



# Forging a New Security Order in Eurasia: China, the SCO, and the Impacts on Regional Governance

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## Abstract

Beijing played a critical role in establishing the SCO in the aftermath of the break of the former Soviet Union in response to the emerging non-traditional security challenges. Overtime, the SCO has evolved into a regional institution critical to China's growing interests in Central Asia/Eurasia and increasingly, Beijing seeks to influence and shape the organization in support of its institutional balancing strategy— inclusive in soliciting Russian endorsement of its diplomatic agendas in the region ranging from energy security and greater economic integration, and exclusive in resisting and preventing US influence in the region. Lately, that strategy has also been displayed in the SCO membership expansion to India to minimize chance of a Washington–Delhi axis against China, at least not where SCO-wide (that would include China) interests are concerned. But the most critical transformation of the SCO as a regional institution is its utility in Beijing's exclusive institutional balancing strategy against the US, to prevent the latter from gaining access and influence in Central Asia/Eurasia; to foster trust among member states, and develop the SCO into a regional security community, and to safeguard Chinese interests in both geo-economic (trade and energy) and geopolitical (security and regional stability) terms.

**Keywords** Shanghai cooperation organization · Regional security · Russia · China · Institutional balancing · Central Asia

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## 1 Introduction

2021 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A regional arrangement following the successful resolution of border disputes between China, Russia, and three Central Asian republics, the SCO has over the past decades developed into a regional institution with an expanded list of formal members, observer countries, and dialogue partners. It has also formed relationships with other regional and global organizations from the United Nations to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The SCO's geographic reach has extended to South Asia with the induction of India and Pakistan as members in 2018, and to the Greater Middle East with the approval of Iran as a member in 2019. The SCO's mandate has also expanded from its original focus on the “three evils”—terrorism, separatism, and extremism, to include a broad range of issue areas covering energy security and cooperation, economic development, and other emerging non-traditional security challenges.

What is of longer significance, is the SCO's potential to become part of a new security architecture or regional order in Eurasia together with the other regional institutions such as the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and, to some extent, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). There already have been some coordinated actions taken by both China and Russia to attempt transforming Greater Eurasia into what analysts have described as a non-Western international society. US tensions with both Russia and China have further incentivized Beijing and Moscow to work toward that end. The SCO with its current membership (not yet including Iran) accounts for 40% of the world's population and 20% of its GDP. The envisioned international society presents even greater potential in geo-economic as well as geopolitical terms.

China is clearly tempted by the prospect given its geo-economic interests and geopolitical ambitions in Eurasia. Working within the SCO framework and with Russia has given Beijing the confidence but also made it aware of the challenges to realizing its ambitious undertakings. Russia's difficulties in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine have provided China with the opportunity to strengthen its position in Eurasia. At the same time, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has divided the region and will pose significant challenges for Beijing both as a result of a much-weakened Russia and a more united Europe and greater transatlantic relations. This being the case, China's efforts to expand the SCO's remit to include policy areas beyond the early focus on the “three evils” will continue, albeit in somewhat modified form. Given its own economic slowdown, its economic development plan of “Go West” and energy security needs, and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), will be affected. Russia's invasion of and the indiscriminate wonton destruction inflicted on Ukraine has resulted in serious setback to China's agenda of combining its excess capacity to link countries—Ukraine included—along the ancient route with infrastructure construction that could transform the region and turn Eurasia as the corridor for Chinese commerce all the way to the very heart of Europe.

This paper focuses on how Beijing has used the SCO and worked with Moscow in Central Asia to both coordinate China–Russia approaches in countering

US activities and preventing it from projecting and entrenching its presence in the region and address Russian concerns of growing Chinese influence. To help set these issues in theoretical contexts, the paper looks at how Beijing's institutional balancing strategies enable it to achieve its long-term objectives of expanding economic ties, projecting influence, assuring Russia, and excluding US influence. It also discusses efforts by China and Russia in promoting the idea of a Greater Eurasia as a non-Western international society to advance its geostrategic, foreign policy, and economic interests. It argues that while Beijing and Moscow share many interests in the region, their priorities and approaches may not always align. The next section briefly introduces the concepts of institutional balancing and a non-Western international society. This is followed by an analysis of the developments of the SCO over the past 20 years, such as institutionalization, expansion of membership and geographic reach, and some of the challenges it has faced in consolidating and realizing its potential, including the prospect of a non-Western Eurasian community. The paper concludes with some observations on the prospect of the new security order as envisioned by China and Russia, and the utility and limitation of the analytical framework of institutional balancing in accounting for Beijing's strategic calculation and specific policies as they relate to the SCO over the past two decades.

