

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation:  
A Tenable Provider of Security in Post-2014  
Central Asia?

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## **Abstract**

This article considers whether, and to what degree, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can serve as a security provider in post-2014 Central Asia. The article accomplishes this by contrasting the SCO's strengths and weaknesses against potential (and probable) insecurity in the Central Asian region following the International Security Assistance Forces' (ISAF) planned withdrawal of the majority of its troops by the end of 2014. The article concludes with policy suggestions for the SCO's further development that could augment its weaknesses and make the organisation a more formidable security actor.

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*The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.*

## Introduction

The Obama Administration's May 2014 announcement that the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) will withdrawal all but 10,000 troops by the end of 2014 (with the remaining troops out by 2016) has sparked concern among many Central Asian states as to the region's future security environment. Military and political leaders from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—as well as Russia and China—have expressed fear that a resurgence of insecurity within Afghanistan will result in spill-overs of violence, organised crime, illicit trafficking, and fundamentalist ideology into their own countries.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the shared threats Central Asian states face in relation to the potential post-2014 security vacuum, regional politics are in many ways defined by a lack of common situational awareness and/or cooperation. States in Central Asia continue to view security largely through the lens of their national interests, directly addressing security within their borders but forgoing interstate policy coordination. This narrow view of security is both the result of strict regional adherence to matters of sovereignty and non-interference and lack of trust between Central Asian states.<sup>2</sup> The unwillingness or inability of Central Asian states to engage in collaborative security has stymied regional multilateralism, which remains weak.

A notable exception to Central Asia's lack of regional multilateralism is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Established in 2001 by members of the pre-existing Shanghai Five, the SCO has emerged in Central Asia as a multilateral institution with a mandate to seek cooperation between its member states on security matters. While still in many ways an incipient organisation in that its internal dynamics and strategic agenda remain largely undefined, the SCO has become a regional venue for varying degrees of coordination and cooperation between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China. As it is the only institution in Central Asia that includes this wide array of regional actors, the SCO is in many ways the face of multilateralism in Central Asia today.

There is not, however, a clear line between the SCO's centrality in Central Asian regionalism and its organisational effectiveness. While the SCO has strengths that multilateral institutions in Central Asia such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation lack (CSTO), it also has substantial weaknesses that draw into question its ability to execute its security agenda. The SCO's relevancy as an operational institution—as opposed to its prestige as a regional 'talk-shop'—is, therefore, questionable. Nowhere will the organisation face more pressure to prove its applicability to regional security matters than in Central Asia's post-2014 security environment.

This article considers the degree to which the SCO can both increase multilateralism in Central Asia and meet the challenge of organising a regional response to the potential insecurity in Central Asia resulting from ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan. To accomplish this, the article will first consider the nature and type of security challenges likely to develop in the region as a result of ISAF troop decampment from Afghanistan. It will then look at the SCO's capacities and its limitations to contribute to a multilateral, regional approach to security. The article will then consider the SCO's applicability as a multilateral venue for security cooperation in Central Asia and conclude by providing policy suggestions for the SCO's short and medium-term conceptual, organisational, and operational development.

## ISAF Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Implications for Central Asia's Security

Afghanistan's security environment is very likely to worsen following the ISAF forces' drawdown for three important reasons. First, the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) lacks the capacity and resources to deal effectively with the country's persistent threats. A 2014 United States Congress-commissioned report identified six areas where the ANSF's capacity is deficient, including mobility, air support, logistics, intelligence, communication and coordination, and recruiting and training.<sup>3</sup> This dearth of capacity is especially pronounced among the Afghan National and Local Police, where issues such as tribalism and ethnicity undermine efficiency more than within the Afghan Armed Forces.

Second, international actors such as the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) will likely curtail security and economic support to Afghanistan post-2014. Many analysts believe that while Afghanistan will require international assistance to maintain even a vestige of security, there is an increasingly likelihood that such assistance will be either limited or simply cut-off all together.<sup>4</sup> This potential is most clearly evidenced in the Obama Administration's May 2014 announcement that ISAF forces will completely withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2016. This concern extends to a potential diminishment or withdrawal of foreign direct investment in Afghanistan, which is essential for the country's development and stability.

