonialist" syndrome. This ambivalence has had many expressions, including Russia's more-than-cool attitude toward the involvement of what it calls "extra-regional players" in the former Soviet Union (FSU). However, this attitude has been reserved mostly for the West—the United States, the European Union, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), or their individual members. All have been accused by Moscow of trying to deliberately undermine its strategic interests in the post-Soviet space by hindering the integration processes that Moscow has been trying to stimulate among the former Soviet republics.

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Asian Survey, Vol. 53, Number 3, pp. 461–483. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2013 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/AS.2013.53.3.461.

No such rejection of the involvement of “extra-regional” actors in the FSU can be found, at least with such intensity, in the Russian domestic debate about the involvement of outside players in this geopolitical space, even though some of those players are dynamically developing their influence there. From this perspective, China is an interesting example. Over the past 15 years, Beijing has significantly enhanced its presence in the post-Soviet space in the political, economic, and security fields. This trend is, of course, particularly noticeable in neighboring post-Soviet Central Asia, where China has consistently projected its products, energy interests, and strategic concerns. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹ is widely perceived as a China-dominated organization, as reflected in its name and in the location—Beijing—of one of its rare permanent institutions, its Secretariat. Despite this, Russia has so far not only uttered no explicit ambivalent remarks toward the SCO but has been constantly promoting its importance on the world stage. As a result, some foreign observers speculate that “the concessions to China that engagement with the SCO represents must offer some very tangible benefits” for Moscow.²

For the Kremlin, indeed, the stakes attached to the SCO are quite high. Its policy toward the SCO has been quite coherent with its priority goals in three strategic directions of its foreign and security policy since the mid-1990s. One goal is Moscow’s desire to be recognized as the predominant power in what it sees as its “near abroad” (that is, basically, the former Soviet republics minus the Baltic states). Another is the “strategic partnership” with China, which is commonly recognized as a major foreign policy success of post-Soviet Russia. However, this partnership appears increasingly uneven to the detriment of Russia in many respects; therefore, in Moscow’s eyes, it has to be carefully balanced via all possible political and geopolitical means, the SCO being perceived as one of these. Finally, Russia has been driven since the early 2000s by a willingness to restore its status as a global player and to be recognized as a leading power center on the world stage. Here, too, the SCO is perceived as a very convenient tool.

1. The SCO, which was set up in 2001, includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

2. Alexander White, “Guiding the ‘Near Abroad’—Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *CEF Quarterly*, Special Edition *The SCO at One* (July 2005), p. 31, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/CEF/CEF_Quarterly_July_2005.pdf>, accessed May 1, 2012.

THE SCO AND RUSSIA'S AMBITIONS IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN PART OF ITS "NEAR ABROAD"

Viewed from Moscow, the SCO appears as one important device in its strategy to keep in check both the increasing influence of Western players and the instabilities along Russia's southern periphery. Both are seen as threatening, for the more or less short term, to Moscow's influence and to security in this area. Since the color revolutions in 2003–05 (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan), in the Russians' view these two elements—the increasing regional involvement of the West and insecurity in Central Asia—are in fact two faces of the same coin: Moscow believes that Western "interference" in the region, especially if it aims at orchestrating regime changes, could not only reduce its own influence but also bring extra trouble by seriously destabilizing the neighboring Central Asian states. Such destabilization, in turn, could mean a major risk to Russia, including its losing control over key economic assets—energy export routes, uranium sites, military-industrial facilities, power plants, and trade links.³ Moscow's hope is that "framing" Central Asian states in a close union with both Russia and China that is guided by the principle of non-interference in sovereign states' affairs, a prevailing rule within the SCO, is a way to limit the risk of regime change, and the potential instability attached, in the region.

The SCO in Russia's Comeback Strategy in Central Asia

In the early 2000s, after almost a decade of neglect in Central Asia, Russia simply had to rebuild its presence in the region.⁴ In this endeavor, any means was deemed convenient. Moscow arranged presidential trips to a number of Central Asian capitals starting in 1999, giving more prominence to these

3. "La Russie en Asie Centrale: Vieilles Querelles et Nouveaux Défis" [Russia in Central Asia: Old squabbles and new challenges], in Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *L'Asie Centrale à l'Aune de La Mondialisation, Une Approche Géoéconomique* [Central Asia by the yardstick of mondialization, a geoeconomic approach] (Paris: Armand Colin/IRIS, 2010), pp. 34–35.

4. While immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Central Asian newly independent states were quite willing to keep close economic and political links with Moscow, the Russian government, oriented toward the West and concentrated on conducting liberal economic reforms, considered these countries as burdens in its effort to reach its own transformation objectives. Trade links declined, and Russia ousted Central Asian republics from the ruble zone. All this created harsh memories that Moscow is still struggling to lessen now that it is trying to reassert its presence in the area.

partners in its foreign policy.⁵ In this perspective, Russia saw many advantages in the SCO. As Benjamin Fontaine Gonzalez put it, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization offered a different way for Russia to pursue its interests in the region, reassert some of its influence, and counter the challenges to Russian foreign policy in Central Asia.”⁶ Russia has behaved along the lines of Andrew Hurrell’s observations about regional organizations, which sometimes “can be beneficial to declining hegemons by allowing them to pursue their interests while sharing burdens, pursuing problems held in common with other members, and [. . .] generate international support and legitimacy for their policies.”⁷

Through the SCO, Russia could hope to reconstruct more solid ties with distrustful Central Asian republics by creating at least the impression that partnership with Moscow could be mutually beneficial, if only because it helped them avoid being in an unbalanced tête-à-tête with the former imperial power. From this perspective, the presence within the SCO of another “big one,” China, has been instrumental in reassuring the Central Asians that it will be more difficult for Russia to impose its authority upon them harshly, since the SCO offers them a possibility to balance the two giant regional powers. Also, “using” the SCO allowed Russia to compensate for the fact that in the early 2000s, it did not have a lot of political energy and financial resources to invest in its comeback in Central Asia. The SCO appeared as a way to facilitate this comeback by relying indirectly on China’s political dynamism and economic strength. Thus, the SCO has played a supplementary and consolidating role with Russia’s own regional initiatives, offering Moscow “additional ‘entry channels’ into Central Asian policy mechanisms”:⁸ the Organization’s very existence has mechanically enhanced Moscow’s geopolitical profile in the Central Asian region.