## 2 The SCO, Institutional Balancing, and Eurasia

With the end of the Cold War and a period of relative stability and even cooperation between its two principal antagonists at the global level, new initiatives and arrangements emerged in the 1990s to address what was perceived as the power vacuum and to preempt conflicts at the regional level. In the Asia-Pacific, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) initiated a multilateral security arrangement in the form of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which sought to engage all the major powers in the region in dialogues on confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution (Acharya 2021; Tan 2015). In Europe, on the other hand, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the dismantlement of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, new or modified security arrangements, such as the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Partnership for Peace (PFP), and Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) were created to facilitate transition to a post-Cold War Europe (Park and Wyn Rees 2017). These developments can be explained by the theory of institutional balancing.

Institutions get established either because great powers create them to reduce transaction costs, to entrench norms and rules to their advantage, or respond to demands for them. These developments often take place at major junctures of international history, where uncertain environments either call for great power interventions or provide strong demands for the creation of institutions to provide for stability (Keohane 1984). Some institutions come into being with well-designed structures and carefully crafted long-term objectives. The Bretton Woods System and the United Nations could be considered as such institutions (Steil 2014; Schlesinger 2004). At other times, states (with some taking the lead) come together

to create institutions to address specific issues and later extend their mandates, strengthen their structures, and assign them additional tasks. The SCO could be considered as falling in this genre (Fredholm 2012). The wellbeing and viability of institutions depend on commitments from members (often the more powerful ones) to their maintenance and renewal and their internal norms, rules and structures may also require periodic adjustments as distribution of power within registers significant changes. When adjustments do not take place or when they are slow in coming, institutions can be held down due to strong internal disagreement or bickering. In addition, dissatisfied members can choose to create institutions of their own to address issues they consider to be more important (He 2020).

Indeed, the challenges postwar international institutions have been facing in recent years provide the stimuli for academic debates on and exploration of the conditions and circumstances under which existing institutions either adjust or fail to do so, but also about how emerging powers seize the opportunities to demand changes and advance their own interests that existing institutions can no longer serve or even impede. Beijing's initiatives in launching the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) represent efforts in bypassing rather than seeking to replace existing institutions in international economic relations (Cai 2022). In this context, institutions become the vehicles through which great powers—reigning and emerging ones—compete for either preservation or expansion of their influence and their share of benefits. Theory of institutional balancing seeks to explain the strategies adopted by emerging powers to protect and advance their interests without fundamentally challenging the existing institutions as doing so may incur significant costs without guarantees of success. This line of logic is premised on the understanding that overthrowing the existing liberal international order (itself a rather contested concept) may be neither necessary nor possible, not the least because emerging powers often have benefited from and still find the existing order valuable, but also because of the enormous costs involved and uncertainty of success (Kastner et al. 2016; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 2016). However, they also are not contented with the power structure, rules and procedures, and the distribution of benefits that continue to favor established powers despite the changing power distribution (Acharya 2018; Caffarena 2017; Parmar 2018).

The emerging gap between existing institutional structures and changing power distribution can result in contested multilateralism, which describes strategies pursued by states or, increasingly also non-state actors designed either to seek changes within institutional arrangements or set up alternative institutions to address specific issues (Morse and Keohane 2014; Zürn 2018; Lisk and Šehović 2020; Ullah et al. 2021). Since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis (GFC), governance issues have become ever more important in terms of coordinating global (and also regional) issues and challenges through multilateral efforts that engage and bring in emerging powers to allow them a say in recognition of their growing power, as well as to address normative questions of the what and how of governance (Gu et al. 2021; Tsingou 2020; Breslin 2020; Deciancio and Tussie 2020). One key motivation in engaging in contested multilateralism is the dissatisfaction with the presence or the lack thereof, the ability, and the willingness of existing institutional arrangements to address issues of serious concern to a particular party. For instance, the majority

