



The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): An evolving platform that should not be overlooked

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Summary

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It has since expanded to nine members with the inclusion of India and Pakistan in 2017, Iran in 2023, and Belarus in 2024. The SCO Charter, drawn up in 2002, announced the organization's ambitious aims to foster security and economic cooperation amongst its members. Yet in the two decades since then, the SCO has had relatively limited success. In the security domain, its main achievements have been the many statements about furthering cooperation on countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism, together with the annual military drills in which some members participate. Meanwhile, in the economic area, it has helped advance Chinese lending to Central Asian states and has indirectly spurred trade and cooperation between members, but its other economic aims have largely not been realized. This ineffectiveness of the SCO can be attributed to the fact that the different members, particularly China and Russia, have distinct interests regarding the organization. Recently, however, there are signs that they are coming more into alignment. This means that we should not write off the SCO just yet.



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Introduction

In the summer of 2024, sixteen world leaders from across Asia gathered in the Kazakh capital of Astana for the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Among them were the Chinese president Xi Jinping, attending after making a state visit to Kazakhstan, and Russian president Vladimir Putin, who came after trips to North Korea and Vietnam. This key summit ended with the Astana Declaration in which the expanding number of members of the SCO described how they together aimed to respond to “tectonic shifts” taking place in international affairs.

The SCO was established at the start of the new millennium to formalize cooperation amongst China, Russia, and the Central Asian states bordering with them. But what exactly is the role of the organization, and how effective has it been in achieving its objectives? This UI brief has three aims. First, it introduces the SCO and describes its objectives. Second, it offers an assessment of what the SCO has achieved so far in the domains of security and economic cooperation. Third, it provides analysis of why concrete achievements in these areas have been relatively limited and how recent developments in international politics are affecting the organization. It concludes by arguing that these developments mean that the SCO may potentially take on greater importance in the future. We should not assume the organization will continue to be held back by conflicts of interest amongst members and it should be watched closely in the coming years.

¹ Weiqing Song, ‘Interests, Power and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2014): 85–101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.809981>.

Introducing to the SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established at a summit meeting in the Chinese city of Shanghai in June 2001. It was the successor to the more informal “Shanghai Five” dialogues which had been set up in 1996 by China, Russia, and the three bordering states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These were held largely as way of reducing border tensions and building confidence between China and new neighbouring states after the Soviet Union collapsed.¹ These summits became institutionalized, and the discussion expanded to issues including drug trafficking, cross border crime, and terrorism. In 2001, these states were joined by Uzbekistan to make up the SCO original grouping.² The organization has since also gained new members India and Pakistan (2017), Iran (2023), and a first European member, Belarus (2024). The SCO grants observer status to Mongolia and Afghanistan, although the latter has been inactive since 2021. It also has numerous dialogue partners, such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The SCO Charter³ was drawn up in 2002 and outlines the core principles of the organization, such as consensus-based decision making and mutual respect of sovereignty of member states. It was established that the organization would have a secretariat based in Shanghai (reflecting China’s leading role) to carry out coordination and support activities, headed by a Secretary General appointed on a rotating basis by the different member states.

² Turkmenistan adopts a neutrality stance that has meant it has not joined the SCO, but since 2007 the country’s president has frequently attended the annual summits.

³ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreaties/Doc/000M3130.pdf>



The Charter also sets out the SCO's main aims. From the outset, it was intended to have both security and economic roles. In the realm of security, the SCO was envisaged to continue the focus of the "Shanghai Five" on border security and cooperation against cross border crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism. In particular, it aimed to continue the emphasis on combatting international terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism. These issues have been a priority for China since the late 1990s⁴ and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has grown increasingly worried⁵ about the potential for extremist activities in its far western regions to challenge its rule.⁶

Other members of the SCO also have longstanding concerns about terrorist threats and particularly about Islamic movements. These include the Uzbek government's worries about threats from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan⁷ and Russia's worries about terrorist groups in Chechnya and Afghanistan.⁸ Several of the Central Asian states are plagued by internal instability and see cooperation with China and Russia as a way to help stabilize their regimes.⁹ Both China and Russia share a

concern about the potential for "colour revolutions" in the Central Asian states, where external interference brings to power pro-Western regimes.¹⁰

