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CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE SCO: CONSENSUS & DIVERGENCE

WANG LI,[1] ZHOU DONGCHEN,[2] and ANNA KOLOTOVA[3]

Abstract: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the largest regional security and cooperation organization and has existed for nearly two decades. Since its inception China and Russia have acted as the driving force behind it, playing a leading role in its development. The main goals of the Big Two's cooperation are to ensure the Eurasian corridor is developed, to promote collective security through regional cooperation organizations, including the United Nations, and to recast the world order on the basis of political dialogue, mutual respect, equality and international law. Nonetheless there are disagreements between China and Russia and among the member states. China is keen to tackle terrorism, extremism and separatism and pursue economic collaboration, while Russia is more ambitious about transforming the SCO into a strategic counterbalance to U.S. hegemony. Looking forward, people may wonder how China, a rising economic power and military force, will continue to share liabilities within the SCO, particularly with Russia but also the other member states. There is no definite answer to that question at the moment. All we can say is that the SCO has steadily evolved into one of the most multilateral and dynamic organizations. But if progress is to be sustained, reforms and systematic change are necessary.

Keywords: China; Russia; SCO; strategic consensus; tactical divergence

Introduction

Over the past few decades, China and Russia have developed their strategic partnership to the highest ever level. An official statement issued by the two heads of state declared that the Sino-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination has come of age. Since 1992 when the world entered the post-Soviet era with all its many uncertainties and challenges, all nations have tried to do their utmost to strengthen their countries. China and Russia are no exception. They consulted with each other and decided to work together to achieve a multiple world order, regional peace and stability. The Russian side has opined that as long as the two Eurasian powers are able to continue to deepen cooperation within the multilateral framework, no one and no force can undermine the strategic trust between Moscow and Beijing. Their confidence in one another has improved continually, and bilateral relations are stronger than at any previous time. Now that China and Russia are re-emerging as economic and highly advanced military powers, they are expected to play a

more responsible role in world affairs. One such example is Sino-Russian coordination in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was founded in 2001 by six states—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—and "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Charter" was adopted in 2002. It is based on mutual trust and neighborliness between member states with an emphasis on joint efforts to ensure peace, security and stability in the region and to build a democratic, fair and rational international order. Its values are enshrined in the "Shanghai Spirit": "mutual trust, equality, respect for cultural diversity, and common prosperity" among members and "non-alignment, non-targeting any third party and inclusiveness" in relation to non-members (Xi, 2014, pp. 373-376). Now the largest regional cooperation organization in the world, the SCO originally grew out of the consensus between China and Russia on peaceful development and the settlement of border disputes in the region, some of which are left over from the Soviet era. As a result, the SCO brings together not only the original six member states but also India and Pakistan, who became full members in 2017, and Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia as observer states, and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka as "dialogue partners". Moreover, guest delegations were sent by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2016 President Recep Erdoğan announced Turkey was ready to apply for full SCO membership as Ankara continued to distance itself from the West (Reuters, 2016). In 2018 Russian President Putin stated, "Although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization started off as a low-profile group, with primary goal of solving border issues between China, Russia, and former USSR member states, it has now evolved into one of the most dynamic organizations." (CGTN, 2018) The SCO, though not a conventional alliance, is a major international organization and can no longer be ignored.

Initially, the SCO set out four areas of cooperation—politics, economics, security and social affairs—in which the major tasks were combatting terrorism, extremism and separatism. At the Qingdao Summit convened in 2018, the heads of the SCO member states reconfirmed the Shanghai Spirit, emphasizing full cooperation. While the original goals of the SCO were founded on security cooperation as the basis of coordinated efforts, at the Qingdao Summit cross-border organized crime, drug trafficking, gun smuggling and internet security were added as new threats to the region's security. The SCO decided that the peace and stability of Eurasia lay in "collective security" rather than in the absolute security of any one country (Wang & Zhu, 2010).