of the non-nuclear weapons states have in recent years become increasingly disillusioned and dissatisfied with the pace of nuclear disarmament within the existing institutional architecture—the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1968. As a result, they called for and negotiated a new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to address this issue (Thakur 2018; Müller 2017). Another is that control or influence over institutions is crucial, even in circumstances where inclusive institutional balancing is applied, since defining rules and setting agendas can affect important outcomes and therefore can determine winners and losers in geopolitical games, or at a minimum, favor those agenda-setting members in the institutions (Dai 2015). Given its growing power, China has become more active in participating in various international and regional fora, offering “Chinese voices” and providing “Chinese solutions” in public health, climate change, financial reform, among others (Kirton and Wang 2022; Caballero-Anthony and Gong 2021).

Whereas contested multilateralism reflects the fragmentation of power and hence competing regime creation and regime complexes (He 2020), institutional balancing theory offers a conceptual framework to describe strategies that emerging powers can adopt to advance national interests. The theory distinguishes between inclusive and exclusive balancing. The former seeks to include a target state in an institution and use the rules and norms to constrain its behavior. Additionally, inclusive institutional balancing also serves to reassure and work with the targeted power to both manage the latter’s suspicions of the intentions and growing power of the state applying inclusive institutional balancing and join force with it to advance their shared agendas and interests. In the context of the SCO, this has been operationalized with Beijing at once courting and reassuring Moscow that China’s growing presence in Central Asia is less about replacing Russia than working with it to promote their common interests. Beijing’s approaches have been relatively consistent even as the gap between China and Russia’s economic power has been widening, and even as Central Asian states see value in growing their economic ties with China (Pizzolo and Carteny 2022). At the same time, the ever-expanding institutional arrangements within the SCO structure also provide legitimate reasons for China to engage the SCO’s Central Asian members while reducing Russia’s ability and justification in preventing China from doing so.

The latter, on the other hand, excludes a target state from an institution while mobilizing the resources within the said institution to counter perceived or real threats from the excluded target state (He 2015; Feng and He 2018). For instance, the original Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiated by the Obama administration and the recently announced Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) have not included China, even though China is the largest trading partner of nearly all member states of these two institutions. The original impetus for establishing the SCO would not be considered as China’s or, for that matter, Russia’s deliberate attempt at exclusive institutional balancing as they were more concerned with the so-called “three evils” (SCO 2002). However, as the SCO has evolved, its role—and Beijing and Moscow’s interests in using the regional institute to exclude or at least minimize US influence and presence in Central Asia to guard against Washington’s strategic intents, including instigating “colored revolution” and establish military bases in the region. These efforts have been reflected in the various SCO joint statements on

the need to establish a new international order and the emphasis on states' rights to choose their own politico-economic systems without external interferences; intra-institution economic and energy cooperation, and financial arrangements for intra-regional developments; and greater cooperation and policy coordination in anti-terrorism, joint military exercises, and collaboration in law enforcement (SCO 2005, 2016).

Whether a state chooses inclusive or exclusive balancing strategies depends on the gain–loss calculation and on the specific issues in question, and the extent of its existential influence or lack thereof. Where a state values more legitimacy and seeks broader support and recognition of what it seeks to achieve, and where it does not possess enough power and influence over issue areas it cares about the most, it is more likely to favor inclusive institutional balancing. Russia–China cooperation within the SCO would be an example of this type of institutional balancing strategy, where both sides (and Moscow more so) seek to constrain as well as utilize each other's power resources to advance their common and respective interests (Lo 2017).

International institutions facilitate cooperation among actors, reduce transaction costs, shape and maintain certain norms, and overtime and together form the building blocks of an international community. This is the perspective of the English School, which defines an international society as

A group of states (or more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements (Bull and Watson 1985, p. 1).

Similarly, Hedley Bull argued that

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (1977, p. 13).