5. See Marlène Laruelle, “Russia in Central Asia: Old History, New Challenges?” Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM), Working Papers, no. 3 (September 2009), p. 5, <<http://www.ceps.eu/book/russia-central-asia-old-history-new-challenges>>, accessed May 1, 2012.

6. Benjamin Fontaine Gonzalez, “Charting a New Silk Road? The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Russian Foreign Policy,” master’s thesis, University of Victoria, 2007, <<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8443/handle/1828/204>>, accessed May 1, 2012.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 60. Andrew Hurrell is a professor at Oxford University.

8. Pavel Baev, “Assessing Russia’s Cards: Three Petty Games in Central Asia,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17:2 (July 2004), p. 279.

Countering Western Disturbing Influences

Russia's policy in Central Asia has been driven by two priorities since the fall of the Soviet Union. One is to keep the region as free as possible from the influence of what Moscow calls "extra-regional powers"; another is to try to contain regional instability in order to prevent or at least limit its projection to Russia's territory, particularly its Caucasian areas. The first goal is primarily targeted at the Western presence. Western players are not the only powers that have strengthened their hand in Russia's near abroad. However, in Moscow's view, they have proved much less transparent in their undertakings there than China, Iran, or Turkey have. Such a vision has to be analyzed in a broader context that Moscow has interpreted as a deliberate Western strategy aimed at undermining its position and interests in its former empire, i.e., NATO's enlargement to include former Soviet republics (the Baltic states), its invitation to Georgia and Ukraine to join in the future, and U.S. and European support for oil and gas pipelines that circumvent Russia's territory to export Central Asian and Caucasian resources directly to world markets. The SCO, therefore, together with many other stratagems and tactics, has been used by Moscow as an instrument in its effort to counter U.S. and Western influence in the region.

The SCO may not be destined to become an Eastern NATO (there are many obstacles to the materialization of such a scenario, as will be explained later). However, one cannot deny that some of the military drills conducted under the SCO aegis in recent years (in particular the 2005 and 2007 Peace Mission exercises) were not only about counterterrorism, as officially declared. Their dimensions (number of personnel deployed, types of equipment used, etc.) were also a demonstration of force aimed at showing the West who is in control and in charge of the region. Russia has probably been the SCO member most eager to send this message to the rest of the world. Advertising the strength of the SCO is, for Russia, a way to rationalize its rejection of a strong Western presence in Central Asia by indicating that this presence is not necessary to tackle the regional security challenges. The message is that no extra-regional power is needed, because collectively, at the regional level, SCO members are well equipped to do so.

Accepting Multilateral Security Action in Troubled Central Asia

Since the mid-1990s, Russia has been very preoccupied by growing instability in Central Asia, which has only been fueled by the developments

in Afghanistan. As explained by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin, the key goal of Russia's policy in Central Asia is to ensure stability and socio-economic development in the countries of the region because "without stability in Central Asia, it is hard to imagine the stability and progress of the Russian Federation."⁹ For Moscow, which shares with the region a 7,000-kilometer-long border (with Kazakhstan only, while China borders three states), this is a very important security issue. This porous border is a significant vulnerability because it is impossible to cover and protect fully. Russia fears Islamist infiltration into its territory from Afghanistan through Central Asia, as well as an increase in drug trafficking through the same itinerary. As explained by Federal Drug Control Service Director Viktor Ivanov, drug flows from Afghanistan already pose a serious threat to Russia, where 156,000 young Russians die annually from drug addiction and where about 1.5 million people are addicted to heroin.¹⁰

On this front, too, Russia as early as the 1990s accepted that it cannot implement a sound securitizing strategy with its own limited national means. The SCO began as the "Shanghai 5" group, pressing for confidence-building and demilitarization measures at the former Sino-Soviet border to help stabilize the regional security landscape. The expanded Organization has developed a rather strong (if not fully efficient) security pillar;¹¹ it has been a reflection of Moscow's realization that it should join forces with China to handle the Central Asian security situation because Russia is too weak to

9. "C. Asian Countries Need Reforms to Avoid N. Africa Scenario—Official," Interfax-AVN (Moscow), April 14, 2011.

10. "Many Central Asian Natives Involved in Drug Trafficking—FSKN," *ibid.*, April 11, 2011.

11. Growing tensions in Afghanistan starting in 1996, incursions of militants from Afghanistan to Central Asia, and terrorist acts on the territory of a number of Central Asian countries in the late 1990s/early 2000s have been among the key factors that have convinced Russia (and China) of the need to maintain and strengthen the SCO. Dealing with anti-terrorist activities, separatist endeavors and extremism, drug trafficking, and organized crime have been key items on the agenda of one of the SCO's permanent institutions, the Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The SCO's prime field of activity in the security realm is exchange and analysis of information and intelligence, and coordination among agencies in charge of fighting these scourges (especially in their transnational dimension). Extradition agreements and efforts to harmonize anti-terrorist legislation are also on the agenda. RATS has a list of terrorist, separatist, and extremist organizations, as well as a data bank on these organizations and some of their individual members. Officials in member states assert that such action has enabled them to prevent a great number of terror attacks and to neutralize a number of terrorist activists. However, this is hard to check. And it seems clear that cooperation remains limited, and that the SCO's achievements are not comparable to what is achieved in other frameworks such as Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) equivalent structures.

face this challenge alone. In this effort to “mutualize” the burden of securitization in order to properly fight terrorism, fundamentalism, the narcotics threat, and political destabilization, China has been deemed by Moscow a much more reliable partner than the West. So far at least, in contrast to the U.S. or NATO, Beijing has not been suspected of having a hidden agenda designed to oust Russia from the region. That also explains why Russian officials advocate cooperation between the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)¹² and the SCO on fighting drugs and terrorism. Again, the Russians are convinced that these threats merit joining forces at the regional level with trusted partners.