These eventualities lead to the third point, which is the likely resurgence of radical Islamic groups in Afghanistan following ISAF withdrawal. A weak domestic security apparatus and poor international support will result in fewer counterinsurgent and counterterrorism missions. This mission drawdown, in turn, allow the Taliban to regenerate and to engage in more offensive activity aimed at challenging or displacing government control at the local, provincial, and national levels. The easing up of military activity by foreign forces and the ANSF out of necessity may also allow Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda-affiliates to re-group in northeast Afghanistan for action aimed at the Afghan and Central Asian states' governments.

The confluence of insufficient domestic security, inadequate international support, and growing power among radical groups at the local and national levels has the potential to undermine many of the security gains ISAF has made over the past decade. In this respect, the chaos and instability in Afghanistan following the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1988/89 is a clear historical precedent. While initially pledging continual security and economic support much in line with current ISAF guarantees, the Red Army left Afghanistan with weak political and security institutions. Domestic instability in the Soviet Union (and its subsequent collapse) forced Moscow to first limit and then eliminate its pledged support. These factors, in turn, led to a security vacuum in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Within these situational conditions, the Taliban gained power and Afghanistan became a largely ungoverned space in which foreign jihadist groups established strongholds.

Instability following the Soviet withdrawal and abandonment in Afghanistan had major security implications for Central Asian states, a scenario with similar predictive relevance for the region's post-2014 environment. First, the Afghan civil war affected states like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan through spill-overs in violence stemming from shared ethnic groups and common borders. Second, following the war, the Taliban's expansionist agenda placed both direct and indirect pressure on governments in Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>6</sup> Third, Islamic fundamentalist groups based in Afghanistan such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used the country to network and launch attacks against Central Asian states in an attempt to establish an Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley, which covers large parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR).<sup>7</sup>

While history does not, of course, determine future conditions, there are enough commonalities between the ISAF's and the Red Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan that Central Asian states are concerned, with good reason. While regional dynamics have evolved, much of the structural weakness and vulnerability that existed in post-Soviet Afghanistan and Central Asia remains. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all have varying degrees of institutional weakness and lack the military capacity to insulate themselves from cross border threats. Both Russia and China face internal instability (Russia in the Northern Caucasus, China in the XUAR) that could escalate in tandem with rising regional tensions. Adding to these pressures is the likelihood that the ISAF's withdrawal will facilitate a shift of extremist and terrorist activities from Afghanistan's south to its north that would exacerbate the Central Asian states' vulnerabilities, lead to a rise in regional tensions, and undermine regional stability.<sup>8</sup>

Of the myriad security issues that could result from the ISAF withdrawal and subsequent instability in Afghanistan, the resurgence of the Taliban, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and the growth of narco-trafficking are arguably the most salient. Together, they also form a complex of transnational security concerns that could undermine regional stability.

A return to power by the Taliban could reproduce many of the security tensions and risks that emerged for the Newly Independent States post-1996, which include Taliban attacks on regional symbols of power and spill-over violence among the ethnic groups that straddle formal borders, such as the ethnic Tajiks. Should the Taliban re-take power or establish control over large swaths of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan face the greatest threat to their domestic security situations.<sup>9</sup>

Of particular concern is the resurgence of the IMU in northern Afghanistan and the potential that it will challenge regional states' sovereignty over areas included in the Fergana Valley. The Fergana Valley overlaps areas within Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and the XUAR and is considered by many to be the geographic heartland of Central Asia due to its strategic centrality, its fertile soil, its religious significance, its overall instability, and its dense population.<sup>10</sup> Central Asia's regional stability would suffer greatly should the IMU or any other radical Islamic group establish effective control over this area.

Drug trafficking is another potentially explosive security challenge for the region. While the ISAF has had limited success in dealing with drug trafficking stemming from poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, there is little doubt that production and trafficking will increase in the absence of patrols and border security. A growth in regional drug trafficking would not only lead to transnational violence as criminal gangs and insurgent groups vie for control over the lucrative smuggling routes but would also contribute to outbreaks of drug abuse and addiction throughout the region. As Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan are all connected to Afghanistan through drug smuggling routes, the effect of increased narco-trafficking would truly be region-wide.<sup>11</sup>

While Central Asia remains a region most accurately described as weak in terms of regional cooperation, the SCO has emerged as a platform for multilateralism, however limited. It has both the potential to contribute to regional stability and security through its existing capacities and the potential to fail in its self-appointed role as a security provider because of its institutional shortcomings. If the SCO is to play a central, constructive role in Central Asia's post-2014 security environment, it is, therefore, necessary to critically examine the institution with an eye on potential reform to buttress its strengths and ameliorate its weaknesses.

