

Shanghai Noon?
An Analysis of China's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The People's Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China or the PRC) has historically been uninvolved in any sort of multilateral organizations. Its involvement in the United Nations, the quintessential international organization, was minimal from its admission in 1971 to the beginning of the new millennium (International Crisis Group). It has typically avoided formal agreements between groups of states, instead preferring the flexibility that nonalignment offers. It fiercely defends the principle of state sovereignty, often criticizing multilateral organizations for violating the autonomy of states deemed outside of the organization's norms, such as the intervention of NATO in Serbia in 1999 (Ambrosio).

Given this aversion towards multilateral organizations, China's prominent involvement in and leadership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is, at first glance, very puzzling. Why would China participate in such a formalized and institutionalized organization when doing so would obviously limit its flexibility in the international arena? Why should China participate in a relatively unknown organization when it has historically been reluctant to contribute even to the United Nations? Is this involvement in the SCO an anomaly, or is it the beginning of a new trend in Chinese foreign policy?

This paper seeks to answer these questions by analyzing the details of China's participation in the SCO. The first section gives a general summary of the organization's history, and how China played a hand in its creation, formalization, and institutionalization. It is determined that China's seemingly atypical participation in the SCO is due to the leadership role it played in the organization's birth and development. The three following sections focus on three specific areas of SCO activity, and how China has managed to gain considerable influence over the member states in these areas: security cooperation, economic interaction, and cultural

exchange. After this analysis of interactions between member states, the paper investigates how China has managed to successfully sway the member states' relations with the United States. Finally, the implications of China's activity in the SCO for its future place on the global stage will be predicted. With this examination, this paper will show that China's prominent role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a result of its ability to influence the member states, and that this role will be representative of China's future interactions in the international community.

Rising from a Shanghai Dawn: History and Background

Before China's role in the various functions of the SCO can be properly analyzed, the organization itself must be described. The SCO is a relatively young presence in Central Asia. Its origins can be traced back to April 1996, when China met with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in Shanghai in order to redress outstanding border disputes (Sutter; Harris a). Upon meeting with success in this area, these countries, which were collectively dubbed the Shanghai Five, sought to improve overall military relations and to start the process of demilitarizing their borders (Ambrosio). When these measures also proved to be successful, representatives from each country began to meet annually to discuss a wide range of topics, including "political, security, diplomatic[,] and economic issues" (Ambrosio).

As these annual summits continued to convene, they began to acquire some real teeth. This development could already be seen by the fifth summit: "[A]t the Dushanbe summit [in 2000], where Uzbekistan participated as an observer for the first time, [the members of the Shanghai Five] signed a declaration endorsing China's and Russia's positions on a multi-polar world, [as well as] an Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, and opposed the United States' plan to build a National Missile Defense system in the Asia Pacific region" (Azarkan). The group's progression from a summit between several countries to a full-fledged multilateral organization became

official in 2001, when the members of the Shanghai Five and Uzbekistan founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At this founding, “the members declared that the SCO would be devoted to enhancing regional economic, cultural, and security cooperation” (Kurlantzick).

However, the development of this group did not stop at an official founding. The members began to make the SCO much more robust by creating a variety of institutions to help implement its goals. This was evidenced in 2002 by the adoption of an official SCO charter (Ambrosio), and in 2004 by the opening of “two permanent bodies: a secretariat in Beijing and a regional antiterrorism structure based in Tashkent” (Sutter). Thus, within three years of its birth, the SCO was already one of the most institutionalized organizations in the Central Asian regions.

The members of the SCO have also flirted with expanding the organization. The same year that the secretariat and the antiterrorism structure were implemented, the SCO granted observer status to Mongolia; the next year, this status was extended to India, Iran, and Pakistan (Ambrosio). After the creation of the status of “dialogue partner” at the SCO summit in 2008, this position was granted to Belarus and Sri Lanka (Yan). However, despite the 2008 announcement of Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki that his country was seeking full membership in the organization (Azarkan), the SCO has yet to expand its full-member ranks.

China’s role in the SCO’s development and institutionalization has been pivotal. This is reflected in the commonalities between the SCO’s charter and principles that are commonly accepted as characteristically Chinese in nature. For example, in the introduction to the charter, it states that the countries desire “to jointly contribute to the strengthening of security and stability in the region in the environment of developing multipolarity and economic and information globalization” (SCO Charter). The mention of security harkens back to the importance China places on maintaining a secure periphery (Swaine and Tellis); the emphasis on

multipolarity was typical of Chinese rhetoric in the 1990s and early 2000s (Sutter); and the statement about stability and economic globalization fits in with China's often-stressed meta-ideology of "peace and development."

