



Executive Summary

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STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVOLVING SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

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Looking closely at the early development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) shows two things: first, the consistent leading role taken by China from the earliest stages; and second, the manner in which the organization in its current form developed almost by accident from a series of short-term measures intended to resolve border security issues. The main initial driver for security cooperation between the current members of the SCO was resolving border demarcation issues. This was significant when considering Chinese relations with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, all of which had disputed borders with China as a consequence of the Soviet period. Yet, even at an early stage of the long negotiations on border issues, shared security concerns were leading to additional closer cooperation over and above demarcation. Recognition of the unique challenges of the time led to unprecedented multilateral cooperative security initiatives.

This period has now passed, and the SCO is a stable organization engaging in a busy round of diplomatic meetings which produce little substantial output. The SCO Secretariat organizes and coordinates meetings of an impressive array of interstate groups, covering a range of activities some of which are far removed from the Organization's original focus on hard security issues. Many of these meetings are no more than diplomatic familiarization tours and PR exercises with little actual substance, and it remains unclear whether any of them, in fact, have the bureaucratic capacity to achieve any actual deliverables.

By contrast, anti-terrorism cooperation by SCO states shows distinct signs of productive activity. Relative to other SCO activities, internal cooperation

within the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) appears unusually productive, and, since cooperation is clearly in the interests of the ruling regimes of the contributing states, it is very probable that the member states will continue working on its improvement. Furthermore, the RATS is highly likely to be a beneficiary of the intense concern shared by SCO member states over the aftermath of the International Security Assistance Force drawdown in Afghanistan.

Large scale joint anti-terrorist exercises by the armed forces of SCO states are likely to become more frequent. Because of very different definitions of terrorism and counterterror operations in the region, as opposed to those accepted in the United States, some of these may resemble the beginning of SCO military cooperation, especially if there is a resurgence of radical, armed Islamic groups in the region. In particular, a "bloc law enforcement and security apparatus" intended to counter terrorism and narcotics may strongly resemble military cooperation, and will certainly have direct implications for security cooperation with the United States. But this should not be treated by the United States as the creation of a military bloc, unless specific evidence and intentions to the contrary appear.

The future of the SCO depends largely on the relationship between China and Russia and on where these two major players wish to take the organization. Some future decisions taken by the SCO may be important for the region, but those taken bilaterally by Beijing and Moscow will be vital. At the same time, the SCO provides a vehicle for Russia and China to cooperate with each other and to observe each other's activity in their area of shared interest in Central Asia.

Both countries share concern about the continuing U.S. military presence in Central Asia, and both are determined to build a new international order but not (at present) through a force of arms. As far as the four poorer, landlocked members of the SCO are concerned, this quest by Beijing and Moscow to limit outside influence can be beneficial, as it would tend to preclude external interference in the management of their autocracies (except, of course, by Beijing and Moscow) and promote the kind of stability favored by the local regimes. But basing agreements with the United States are a specific example of how the interests of the smaller SCO members, and the interests of the United States, may be in direct opposition to the stated priorities of the SCO overall.

Extending membership of the SCO to new nations is likely to continue to prove complex, and prospective members face a range of hurdles. For the moment, therefore, any enlargement of the SCO seems unlikely, since there are obstacles to the membership of any of the current candidates, and some (for example Iran) would instead have a destabilizing effect on the alliance. This, however, does not prevent the SCO seeking closer links with both observers and partners. ("Observer states" and "dialogue partners" form two distinct groups of states external to the SCO but maintaining relations with it.)

Current U.S. policy objectives in Central Asia include stability for Afghanistan, combating terrorism, stemming drug flow, and nonproliferation. These policy goals are closely aligned with the stated SCO goals, which bring an opportunity to pursue these policies on a bilateral basis with each country without public resistance. Most Central Asian states value their bilateral relationships with the United States simply because of the financial incentives it provides. However, any financial assistance with strings attached to human rights, democratization, or combating corruption will be met with resistance, and will likely hinder the development of close political ties and alliances within Central Asia. It should be remembered that attempts to link aid, assistance, or cooperation with domestic governance issues, and in particular human rights, will immediately increase the relative attractiveness of Russian and Chinese offerings.

Many of the aims of establishing and developing the SCO are vaguely defined and consist more of building long-term policy momentum for long-term aims, including eroding the U.S. near-monopoly on moral support and on the ability to marshal backers in international fora. Thus, the apparent lack of concrete achievements by the SCO as an international organization should not lead U.S. policymakers to discount it as a tool, or facilitator, for longer-term objectives by its two key members. Significantly for U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives, both in Central Asia and beyond, the SCO, in a similar manner to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), can be used to claim parity or equivalence with U.S.-friendly organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in an attempt to gain leverage for Russia. Just as with the CSTO, this would be an unwelcome development which should be resisted.

Overall, therefore, the main significance of the SCO to U.S. interests is not as a direct challenge, but rather as an indirect means for Russia and China to exert influence against the United States in a range of fields and fora.

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