Even though, as will be explained later on, Moscow also relies on the CSTO to balance China's growing clout in Central Asia, it considers that none of these multilateral organizations is superfluous.¹³ CSTO's secretary-general, Russian General Nikolai Bordiuzha, also proposed that CSTO and SCO join together on post-conflict rehabilitation in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, for his part, declared in late 2010 at a meeting of the SCO Council of heads of government in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, that the SCO and CSTO would work on the creation of anti-terrorism, anti-drug, and financial security belts or zones.¹⁵

Moscow is more ambivalent about the SCO's role in appeasing political and strategic tensions within Central Asia. Russian officials have always said they consider the Organization a useful forum for creating synergies among Central Asian states, whose interrelations are far from harmonious, and for encouraging them to cooperate more thoroughly at least in fighting common

12. The CSTO is a collective defense and security organization that includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and, until its withdrawal in 2012, Uzbekistan.

13. See Alexander Frost, “The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Russia's Strategic Goals in Central Asia,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7:3 (2009), p. 84.

14. Russian officials often stress the importance of the SCO's role in settling the Afghan problem, especially by involving more thoroughly the observer countries (“SCO Can Play Leading Role in Settlement in Afghanistan—Russian Official,” Interfax-AVN [Moscow], November 24, 2010, quoting Russian Security Council Deputy Secretary Vladimir Nazarov). Moscow officials also suggested that Afghanistan should acquire an observer status within the SCO, which was granted in 2012.

15. He stressed, on this occasion, that force or administrative measures would not be enough to face these problems, and that efficient socio-economic development, spurred by infrastructure and energy projects, would be a key. Maybe, in Vladimir Putin's mind, this part of the solution has to be taken charge of mainly by the SCO (“SCO, CSTO to Cooperate in Fighting Terrorism, Drug Trafficking—Putin,” Interfax-AVN [Moscow], November 25, 2010).

challenges—drugs, extremism, separatism, and organized crime. However, it should be noted that this does not prevent Moscow from playing on the differences between these countries on other issues (such as infrastructure projects), in order to divide and rule, even if this impedes realization of the first goal of strengthening regional security by stimulating concord among Central Asian countries. This indirectly undermines the SCO's (and CSTO's) political strength. Besides, the Shanghai Organization has so far proved quite powerless to solve the numerous regional disputes, among them water and environmental problems, and ethnic issues.

The current period appears to be a moment of transition, in which Russia has only limited political and financial resources to rebuild its presence in Central Asia, which is not the only priority of its “near abroad” agenda. This is an additional reason to look for partners to share the burdens of securitization and economic development in Central Asia.¹⁶ In other words, as viewed in Moscow, Beijing can supplement Russia's efforts in this direction—and the SCO is an ideal framework for that, since it offers the image of a balanced leadership between Russia and China—reassuring to the Central Asians in their relationship with Moscow and, so the Russians hope, deterring the West. However, that does not mean that Russia is 100% confident that such a favorable “division of labor” will last forever and that the terms of the Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia will remain favorable to its interests over the longer term.

HOPING THE SCO WILL CHECK CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Many experts note that, given its traditionally rather defensive strategic posture in its near abroad, Russia could have been expected to be much more concerned by China's rising influence in Central Asia than it seems to be, and should resent belonging to a China-inspired organization, which the SCO is. So far, however, this has not, at least apparently, reduced Moscow's interest

16. Moscow is, in parallel, very actively pursuing closer ties with post-Orange revolution Ukraine and is strengthening its strategic presence in the South Caucasus; in previous years, it had suffered serious geopolitical setbacks in both directions. These two axes may be even more important, in the Kremlin's eyes, than Central Asia where, objectively, Moscow has relatively stronger political, strategic, and economic assets at its disposal than it does in Ukraine and the Caucasus.

in the SCO's potential to help Russia promote its own political, strategic, and security interests.

China, a Respectful and Understanding Partner

It should be recognized that when Russian officials stress that “Russia does not claim to play an exclusive role in Central Asian affairs and is open for cooperation,” this is not only propaganda. For the sake of regional stabilization, Moscow has repeatedly agreed to unlock the security game there, by setting up the “Shanghai 5” group together with China and Central Asian republics, or following September 11, 2001, when Russia did not try to oppose the deployment of Western troops to Central Asian neighbors. But these same Russian officials have always indicated that Russia could welcome other states' action in Central Asia only if “moves by all players in this region [are] predictable and transparent.”¹⁷ It is clear that from a Russian perspective, China has so far proved genuinely inclined to take into account Moscow's sensitivities regarding its former empire. Beijing has been acting more or less transparently in its dealings with Central Asian states—anyway, more transparently than the U.S., the other power that, in the Russian perception, is in a position to contest Moscow's preeminence in Central Asia.