Another prime example of Chinese influence on the SCO's charter is also found in Article 2, Principles, where it speaks about "mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas" and "equality of all member States, search of common positions on the basis of mutual understanding, and respect for opinions of each of them" (SCO Charter). This laundry list of shared ideals is reminiscent of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which are "non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty" and "mutual non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence with other countries, regardless of political system" (International Crisis Group). Additionally, Article 25 identifies China as "the Depository of this Charter" (SCO Charter). Thus, simply by looking at the SCO Charter, it is obvious that China has had a significant role in the organization.

However, China's influence does not stop there: its activity and prominence in the SCO is also significant. As mentioned above, the secretariat for the organization is located in Beijing, thus showing China's commitment to the SCO and the high opinion its member states hold of the PRC. The commitment by China and the respect of its peers is made more apparent by the SCO's selection for its first Secretary-General: Zhang Deguang, who was "a Chinese career diplomat, former deputy minister of foreign affairs, and ambassador to Russia" (Ambrosio). This high level of activity and prominence is typical of China's role in the organization.

Therefore, it is readily apparent that China has considerable influence over its peers in the SCO. But how does it wield such influence? This question can be answered by analyzing how China's goals and the SCO's policies overlap in the areas of antiterrorism and military (security) cooperation, economic integration, and cultural ties, as well as how effectively the organization can act as a power bloc balanced against the presence of the United States in the region.

Combating the Three Evils: Security Cooperation in the SCO

According to the SCO, there are "three evils" that must be combated in order to help maintain a secure and stable region: "religious extremism, ethnic separatism, and international terrorism" (Yuan). The SCO seeks to deal with these problems by pursuing joint antiterrorist and military cooperation. Military cooperation was already apparent even during the Shanghai Five era, as the member states agreed to reduce the size of their border armies (Pempel). However, this collaboration is most apparent with the creation of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which is "a multilateral security arrangement that establishes precise security commitments between SCO Member States" (Kavalski). These member states have carried out "several cross-border military and counter-terrorism exercises" (Kavalski), thus providing further evidence of the commitment that China and the other members of the SCO have made to ensuring that the organization has real power.

These joint military operations have gradually gotten larger and larger as they have been repeated. The first exercise was composed of over 1,000 troops, and was carried out in Kazakhstan and Xinjiang province (Yuan). Two years later another operation was conducted and involved ten times as many troops, along with state-of-the-art weaponry (Yuan). Significantly, these actions show "strategic consultation among SCO member states, power projection, joint command, and joint operations" (Yuan). Even more significantly, these cross-

border military exercises “are the only such actions by an Asian regional body” (Pempel).

Therefore, despite the fact that the SCO is not portrayed as a formal military alliance (Pempel), the organization has real power in the region, and is also at the forefront of military and antiterrorist cooperation, thus serving as an Asian leader in these fields.

But how does China hold sway over this power and leadership? What does it have to gain as an individual state in the international system? The most obvious answer to these questions has to do with China’s Xinjiang province, which is vital to Chinese production and resource allocation (You; Azarkan; Kavalski), yet is plagued with the problem of Uyghur separatists (Kavalski; Yuan). Obviously, China wants to achieve stability in the region by minimizing the Uyghur threat; this minimization is precisely what the SCO antiterrorist and military operations allow. The members of the SCO all work towards “suppressing Uyghur cultural and political information” (Kavalski) and “preventing the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic separatist elements from spreading into Xinjiang” (Yuan). The importance of Xinjiang’s stability to China (and, by extension, to the SCO) is clear due to the fact that it was in this province that the first antiterrorist and military cooperation exercises were held. While it is true that the anti-separatist, anti-extremist, anti-terrorist principle is certainly also beneficial to the Central Asian states (especially in order to prevent the pro-democracy “color revolutions” against the autocratic regimes of the member states), the Chinese influence is strongest. This is most noticeable due to the fact that many of the Central Asian republics have large groups of people with ethnic ties and sympathies to the Uyghurs (Kavalski), yet their leaders continue to support China’s suppression of the region’s Uyghur populace.