The European Union (EU) is often described as an example of an international society where sovereign states continue to exist but many of the conditions described by Bull and Watson, and there is a high level of shared values, norms, and institutional frameworks binding on members. In recent years, Russian and Chinese efforts in creating synergies between the SCO, the CSTO, the SREB, and the EAEU represent an attempt to form a Greater Eurasian Community that could evolve into a non-Western international society. It is clear that both Beijing and Moscow see the benefits of forming such a community to protect their core interests and bank on the region's rich natural resources and economic potential to further their power and influence in what both are pushing for: the transition from a unipolar to multipolar world (Lukin and Novikov 2021). In many aspects,

the SCO's evolution and Beijing's investment in the organization, over time have fostered a regional security community in that member states share certain values embodied in the "Shanghai Spirit", such as respect for sovereignty, non-interference in international affairs, states' critical role in coordinating responses to non-traditional security challenges, promote mutual trust between members, and efforts toward peaceful management of disputes (Lanteigne 2006, 2007; MacHaffie 2021). The SCO, as the region's most developed organization, could play an important facilitating role in this ambitious undertaking.

### 3 The SCO and Institutional Balancing: Establishment, Expansion, and Effects

China's motivation in establishing the SCO was primarily driven by its growing concern about the security threats to its northwestern region of Xinjiang and the absence of any regional institutions in dealing with these threats. The Soviet Union disintegrated in late 1991 and the newly independent Central Asian states all faced serious challenges of their own. Because the so-called "three evils" were of transnational and across-boundary nature, China alone could not properly address them; at the same time, years of border negotiation, military confidence building, and gradual development of mutual trust between China and its Central Asian neighbors and Russia, provided a foundation for the establishment of the SCO and Beijing seized the opportunity to take the lead and make it a reality. In this case, it was not so much the dissatisfaction with an existing arrangement as the absence of any institution deemed as the proper response to the emerging threats to security that led to the creation of the SCO.

The SCO as a regional multilateral institution evolved from the so-called Shanghai-Five, a multilateral process of over a decade of negotiations on border issues between China and the former Soviet Union (and since the end of 1991, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). During the negotiation process, a so-called "Shanghai Spirit" that "embodies mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultation, respect for the diversity of cultures, the pursuit of common development," was promoted. All parties, big and small, have pledged to seek peaceful resolution of disputes through communication, cooperation, coordination, and confidence building (SCO 2021). Two important military confidence-building agreements were signed in 1996 and 1997 respectively, with significant troop reduction along the Sino-Russian/Sino-Central Asian borders (Yuan 1998). After the successful conclusion of the border negotiation, Beijing and its counterparts recognized the need for a regional organization to deal with emerging non-traditional security challenges that threatened the still very fragile Central Asian states and China's north-western region of Xinjiang. In June 2001, in Shanghai, the initial five parties to the border negotiation and Uzbekistan established the SCO, with its key objectives being fighting the so-called "three evils"—ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism (Yuan 2010). Over the past twenty years, while closely working with Russia and the Central Asian members, Beijing not only has continued to advocate the "Shanghai Spirit" but has also been

promoting the principles of respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and equality within the organization; multipolarity and multilateralism in international politics, and cooperation based on strong partnerships among members and state-regulated economic regionalization and globalization (Perskaya et al. 2021). It is in the economic arena that China exercises the most influence in the region, and it is also where Beijing has been promoting greater integration and cooperation, including in social development, technology, and energy. However, it has to tread carefully, in order to not raise Russia's suspicion of China's intentions but at the same time promote norms and rules that would promote both multilateral and bilateral ties within the SCO framework that Russia would find hard to prevent (Chao 2021).

Russia clearly wants to retain its influence in Central Asia, which traditionally was part of the former Soviet Union and today considered to be both its backyard and heart of Eurasia where it has vital geopolitical interest. After the establishment of the SCO, Moscow has continued to promote the indispensable role of the CSTO as a critical security player in the region, of which China is not a member, and launched the EAEU in 2015 with Belarus and Kazakhstan where it remains a supreme power and promotes greater roles for the two regional organizations (Silvan 2021). These would dilute the influence of the SCO where China exercises more influence, which Moscow seeks to counter within through institutional balancing. Russia's role in the SCO is also ambivalent: it sees its value as a collective counter force vis-à-vis the US and the West, but its limited capacities also create a gap between its commitments to the organization and what it can deliver and lead. This explains why the CSTO and the EEU are more important to Moscow in substance terms, while the SCO is more symbolic. From Beijing's perspective, maintaining a stable working relationship with Moscow both within the SCO and across the broader Central Asian region represents an institutional balancing effort to keep Russia in while Russia's hedging behavior reflects its attempt for cooperative hegemony with China as asymmetry of power keeps growing (Šćepanović 2021).