The question is: how long can such peaceful coexistence last? To some observers, this might be a long-term phenomenon. After all, the SCO is viewed in Moscow as giving the Russian authorities “an opportunity to weigh in on Sino-Central Asian relations,”¹⁸ thus keeping China's rise in check. Russia and China have shared many common approaches regarding regional security. They agree that too heavy a Western presence in the region, especially if accompanied by a democratization agenda, could worsen the security situation by challenging the stability of the regimes of Central Asian SCO members. They agree that non-interference in internal affairs should be a leading principle in ensuring security in the SCO space. They concur, too, on the fact that the primary element on the SCO's security agenda should be the fight against the “three evils”—separatism, extremism, terrorism—on which they

17. “Russia Doesn't Claim to Play Exclusive Role in Central Asian Affairs—Diplomat,” Interfax-AVN (Moscow), April 13, 2011. The diplomat quoted is Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin.

18. Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Difficult Match,” *CEF Quarterly*, Special Edition *The SCO at One*, p. 26.

have similar visions.¹⁹ It is quite likely that in the foreseeable future, Beijing, strategically busy in Eastern and Pacific Asia, will not mind continuing to share influence with Moscow in Central Asia, even conceding it some kind of regional ascendancy.

The Irresistible Chinese Impact in Central Asia

This may change, however. In recent years, Russia has been increasingly concerned with China's growing financial, economic, energy, and infrastructure presence in Central Asia. Moscow is well aware that it does not have the financial muscle and political energy to completely resist Beijing's deepening influence, especially in the context of the global financial and economic crisis. Convinced as it is that one country's economic clout must unavoidably be transformed into political and geopolitical power and leadership (this theme has become a key item in Russian foreign policy discourse since Russia recovered from the profound economic crisis it lived through in the 1990s), Moscow cannot but feel nervous while observing China's economic advances in Central Asia. Beijing has increased its trade connections with Central Asian states (according to some sources, from \$500 million in 1992 to \$10 billion in 2006²⁰); offers preferential loans to its SCO partners; is advocating the establishment of an SCO development fund for which it would provide the majority of the initial capital; and hoping to build a free-trade zone on the basis of the SCO. Both Russia and Kazakhstan fear that they could be overwhelmed by the Chinese state's financial capacity to invest in SCO countries and even to bail out some of them in times of crisis, with the attendant risk of constraining them in their political and economic relations with Beijing. Obviously, that is one of the reasons why the Russian government says it would prefer a development fund composed of both state and private money. Some Russian sources note that the infrastructure projects the SCO has been promoting are concentrated in the border areas between China and Central Asian states, which has helped Beijing encourage the

19. Although the war in Georgia in 2008 and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's self-proclaimed independence challenged their solidarity on the issue, Moscow and Beijing are closely tied by the idea that separatism is a major threat to their national security, and have imposed this agenda on the other SCO members, although these seem less vulnerable to this threat (Sébastien Peyrouse, "Facing the Challenges of Separatism: The EU, Central Asia, and the Uyghur Issue," EUCAM Policy Briefs, no. 4 (January 2009).

20. Rajan Menon, "The Limits of Chinese-Russian Partnership," *Survival* 51:3 (2009), p. 118.

formation of a unified economic space on the territory of the SCO. This has the effect of marginalizing Russia, which, as a result, may, under certain circumstances, “lose its influence in this region.”²¹ From this point of view, a key development has been the signing of energy contracts and projects between China and the Central Asian republics, the most symbolic probably being the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, which was launched in December 2009 and crosses the territories of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

In this connection, Russia's approach to the SCO has, in fact, proved dual. On the one hand, it believes that the best way to keep this trend and its potential consequences in check is to try to balance China's growing power by engaging it as closely as possible through a tight network of agreements and dialogue platforms.²² Here, the SCO is seen as a convenient instrument, especially with the presence of some of the observer members such as India,²³ whose involvement in various economic, infrastructure, and security projects can help balance China's rise. At least that is what Russia likely hopes. As Gonzalez argues:

A benefit of the SCO [for Russia] is that it ties Chinese influence in the region, at least to a degree, to Moscow and this helps ensure that Russia at least has some say in Chinese regional policy. Without the SCO Russia would not only be competing with the US for influence in Central Asia, but likely also with China, and this would make Russian influence in the region much harder to preserve.²⁴

At the same time, many elements in Russia's policy toward the SCO show that the Kremlin is eager to make sure that this organization is not going to advance Chinese interests in Central Asia in a disproportionate way. For example, as was suggested before, Russia has been resisting China's effort to strengthen the economic dimension of the SCO, which would obviously

21. “Rossiya i Shankhayskaya Organizatsiya Sotrudnichestva” [Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization], *Informatsionno-analiticheskiy obzor* [Information and Analytical Survey], no. 110 (August 22, 2008), pp. 5–6.

22. This is apparently also the strategy pursued by Moscow for tackling the potential problems that may emanate from the unbalanced situation at the joint border in its Far Eastern territories (demographic pressure, illegal migration, illicit trade). The joint border has been fully delimited and bilateral intergovernmental working groups have been set up to discuss the problematic issues.

23. The SCO has welcomed Mongolia (2004) as well as India, Pakistan, and Iran (2005) as observers, with Afghanistan the last to join as an observer, in 2012, as noted above.

24. Gonzalez, *Charting a New Silk Road?* pp. 104–05.

be to Beijing's advantage. Together with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Moscow has been rejecting the People's Republic of China's (PRC) proposal to create a free-trade area on the basis of the SCO. Russia has also proved ambivalent about setting up a development fund for financing the costly infrastructure projects the SCO is supposed to promote. Moscow is, indeed, well aware that such a project could de facto strengthen Beijing's hand, especially in the context of the global economic crisis, because only China has the financial muscle to provide such a fund with the bulk of the necessary resources. In parallel, Moscow has also been trying to play a more shaping role as concerns the agenda of the SCO, which since its inception has tended to be driven largely by Beijing's proposals. Thus, in November 2010 the Russian government suggested that SCO members work on a road map for the Organization for the next 10 years.

