Role of the People's Republic of China in the Activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to identify the role of the People's Republic of China in the activities of the organisation, based on the Chinese vision of its role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as one of the ideological and philosophical leaders that determine its focus and ideology. In particular, China implements the principle of polycentrism in Eurasia and interstate partnership and promotes the idea of state-regulated economic globalisation. The methodology of this scientific research is based on the analytical method of studying the issues related to the topic of the scientific research. China proceeds from the concept of ensuring full sovereignty by the member states of the organisation, but against the backdrop of low development rates of national economies (up to 2–2.5%) and lack of awareness by countries of their national interests in the region, Chinese business will strengthen its expansion, relying on both the World Trade Organisation rules and using protectionist measures by absorbing ineffective business entities. China is guided by the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, while maintaining its socio-political model based on the fusion of the communist ideology and the traditional philosophical doctrines of China and the mentality of the country's population, excluding the democracy export policy, denying the desire for undivided hegemony and to rule the world community. This is confirmed by the main key elements of the People's Republic of China's foreign policy, determined by the Chinese leadership.

Keywords International organisation · International economic relations · National interests · Polycentrism · Chinese spirit · Foreign policy

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Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a subregional intergovernmental international organisation, based on the principles of equality of large and small countries, mutual respect for their cultural and religious traditions, administrative forms and the concept of national development aimed at preserving national identity in the current context. The “Shanghai spirit” as the philosophy of this organisation is based on the implementation of the basic principles of international relations in a multipolar world, leaving the possibility of new states joining the SCO [3]. Polycentrism is a concept that characterises the multiple political structure of the modern world, the subjects of which appear as sovereign state-organised centres of power and development [3]. The ideas of polycentrism permeate the semantic spirit of the SCO charter since it does not imply the creation of various blocs aimed at confronting each other and with third parties. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation does not set itself the task of forming a military–political alliance, as well as maintaining ideological confrontation in addressing problems of international and regional development, while focusing activities on economic security based on a non-bloc alliance. Non-bloc alliance is a special international legal status of a state, which provides for the state’s non-participation in military blocs, but leaves the right to conclude bilateral or multilateral defense alliances, to create regional security systems without alienating part of state sovereignty [16].

It is noteworthy that the SCO is internationally recognised as an optimum platform for cooperation between the states of the Eurasian region, which is confirmed by the United Nations (UN) resolutions “Cooperation between the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, regularly adopted by the UN General Assembly since 2010. “The SCO is neither a military-political alliance, nor an economic integration association with supranational decision-making bodies. No country dominates the SCO. It has neither elements of pressure nor coercion, nor winners or losers. All countries are motivated to reach common results based on the principles of full equality and consensus” [19].

The Shanghai Five, predecessor of the SCO, consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, was designed to resolve problems in the border regions on the basis of confidence-building and disarmament. Later on, strengthening good neighbourhood, mutual trust, friendship and cooperation between these five neighbouring countries came up on the agenda. The Agreement on the deepening of military confidence in the border regions and the Agreement on the reduction of armed forces in the border regions were signed in 1997 and 1997 by the heads of the five states at the summits in Moscow and Shanghai. The format of the annual summits at the level of the heads of state, and later of their governments, has become an established practice, and these meetings were held alternately in each of the five states of this organisation [18].

Gradually, the agenda of the meetings included the development of a comprehensive mutually beneficial cooperation in the fields of politics, international diplomacy, economic security, as well as trade, economic, cultural, humanitarian

and other areas. When celebrating the fifth anniversary of the “Shanghai Five” on 15 June 2001 at a meeting in Shanghai, the birthplace of the “five” mechanism, the heads of the member states and the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan signed the Declaration on the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, announcing the birth of a new for regional cooperation organisation. In 2002, a regular summit at the level of the heads of the SCO member states was held in St. Petersburg and the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was adopted, which clearly stated the goals, principles and main areas of cooperation. The adoption of the Charter laid a solid international legal foundation for the new organisation [15, 17, 20].

Thus, the philosophy and ideology of multipolarity, laid down in the principles of the Organisation’s activities, were further developed. The “Shanghai spirit” remains focused on cooperation in areas, such as security, economy and humanitarian sphere, and expansion of activities to create appropriate collaborative mechanisms that ensure the effectiveness of cooperation. These mechanisms are elements of new regulatory instruments in the context of the transformation of the world communities along the path of polycentrism to create a new system of global governance, and this foreign policy vector is decisive for China within the SCO.