In many ways, the SCO has provided the opportunity for China to project power to Central Asia, as well as to secure energy supplies and advance its economic interests. Central Asian countries have also turned to China for investment, economic assistance, and for security cooperation. As former Soviet republics, these newly independent states have sought a delicate balance between the region's two major powers although its elites appear to have leaned toward China, driven largely by pragmatic reasons (Jiang 2021). US analysts suggest that Beijing is availing itself of the opportunities for joint military exercises to expose the PLA to out-of-country experiences, coordination with other militaries, and establish military outposts in Central Asia in the name of combating the "three evils" under the auspice of the SCO. There have been reports of PLA outposts in Tajikistan and counter-terrorism patrols in the Afghanistan–China–Tajikistan border area (Southerland et al. 2020; Standish 2021b).

While Beijing saw its role as a leader in the endeavor given its sheer economic and political weight compared to its weak neighbors, it has also been sensitive and attentive to Moscow's view of its status in what it has always considered as its backyard and sphere of influence. In effect, a delicate and carefully nurtured



co-management of the organization by Russia and China has kept the region in relative stability and the SCO viable and even thriving (Rumer 2006; Lo 2017).

For over two decades, the SCO has been gradually institutionalized, with well-structured layers of dialogue mechanisms ranging from annual summit meetings among heads of states, prime ministerial, and heads of parliament consultation, to a whole range of ministerial-level meetings covering defense, foreign affairs, internal security, and economic development and finance (SCO 2021; Chung 2006). The SCO Secretariat was set up in 2004; this was followed by the establishment of a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) in 2005. The SCO has over the years also sought to develop and encourage closer economic and energy cooperation between member states. An SCO Development Bank has been proposed to help facilitate regional trade and investment. Since 2005, Peace Mission, a bi-annual joint military exercise by member states has been held. China and Russia have been the key players within the SCO and the organization is also increasingly becoming a platform where major statements on international affairs are made (Qi 2018; Song 2016). Not surprisingly, China has made the best of the bi-annual event to both improve the PLA's combat capabilities and to develop bilateral arrangements within the SCO structure to project its military and law enforcement to Central Asian states (Southerland et al. 2020).

As the SCO has evolved, it has also encountered multiple challenges, especially viewed from the perspective of Beijing (and similarly Moscow) using the organization as an exclusive institutional balancing strategy to minimize, if not prevent, the US from establishing more permanent presence and extend its influence in the region. In fact, the exclusive institutional balancing strategy was brought to the fore as a result of several developments that posed significant threats to the very viability of the SCO. The first was the US being allowed by several SCO member states to establish or use military bases in support of its operations in Afghanistan. The specter of such military presence could be made more permanent alarmed China and Russia. US support of what was characterized as the “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 convinced Beijing and Moscow the need to strengthen the organization's internal cohesion, shared values, and coordinated responses to outside efforts of interference and, most notably, pressure on the US to pull back from the Central Asian military bases as active military operations in Afghanistan drew down (SCO 2005; Kimmage 2005).

In June 2017, the SCO formally accepted India and Pakistan as full members of the organization. The expansion has important diplomatic, security, and economic significance for the organization as it now covers 40% of the world's population and 20% of its GDP in the strategically critical Eurasia–South Asia landmass (Hillman 2017). While Russia played an active role in promoting India's membership, the expansion nonetheless aligned with Beijing's geostrategic ambitions as it would further expand the SCO's presence if not yet influence in two geo-strategically critical regions (Weitz 2014). Pakistan's inclusion would allow the SCO to extend assistance and coordinate policies in combating terrorism and ethnic separatism that are major security threats to Chinese interests. Seen in this context, one could argue that SCO expansion to include India is an inclusive institutional balancing strategy to bring New Delhi under the prevailing rules and norms of this organization (Michel

2017). With its expansion, together with a revived Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Beijing was hoping to promote an Asia-style security concept that emphasizes common, comprehensive, cooperation security, and the sustainable development to counter the US-led regional alliance systems and network security arrangements (Ford 2020).