The SCO is also intended to play an economic role. The Charter states it will provide "support for, and promotion of regional economic cooperation in various forms, fostering [a] favourable environment for trade and investments with a view to gradually achieving free flow of goods, capitals, services and technologies".¹¹ While there have been arguments that economic goals are secondary to the SCO's security focus,¹² its economic role should not be underestimated. Although the SCO emerged out of informal security cooperation, from the outset it also identified economic cooperation as a second pillar and has placed steadily increasing emphasis on this. In the SCO legal framework, there are 122 documents (or around 7 percent) related to the economy and aimed at enhancing interaction on trade, banking, and investment activities, as well as manufacturing, agriculture, and transport.¹³ Developing economic cooperation under the SCO has been a particular focus of China. This

⁴ Jean Pierre Cabestan, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, and the Great Powers, an Introduction: One Bed, Different Dreams?', *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (May 2013): 423–35, <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2013.53.3.423>.

⁵ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

⁶ Marc Lanteigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"', in *Russia's Turn to the East*, ed. Helge Blakkisrud and E. Wilson Rowe (Palgrave, 2018), <http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15015>.

⁷ Lanteigne.

⁸ Fiona Hill, 'West Shouldn't Back Russia's Crackdown on Islamic Terror', *Brookings*, 7 May 2001.

⁹ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

¹⁰ Lanteigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"'.

¹¹ 'The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', Indian Ministry of External Affairs, accessed 31 March 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/000M3130.pdf>.

¹² Cabestan, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, and the Great Powers, an Introduction: One Bed, Different Dreams?'.

¹³ Rashid Alimov, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its Role and Place in the Development of Eurasia', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1 July 2018): 114–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001>.



is partly a consequence of China's tendency to link security and economic goals based on the assumption that prosperous people do not revolt.

Limited achievements

The SCO has increasingly institutionalised, expanded its membership, and held more than twenty annual summits which have resulted in numerous statements about enhancing cooperation. Yet the concrete implementation of these statements lags behind the rhetoric.¹⁴ It has arguably achieved most in the security domain, while even here accomplishments are limited. The SCO has gradually developed institutional arrangements connected to security. It approved the "Shanghai Convention on Combatting Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism" (often referred to as the three "isms") at the founding summit in 2001. It followed this by establishing the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) a year later.¹⁵ As part of this, China has contributed by providing military assistance such as materials and personnel training. In 2017, the organization adopted the SCO Convention on Countering Extremism, which furthered ambitions for cooperation on the "three isms" between the expanded number of members of the organization. Following this second convention, joint military and anti-terrorist exercises conducted between members have steadily increased.¹⁶ More recently, at the 2023 Council of Heads of State Summit chaired by India, the members

made a further joint statement on cooperation to counter radicalization leading to separatism, extremism, and terrorism.¹⁷ The SCO has also facilitated dialogue on security issues between the leaders of key member nations, such as the meetings between the Chinese president Xi Jinping and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in 2017 and 2020.¹⁸

There have been many statements about security cooperation of this kind, but concrete actions have remained more limited. Observers have suggested that RATS has failed to put in place more substantial cooperation on combatting terrorism because of the suspicions which SCO member states harbour about their neighbouring countries.¹⁹ They have also described how, while it has succeeded in organizing joint exercises, when terror attacks do occur in member states the response from the SCO has largely been limited to statements expressing sympathy and support. Although the reemergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan gave new impetus to the SCO's counterterrorism and drug trafficking activities, the organization has so far been ineffective in dealing with the growing number of issues which developments there present.²⁰ The SCO has also shown limited effectiveness in supporting its member states with domestic challenges to their regimes. Rigid adherence to the principle of non-intervention in sovereignty limits its ability to intervene in domestic security crises faced by members.²¹

¹⁴ Julie Boland, 'Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Lost Decade? A Partner for the U.S.?', 26 June 2011.

¹⁵ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

¹⁶ Song.

¹⁷ Ashok Sajjanhar, 'India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Vital Partnership', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 17, no. 3–4 (2022).

¹⁸ Sajjanhar.

¹⁹ Cabestan, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, and the Great Powers, an Introduction: One Bed, Different Dreams?'.

²⁰ Eva Seiwert, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 30 September 2021.

²¹ Lantaigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"'.