Hence, the Chinese role in influencing the security policies of the SCO is readily observable. Its activity in this area has resulted in claims that China is now well on its way to

becoming the security guarantor for the area; this high level of participation has been described as “highly unusual – even unprecedented” (Kavalski). However true this may be historically, it is just one of several examples for current Chinese participation in the SCO. This participation and influence is also seen for economic policies among the member states.

Dollars and Sense: Economic Interactions between the SCO Member States

In terms of multilateral, organization-wide economic initiatives, the SCO has not been nearly as active as it has in its security initiatives. Although the SCO is often described as being committed to economic cooperation (Harris a; Wesley; Kurlantzick; Ambrosio; Kavalski), the organization-wide trade agreements have been slow in materializing. One of the only regional economic interactions that has taken place was China’s \$10 billion loan to the SCO, which was designed to help insulate the member states from the recent economic downturn (The Economist). This hesitance is likely due to Russia’s reluctance to commit to such agreements, as a result of the fact that it cannot compete with China economically (Yuan).

While this current lack of a region-wide economic agreement may initially appear to show that China’s influence over the SCO is not especially great, the abundance of favorable bilateral trade agreements between China and the Central Asian states that compose the organization gives evidence to the contrary. As You notes: “In 2004 the bilateral trade between China and Central Asia reached twenty-seven billion U.S. dollars, 1.5 times more than that for 2001. The growth rate was 40 percent – higher than China’s average in its overall foreign trade” (You). This large increase in trade led to a six-point economic proposal by Beijing: pursue “fairness and mutual interests; [use] multiple formats; take advantage of local resources; improv[e] transportation and rebuild [the] ‘silk road’; ... provid[e] limited economic assistance as token of friendship (US\$900 million in low-interest loans to Central Asian republics); and

develop multilateral economic cooperation and promot[e] mutual development” (Yuan).

Additionally, foreign direct investment from China to the region topped \$13 billion in 2007 (Yan). This combination of current trade and future proposals, along with Chinese direct investment, shows China’s commitment to bilateral trade with the republics of Central Asia.

But what is China’s benefit in this “mutually beneficial” interaction? Why would it want to increase its trade with Central Asia? The reason is simple: energy security. This can be seen in the types of business transactions that have taken place between the PRC and Kazakhstan, which is typical of relations between China and the region as a whole: “In 1997, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) purchased 60% of Kazakhstan’s Aktyubinsk Oil Company for US\$4.3 billion. During Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit to Kazakhstan in June 2003, the two countries signed an agreement on plans to build a US\$3.5 billion, 3,000-kilometer pipeline linking Kazakhstan and Xinjiang. In October 2005, CNPC completed a US\$4.18 billion takeover of PetroKazakhstan Inc. The 960-km/US\$700 million Atasu–Xinjiang pipeline became operational and started pumping oil in December 2005” (Yuan). In addition to these deals, China also offered Kazakhstan a \$10 billion loan in exchange for the joint-ownership of MangistauMunaiGas, one of the country’s largest oil producers (The Economist).

These energy deals are also seen between China and other states in the region. China invested \$600 million in Uzbekistan’s oil and gas industries, devoted the same amount for hydroelectric power plants in Tajikistan, and planned to help the hydroelectric industry in Kyrgyzstan (Azarkan). Additionally, China spent \$861 million on linking railways between China and Kazakhstan and China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which helped direct more of the massive load of these trains (5 million tons in 2008) through China (Kavalski). While not all of these investments are in the field of oil- and gas-extraction, and while they are certainly

beneficial to the states of Central Asia, they are all crucial in providing energy security to China. By obtaining these energy supply lines, China is able to secure energy provision by land, as opposed to by sea, and thereby reduce its reliance on United States Navy-protected waters (White and Taylor). Thus, Chinese influence over the members of the SCO, if not the SCO as an organization, is visible in the area of economic cooperation. In addition to the subtle Chinese dominance in the fields of security and economics, China also holds considerable sway in the cultural mission of the SCO.