## **The SCO: Capacities and Opportunities**

Since 2001, the SCO has been the premier institution for dealing with transnational security threats and pushing for regional coordination of military and law enforcement agencies in Central Asia. Over the past decade, it has been instrumental in shaping a fledgling regional identity and determining a regional security agenda exclusive of US involvement. For the six member states, the SCO has been an important forum for trust building, coordination, and cooperation across a range of sectors. For both member and observer states alike, the SCO provides a potential, indigenous alternative structure to that of great power competition that has defined Central Asian geo-politics for decades or longer.

Through its 2013 Bishkek Declaration, the SCO member states have made it clear that the organisation will play a central, although unspecified security provider role in Afghanistan and Central Asia following the drawdown of ISAF troops.<sup>12</sup> Member states also committed to more robust cooperation on countering transnational threats coming from terrorism and drug trafficking, recognizing the instability that the region will likely face post-2014. Both these pronouncements and the SCO's capabilities make it clear that it remains the primary multilateral vehicle for security cooperation in Central Asia.

## *Inclusivity*

The SCO has the capacity to contribute to regional security in a number of important ways. First and foremost, the SCO is a venue for cooperation between the great powers that border Central Asia—Russia and China—and the small, weak states in the region. Within its core membership, the SCO covers the sovereignty states of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the geographic expanse of much of the Central Asia region. This scope of influence and physical area gains significantly when considering the SCO's observer states (many of which have expressed interest in becoming full members), including Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan. No other organisation or institution has anywhere near this degree of participation from Central Asian states, all of which play a central role in ensuring regional stability. More importantly, no other organisation has the potential ability to draw these disparate states into a single body where they can discuss and work to implement security-related policy. Of all the SCO's strengths, this inclusivity of member and observer states is undoubtedly the greatest.

Inclusivity and equality within the SCO also contribute to an overall reduction of tensions between its member states, many of which have histories of territorial and ethnic conflicts. Enshrined in the SCO's 2001 Declaration on Establishment is a commitment by all member states to deal with outstanding security issues through dialogue and to engage where possible in wide-degrees of confidence and security-building activities aimed at establishing trust. In this respect, the SCO has contributed to greater inter-state stability as it provides institutional linkages between states and governments that were previously hostile to one another. Without the SCO to serve as a catalyst for improved relations, state-to-state relations in Central Asia would likely be more acrimonious.

Inclusivity of Russia and China within the SCO also provides a degree of stability for the weaker Central Asia states as both great powers have committed themselves to cooperation and a normative framework of equality and fraternity. This deliberate decision by the region's two great powers amounts to a voluntary limitation of power and a guarantee to the Central Asian members states that Russia and China will not undermine regional stability through pursuit of their own narrowly defined national interests.<sup>13</sup> For the weaker Central Asian member states, this guarantee is hugely valuable as they can pursue other security matters without (in theory) worrying about Russia and China using their power to affect regional change in line with their own priorities.

## *Security Focus*

The SCO's central focus on security, particularly terrorism, separatism, and extremism, is also an opportunity for the organisation to play the prominent role in maintaining stability in post-2014 Central Asia. As evidenced in the 2001 Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, SCO member states have agreed to work singularly and collectively to address the sources of terrorism, separatism, and extremism within and between their respective states.<sup>14</sup>

For Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, this commitment to security is valuable in that they have, in theory, greater access to intelligence from China and Russia—two states with vastly more developed intelligence apparatuses—and to training and retraining of their experts often funded by the SCO's two great power members. They can also receive tactical and operation support aimed at prevention, identification, and suppression of terrorist groups in their territories, many of which the states themselves lack the capacity to effectively govern. These states clearly benefit in terms of their own security and regional stability through their involvement with the SCO.