Russia's Checks and Balances Game

Another way for Russia to keep China's weight in Central Asia in check has been to try to balance that of the SCO by strengthening as much as possible multilateral organizations centered on the region and deprived of any Chinese presence. Here, Moscow has been relatively successful, which reflects the fact that, as Laruelle argues, "[s]ince 2000, Russia has once again become a respected power in Central Asia, where its economic and geopolitical revival is widely admired" and it has "succeeded in returning to its status as the number one partner of the Central Asian states."²⁵ The color revolutions reinforced the political solidarity between Russia and the leaders of these republics. Central Asian states recognize that the Russian-led organizations are, for the time being, more efficient and concrete than the SCO. One of them is the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), which was established in 2000 and has helped simplify customs procedures among members (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). Many experts consider that EURASEC has helped Russia limit the extent of China's economic penetration of Central Asian countries through the SCO. Zhang Deguang, who was the first executive secretary of the SCO, noted that EURASEC generally deals with the same kind of economic issues as the SCO,²⁶ and that

25. Laruelle, "Russia in Central Asia," pp. 4, 5.

26. See "ChOS I EvrAzES Dogovorilis' o Sotrudnitchestve v Sfere Ekonomiki" [SCO and EURASEC reached agreement on economic cooperation], *RIA Novosti*, May 10, 2006.

such overlapping creates some difficulties for the integration projects promoted by China on the basis of the Organization.²⁷ From this same point of view, the future of Moscow's project of a Eurasian union on the basis of the customs union formed by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2010 will be a very important matter to follow.

Russia, the Hard Security Leader in Central Asia

Another organization Russia has been relying on is the CSTO. Although it includes Russia, Belarus, and Armenia, its prime geographical focus is Central Asia. Russia has striven since the early 2000s to stimulate both multilateral and bilateral military cooperation with Central Asian states and to assume the "role of coordinator in the process of setting up a regional security system" through CSTO.²⁸ CSTO goes much further than SCO in terms of military integration. Russia offers its CSTO partners preferential prices for Russian armaments and military equipment. Russian military education institutions welcome many Central Asian officers for training courses; within the framework of CSTO or/and under bilateral agreements, Russia has been using various military bases and testing and training sites on its partners' territory, as well as upholding military-industrial cooperation schemes with them. In relative terms, compared to its investment in the SCO, Moscow has devoted much more political energy and financial means to the development of CSTO, which is a "bloc where Russia's role as a central hub in defense cooperation and collective decision making is beyond challenge or question."²⁹ CSTO has established collective

27. To some experts, if a *modus vivendi* is not found, this could even be very detrimental to the stability and development of Central Asia, including by triggering problems with China and jeopardizing opportunities for socio-economic development. See "Problemy i Perspektivy Vzaimodeystviya ChOS i EvrAzES v Tsentral'noy Azii" [Problems and prospects of interaction between SCO and EURASEC in Central Asia], materials from a conference on the problems of economic and financial cooperation within SCO, Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies, Almaty, May 31, 2006, <http://www.vneshmarket.ru/content/document_r_38DF9D11-D424-4ADE-86C8-6B877F4D86C4.html>, accessed May 1, 2012.

28. Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, "The Evolution of Russia's Central Asia Policy," Central Asian Series, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom 08:21 (June 2008), p. 14. The authors are two Uzbek independent researchers.

29. Mikhail Troitskiy, "A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," in *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) Policy Papers, no. 17 (May 2007), p. 34.

rapid reaction forces, while the SCO lacks permanent military structures and forces.

Many Chinese commentators stress that Russia sees security cooperation as the primary focus of the SCO while the Chinese view economic cooperation as its main purpose. Everything depends on what one understands by “security.” One should not overestimate Russia’s desire to see the SCO take on a robust security role in military terms. Although Russia would certainly not mind if the West believed that the SCO could become a more serious military player over the longer term, it has not done much to strengthen this organization’s military profile. On the contrary, Putin himself repeatedly denied that the SCO would develop into a full-grown security organization such as NATO or that it would conduct military operations. For him, the SCO’s security role is “to give moral and political support to its members, and facilitate exchange of information.”³⁰

For Moscow, the main goal is to assert CSTO as the major hard security structure in Central Asia, even if, as was stressed previously, the Russian leadership does not exclude CSTO-SCO interaction. An agreement was signed between the SCO’s RATS and CSTO in 2006, followed by a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in October 2007.³¹ Moscow has not been insisting on giving a military dimension to the SCO, which Beijing would have rejected anyway. What Russia has been suggesting is more or less developed SCO-CSTO formal relations that, given Russia’s predominant role within CSTO, might strengthen the country’s regional profile in comparison to China’s (after all, security is a key concern of the Central Asian republics). Apparently, Russia tried to make the SCO Peace Mission exercises into a joint CSTO-SCO endeavor.³² Moscow may hope that if it cannot fully balance China’s regional economic and financial might, it may succeed in the military sector (all the more so that, apparently, Central Asian states would be quite reluctant to accept the same degree of military cooperation with China as with Russia, and do not plan to host Chinese military bases on their territories).

30. Trenin, “Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” p. 26.

31. In 2006 an agreement was signed between the Secretariat of SCO and the Integration Committee of EURASEC.

32. Marcin Kaczmarek, “Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence by Promoting CSTO-SCO Cooperation,” *CACI Analyst*, October 17, 2007, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4716/print>>, accessed May 1, 2012.