Killing Them with Kindness? : Cultural Exchange in the SCO

In addition to seeking security and economic cooperation, the SCO also pursues greater cultural integration between member states (Kurlantzick; Yan; Pempel; Yuan). This goal is also evident in the charter, which includes “development of interaction in such spheres as science and technology, education, health care, culture, sports, and tourism” as areas of cooperation (SCO Charter). The implementation of this goal can be seen in a variety of activities, from the annual heads-of-state summit (Yuan), to the increased railway-connections mentioned above, which would increase flow of not only materials, but also people (Kavalski). Even the organization-wide support of autocracies and fear of “color revolutions” occurring in any of the member states could be viewed as a shared norm that has been reinforced by the SCO (Ambrosio; Wesley).

Once again, it is important to question what China has to benefit from such interaction in order to understand how influential a role it plays in the organization. In this circumstance, China seeks to improve cultural exchanges in order “to put its point of view directly to others, to minimize misperceptions, and to read easily the drift of regional opinion” (Harris b). This effort has been labeled by Kurlantzick as China’s “charm offensive.” He gives ample evidence of this offensive: “[T]he Chinese government invested in public diplomacy in Central Asia and

increased its aid programs. Beijing established a Confucius Institute for Chinese-language and -cultural studies in Uzbekistan. It created programs to train Central Asian officials and politicians, and promised the 'Stans that Beijing would fund a \$1.5 billion highway linking China to Central Asia" (Kurlantzick). China's main purpose in achieving these objectives is to help assure its neighbors of its peaceful rise (Kavalski), since an open Central Asia would be much more conducive to securing peace and stability along China's periphery (You).

In addition to the primary objective of assuring the Central Asian republics of its peaceful rise, China's cultural policy has also paid special attention to assuaging any Russian apprehensions. The PRC has recognized "Russia's special position and strategic interests in Central Asia" and has given Russia a prominent role in the organization, often allowing it to take the lead on anti-US rhetoric (You). This constant awareness of Russia's reputation stems from the fact that it is China's main competitor for influence in Central Asia, since its "historic dominance has left it with the habit of trying to boss former Soviet republics" (The Economist). Therefore, China's "charm offensive" towards Russia seeks to kill them with kindness; by defusing as many anxieties that the former hegemon has with China as possible, the PRC's path to regional rule will be much smoother.

Consequently, China is able to exert considerable influence on the member states of the SCO in the fields of security cooperation, economic relations, and cultural integration. With this authority, China is able to direct many aspects of the interactions between the member states. But how does China sway the interactions of these states with non-members? Specifically, how does China guide the foreign policy of the SCO towards the one country that is always a consideration when formulating strategy? How does China use the SCO to deal with the United States?

U.S. vs. Them: SCO Balance against the United States

Before the SCO's response to the United States can be understood, the role of the US in the region must first be summarized. This is done effectively by Kurlantzick: "[B]etween 2001 and 2005, Central Asia went from an obscure region of Muslim-majority 'Stans' to one of the world's most vital regions. As diminishing global oil reserves and growing energy demands pushed up world oil prices, the resource-rich Central Asian states – Kazakhstan alone produces more than one million barrels of oil per day – became, comparatively, even resource-richer. After September 11, the region's land borders with Afghanistan, and its old Soviet bases, placed it in the center of the fight against [a] Qaeda." Essentially, the region was largely ignored by the US, and by the West in general, until the recent past.

However, immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US role in Central Asia expanded rapidly. Besides its obvious military presence in Afghanistan, the US also obtained basing rights in Uzbekistan, at Karshi-Khanabad airbase, and in Kyrgyzstan, at Ganci airbase; Tajikistan was also willing to provide three of its airbases, but they were deemed to "lack good roads into Afghanistan" (Azarkan). Significantly, all three of these countries were members of the SCO during this time. Therefore, it is apparent that the United States, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, was able to exert considerably greater influence on the countries of Central Asia than China was able to through the SCO. This posed considerable problems for China, as it created the potential to fragment the organization that the PRC had just created and was well on its way to leading. This was seen by "Tajikistan's denial of the PLA transit to participate in the 2007 SCO military exercise[, which] forced Chinese soldiers to travel an extra two thousand kilometers to reach the exercise destination. Beijing seemed to see an invisible hand behind Tajikistan's move" (You).