Russia and China benefit from the SCO's focus on security in that they have assurances from some of Central Asia's weakest states that they will pursue separatist and/or extremist groups within their territories. As both Russia's Northern Caucasus and China's XUAR are vulnerable to terrorist groups operating outside their respective borders in Central Asia, and as both states adhere to norms of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty, it is essential that they guarantee cooperation from the states

from which these groups operate. For China, this means ensuring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan act against ethnic Uyghur groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.<sup>15</sup> For Russia, the SCO allows for greater cooperation against Chechen separatists based and operating in Central Asia.<sup>16</sup>

### *Military Cooperation*

Building on both its inclusivity and its security focus, SCO member states have engaged in military cooperation, exchange, training, and joint-operations since 2003. Military-to-military activities within the SCO framework include large-scale war games led by Russia and China (Peace Mission), anti-terror/anti-crime training with more equal participation from the region's smaller states, and bilateral anti-terror/crime exercises between member states.<sup>17</sup> Smaller exercises include bilateral or multilateral trainings on issues such as hostage rescue, border security, drug smuggling, and terrorism. Cooperation between member states' troops also occurs within the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, or RATS, as each member state commits troops to the permanent organ.<sup>18</sup> These types of military-to-military interaction between member states are the SCO's most salient, potentially significant operational components.

For Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the chance to engage in military exercises within the SCO is an opportunity to raise their military capacity and expertise. All four of these small Central Asian states lack the military means to address their internal security issues while at the same time dealing with transnational threats, so cooperation with the SCO also contributes to their otherwise limited national security resources.<sup>19</sup> Engagement with Russia and Chinese troops within the RATS also provides valuable training opportunities for these Central Asian states' domestic troops, many of whom rely on multilateral venues to receive military training opportunities.

For Russia and China, military cooperation with the Central Asian states is an important opportunity to increase interoperability between their respective militaries and with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan's own security forces. This interoperability is an essential component of both Russia and China's regional security strategies as it provides both states with important security ties to the region as well as a capacity to deal with threats stemming from Central Asia without having to become involved directly in regional affairs.<sup>20</sup> Military cooperation within the SCO framework is also an important messaging tool for both Moscow and Beijing as they seek to reassure smaller Central Asian states of their desire for security cooperation rather than competition.

Lastly, military cooperation under the SCO umbrella is an important enticement for observer states in terms of creating incentive for closer cooperation. Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Iran are all regular observers of the SCO's exercises and see value in the organisation's ability to arrange region-wide security cooperation.

### *The Shanghai Spirit*

Last in terms of the SCO's strengths and opportunities are the organisation's normative features, which member states refer to as the 'Shanghai Spirit'. Based loosely on concepts such as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the Chinese 'New Security Concept', the Shanghai Spirit as elaborated in the SCO's 2001 Declaration and 2002 Charter includes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development. As opposed to the European Union, African Union, or Organisation for American States charters, the SCO does not call for cooperation based on democratic values but instead highlights the importance of non-interference in its member states' internal affairs.

For all SCO member states, the Shanghai Spirit serves as a code of conduct. For the small states, the Shanghai Spirit means, in theory, that they have formal guarantees from both Russia and China that neither will use force to affect change within their states. Such a guarantee by regional great powers is incredibly valuable for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as they are all post-colonial

states. For Russia and China, the Shanghai Spirit is an opportunity to establish political ties with the smaller Central Asian states in line with their own authoritarian systems of government and their own non-democratic norms and values.<sup>21</sup>

## **The SCO: Obstacles and Challenges**

Notwithstanding the organisation's capabilities, the SCO faces a number of obstacles it must overcome to deal more effectively in Central Asia's post-2014 security environment. These challenges stem from the interrelations between member states and from the SCO's existing institutions and structures.

### *Competition between Russia and China: Identity and Influence*

Existing tensions between China and Russia both bilaterally and within the SCO framework challenge the organisation's effectiveness and raise questions about its long-term sustainability. While Beijing and Moscow regularly employ rhetoric around partnership, China and Russia's strategic goals are not only divergent but oftentimes contradictory. There is an 'axis of convenience' as noteworthy for its inherent suspicions, animosities, rivalries, and competitions as for its cooperation.<sup>22</sup> The underlying tensions between the two states become clear when examining their strategic interests in Central Asia and their respective perceptions over the SCO's regional role.