One main success has been the carrying out of joint military drills between members. These military exercises have gradually expanded over the years. The first was in China in 2002, involving Chinese and Kyrgyz forces.²² Since then, they have become known as “Peace Missions” conducted annually and involving a range of SCO members. Russia and China conducted joint drills for the first time in 2005. In 2007, a broader military exercise was carried out in China’s symbolically laden Xinjiang region, involving troops from Russia, China, and other SCO members Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with only Uzbekistan not participating.²³ These drills have helped to foster closer cooperation between member states²⁴ and added to their counter-terrorist capabilities.

However, despite the relative success of these drills, there have remained issues. Participation by SCO member states is voluntary. While China has actively participated in almost all of the exercises, participation by other members has been more irregular. The different SCO members have continued to have diverging views about carrying out these drills. For example, China and Russia sometimes disagree about their planning, as they did in 2007 when Beijing did not want to conduct Peace Mission exercises alongside the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance in which Russia has a leadership role.²⁵ Although Russia’s support for the exercises has grown as it is challenged

by the US, it has remained relatively passive.²⁶ This is partly due to its fears that greater cooperation in the SCO, where other powers are more dominant, will mean it loses the regional influence it maintains with leadership in other organizations.

In other areas of security cooperation, the SCO has also been relatively ineffective. For instance, it played very little role in the political and security crisis which developed after protests against the government in the member state of Kyrgyzstan in 2010.²⁷ The only attempt to exercise influence over the events, which threatened to plunge the country into civil war, was to issue a statement calling for a peaceful resolution. This led some commentators to remark on how surprisingly disengaged the SCO was regarding this situation.²⁸ The SCO was similarly absent when violent protests broke out in 11 provinces in Kazakhstan at the start of 2022, with the Kazakh president instead calling on Russia and the CSTO for assistance.²⁹ The organization has had only a very limited influence over developments in relations between Russia and Georgia, and in the Ukraine crisis. In many of these situations, the SCO might have been expected to intervene in order to address security issues and bring greater stability to the region. China generally tends, rather than acting unilaterally, to make use of multilateral cooperation platforms to maintain stability in regions with which it has significant economic relations. However, the SCO has been limited in its ability to act by its

²² Janko Šćepanović, ‘Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity’, *European Politics and Society* 23, no. 5 (2022): 712–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1932081>.

²³ Šćepanović.

²⁴ Stephen Aris, ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Eurasian Security Actor?’, in *Regional Organisations and Security*, ed. Stephen Aris and Andreas Wenger (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203422496>.

²⁵ Lanteigne, ‘Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the “Crimea Effect”’.

²⁶ Song, ‘Interests, Power and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)’.

²⁷ Richard Weitz, ‘What’s Happened to the SCO?’, *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2010.

²⁸ Weitz.

²⁹ Sajjanhar, ‘India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Vital Partnership’.



strict adherence to the principle of non-intervention in sovereignty. During 2024, after many years of disputes that boiled over into armed clashes in 2021 and 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan successfully reached agreements on their borders.³⁰ However, despite the fact that both are members of the SCO and CSTO, these two organizations played very little role in these discussions. Instead, this was a diplomatic process between the two, with assistance from Uzbekistan.

Economic Cooperation

The SCO has been even less effective in furthering economic cooperation between members. Very few of the organization's ambitious economic goals have been realized. One of the few cooperative successes occurred in 2004 when, under the SCO framework, China agreed to provide a US\$900 million loan with preferential interest to the Central Asian states. This agreement was implemented in the following two years.³¹ Apart from this, economic cooperation has been limited to several framework agreements made at the annual summits which lack firm plans for implementation.

The organization has arguably also indirectly spurred trade and cooperation between different members.³² The SCO has helped member states, particularly the Central Asian states, to work together on infrastructure

projects including railway lines and energy pipelines. One example is the pipeline completed in 2009 which carries gas from eastern Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China.³³ China has also reached bilateral agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on specific projects, where this process may have been helped by the fact that these states are meeting frequently in the SCO. More recently, China and Iran have agreed to large cooperation programs, where again this could have been helped by Iran's gradual incorporation into the SCO as observer in 2005 and as a full member in 2023.³⁴ Yet much of this cooperation, while loosely under the SCO framework, is best described as bilateral cooperation between China and regional states which may have been helped by the SCO. In many areas China has increasingly pursued cooperation outside of the SCO.