The concept of "collective security" is widely endorsed by many countries, including Russia and China, which are in full agreement as to the function of the SCO. Collective security concerns two related concepts: sovereignty and international law. For China and Russia, sovereignty is the legal supremacy of a given territory that is championed by the United Nations and international law. Some states have, however, refused to be constrained by law and often see their compliance as voluntary rather than mandatory. Another rational behind the Sino-Russian cooperation comes out of their consensus on the common or similar interests and their concern with the U.S. hegemony in the world affairs. As Henry Kissinger (2014) said, in international affairs "States with congruent interests or similar appreciations might assign themselves a special role in guaranteeing the peace and form a sort of alliance"

(Kissinger, 2014, p. 262). Collective security is often designed to deal with specific and strategic threats, either named or implied. In the wake of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the United States, being increasingly paranoid about its supremacy in the world, has sought to structurally reassert itself, opting for the nostalgia of geopolitical struggle. In response to the looming prospect Russia and China came to perceive the United States as a common menace, although the SCO is not officially aimed at a specific issue but at any violation of international norms (Zhou & Wang, 2019, pp. 9-10). But first we must grasp the rationale behind the role of the "Big Two" and the SCO.

The first phase of the SCO (1996–2000)

The 1990s was a key decade in Sino-Russian relations. China was subjected to diplomatic isolation following the 1989 uprising in Beijing and Russia was severely weakened by the collapse of the former Soviet bloc and then fell into internal chaos. Despite the tragic end of the Soviet bloc, new Russia inherited the primary assets of the former Soviet empire. Geographically it extends across the entirety of Northern Asia and parts of Eastern Europe covering the fragile South Caucasus (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). Geopolitically, the South Caucasus has been a land-bridge where East meets West, serving as a land-bridge or barrier for Russia, which was involved in Chechnya's wars (1994–96; 1999–2000). As a result, Moscow vows to acquire a large share of its natural resources and, if necessary, preserve its power over the region.

The eastward enlargement of NATO has pressed Russia into finding allies or strategic partners in its neighborhood. Iran was first to come to Russia's attention because it recognized it was a natural and crucial partner. Meanwhile, Russia was working on a strategic and constructive partnership with China, with the two countries agreeing not to aim or deploy their nuclear warheads against each other. In 1996 the two great powers signed the Shanghai Protocol, along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, laying down the foundations of what would become the SCO. A more pragmatic reason later emerged for the two powers to engage more with one state. In 1999 the U.S.-led bombing campaign by NATO against Yugoslavia led China and Russia to realize the urgency of forming a strategic consensus and in 2001 the Treaty of Sino-Russian Good-Neighborliness and Friendship Cooperation was signed. Out of shared security concerns, the two sides agreed to enter into a de facto alliance and for two main reasons. Firstly, Russia's western borders were now vulnerable to NATO, which had persistently moved eastward along with the EU, while China became involved in conflicts with ethnic groups in its border regions, assisted by external terrorist forces in some cases. Secondly, China and Russia were both permanent members of the UN Security Council. But the United States adamantly ignored and even tried to undermine the UN's role, for example by launching a series of unilateral wars against Iraq, Somalia and Kosovo.

Under these circumstances, China and Russia, with their credible nuclear deterrent capacities, shared geopolitical interests and belief in the role of the UN, were determined to counter the supremacy of the United States by endorsing multilateralism in world affairs. According to the RAND report (Gompert, Cevallos, & Garafola, 2016),

> Russia lacks capabilities to exert effective military operations in Western Pacific, it could exploit U.S. preoccupation in Pacific to increase threats to Eastern Europe (e.g. Ukraine) and the Caucasus (e.g. Georgia), and even try to intimidate its Baltic neighbours despite their NATO membership. (Gompert, Cevallos, & Garafola, 2016, p. 56)

Moreover, Russia indicated it was willing to assist China meet its long-term oil and natural gas demands. More significantly, Russia's advanced military technology could meet China's security needs and expenditure (e.g., aircraft and air defense). In effect, the two countries have realized that the increasingly complex and volatile international scene required them to work with one other in support of a multipolar world order. Joseph Nye warned in 2002 that only the unlikely prospect of a relentless, arrogant United States would drive China and Russia into a comprehensive partnership. Yet, in the post-Soviet era, the policies of an ascendant United States led to the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership (Nye, 2001, p. 28). Ironically, the United States won the Cold War partially because of its friendship with China, which started in 1972 when President Nixon made a historic trip to Beijing, which soon later resulted in U.S.-China cooperation to confront the Soviet Union more effectively.