Despite the MoU between these two organizations, Russia and China do not really see eye-to-eye on a closer CSTO-SCO relationship. Cooperation has remained basically limited to consultations. In April 2012, CSTO's Bordiuzha said that it would be rational to arrange anti-drug cooperation between CSTO and the SCO to avoid duplication and its consequence, i.e., unnecessary spending—thus implying that there is still no such cooperation.³³ One explanation may lie in the relative immaturity of the two organizations. However, it also appears that China has done its best to restrain the scope of their cooperation. Before the signing of the MoU, Russia had been promoting cooperation between CSTO and the SCO since 2003, to no avail, because China was not interested.³⁴ In 2006, Beijing rejected the proposal by the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and CSTO to conduct joint CSTO-SCO maneuvers. This was explained in Moscow by, among other things, the fact that “Beijing probably does not want to share the high prestige of the SCO, where it plays a major role, with the CSTO, of which it is not even a member for geographic reasons.”³⁵

One cannot be sure of the motivations underlying Beijing's reluctance. One of them is certainly the desire to avoid entering *de facto* into any kind of a military alliance with Russia. Neither does Moscow wish this, given the uncertain strategic prospects of the bilateral relationship and the fact that outside Central Asia, the two countries' security priorities are not convergent. Moreover, such an alliance would send excessively provocative signals to the West, which Russia and China have so far wished to avoid. But it would not be surprising in the future to see Russia propose putting the organization at the disposal of the SCO to handle hard security crises and crisis management in Central Asia. This would aim at augmenting Russia's own prestige in the Central Asian security field to the detriment of China/SCO, with the added goal of retaining for Moscow an ability “to monitor contacts between China and Central Asian states in the security dimension.”³⁶ If so far Beijing has been cautious in developing such contacts and the Central Asians have seemed wary

33. “Bordiuzha: ODKB i ShOS Nuzhno Vmeste Borot'sia s Narkougrozoy” [Bordiuzha: CSTO and SCO must fight together against the narco-threat], Mir 24 TV, April 11, 2012, <<http://mir24.tv/news/community/4861295>>, accessed May 1, 2012.

34. Kaczmarek, “Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence.”

35. Viktor Litovkin, “CSTO Will Merely Watch SCO War Games,” *RIA Novosti*, February 8, 2007.

36. Kaczmarek, “Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence.”

of moving fast on this front, it cannot be excluded that, in the future, China may become pushier in building security and military ties with SCO members.

Although the SCO could ultimately prove a double-edged sword by helping China promote its influence in Central Asia to Russia's disadvantage, Moscow has been confident thus far that it can aid in stemming China's impact—as long as Beijing proves prepared to share leadership of the SCO with Moscow. In this context, Russia's advertising the SCO on the world stage is considered safe, and useful in serving other directions of Moscow's international plans.

THE SCO IN RUSSIA'S GLOBAL DIPLOMACY

Russia has remained quite eager, over the years, to promote the importance of the SCO on the world stage, hoping to use the organization, as it does with other multilateral forums, to reinforce its own visibility and project its proclaimed (or desired) great power status internationally.

The SCO in Moscow's Quest for Friends and Allies

Moscow, indeed, is well aware of the serious weaknesses of its power base, both domestically and abroad. Therefore, it has been trying to augment its political and diplomatic weight on the world stage by demonstrating an ability to rely on partnerships with states identified by the international community, especially the West, as emerging and future centers of power. In other words, Russia has been trying to enhance its own international existence through the authority of others. One of the motives behind its decision to strike a strategic partnership with China in the mid-1990s or to promote, in the same period, the idea of a political troika with China and India³⁷ was precisely that—to compensate for its structural limitations in order not to be marginalized on the world stage. More recently, Moscow's

37. The idea came out in 1996. It was then promoted by Foreign Minister E. Primakov. Every year, the three countries' foreign ministers meet to discuss international and regional security issues, economic cooperation, and international financial and economic governance, with a view to achieve better coordination among the three countries within multilateral organizations such as the SCO or the ASEAN Regional Security Forum. During their 2010 trilateral meeting, they stressed that one of the most important platforms for regional cooperation on the Afghan problem is the SCO ("Iran Must Prove Peaceful Purpose of Its Nuclear Developments—Ministers," *Interfax-AVN* [Moscow], November 15, 2010).

moves to publicize the importance and achievements of the BRICS grouping was another illustration of this strategy.³⁸ All of this is meant to make the major states and international organizations think of Russia not as a lonely and weak player but as a partner in important economic and political multilateral schemes, with increasing significance in world affairs.

The SCO, with the combined political, strategic, and economic power it represents on paper, fits this approach quite well. If one takes into consideration both the SCO's permanent members and its observers (India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia, Afghanistan), the organization constitutes an impressive ensemble. It comprises two permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and four nuclear powers. Russia and China have among the largest armed forces in the world. The SCO also boasts considerable human capital (almost one-quarter of the world's population, or almost half when the five observers are counted). The group's relative economic strength derives primarily from the presence of China and India, both major emerging economic powers. For Moscow, associating itself with key emerging powers is a source of prestige: Russia itself so far has failed to convince the rest of the world that it is one of the key emerging global centers of power. One might remember how actively Moscow "marketed" the fact that the June 2009 SCO summit was combined with a meeting of the BRICS.

The SCO in Moscow's "Resistance" to the West

Russia, through the SCO, sends messages to the major force that, in its view, opposes its recovering great power status, i.e., the West. Mainly because of the influence of both Russia and China, many SCO declarations denounce unipolar policies, certain countries' ambitions to deploy global anti-missile shields, and the trend toward growing interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. All of these refer to international policies of the U.S. or NATO, even though neither is ever referred to by name. These themes have been central in Russia's diplomatic discourse in recent years. From this perspective, the so-called Shanghai spirit, with its proclaimed principles of mutual trust and benefits, equality, and respect for cultural diversity, suits Moscow's line quite well. Russian officials tend to present this way of

38. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is a quintet of emerging powers with a common interest in turning their growing economic strength into political clout in the world arena.

behaving with international partners as an alternative to what it sees as the “hegemonic” and “brutal” attitude of Western players.