Tensions between China and Russia stem from China's growing influence in Central Asia. Traditionally Russia's sphere of influence, China's economic activities in Central Asia have helped increase Beijing's presence in the region, often at Moscow's expense. While Russia maintains the advantage of having shared linguistic, historical, and cultural ties to many Central Asian states, these traditional linkages are eroding as younger generations look to Beijing, not Moscow, for opportunity.<sup>23</sup>

This balance of influence in the region is significant for two important reasons. First, Russia's status in the region is closely tied to its identity. Should China challenge Russia's position in Central Asia, or even significantly limit its ability to project power into the region, Russia's great power status would diminish. Russia does not enjoy influence over any region in the world like it does over Central Asia. Loss of influence in Central Asia would be a devastating blow to Moscow's prestige.

Second, and perhaps even more important, is the effect China's growing influence has on Chinese attitudes toward Russia's Central Asian position. Whereas before Beijing employed policies specifically conceptualised not to upset Russia's Central Asian sensibilities, Beijing is increasingly dismissive of Russia's claims to an exclusive sphere of influence and interested in expanding further into Central Asia politically and economically.<sup>24</sup>

Notably, competition between Russia and China in Central Asia has been restrained up to the present. The ISAF drawdown in Afghanistan post-2014 will, however, remove one variable that has contributed to cooperation between the two states in Central Asia. Not only will the ISAF withdrawal remove an important driver for cooperation, but it will leave a political, economic, and security vacuum that could spark competition between the two states. Both Beijing and Moscow will certainly see the ISAF drawdown as an opportunity to expand their respective interests.<sup>25</sup> The SCO's future depends in large part on whether the two large states choose to advance their regional interests unilaterally or under the auspices of the SCO.

### *Competition between Russia and China: Implications for the SCO*

This competition between China and Russia extends into the SCO as both states have somewhat conflicting views of the organisation's utility. For Moscow, the SCO is of secondary importance for its multilateral involvement in Central Asia. This is primarily because Russia views the SCO as largely dominated by China, despite Moscow's position within the organisation as co-founder. Moscow



understands that it does not hold the same amount of sway over Central Asian states through the SCO as China's centrality in the organisation dilutes Russia's influence. Russia, therefore, prefers to engage with Central Asian states on security through CSTO and on economic issues through the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), both organisations Moscow largely controls and that exclude Beijing.

In the respect, Russia's sees the SCO's principal value coming from its ability to help Moscow manage its relations with China in Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> Membership in the SCO allows Russia to engage with China so as to institutionalise its regional activities within a multilateral framework. In doing so, Moscow hopes to undermine momentum behind any Chinese-led economic block in Central Asia that might result from, for example, a China-Central Asian Free Trade Agreement (FTA).<sup>27</sup> For all the benefits that Russia receives from its cooperation in the SCO, its ability to affect China's behaviour in Central Asia is the most important.

For China, the SCO is a vehicle to establish a single economic space in Central Asia, to resolve border disputes, and to provide security for the XUAR.<sup>28</sup> While these goals are ostensibly related to Central Asian regionalism, it is more accurate to view China's strategic understanding of the SCO in domestic security terms. China specifically wants to secure regional backing for its internal-security goals of combating the 'three evils' of radicalism, terrorism, and separatism.<sup>29</sup> For Beijing, the SCO is an extended means of ensuring stability in the XUAR through economic development, external/internal control, and regional coordination.

In contrast to Russia, China sees the SCO as the region's dominant economic and security multi-lateral organisation. While China prefers to engage bilaterally with states when possible, the SCO also provides Beijing with a forum to advance its strategic goals at a regional level. The SCO's value for Beijing is re-enforced by China's dominance of the SCO, the SCO's role as a counterweight to the US and NATO presence in Central Asia, and the SCO's ability to facilitate closer Sino-Russian relations.

### *Sovereignty*

State conceptions of sovereignty and the importance of non-interference in state relations in Central Asia is also a significant obstacle for the SCO to emerge as a leading multilateral organisation in the maintenance of Central Asia's security and stability post-2014. For all the SCO member states, the concept of sovereignty is sacrosanct, particularly as they are all dealing with their own internal instability resulting from state-society or intra-society conflicts. The issue of sovereignty affects the SCO both in terms of states not wanting to interfere in other states' affairs (for fear of setting a regional precedent) and in garnering support for states to put aside national interest for the sake of multilateral action.