Furthermore, India's inclusion, along with the existing BRICS grouping and the China–India–Russia trilateral framework, means that Washington's efforts in enlisting New Delhi in checking China's challenges to US primacy in Asia could be restrained to some extent. While New Delhi would likely continue to place strong and cooperative ties with Washington as important foreign policy goals, SCO membership and shared perspectives with Beijing in promoting a multipolar international order also suggests that India would be more cautious in joining or being perceived to be part of any anti-China encirclement. Indeed, India's membership, in addition to its participation in the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) as a founding member, suggest it was attracted to the potential economic and security benefits that these Chinese-led organizations could bring (Joshi 2017). These in turn would offer Beijing the opportunity to demonstrate to New Delhi that China is sincere in developing better ties at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, a useful wedge strategy to wean India away from openly endorsing and participating in anti-China networks.

This first round of SCO expansion took place at a critical juncture in international politics. China was in a much stronger position than when the organization was set up more than 15 years before, to consolidate and expand its influence, and promote the types of diplomatic and economic agendas that would serve its national interests. During the Obama administration, Washington sought to maintain its primacy in Asia by launching a multi-pronged pivot or rebalancing strategy, largely in response to perceived and real Chinese growing power in the region. While largely seen in its military aspects of redeploying most of US naval and air force assets to Asia, the Obama administration in fact placed more emphasis on building diplomatic ties and security partnerships, and on developing a high-standard regional free-trade arrangement—the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the TPP—to reclaim the economic momentum and check China's growing influence (Manyin et al. 2012).

In this context, America's decline in leadership credentials in Asia came at roughly the same time when China under Xi Jinping began to assert its. SCO expansion further consolidates Beijing's growing influence in Central Asia and extends to the subcontinent. It promotes an agenda that China has been pursuing for years but has not been able to make major progress until now. Indeed, the SCO has been a testing ground for China to take an important role in both initiating and leading a regional organization vital to its national interests. The establishment and consolidation of the SCO have helped the member states not only in better coordinating and deploying resources in response to these challenges but also, over time, facilitated a sense of community where common interests further encourage cooperation among member states. A stable Central Asia and a cooperative Russia serve Beijing's interests in maintaining regional security and stability, and in seizing and developing the potential for cooperation in energy, trade, and investment, part of China's long-term western development strategy (Clarke 2016).

Needless to say, SCO expansion also carries potential risks, especially if it becomes embroiled in the India–Pakistan conflicts (Grossman 2017). At the same time, while Beijing’s assessment at the time saw more gains and opportunities than potential challenges and even serious problems, it has turned what was perceived as manageable risks when viewed against major diplomatic, security, economic benefits for the organization’s legitimacy, its dynamics, and its geopolitical reach, have been rather underestimated as subsequent events would demonstrate later. Given the perennial India–Pakistan conflicts and growing tension between China and India, keeping them from bringing their disputes within the organization has become a critical management issue for Beijing (Singh and Singh 2021). For the time being at least, China appears to have come away with the most gains in further tilting the balance of power, in two of the world’s strategically vital regions, to its favor (Pantucci 2021a).

In a much larger context, while recognizing that the SCO has evolved as a symbolically highly institutionalized organization with its annual meetings at the heads of state, government, parliament, and ministerial level, its substance structure remains mediocre to non-existence, as are its agendas, which tend to be rather diverse than focused, with key differences in interests and priorities impeding the SCO’s transformation into a real consequential regional organization (Kortunov 2018). Perhaps that was exactly the intent of the founding members so they would not have to cede too much sovereignty to the embryonic construct other than coordinating their efforts in fighting the “three evils.” In fact, apart from the skeleton secretariat the only other concrete entity under the SCO is the RATS—the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. And the bi-annual joint anti-terrorism exercises, which typically feature the Russian, and increasingly Chinese participants, are perhaps the most high-profile activities the organization has engaged in. Moscow’s Eurasian pet projects are meant to preserve the semblance if not the substance of its power while in the process undercutting Beijing’s plans for the organization and the larger region (Clarke 2018).