Literature Review

The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a fundamentally new platform that makes it possible to implement a program of broad economic cooperation in the region in the context of the objective realities of Eurasian economic development and the implementation of economic development strategies of its member states and of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative were analysed by R. Alimov [1]. He noted: “The SCO partnership system as a model of interstate interaction that can provide an institutional platform for broad regional economic cooperation within the context of the new realities of Eurasian development, the implementation of member states’ national development strategies, the linking of efforts to align integration processes within the EAEU, and the implementation of China’s One Belt, One Road initiative with the potential to form an overarching partnership between countries of Eurasia and the Asia–Pacific region”.

The significance of the SCO in the context of a regional multifunctional organisation was considered by A.J.K. Bailes, P. Dunay, P. Guang and M. Troitskiy in the study of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [2]. The researchers noted that the deeper goals of the SCO include “... managing potential Sino-Russian tensions or competition, but its overt activities are directed first at transnational threats and, additionally, at economic and infrastructure cooperation. In this study, the main emphasis is made on the real potential of the Organization for further multidimensional development”.

E. Koldunova and N.D. Kundu [9] noted that the consideration of Russian-Chinese relations in the context of the Central Asian dimension, taking into account the global status of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a political heavyweight, does not always imply the coincidence of the views of the leaders of the two powers

on key issues of economic and foreign policy cooperation. At the same time, it is the SCO that is an ideal platform for working out the imperatives of stable development in the region. Here, the emphasis is placed on the fact that only a dialogue with the involvement of many participants allows the SCO member states to create mutually acceptable cooperation instruments and mechanisms on the Eurasian territory.

The strategic partnership between Russia and China is discussed in the article by L. Wang and D. Zhou [18]. They note that the leaders of both states are able to come to a consensus on the issues discussed, but they may have tactical differences on certain aspects of state positioning in the global community. Cooperation between Russia and the PRC envisages solving the problems of Eurasian development and promoting collective security through regional cooperation organisations taking into account the trends in changing the world order based on political dialogue, mutual respect, equality and international cooperation. The authors believe that the SCO is a multilateral organisation, but it must develop dynamically in order to maintain this position. A number of experts emphasise that it was China that initiated the transformation of the Shanghai Five into the SCO [19]. The Chinese vector in the SCO was considered by D. Trenin, V. Tsygichko, S. Gabuev, R. Mohan and P. Haenle who emphasise the flexibility of the Chinese side and the ability to find consensus within the SCO, taking into account the positions of other member states [7, 12].

At the moment, Russia and China have common interests, including in Central Asia, which positively affect the development of their cooperation. Beijing and Russia strive to strengthen stability in the region and reduce the threat of separatism. They see this as a condition for curbing their internal separatist manifestations in the Chinese province of Xinjiang and in the Russian North Caucasus. In addition, they are united in their efforts to limit the growing US presence in the region [19]. In the economic sphere, both states are striving to strengthen ties in the region and provide markets for their exports in the countries of Central Asia. Nonetheless, energy issues cause disagreement among the governments of the two countries. The Chinese leadership is interested in gaining access to the region's energy resources, while Russia seeks to retain control over energy supplies [22]. Although confrontation of economic interests may become a source of conflict in the future, a pragmatic understanding of the need for cooperation to strengthen political and economic stability is now coming to the fore.

However, a number of researchers are sceptical about the prospects regarding the equality of partnerships within the SCO due to China's economic and political power [13]. In this context, it seems relevant and appropriate to consider the thesis of M. McFaul that China should be viewed as it is, and not as some leaders want it to be. In any case, the assessment of the Chinese vector in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a large-scale issue that requires a comprehensive reflection and careful study [22]. The novelty of this study lies in the fact that, based on the main conceptual provisions of China's foreign policy, determined for the coming decade, it has been proved that the PRC leadership does not seek either world hegemony or dominance within this international non-specialised multidimensional organisation. At the same time, using the advantages of the existing globalised system of the world economy, China will persistently promote its economic interests, incl. using activities of transnational corporations (TNCs) created

by Chinese businesses and registered in foreign jurisdictions, while applying the tools of fair competition in accordance with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreements, and protectionist measures aimed at supporting the national business corps. Within the SCO, the Chinese leadership is pursuing a policy of implementing the principles of polycentrism (religious–moral, ideological–philosophical, socio-cultural, normative value) in Eurasia, does not seek to dominate and under the conditions of increasing confrontation with the USA will implement a policy of increasing the importance of the SCO's regulatory activities.