All the SCO member states, with the possible exception of Kazakhstan, face varying degrees of domestic conflict that effect their respective governments' ability to establish internal sovereignty. These current socio-political challenges coupled with anti-colonial sentiment in the CIS and China effectively undermine the SCO's willingness to act when doing so would entail becoming involved in a state's domestic affairs. This hesitancy to act is evident in three separate events.

Most significant for discussion of post-2014 Central Asian security is the SCO unwillingness to intervene in Afghanistan's domestic affairs in the early 2000, despite the negative impact the Taliban had on all member states' domestic security.<sup>30</sup> While the heads of the SCO's member states all expressed 'deep worries' in a joint statement, they were unwilling to use the SCO to affect the security situation in Afghanistan. There is perhaps no greater argument against the SCO's ability to manage regional instability in post-2014 Central Asia than this precedent.

A second challenge came for the SCO in 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia and recognized the independence of the breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia. SCO member states did not support Russia's actions as they saw it as a violation of the norm of non-interference.<sup>31</sup> Russia's current use of force in the Ukraine to affect internal change within that country poses a similar test for SCO unity.

Finally, the SCO did not mobilize to deal with the violence and change in government that took place in member-state Kyrgyzstan in April 2010. Concern over maintaining non-interference and sovereignty norms, for fear violation could lead to a regional precedent of intervention, overshadowed the need to provide direct security support to the Kyrgyzstan government. This episode marks a particular failure of the SCO as the organisation failed to come to the aid of one of its member states.

### *Member State Relations with the United States*

One important consideration as to the SCO's role in post-2014 Central Asia is the potential presence of ISAF troops in Afghanistan beyond the drawdown date. Indeed, the Obama Administration announced in May 2014 that 10,000 US military personnel will remain in Afghanistan engaged in training and anti-terror missions through 2016, contingent on the US and Afghan governments' reaching a security agreement. This continued ISFA presence would mean the United States would remain at the centre of any regional approach to security in post-2014 Central Asia.

In this eventuality, there is little evidence that the United States would be open to cooperation with the SCO on matters of security in Afghanistan or Central Asia writ large. Rather, the US prefers to deal with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan through annual bilateral consultation mechanisms and with Kazakhstan through a strategic partnership dialogue. The US also engages with all these member states through the Northern Distribution Network, an initiative the US would likely continue to develop so as to increase constructive ties with Central Asia post-2014.<sup>32</sup> The United States also deals bilaterally with China and Russia on Afghanistan and Central Asia security issues, as well as SCO observers India and Pakistan.

While it is possible SCO member and observer states could agree among themselves to deal with the US through the SCO and not bilaterally, the actual chance of such a development taking place is highly unlikely. SCO member states have highly divergent strategic views of US involvement in Afghanistan and Central Asia ranging from Russia's desire to have a total US withdrawal from the region to Kazakhstan's aim of developing robust bilateral cooperation with the US. It is, therefore, questionable whether SCO member states can deal with the US collectively in a way that would meet each state's individual strategic needs more than bilateral cooperation with the US does at present.

While this reality does not directly undermine the SCO's role in Central Asia, it is an obstacle for the SCO to take a leading position that encapsulates its member states' economic, political, and societal goals.

### *Expanding Membership*

Having Iran, Pakistan, and India as observer states is a huge boon for the SCO's overall relevancy as a security provider in post-2014 Central Asia. If their full influence were brought to bear with China and Russia under the SCO, the organisation would be a powerful regional instrument to affect real change in Central Asia. In order for this to happen, however, Iran, Pakistan, and India must become member states. There is scant evidence to suggest such a development in the near-term. Indeed, there is sufficient reason to believe expanded membership will not occur.

First, inclusion of Iran would add to the perception that the SCO is an 'anti-NATO' organisation with a mandate to exclude the US from Central Asia. As the US is currently engaged in isolating Iran economically and politically because of its on-going nuclear program, inclusion of Iran in the SCO would likely bring the SCO and the US into direct confrontation. As Iran's inclusion would not improve SCO functioning, accepting its application for membership would carry more cost than benefit for current member states.<sup>33</sup>

Second, it would be very difficult to accept Pakistani membership in the SCO without accepting Indian membership and vice versus. Extending membership to both states would, however, likely end in internal conflict that would hamper the SCO's effectiveness.<sup>34</sup> The inability for

Pakistan and India to work together within a regional multilateral setting is already evident in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Such animosity could also develop between India and China or force a division with Russia-India on one side and China-Pakistan on the other.