#### 4 Iran’s SCO Membership and the Greater Eurasian Embrace

As the SCO marked its 20th anniversary in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in September 2021, another milestone was reached, when a formal process was started to consider Iran’s full membership in the organization. This would be the second time the organization expanded its membership after it accepted India and Pakistan as full members in 2017. With Iran as the new addition, the SCO will now extend its reach to the greater Middle East, having already spanning Central Asia and South Asia (Eguegu and Aatif 2021). There is no question that Iran’s inclusion in the SCO has important implications. Its geographic reach has now extended to the greater Middle East. If the organization’s observer members and dialogue partners are included, its geographic footprint is already a fact of life. Analysts debate on whether Iran or the SCO, has been the beneficiary of the expansion, but Tehran has clearly gained a place in a regional organization at a time when it feels isolated and hopes that its membership will open up opportunities to expand political, economic, and cultural ties with countries across the region. With two of its members on the United Nations

Security Council, Iran also hopes its case will get a more sympathetic hearing at the international body, especially where its interests are at stake—including sanctions relief (Eftekhari 2021).

Beijing has in the past two decades greatly extended its reach and influence throughout Central Asia, maritime South Asia, and increasingly also the Middle East. The SCO has helped China secure important energy supplies through Eurasia. Given its interests in self-preservation and opposition to external interference, modest economic objectives of energy cooperation, and infrastructure development, Iran's membership will hardly add to the SCO's strength. If anything, the fact that it is expanding with a major player in the Middle East as its newest member has symbolic significance in the organization's geographic reach and continued relevance as an advocate of certain principles it values, most notably, common development and cooperative security.

Nonetheless, with Iran's full membership, the SCO has expanded its geographic reach to the Middle East. However, whether and to what extent the organization will have the will and capacity to seriously redefine and develop its agendas to play a more prominent role and tackle the security and economic issues that connect three critical regions in the global geopolitical and geoeconomics landscape remains to be seen (Gater-Smith 2018). These could include the stability of Afghanistan in its post-US withdrawal reconstruction. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, established in 2005, could now play a more active role. China is particularly interested in seeking the Taliban government's commitments to not allow the Uyghur separatist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to use Afghanistan to destabilize the Xinjiang Region. However, with the Taliban's return to power, whether the mechanism will continue is not clear, nor is there any certainty that the SCO is willing to get entangled in a highly volatile situation (Pantucci 2021b; Seiwert 2021).

How to translate the organization's potential into concrete policy agendas and deeper collaboration on security and development depends on the extent to which domestic interests and priorities of the member states converge, reinforced by external pressures and opportunities (Gater-Smith 2018). In all likelihood, the SCO's ability to affect and even actively build a regional economic and security architecture will remain limited, selective, and gradual. This is understandable, given the diversity and complex of the three regions—Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East as they face different challenges and require significant resources to tackle them. Clearly, there is potentially a bigger role for the SCO to play to contribute to the post-conflict stability of Afghanistan. However, any discussion of the SCO consolidating into a NATO-like organization remains a distant if not all impossible prospect and could be affected by how the US–Russia and US–China relations will evolve (Kaleji 2021).

On the economic side, while Iran's full membership in the SCO presents new opportunities for the organization, the broader geopolitical realities also impose significant constraints and potential costs to its current members. Whether Iran can get the much-needed economic benefits, for instance, its oil exports will be influenced by how Tehran complies with the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), whether the US will return to the agreement soon, and the extent to which

Washington can and is willing to impose or lift third-party sanctions. Do no harm rather than do more perhaps best captures what the SCO is likely to pursue after its latest round of expansion.

20 years on, China continues to view SCO as an important regional security organization through which to combat the “three evils” and increasingly Beijing is leveraging its growing influence in Central Asia to supplement measures, especially with a focus on Uyghur separatist movements, including strengthening law-enforcement collaboration through both the SCO mechanism (e.g., RATS, joint military exercises) and bilateral arrangements. What is more important, SCO institutionalization in security, economic, and political arenas, together with the other regional institutions such as the CSTO and EEU, has enabled China and Russia to formulate and implement exclusive institutional strategies to exclude the US presence and minimize its influence, especially in security and political areas from Central Asia, where Beijing and Moscow have managed to consolidate their positions, nurture a sense of community, and extended the geographical reach to South Asia and the Greater Middle East with the new membership of India, Pakistan and, in the near future, Iran. At the same time, inclusive institutional strategies as applied by Beijing and Moscow have also allowed China and Russia to manage potential conflicts between them while aligning their resources in promoting their common interests, through the SCO and other organizations.