In recent years, Russia has certainly been the most aggressive among SCO members in promoting this part of the group’s agenda. This was especially the case during heavy tensions in Russian-Western relations in 2004–08, when Russia expressed vigorous resentment of many items in American and NATO policies under the influence of the Bush administration (the U.S. intention to deploy interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar installation in the Czech Republic; Georgia’s and Ukraine’s color revolutions and their subsequent rapprochements with NATO; the independence of Kosovo, among others). To these items, one should add the lack of transparency that, Russians stress, has characterized Washington’s position on how long it plans to keep a military presence in Central Asia. (Russia’s hope that the Western military intervention in Afghanistan can stabilize the regional situation has vanished, and no longer warrants Moscow’s unconditional acceptance of the U.S. stationing troops in Russia’s “near abroad.”)

From this perspective, it is certainly not by chance that it was during 2005–08 that the SCO most strongly gave “the impression that it was emerging as a powerful organization successfully challenging American ‘hegemony’.”³⁹ In any case, by that time many articles appeared in Western international relations literature describing the SCO as having the potential of becoming a “NATO of the East.” Here, the return on investment was quite positive for Russia, at least in terms of its image as a resurgent power in Central Asia. As Gonzalez notes, following the Astana Declaration in July 2005 calling for foreign troops on the territory of SCO member states to declare a calendar for their withdrawal, “The majority of articles . . . chose to

39. Mark N. Katz, “Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Moscow’s Lonely Road from Bishkek to Dushanbe,” *Asian Perspective* 32:3 (2008), p. 184. At the July 2005 SCO summit, the member states issued a joint declaration calling upon foreign troops to set a timetable for withdrawing from military bases in Central Asia. In 2005, the SCO welcomed two friends of Washington’s (Pakistan and India) and one of its “enemies,” Iran, as observers. Iranian President Ahmadinejad attended the annual SCO summit of heads of state in 2006, 2007, and 2008. And, as was stressed previously, the 2005 and 2007 editions of the SCO Peace Mission exercises were particularly striking in terms of number of personnel and nature of equipment deployed. Moscow used the context of the 2007 Peace Mission drills to announce the resumption of strategic bombers’ regular flights, which was clearly aimed at making such an announcement even more impressive to Western capitals.

focus on the gains Russia had made in Central Asia through the SCO, while for the most part ignoring China.”⁴⁰

Along the same lines, Moscow has also been trying to use the SCO as an “amplifying factor” of its energy diplomacy in relations with the West by suggesting that the organization (which, if one counts its observers, aggregates a substantial share of world oil and gas reserves as well as a significant portion of the world’s demand for fossil energy) will become one of the forums where strong coordination among oil and gas producers could be arranged. This would be to the detriment of consumers, particularly Western ones, since such coordination would likely center on satisfying the needs of Asian consumers. It is important to recall here that it was Putin, as Russian president, who instigated the idea of creating an energy club within the SCO.⁴¹

That said, since U.S. President Barack Obama launched his “reset” policy in 2009, Russia’s activism on this front, which the other members have not always been willing to emulate, has noticeably calmed. In late 2010, a senior Russian diplomat, Alexander Kramarenko, then head of the Foreign Policy Planning Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), declared that there is “nothing anti-Western in Chinese-Russian cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.”⁴² And it seems important, from this point of view, that in 2010 the SCO officially rejected Iran’s potential membership on the grounds that countries subject to U.N. sanctions could not become permanent members. This would seem to mean that China and Russia have agreed not to take excessively provocative moves toward the West on the delicate issue of Iran.

More generally, the SCO is also viewed in Moscow as one platform, among others, to be used to give flesh to the proclaimed “Asian power” status Russia has been seeking without being able to develop efficiently its political and economic presence in that region. Russia, indeed, now wants to “[re]mind] the world that [it] has a global horizon, which was reduced to

40. Gonzalez, *Charting a New Silk Road?* p. 93. However, this Russia-centered analysis also reflected the fact that “China, while it has joined Russia in criticizing American unilateralism, has been careful not to allow the rancor to jeopardize the fundamentals of its relationship with Washington.” (Menon, “The Limits of Chinese-Russian Partnership,” p. 112.)

41. The mitigated efficiency of the SCO members’ efforts to move toward achieving this goal should, however, be mentioned here.

42. “If Russia Is Invited to Join NATO, It Would Be Hard to Refuse—Russian Diplomat,” *Interfax-AVN* (Moscow), December 9, 2010.

a regional scale after the Soviet Union's break-up."⁴³ This presupposes that Russia anchors itself more firmly into the Asian political and economic landscape, given its rising importance in world balances. The Russian press and consulting agency Integrum presents the SCO as "one of the major projects through which Russia, in cooperation with the PRC, can realize its foreign policy on the territory of Central *and South* Asia."⁴⁴ Finally, putting forward the SCO is also instrumental for a Russia always trying to demonstrate that it behaves responsibly in world security affairs. Russian officials often stress that through its active involvement in the SCO, their country has been a net contributor to stability and security-building in a region, Central Asia, which is central to the future of world security.

CONCLUSION

The SCO is often presented as being a China-dominated organization. So far, the SCO balance sheet offers a more nuanced picture. In terms of leadership, Russia is still on a relative par with China within the organization, which the two have co-founded and co-opted. After all, Russia is the most recent former imperial power in Central Asia, and this has left marks that make Moscow remain a significant player in the economic, security, and strategic fields in that region.