These contingencies coupled with the SCO's conservative approach to expanding membership suggest the SCO will not admit Iran, Pakistan, or India into the organisation in the near future. This is unfortunate as the three countries' exclusion greatly undermines the SCO's ability to act as the premier regional multilateral institution. Without Iran, Pakistan, and India's participation, the SCO cannot claim to speak for Central Asia a whole.

### *Two-tiered system, asymmetrical cooperation.*

The SCO remains an unbalanced organisation, with Russia and China occupying the dominant leadership positions and the small Central Asian states occupying more dependent and passive roles.<sup>35</sup> Some analysts have gone so far as to question whether the Russia and China have coerced the weaker member states into joining the SCO and to suggest the organisation is a form of shared regional hegemony between the two great powers. As the small SCO member states do benefit from membership, and as they remain engaged with the US on a bilateral level in ways that often undermine Russia and China's strategic concerns, this perception of the SCO seems farfetched. Nevertheless, asymmetry does exist within the organisations to the point where a small state like Mongolia, which is currently an observer, does not see the benefit of full membership.<sup>36</sup>

### **The SCO as a Security Provider?**

Analysis of the SCO's strengths and weakness reveals a multilateral institution that is in many ways at a transitional point. While on the one hand the SCO is better positioned than any other institution to deal with potential insecurity in Central Asia resulting from the ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan, on the other hand it is an organisation with deep, inherent weaknesses with the potential to undermine its operational capacity and to stymie further development. In this respect, the correct question may not be whether the SCO is capable of acting as a security provider in Central Asia post-2014, but whether it will rise or sink in the face of unprecedented transnational security challenges.

Much depends, of course, on how the SCO's member states deal with any increase in regional insecurity. If its six member states adopt a more collective approach to security in which they willingly accept limitations on their sovereignty for the sake of a more robust, collective security response, their actions will strengthen the SCO as an institution. If each member state reconceptualises security as a complex, transnational phenomenon in need of an equally complex, transnational response, the SCO will most certainly emerge as the regional forum best suited to coordinate such a response.

Conversely, if the SCO member states continue to view security in terms of their national interests—resisting any voluntary limitations on their respective sovereignties for the sake of a collective response—the SCO will become less salient in regional security affairs. This potentiality is even greater if diverging security priorities emerge between member states, thereby creating tension or animosity within the existing SCO structure.

Considering these two potential avenues for development, the remaining article provides policy recommendations that could ameliorate the SCO's weaknesses and raise the possibility for collective security action with the SCO framework.

## **SCO: Potential Policy Reform**

### *Solve the China-Russia Challenge*

The SCO's development is hamstrung by China and Russia's conflicting agendas and the innate competition between the two states. The division between the two states over the SCO's purpose is often cited as the organisation's key failure and its principal weakness. For the SCO to develop into a more effective and cohesive regional institution, it is essential that the two states work to form a common conceptualization of the SCO's functions. Even agreeing on a lesser role for the SCO than is often envisioned would strengthen the organisation as it would allow other members and observers states, as well as external actors, to view the organisation with more transparency and certainty. Failure to develop this common stance will result in a less cohesive organisation that is more prone to inaction or overreaction.

The SCO's Council of Heads of State and Council of Heads of Government are the appropriate venues for dealing with the rift between Chinese and Russian intentions and goals. Both councils meet once a year and have power to define and set a clear future agenda for the SCO. More effort must be taken in these venues to establish a lasting vision of the SCO that both Beijing and Moscow adhere to. Member states must acknowledge competing agendas and seek institutional means to deal with them.

### *Focus on Collective Security*

Member states must relax their traditional Westphalian concepts of sovereignty if the organisation is to develop into a security community or an integrated economic community. Unwillingness by member states to accept a compromised sovereignty over transnational security issues or interstate trade and investment could result in the SCO becoming little more than a 'talk shop' that engages in high sounding rhetoric around cooperation but lacks a mandate and mechanisms to enforce state compliance. For the issue of sovereignty not to remain an obstacle, all member states, including China and Russia, must be willing to move toward greater interdependent sovereignty.