Materials and Methods

This scientific study aimed at analysing the role of the Chinese vector in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The authors give a brief overview of the history of the emergence and formation of the SCO and describe various stages of development of relations between the countries that are members of this organisation. The object of the study is the role of the PRC in the emergence of the SCO and the analysis of the influence of China on the activities of the organisation as a whole and the building of relations between its member states. A scientific study of the theoretical prerequisites for China's promotion of its global interests around the world in general and in the Eurasian region in particular is conducted. The article also analyses possible prospects for the development of relations between the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, as well as the prospects for the development of the organisation itself, taking into account the importance of the role of the Chinese vector in its activities.

The methodology of this scientific research is based on the analytical method of studying the role of the Chinese vector in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which manifests itself in various aspects of making key decisions. The method of in-depth analytical research substantiated the assertion of the fact that the PRC seeks to advance its interests within the SCO, implementing the policy of polycentrism. The methodology of this scientific research is built taking into account the study of materials available, covering both the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in general and the role of China in its creation and development in particular. A number of data for the study were taken from foreign sources devoted to the scientific study of the influence of the Chinese vector on the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the economic situation in the Central Asian region as a whole.

In order to facilitate the information perception and to create the most objective picture of the research, many materials, including quotations from books and specialised journals, were translated into Russian. The use of the analytical method for studying the issues raised in the subject of this research paper contributed to the highest quality disclosure of the topic and the drawing conclusions on this basis that reveal the essence of the issues under study and give a correct scientific justification for the results obtained in the course of this scientific research. The practical use of such a research methodology lies in determining the main aspects of the influence of the Chinese vector on the SCO activities, as well as in assessing the degree of

cooperation efficiency between its member states, partners and observers, when they solve the entire range of problems that are important for the development of constructive relationships between them.

Results

The study of a wide range of issues related to the role of the Chinese vector on the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation led to the following results. In the first half of the current twenty-first century, there is a clear trend towards an increase in the number of interregional organisations striving to expand their own functionality for a better solution of issues related to achieving their own strategic goals in the region of their operation. As noted above, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation grew out of the Shanghai Five when the participating countries and Uzbekistan agreed that the status of an international organisation with numerous aspects of activity would give an opportunity to provide a more effective solution to the vital tasks and respond to geopolitical and geo-economic challenges. China proceeds from the assumption that its foreign policy is guided by the multipolarity of international relations of a completely different kind and this contributes to a gradual transition to a “community of a common future for all mankind”.

China’s foreign policy initiatives, based on the ideological posture of future development, are clearly linked to the personification of the role of the President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping. Economic globalisation that has been developing in the world since the end of the 1990s of the last century, due to the lack of its regulation and consideration of social justice factor, increased employment and responsibility of each state before its people, has become extremely unfair. Globalisation, according to him, is an exclusively economic process aimed at opening markets while maintaining the political sovereignty of national states. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017, Xi Jinping in his keynote speech entitled “Jointly shoulder the responsibility of our time, promote global growth” put forward the idea of “three needs” to rebalance the process of economic globalisation—dynamism, inclusiveness and sustainability so that the results of business efficiency aim to uphold the justice, so that different states, segments of the population and groups of people share the results of globalisation [21]. At the 2018 Qingdao summit, President Xi Jinping emphasised that the principles of SCO functioning were an open, harmonious, mutually beneficial attitude to cooperation, rejecting a narrow policy of selfishness and myopia, supporting the WTO rules, a multilateral trading system and shaping an open world economy [21, 27, 28, 32].

The People’s Republic of China sees its place in the SCO in promoting the “Shanghai spirit”, overcoming the difficulties of time and risks, solving problems, promoting the creation of “lasting peace, common security, common prosperity, openness, tolerance, purity and beauty in order to build a future for the community of common human destiny” [21]. In addition, China views the expansion the SCO by admitting Pakistan and India from the standpoint of mutual trust and tolerance, equality, mutually beneficial cooperation and development. According to the position of the Chinese side, the cornerstone in this issue should be the solution of a

common task to ensure the peaceful and sustainable development of countries in the Eurasian region. The “Shanghai spirit” is still focused on cooperation in the areas of security, economics and the humanities, expanding its activities to the formation of appropriate cooperative mechanisms that ensure its effectiveness, incl. considering them as elements of the formation of new regulatory instruments in the context of the transformation of the world community along the path of polycentrism for the purpose of creating a new system of global governance [21, 29].