Yet, ironically two-decades later, open competition and gradual rivalry with China have since led to the Sino-Russian relationship becoming a real strategic partnership, even though Beijing has stated that it has no capacity or even the intention to challenge the United States.

It is true that long-standing geographic and strategic realities have driven realists to opine that Russia's long border between China and sparsely populated Siberia, is inherently porous and has been throughout its history. Neither Beijing nor Moscow will entrust the security of these borders to the continued goodwill of the other; all of which is partially bound up with the inevitable irritation emanating from hegemonic America. In 1996 the American scholar S. C. M. Paine (1996) wrote,

> Now China is resurgent and beginning to catch up with its north giant neighbor, but Russia has imploded both at home and abroad. Consider that with the growing power of China and with the rising tide of Muslim fundamentalism in the Middle East, border tensions between China and Russia—the two Eurasian powers—seem likely. (Paine, 1996, pp. 14-15)

The situation would be much more dangerous if the politically ambitious on either side attempted to use national security and the territorial disputes as a vehicle in domestic politics. The likelihood of this loomed large when Hong Kong and Macao were returned to China. Since the disputed frontier was one of the thorny issues wherein China was once humiliated by Europeans, the Sino-Russian border dispute was likely to cast a long shadow well into the 21st century. However, Paine got the history wrong when she wrote about the *realpolitik* after the end of the Cold War. In 1999 China and Russia formally signed a treaty regarding the delimitation of the eastern borders between the two powers in order to settle the long-standing issue of disputed borders. Both sides agreed that the treaty would underpin mutual trust and bring reciprocal benefits to their relations; nonetheless the treaty itself has been under suspicion among the Chinese in general and the liberal groups in particular.

Sino-Russian strategic cooperation and the SCO (2001–2019)

In 2000 Vladimir Putin became president of Russia, and thus began the "Putin era". The leaders of China and Russia held talks to discuss the complicated and volatile issues of the time and agreed on mutual needs and an equal strategic partnership of coordination in the new century. In addition, China and Russia, along with the Central Asian states, began resolving regional terrorism along their borders. In 2001 the SCO became a permanent intergovernmental organization, and the SCO Charter was signed during the St. Petersburg summit in 2002. The organization is a classic model of a multinational organization with "shared power and liabilities." Its headquarters are based in Shanghai and its Charter was approved in St. Petersburg. As it is the key statutory document of the SCO, it outlines the goals and principles, as well as its structure and core activities. the proceedings of summit meetings since its inception show that the main tasks have been achieved through agreement or co-proposed by China and Russia.

Regionally the SCO prioritizes security and development, the fight against terrorism, and extremism and separatism, which come under the remit of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). In 2001, the SCO stated that terrorism, extremism and separatism were immediate threats to the region. The 9/11 attack provided further motivation for China and Russia, along with Central Asian states, to tackle regional terrorist threats more effectively menaces. Together the SCO member states take up three-fifths of the Eurasian continent, hold about 25% of the world's oil reserves, 35% of its coal deposits, 50% of natural gas deposits and 50% of uranium deposits. Yet, together the GDP of the SCO member states is only a quarter of global GDP, and their efficacy is still at a relatively low level. Security and development are interlinked because one of the goals of the Shanghai Spirit is to seek common development among the member states. In 2013 China proposed to enhance cooperation along the ancient Silk Road which has promoted policy, traffic, trade and monetary interconnectivity and people-to-people exchanges. The SCO member states and observer states were invited to join "the Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) (Rudd, 2020). As the BRI is regarded as a means of achieving common benefits, the SCO has not only continued to enhance the Shanghai Spirit, but also facilitated the common interests of member states in the region. Under Putin Russia has contributed greatly to the joint projects between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union since 2015, for example, Russia agreed to provide security to the BRI and to link the EEU to the BRI. One of the result is to ensure the gaslines from central Asian states to China. As a result, all member states of the SCO agreed to ensure the logistics links and the creation of the common transportation system through Eurasia (SCO, 2020).