However, the Central Asian preference for the United States was short-lived. Generally, the countries of the SCO grew wary of “a semi-permanent garrison of US troops at Central Asian bases” (Kurlantzick). Specifically, relations between the US and Uzbekistan began to sour after the 2005 Andijan crackdown that resulted in the death of four hundred unarmed civilians; the US condemned the Uzbek government, angering Uzbekistan’s leader (Kurlantzick). Simultaneously, China was working on further institutionalizing the SCO, as described in greater detail above. In a typically realist nature, the US loss worked towards China’s gain. Shortly after the condemnation by the United States, the SCO met and “warned against any countries – clearly meaning America – ‘monopolizing or dominating international affairs’ and demanded that Washington provide a timeline for withdrawing American forces from SCO member countries” (Kurlantzick). Uzbekistan shortly thereafter expelled the US from the Karshi-Khanabad airbase (Kavalski). While Kyrgyzstan did not quite follow suit, it did increase the yearly cost for the US to remain there by tens of millions of dollars (Azarkan). Thus, the marriage between the US and the states of Central Asia was fleeting.

In its place, a stronger union between the members of the SCO emerged. This union has been described as providing “the groundwork for a potential pro-Beijing sub-military bloc to emerge” (You). While this structure has not yet been well-established, it is certainly well on its way, with China taking pro-active measures to build off of the anti-US sentiments in Central Asian states. As Kurlantzick describes it, “China would be the friend who would not interfere in domestic politics, even as American officials touched down in Central Asia to make demands for basic rights.” Though claims that the SCO is an “anti-NATO” are certainly premature (Pempel), the organization has proved in many areas that it is a regional powerhouse. This is largely due to China’s success in guiding the SCO. But can the leadership role that China has played in the

region be replicated on the global scale? Or is the interaction with the organization simply an anomaly, completely atypical of China's foreign policy?

Rehearsal for the Global Stage: Implications for China's Leadership in the SCO

While the leadership role that China has played in the SCO may not be typical of its past foreign policy, it is likely that it is representative of its future. The experience that China has gained in working with multilateral organizations and achieving significant results will prove to be very useful. Kurlantzick summarizes these achievements effectively: "The story of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization teaches several lessons – lessons about China's growing global influence, and potentially about the future of China's relations with the United States. In a short period of time, and under the US radar, China amassed significant soft power in Central Asia through aid, formal diplomacy, public diplomacy, investment, and other tools." It is probable that China will develop relations with other nations, Great Power and developing nation alike, in a way that is similar to the development of relations with the members of the SCO.

This similarity should be most evident with cultural exchange, as part of China's "charm offensive." This is somewhat evident even now, as China pursues the creation of Confucius Institutes around the world in an effort to assure the world of its peaceful rise. Economic cooperation is also likely, given China's vital role in the global economy. If the SCO is a microcosm of future Chinese foreign policy, then we can expect to see a multitude of mutually beneficial bilateral trade agreements between China and other countries, while also witnessing a relative dearth of multilateral trade agreements involving China. There is even a chance of increased military cooperation with other nations, as long as the cooperation is targeted towards ensuring security for China, and as long as it takes place in the framework of an international organization (such as the UN). However, the balance against the United States that is evident in

the SCO is not likely to be seen on any sort of global scale in the near future, since China recognizes and accepts the unipolar world that the US dominates. Nevertheless, we may see some Chinese efforts to support alternatives to US hegemony on a smaller regional scale.

All of these new involvements with other nations are dependent on increased Chinese multilateralism. Is this reliance on multilateralism valid? As Qin predicts, “Multilateral diplomacy will occupy an even more significant place in China’s future diplomacy. China will be more active in the United Nations at the global level and in regional affairs. As China’s identity is more defined globally and regionally, the present definition of multilateralism in China’s overall diplomatic strategy may be redefined to realize national interests, solve thorny problems, and provide governance in a complex world.” If this prediction proves to be true, it should be remembered that China gained its first true leadership experience in multilateral organizations with the SCO.

Conclusion

While China’s prominent role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization may be atypical of its historical foreign policy, it can be explained by the significant influence China was able to exert on the organization, from its dawn as the Shanghai Five, to its formalization with the SCO Charter, to the institutionalization of this charter with the secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure. This influence can be seen in nearly every aspect of the SCO, including its security cooperation, its economic interactions, its cultural exchange, and its relations with non-member states (as exemplified by interactions with the United States). Given the success of its initiatives in the SCO and its continued growth and involvement in the international community, it is likely that China will behave similarly on the global stage. With the lessons learned in the SCO, the Shanghai sun will continue to rise, as will China’s leadership in the international arena.

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