SCO member states must strengthen the SCO's Council of National Coordinators by expanding its mandate to include facilitating interstate cooperation. The Council should focus on developing the mechanisms whereby member states can engage through interdependent sovereignty as well as dealing with states' internal issues without violating the SCO's commitment to non-interference.

### *Deal with the US as a Collective*

SCO member states must increasingly work to speak with a single voice on regional issues. This is particularly true when dealing with the United States in Central Asia, as its goals are often divergent from those of individual SCO member states. It would be much easier for the SCO to maintain continuity in relations to the US if it formed into a security community or economic block. In this respect, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provides a useful model. While the US does still engage bilaterally with ASEAN member states, it also works on regional issues through the organisation. A more formalised SCO could similarly socialise the US in Central Asia in a way that would increase its relevancy.

The role of speaking with a common voice falls to the SCO's Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, although at present its mandate is limited. SCO member states must bestow more authority on the Council to engage bilaterally with member states so as to formulate organisation-wide positions. Member states can strength the council through closer coordination of their activities with outside states, such as the United States.

### *Clarify the Path to Membership*

The SCO must either develop a more systematic means of expanding the organisation's members or declare its intention not to expand membership. Failure to deal with membership in a forthright manner gives the organisation the appearance of equivocation and inefficiency. The issue of membership expansion is closely related to that of China-Russian relations as both states have their own national interests in either expanding or limiting membership. Member states must reach a consensus and provide transparency in their decision making. Failure to do so will result in the SCO's presenting a disunited face to the international community.

The SCO should amend Article 13 of its Charter to more directly outline requirements, timeframes, and limitations for membership. At present, Article 13, which outlines the organisation's approach to expanding membership, is vague in all three of these criteria. A more clearly defined rubric for membership would go a long way to providing coherence and transparency to a process that is increasingly mired in member states' internal politics.

### *Eliminate the two-tiered system and asymmetrical cooperation*

Arguably the most important conceptual reform the SCO must undertake is establishing a mechanism for dealing with asymmetry within the organisation. Smaller member states are not satisfied with their subordinate position and observers, such as Mongolia, are not interested in joining because of the apparent unequal nature of cooperation in the SCO. Amending this situation will require organisational reform as member states are theoretically equal within the SCO's Charter. It will require conscious relinquishment of power by China and Russia.

One way the SCO can move toward a more balanced system is to revise its decision making process. At present, the SCO relies on consensus as a decision making mechanism rather than unanimity.<sup>37</sup> The key difference between the two methods is that consensus decision making does not require members to vote, only to not vocally object. If the SCO moved toward unanimity, all member states would hold one vote and be forced to make their position known during the decision making process. This revision might limit Chinese and Russian influence over the smaller states as there is a large difference between abstention and voting against one's interests.

## **Conclusion**

Since 2001, ISAF forces in Afghanistan have borne the brunt of fighting against the Taliban, the IMU, and Al Qaeda while also helping to stem the flow of transnational crime from Afghanistan into Central Asia. While far from perfect, the ISAF's activities have contributed to regional stability in Central Asia outside of Afghanistan across a number of fronts. Established in 2001, the SCO developed as a multilateral institution within this relatively stable environment. For the entirety of its existence, the SCO has relied on the ISAF to provide the security environment in which it functioned. This dynamic of security provider and security received will, however, end after 2014 together with the ISAF's mission in Afghanistan. New regional dynamics, in whatever shape and form, will force the SCO into a central role of security provider.

The question is whether the SCO is ready to assume the role as Central Asia's primary security provider. The answer is far from certain. The SCO clearly has strengths that other multilateral organisations in Central Asia lack, but these strengths are largely offset by its internal weaknesses. While the reforms this article identified could help ameliorate these weaknesses, it is also uncertain whether SCO member states would accept reform along these lines, particularly as many of the reforms run counter to the SCO's founding tenets and challenge the organisation's status quo relations.

One point of certainty within this line of questioning is that the SCO will have to fundamentally change in the near-term as its new operation environment will force such change. Gone are the days when the SCO

member states could opt out of regional security matters such as instability in Afghanistan. Time will only tell whether the organisation meets the challenges drawing on its strengths or whether the challenges precipitate the SCO's irrelevancy.

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