Strategically the SCO has stated that it is not an alliance directed against other states and regions but that it seeks political dialogue and cooperation with other states and relevant international and regional organizations, such as ASEAN, the CSTO, CIS and EAEU. Since Russia and China are encouraging multilateral synergy rather than unilateralism. Some scholars have cast doubt on Russia's and China's priorities regarding the SCO, but according to the SCO's Moscow Declaration of 2003, the aim is to jointly develop partnerships on the extensive interests shared by the member states and follow a broad agenda including global and regional cooperation in the political, trade, economic and humanitarian spheres, particularly in countering current threats and challenges, among other things.

On specific issues such as anti-terrorism, China and Russia have endorsed UN resolutions, for example, the SCO acting in line with the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council. The SCO attaches great importance to the early finalization in the UN of the draft of International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and Comprehensive Convention on Combating International Terrorism (SCO, 2011). In 2011 the SCO expressed grave concern over the instability in Libya and Iraq as the foreign armed intervention openly violated the basic principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of all states. The SCO openly urged all the parties concerned to accept the ceasefire in Libya by abiding with the 1970 and 1973 UN Resolutions. This shows that China and Russia have cooperated closely in the SCO and the UN as well.

In addition, since the 1990s, China and Russia have opposed any hegemony in the name of humanitarian intervention without UN approval. They and other SCO member states have observed that the modern world with all its diversity of political and economic systems is changing rapidly. Yet, given the turbulent and complicated prospects of the world situation, China and Russia have urged all the countries, particularly the major powers to respect the different civilizations of the world and to promote an equitable and sustainable world economy. If the major international issues are to be addressed, the United Nations has to be reformed so it can keep abreast of rapidly changing situations in the world. The United Nations should therefore take pre-emptive measures in accordance with the UN Charter and law to avert conflicts (SCO, 2017). The SCO is of the view that the UN should play a responsible role in international affairs, including in the reconstruction of war-worn states. Regimes that transition into peaceful and prosperous democratic societies have to respect national interests and the sovereign rights of the people involved, while the international community has to provide practical, effective aid.

The SCO has listed three key areas in which all the member states, including China and Russia, have common interests, so there is good potential for the fight against terrorism to succeed, as is evident in the remarkable progress made. Looking to the near future, however, it may be that the SCO lacks the political capacity or resolve for it to combine and organize into a formal alliance like NATO. We should be aware of the challenges, and of course no one can predict how the SCO would react to disagreements between the "Big Two" in particular. It is therefore likely that if the SCO has a future role, some internal reforms or adjustments will be essential.

The challenges ahead for the SCO

The SCO has become the world's forefront regional organization in terms of its economic power and military capabilities, not to mention its natural and human resources and vast territories. Xi and Putin are well-aware of the importance of having shared personal views on strategic issues and have declared they will maintain coordination in international affairs. During the trade war between China and the United States, Beijing fought hard to safeguard multilateralism and free trade. Putin stated that "as there remains only a desire of the United States to ensure by all means its global hegemony, any anti-Russian attack, either rhetoric or actions, can't be tolerated without a harsh response from Russia." (CNN, 2018) Although the SCO rejects the cold war mentality of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation of the last century,

China and Russia have responded either individually or within the SCO, but adopting the same position.

China and Russia are eager to safeguard their shared interests because they are aware of the maxim that evenly matched well-armed powers considering war need to calculate whether the possible gains will pay the interest on the probable cost. Unsurprisingly, given their different historical and strategic cultures and domestic priorities, Beijing and Moscow have had different views on some issues, sometimes opposing ones, and have favored different approaches, including in relation to the role and mission of the SCO, both in the present era and the future.

China is a rising power shrugging off its inferior status in modern history, while Russia has been a great power since the mid-18th century and only lost its superpower status during the Cold War. Consequently, China has concentrated on economic modernization and technological innovation, while Russia, a resurgent great power, has been more anxious to restore its world-class status. We should note that China has been involved in the world's economic and financial systems since 1979, and that it cannot modernize outside the globalization processes. Russia has selectively challenged the U.S. and NATO advancement near its borders. President Putin has therefore suggested that the SCO should act more positively in Syria and Afghanistan and on the Iranian nuclear issue. That would mean the strategic partnership set out by China and Russia, a de facto alliance, would seriously hamper U.S. foreign policy. Washington and its allies have come to see Russia and China as strategic competitors and even potential threats and think the two Eurasian powers will continue to challenge American power and interests (BBC News, 2017). The consensus in the EU is that its relations with Russia and China should have an equal balance of cooperation and competition, as can be seen in the fact that Brussels has said that it must look at competition with China on a global scale. (Taussig, 2020)