Lack of consensus between members has led to failed attempts at economic cooperation.³⁵ In the energy sector, China is interested in developing cross border transportation, but Russia remains focused on controlling energy in the region and has blocked efforts to establish a comprehensive regional energy framework.³⁶ In 2016, the then Chinese premier Li Keqiang again expressed the long-standing desire for the SCO to establish a free trade zone.³⁷ This proposal was opposed by the Russian Prime Minister at the time, Dmitry Medvedev, who argued that establishing such a regime would be complicated and involve delegation of

³⁰ Sher Khashimov, 'Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Finalize Border Agreement – The Diplomat', *The Diplomat*, 26 February 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-finalize-border-agreement/>.

³¹ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

³² Cabestan, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, and the Great Powers, an Introduction: One Bed, Different Dreams?'

³³ Cabestan.

³⁴ Lars Erslev Andersen, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Forum Where China Works for a Multilateral Order in Central Asia', *DIIS*, 4 November 2022.

³⁵ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

³⁶ Song.

³⁷ Lantaigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"'



decision making authority.³⁸ Russia has also opposed the establishment of an SCO bank.³⁹ Some commentators have argued that Russia has never really been in favour of any economic aspects of the SCO.⁴⁰ They suggest that the SCO's failure to move forwards on all these forms of economic cooperation is rooted in the relative gains concerns of both China and Russia, where each is worried about how cooperation will aid the other side.

Different aspirations

The different members have distinct interests regarding the SCO. China is most enthusiastic about consolidation of the current SCO cooperation into a more complete organization that covers different key functional areas.⁴¹ It remains focused on combatting the “three isms” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism). China's large-scale infrastructure program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has also increased the importance that it attributes to security in the neighboring regions.⁴² China wants to use the SCO as a mechanism to enter more fully into the Central Asian region, engaging equally in both security and economic cooperation.

Russia is much less enthusiastic about the SCO overall.⁴³ For security issues, Russia for a long time has viewed the SCO as more of a

complement or secondary focus, placing greater emphasis on the CSTO.⁴⁴ Russia is also hesitant about economic cooperation through the SCO⁴⁵ and wary about China's growing presence in the region which is traditionally its own backyard.⁴⁶ Yet Russia does show a willingness to participate in the SCO for several reasons. First, it likely recognizes that being a part of the organization is necessary, and it would face costs otherwise. Second, it regards the SCO as a useful way to improve relations with China.⁴⁷ Third, and perhaps most importantly, Russia views participation in the SCO as a way to reinforce its external image as an influential actor and to “reaffirm Russia's status of a great power”.⁴⁸ Russia particularly recognizes how the SCO can be used to symbolically challenge the dominance of the Western powers and push for an alternative world order. For Russia, the SCO provides an effective means to advance a desired form of international order and global governance that recognizes global multipolarity.⁴⁹

The Central Asian states aim to use the SCO to develop relations with both Russia and China. They almost all suffer from a lack of regime security, looking to both Russia and China to help support them in this area. However, like Russia, some of these states tend to view the SCO as secondary to other security cooperation mechanisms in the

³⁸ Lanteigne.

³⁹ Lanteigne.

⁴⁰ Šćepanović, ‘Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity’.

⁴¹ Song, ‘Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)’.

⁴² Lanteigne, ‘Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the “Crimea Effect”’.

⁴³ Šćepanović, ‘Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity’.

⁴⁴ Song, ‘Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)’.

⁴⁵ Lanteigne, ‘Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the “Crimea Effect”’.

⁴⁶ Šćepanović, ‘Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity’.

⁴⁷ Šćepanović.

⁴⁸ Šćepanović.

⁴⁹ Šćepanović.



region, such as the CSTO.⁵⁰ Economically, they broadly share a need to engage in greater cooperation to bring in foreign investment that will allow them to develop infrastructure which can support their key industries and export of resources.⁵¹ They see how both China, and to a lesser extent Russia, can be useful in providing this kind of economic cooperation. While wary of China's involvement, they have also embraced its growing role in the region to some degree and treat the SCO as a useful way of managing this relationship collectively.⁵²