Thus, the PRC is persistently pursuing a policy of polycentrism within the SCO, combining it with Confucianism and the traditional mentality of Chinese society. China positions itself within the SCO with the ideas that the ideological posture of conflicts of civilisations in the Cold War era, or zero-sum games, are replaced by political mutual trust, equality and steady observance of national sovereignty. It should be noted that in 2018, in order to facilitate the creation of a community of destiny of the SCO countries, President Xi Jinping announced a set of practical measures, including:

1. The allocation by the PRC of a special loan of 30 billion yuan to a consortium of banks of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
2. During 2018–2021, the PRC will provide the SCO member states with a training base for the international exchange of judicial experience, which will allow for the training of approximately 2000 law enforcement officers from all countries and help strengthen the capacities of national law enforcement agencies.
3. During 2018–2021, China will provide about 3000 training places for the development of human potential of the SCO member states.
4. China expressed its readiness to grant the right to use the FengYun-2 meteorological satellite for the development of international cooperation of the SCO countries in the meteorology field.

The concept of building a “community of a common future for all mankind”: “No country can cope alone with the various challenges facing humanity, and no country can return to a closed isolated island. The peoples of all countries should work together to build a community of the common destiny of mankind, to create such a beautiful reality where peace, common security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, and a clean environment prevail” [17]. It is implemented by respecting each other, holding equal consultations and firmly abandoning the war mentality and the policy of force. New approaches should be applied to interstate relations, based on dialogue and partnership, rather than confrontation and bloc thinking. In fact, the China’s role in the implementation of the Shanghai Cooperation Plan is a set of measures to implement the concept of building a “community of a common future for all mankind”, which reflects de facto a long-term vision of prospects, thereby emphasising the historical role of Chinese leaders for future development. The main task of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, spelt out in the SCO Charter, is to strengthen friendship and mutual trust between the members of this organisation. Since 2013, the Politburo of the Central Committee marked a new stage in China’s foreign policy strategy,

when peaceful development and an independent foreign policy began to be implemented in the context of China's growing responsibility to humanity, striving neither for expansion nor for hegemony [19, 30].

The main principles formulated by Chinese diplomacy in 2020 regarding the unification of political and economic tasks of the country's development, in relation to its activities within the SCO, are as follows:

1. Subordinating the PRC diplomacy to the objectives of progressive internal development, which requires strengthening the assessment of the domestic and international situation, using all available diplomatic means and resources, various strategies for creating a good international and regional environment to achieve an all-encompassing prosperous society.
2. Protecting national interests by building a solid line of defence to protect national sovereignty, security and development interests, territorial integrity, by countering attempts at external interference in the internal affairs of the state.
3. Deepening partnerships, incl. guided by the strategic interaction between China and Russia, and expanding cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in broader areas, raising the level of relations with the EU. The work should be aimed at a comprehensive deepening of strategic mutual trust and realisation of interests, taking into account the tasks of neighbouring countries to create a community with a common destiny.
4. Defending multilateralism, incl. participating in the review of the purpose and principles of the UN Charter, supporting the UN to play a central role in international multilateral affairs. Supporting the institutional building of platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the BRICS and the G20 to create a fairer and more effective global governance system and a greater international consensus to build a community of a common future for humankind. Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, actively engaging in international cooperation to combat climate change and contributing more Chinese initiatives to address various global challenges.
5. Actively expanding international cooperation, incl. through the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and building global partnerships [23].
6. Modernising the diplomatic system, incl. strengthening the correctness of diplomatic theories, tools and capabilities, promoting the rule of law in major powers with Chinese characteristics and contributing to the modernisation of the management system in the Foreign Ministry [24].

Chinese foreign policy excludes expansion to the external boundary, but it indicates the internal conviction of China that the process of socialisation is inevitable in all countries interested in ensuring economic sustainable growth. At the same time, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not rule out the strengthening the promotion of the Chinese way of life and the advantages of its path of development, including using the arguments of the victory over the COVID 2019 epidemic and a fairly rapid recovery of the growth rate of the national economy. The authors would like to emphasise that competition between companies and

partners of the SCO countries is not excluded. Increasing the competitiveness of economic entities is one of the strategic goals of economic cooperation between the SCO countries. An example of the fairness of the approaches on the part of Chinese experts is the coverage of the fact of registration of a vaccine in Russia against coronavirus, although there are already several vaccines in the PRC and they are used, but only among the military personnel. In other words, the fact of recognition of the primacy for Russia takes place, but the PRC's desire to compete in this area cannot be ruled out [10, 25]. In fact, the control system built in the PRC under the leadership of the CPC is organically integrated into the historical–mental and socio-historical structure of the Chinese society as a whole.