China is already the second largest economy in the world in terms of GDP, but urgently needs to alleviate poverty in the country by 2020 to ensure the legitimacy of the ruling party. Accordingly, Beijing sees science and technology as the next focus of Sino-Russian cooperation, with China taking the lead in IT, satellite navigation and supercomputers, and Russia having unique advantages in primary research and original innovation. However, there are uncertainties and suspicions among some Russians regarding Russia's role in its relations with China amid concern that Russia will perform poorly against Chinese businesses on products such as Siberian timber and Baikal water, and far eastern farmland used by the Chinese. Beijing is aware of the fragile social basis of the bilateral relations.

Geopolitically, China and Russia may not see eye to eye on Central Asia as historically it has been Russia's "back garden". China should therefore be aware of Russia's core interests in the Greater Eurasian partnership. For example, Vakhtang Surguladze (2014) has argued that Russia's priority in Central Asia is to cooperate security-wise with the CSTO and economically with the EAEU because Moscow has a key role in these organizations, while Beijing is not a member. China and Russia should therefore maintain their strategic partnership in a flexible and principled way. Security is a much broader issue, and the SCO has ensured peace, security and stability in the region. The fact that Xi and Putin have developed a close personal friendship is equally important and enhances the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between the two powers. Since Russia is ready to

provide China with sufficient oil and gas, and more soybeans and other farm products exported to China, the two sides expect faster alignment of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative. In the short run, security cooperation between the Big Two and the SCO member states will be important. Strategically speaking, it is more sensible for China and Russia to build up their relations based upon the mutual confidence and respect of ordinary people in the two countries.

Conclusion

According to Frieden, Lake, & Schultz (2010), alliances can be formal or informal collective security arrangements between two or more sovereign states (p. 174). The SCO is no exception. It was not originally designed to follow a model like that of NATO; nonetheless the interests of the member states and regional stability could be better served. It is also true that the SCO member states have dealt with security issues, such as terrorism and regional instability, primarily caused by the United States' military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan since the Persian Gulf War started nearly three decades ago.

The SCO pursues a collective security framework in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation and the non-targeting of any third party. It has therefore worked hard to expand its functions in trade, investment, transport, energy and agriculture, and in relation to culture and people. A Plan of Action for 2018–22 has been drawn up with a view to SCO members implementing the Treaty on Long-Term Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation (SCO, 2018). Also, at the Qingdao summit, the SCO spoke in favor of the multilateral trade system and criticized any form of unilateralism and trade protectionism. In a show of their cooperation, member states from Central Asia agreed to serve the transport route linking China to Russia, EU and the Middle East as well.

Economically and financially, China is seen as the leading state in the SCO. It unveiled its key Belt and Road Initiative proposal, which is the basic path to realizing common wealth. Sergey Kanavsky (2013), Executive Secretary of the SCO Business Council, has stated that "For Russia, the SCO is the organization where China holds the dominant position, while Russia plays as the co-founder." As the co-founder of the SCO, Russia can exert an influence on China's policy in Central Asia through its historical and geopolitical links. Transnational institutions—whether global or regional—matter because the states that invest in them can influence decision makers' choices. The SCO is an example of this type of organization.

Briefly, the United States' hegemonic policy has driven China and Russia to work pragmatically and steadily to ensure national security, regional stability and a global equilibrium. The SCO will continue to play a role in Eurasia, where China's entente with Russia is key. Notwithstanding the differences between them, China suggests that the Big Two should start from what they are able to do and on what has been agreed.

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[1] School of International & Public Affairs (SIPA)
Jilin University
2699 Qianjin Ave.
130012 Changchun
Jilin Prov.
China
Email: wlchangchun@jlu.edu.cn

[2] Department of History
Qufu Normal University
273109 Qufu
Shangdong Prov.
China
Email: chensff1024@gmail.com

[3] School of International & Public Affairs (SIPA)
Jilin University
2699 Qianjin Ave.
130012 Changchun
Jilin Prov.
China
Email: kolotov711@rambler.ru