In the Russian debate, dominated by Russian officials' and experts' positive views on the benefits and merits of the organization, there are dissenting voices that emphasize the uneven balance of forces between its two big members, Russia and the PRC, especially in the economic field. In this contrary view, the imbalance will hinder Moscow's influence in Central Asia and the health of its relationship with Beijing. However, the Kremlin has many reasons to present the consolidation of the SCO as one of its foreign policy successes. Membership in the SCO as one of two organization "sponsors," argues Maria Raquel Freire, has allowed Russia to implement "a double containment strategy: on the one side, regarding U.S. involvement in the area, and on the other side, regarding China's growing influence."⁴⁵ The

43. Fyodor Lukyanov, "BRICS: Rapidly Emerging Reality," April 14, 2011, <<http://rt.com/politics/columns/unpredictable-world-foreign-lukyanov/russia-brics-summit-libya>>, accessed May 1, 2012.

44. "Rossiya i Shangkhaiskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva," p. 3.

45. Maria Raquel Freire, "Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, or Imposing?" *Asian Perspective* 33:2 (2009), p. 129.

SCO is also one of the “networking” schemes that Russia can put forward to demonstrate to the rest of the world, including the West, that it has many like-minded allies on the global scene. Russia is in fact quite satisfied with the relative success of its “SCO advertising campaign,” which has contributed to Western decision-makers’ and experts’ view that the SCO is a closed and potentially hostile club. This means that the SCO has been helpful in the Kremlin’s strategy to impress the West and to make it more sensitive to Russian security concerns.

However, in general, the SCO is only one instrument among others in Russia’s ensemble advancing its strategic and security interests, *and it is not the major instrument*. On many occasions, Moscow has had to take note of the fact that the SCO’s utility for achieving Russian foreign policy goals is not that significant. One important example is SCO members’ refusal to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. At the same time, U.S. troops are still deployed at the Transit Center in Manas in Kyrgyzstan.

In terms of keeping China’s influence in Central Asia in check, Russian success is far from absolute. From a Russian point of view, the fact that agreements were signed between Central Asian states and China on pipelines where Russian companies are not involved is bad news. As to upholding Russia’s great power status, the SCO may be a convenient platform for sending messages to the West. But even here, Russia has to reckon with the limitations of this scheme. China and other SCO members have not necessarily been willing to fully endorse Russia’s confrontational attitude toward the West. In addition, within the SCO, another player, China, is claiming great power status, and may be in a more favorable position than Russia to obtain it. This regularly produces latent rivalry, or, at least, a lack of coordination and solidarity, between the two members in their respective relationships with the U.S. and the West. Far from rendering the SCO more efficient, the rivalry may have contributed to making its agenda excessively diverse (security, economy and trade, environment, culture), especially if one takes into account the modesty of the organization’s budget.

Such diversity is probably a way to dissimulate the difficulties of reconciling SCO members’ priorities, especially Russia’s and China’s. Although Moscow certainly believes that the security situation in Central Asia would be worse without the SCO than it is with, Russian experts do not rate very high the organization’s efficiency on this score. Russia, like other SCO

members, is probably not that eager to see NATO leave Afghanistan—even if Moscow has afterthoughts on the potential implications of a prolonged Western presence in Central and South Asia—because it doubts the SCO has the potential to take over the Western players’ security role efficiently. At the official level, it is almost taboo to criticize the SCO’s efficiency (just as it is almost impossible to discuss openly the weaknesses of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership). But Russian experts do underscore the SCO’s deficiencies as a security player and as a platform for multilateral cooperation, even more since the 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, where the SCO had no substantial role. It is likely that Russian decision-makers share this analysis (they made greater efforts to justify and underplay the CSTO’s own passivity in the same crisis).

In general, also, the SCO is not in a position to compensate for all Russian weaknesses, a point Moscow needs to recognize. As concerns the strengthening of its influence in Central Asia, the crucial factor will be Russia’s ability to find a better balance in its relations with the states in the region, which are often offended by its bullying ways. Such dynamics have triggered strains in relations even with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian states most dependent on Russia. Dushanbe, for example, does not appreciate Russia’s ambivalence on such important issues as the funding of hydropower projects, while Kyrgyzstan has resented the fact that the fate of the Manas base has become a motive for Russian pressure and even blackmail. Many Russian observers consider that “Russia is leaving the list of reliable sponsors” as viewed by Central Asian states because its regional strategy is not clear. As a result, even Kazakhstan, a close ally of Russia, may sooner or later be drawn economically into the orbit of China and the EU. Says Nur Omarov, head of the Kyrgyz association of political scientists, “Russia must become attractive as a state, as an economic, technological, humanitarian, intellectual partner. It is not the case now, which compels young [Central Asian] states to look for more interesting, in all dimensions, friends.”⁴⁶ And, indeed, the SCO will be of no help in correcting a number of weak points in Russia’s Central Asia policy, including Russian society’s underlying hostility toward foreigners and its bad habits, as a former imperial power, in the way it treats its neighbors.

46. Quoted in Viktoriya Panfilova, “Rossiya Otdalyaetsya ot Tsentralnoy Azii” [Russia is moving away from Central Asia], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* [Independent Newspaper] (Moscow), January 18, 2010.

In Central Asia, Russia will continue to give priority to regional organizations consisting solely of former Soviet republics, if only to secure a power balance with Beijing at the regional level. However, Moscow will probably keep on promoting the SCO; it may even show a willingness to arrange more or less constructive cooperation between these regional organizations and the SCO. Trade relations with China have developed, energy agreements are finally taking shape, and Russia certainly does not want to jeopardize these positive trends, which it sees as stabilizing factors in the context of China's rapid economic and strategic rise. The SCO, from this point of view, remains a key platform for Russia to keep this relationship as healthy as possible. Moreover, the SCO is one of the cheapest ways for Moscow to assert itself as an Asian, thus global, power. Therefore, Russia has many reasons to maintain its commitment to this organization. In fact, in Moscow's eyes, the only valid motive for leaving the SCO would be an evolution of China's line toward more assertive behavior in Central Asia, where Beijing would start showing less deference toward Russian regional interests.