In the aftermath of the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, the role of the SCO in mitigating the uncertain security environment in the region has been placed on the organization’s agenda. It does not intend to recognize the new regime in Kabul yet but is keen on playing a more active role given Afghanistan’s crucial importance to its neighbors, many of whom are SCO members (Silk Road Briefing 2021). However, getting to a consensus within would be a challenge as members hold diverse positions on how to respond to the Taliban. Beijing, for example, would like to use the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group that was set up in 2005 to address potential challenges after the US/NATO withdrawal. Russia, however, prefers the CSTO to the SCO as the regional vehicle to handle Afghanistan (Omelicheva 2021). Recent reports have also revealed Chinese assistance in building a new military base near the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border, which also reflects Beijing’s concern over the Taliban takeover in Kabul in August 2021 (Standish 2021a).

## 5 Conclusion

Since its inception in 2001, and with its changing interests in the region, Beijing’s SCO policy has incorporated both inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing strategies in that it promotes an alternative regional security arrangement that seeks to exclude or limit the influence of a key ex-regional power (i.e., the US), which could pose a particular threat to China’s interests, including both normative values (the centrality of the state and respect for sovereignty, and the non-interference principle), and geostrategic interests (energy security and potential future markets for Chinese products). Indeed, the West-supported “colored revolution” and democracy promotion in the region have been of particular concern to both Beijing and

Moscow, and likewise for the authoritarian regimes in most member states (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017). At the same time, the fact that Russia still tries to remain a dominant force in Central Asia means that Beijing must also engage in an inclusive institutional balancing strategy in not only seeking Moscow's endorsement of its preferred goals for the organization (against the "three evils") but also place some constraint on President Putin's more ambitious agenda of turning the SCO into an openly anti-West (and the US) alliance (Blank 2008). While China wields enormous economic power and is increasingly extending its presence in Eurasia and South Asia, its ability to use the SCO as both an exclusive institutional balancing strategy and one inclusive one depends on Russia's support. Moscow and Beijing share common interests in countering US influence. But China's interest in expanding the SCO's mandate to include trade, finance, and energy development has met with resistance from Moscow (Gabuev 2017; Lo 2017).

In sum, Beijing has played a critical role in establishing the SCO in the aftermath of the break-up of the former Soviet Union in response to the emerging non-traditional security challenges. Overtime, the SCO has evolved into a regional institution critical to China's growing interests in Central Asia and increasingly, Beijing seeks to influence and shape the organization in support of its institutional balancing strategy—inclusive in soliciting Russian endorsement of its diplomatic agendas in the region ranging from energy security and greater economic integration. Lately, that strategy has also been displayed in the SCO membership expansion to India to minimize chance of a Washington–Delhi axis against China, at least not where SCO-wide (that would include China) interests are concerned. The further expansion of membership to Iran, and the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban both open its geographic reach and entrenches in Central-South Asia should terrorism return in an instable Afghanistan. But the most critical transformation of the SCO as a regional institution is its utility in Beijing's exclusive institutional balancing strategy against the US, to prevent the latter from gaining access and influence in Central Asia and therefore safeguard Chinese interests in both geo-economic (trade and energy) and geopolitical (security and regional stability) terms.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised serious questions for China as to how it can maintain an important partnership and advance their shared interests through the SCO and other regional institutions. Meanwhile, there are serious risks that as a result of its "limitless" relationship, perceived or real, China may be viewed as an accomplice, hence facing sanctions. Putin's unwieldy behaviors and rather aggressive approaches to dealing with the former Soviet republics, from Georgia, Kazakhstan, to Ukraine, can seriously undermine China's regional agendas and place the SCO under significant duress. How Beijing manages this difficult challenge and balances between separating itself from Russian aggression and not alienating or seen by Moscow as deserting it at a critical juncture (Lo 2022). There are great stakes in both preserving the valuable strategic partnership with Russia despite at times competing interests and differences in foreign policy approaches, and keeping the SCO viable and united at a time of growing transatlantic unity and strength.

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