At the moment, the Chinese leadership declares the principles of complete rejection of pursuing the goals of world hegemony and the associated intrusion of the principles of strategic leadership on the SCO member states [26, 31]. The principles of business partnership and the solution of all emerging economic and foreign policy problems in the activities of the SCO are emphasised, solely by building mutually beneficial partnership. At the same time, China emphasises its desire for world economic leadership, which is manifested in the promotion of its own technical and economic projects on a global scale and a priority role in the discussion of a number of economic issues. In the context of the Chinese vector in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, this trend is expressed in consistent investment in the export of products and services provided to other states in order to create the necessary conditions for mutually beneficial economic and foreign policy cooperation in the region. China considers economic development issues as the basis for a successful solution to domestic and international problems [5, 6, 8, 15].

Discussion

The issues of assessing the Chinese vector of influence on the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are widely discussed among researchers of various aspects of the organisation's activities. In view of the complexity of the issues under consideration, various, sometimes diametrically opposed opinions are expressed regarding the role of China in the organisation and the influence of the state on the situation in the Eurasian region as a whole.

Faced with a complex geopolitical situation in Central Asia, China intends to focus on conducting multilateral diplomacy based on the principle of good-neighbourliness within the SCO in order to optimise the regional situation both west of China and in the Central Asian region as a whole. This position of China has gained support from Russia and the countries of Central Asia [11]. Developing this topic in the context of China-Russia relations, D. Trenin and V. Tsygichko note: "Russia occupies an important place in the Chinese geopolitical game, and Beijing is doing everything possible to keep it in its sphere of influence. The authors believe that keeping Russia within China's sphere of influence is the manifestation of Chinese leadership in the SCO. First of all, Russia is extremely important for China as an economic partner – a supplier of energy resources that it needs to continue the country's economic modernisation, as well as a supplier

of modern weapons for its army. Therefore, the Chinese will do everything to strengthen their economic and political positions in our country. This is evidenced by the great activity of the Chinese lobby in Russia, which is successfully operating at all levels of government” [14].

For its part, a team of researchers represented by A.J.K. Bailes, P. Dunay, P. Guang and M. Troitskiy, assessing various aspects of the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, draw attention to the fact that the SCO’s choices “allow interesting comparisons with other regional groups, providing new material for debate on how far the multilateral interstate mode of cooperation meets or cannot meet the needs of modern-day multidimensional security” [2]. N.P. Contessi, when assessing the pace of economic development of Central Asian countries in the last decade, expresses the same opinion: “The SCO’s choices allow interesting comparisons with other regional groups, providing new material for debate on how far the multilateral interstate mode of cooperation meets or cannot meet the needs of modern-day multidimensional security” [4].

Thus, the discussion by researchers of issues related to various aspects of the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in general and the role of China in this process, in particular, demonstrates a variety of opinions and assessments, which indicates the multifaceted nature of the issue and the presence of many approaches to its coverage. The further development of the SCO and the strengthening of the Chinese vector in this context will provide a basis for further scientific research in this area and will have a favourable effect on the economic and foreign policy situation in the entire Eurasian region.

Conclusions

This research study analysed the role and place of the People’s Republic of China in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, taking into account the fact that the Shanghai Five has grown into an international multidimensional non-specialised organisation. The Chinese leadership strives neither for world hegemonism, nor for dominance within the SCO. At the same time, it regards the SCO as an organisation that has grown with the direct participation of the PRC and forms the ideological determinants of the prospects for the development of the world community in the context of the inevitability of its transformation.

China, using the advantages of the existing globalised system of the world economy, will persistently promote its economic interests in using the activities of TNCs created by Chinese businesses and registered in foreign jurisdictions. As before, there will be a combination of tools and methods according to the WTO agreements and outright protectionism aimed at supporting the national business corps. The Chinese leadership will implement the policy of polycentrism in Eurasia within the SCO, without seeking to dominate the Organisation. In the context of increasing confrontation with the USA, China will focus on the need to enhance the significance of the SCO’s regulatory activities in Eurasia.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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