Although relations between these states have improved considerably in recent years, they also remain somewhat wary of cooperation with each other. While China and Russia may be interested in developing organizations like the SCO as a pole in world politics, the Central Asian states are non-polar. They share China and Russia's critiques of some aspects of the Western dominated international order, but they are not anti-Western and do not want to be tied exclusively to China or Russia. The last thing they want is to be behind a new iron curtain. The lack of success of the SCO until now in bringing about greater security or economic cooperation is largely due to these conflicting interests of its members, particularly China and Russia. The different members remain suspicious of each other. Russia and the Central Asian states are wary about China's growing influence in the region. These

divergent interests and suspicions prevent the members from moving cooperation forwards. China would like to consolidate and enhance both security and economic cooperation between the organization's current members.⁵³ Russia seeks to use the organization for functional needs but remains ambivalent about economic cooperation, at the same time keeping a limit on China's growing influence in the organization and in the region.⁵⁴

Russia's aim of limiting Chinese influence has led it to not only block further deepening of SCO cooperation but also to approach the organization in ways that may undermine its effectiveness.⁵⁵ Because it seeks to prevent China from becoming too influential in the region, Russia has pushed for the expansion of the SCO membership in order to dilute this influence, promoting the inclusion of new members such as India.⁵⁶ China was reluctant about the expansion of the organization and would not allow India to join unless Pakistan was also granted membership, leading to both states becoming SCO members in 2017. Russia's push for expansion of the SCO has resulted in the organization becoming even more crowded with different voices.⁵⁷ The existing conflicts of interest within the SCO are further compounded.

India was encouraged by Russia and Kazakhstan to participate in the SCO but was initially reluctant.⁵⁸ It became an observer of

⁵⁰ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

⁵¹ Timur Dadabaev, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Regional Identity Formation from the Perspective of the Central Asia States', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2 January 2014): 102–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.809982>.

⁵² Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

⁵³ Jing-Dong Yuan, 'China's Role in Establishing and Building the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO)', *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 67 (20 November 2010): 855–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2010.508587>.

⁵⁴ Šćepanović, 'Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity'.

⁵⁵ Šćepanović.

⁵⁶ Lanteigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"'.

⁵⁷ Lanteigne.

⁵⁸ Sajjanhar, 'India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Vital Partnership'.



the organization in 2005, but adopted a position of not attending summits because it did not have a substantive role. However, it has gradually become more enthusiastic about the SCO, especially since becoming a full member in 2017. Since then, India has chaired summits in 2020 and 2023, assuming the rotating presidency from 2022-2023.⁵⁹ India recognizes that SCO membership can allow it to expand contact with Central Asian countries, with which it is keen to develop stronger trade in resources, and can also allow it to participate in initiatives to deal with threats from terrorism, radicalization, and extremism in the region. However, there remain tensions between India and other main SCO members which may constrain its involvement. The relationship between India and China has seen increasing friction in recent years, with stand-offs on the border between them. India has not supported China's BRI and is concerned about its growing activity in South Asia.⁶⁰ This may make India reluctant to participate more actively in an SCO where China is increasingly dominant. In addition, India has longstanding tensions with Pakistan, which also became a full member of the SCO in 2017. This is reported to have prevented the two from extensive cooperation on security issues.⁶¹

New developments

This has until recently been the underlying picture of a dysfunctional SCO mired by competing interests and the lukewarm attitudes of its main members. Yet recent global developments, particularly with the

Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, are shifting this situation. These are helping to bring the interests of SCO members in line in ways that could make possible greater cooperation within the organization. China had previously failed to push forwards SCO economic cooperation, largely because of opposition to this from Russia which sought to preserve its own influence. However, in recent years, China's own bilateral initiatives have meant it has grown more established in the region and at the center of much regional trade.⁶² This is such that Russia may be forced to accept the reality on the ground. In addition, since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia has become much more dependent on China⁶³ in ways which may limit its ability to oppose Chinese initiatives to develop the SCO. More broadly, following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has gradually shifted to looking more favorably on the SCO's economic role as a platform for seeking partners outside of Europe.⁶⁴

The SCO members have become more aligned in their views about using the organization to challenge Western dominance. Initially, Russia was more supportive of this, calling on the SCO to challenge the economic and political influence of the West and push for a multipolar world order.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, China and other members were more cautious. However, events over the past two decades and particularly in recent years, have helped to bring the members closer together. For instance, the decline in Uzbekistan's

⁵⁹ Ayjaz Wani, 'SCO under India's Presidency', *Observer Research Foundation*, 14 August 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/sco-under-indias-presidency>.

⁶⁰ Lanteigne, 'Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the "Crimea Effect"'.
⁶¹ Šćepanović, 'Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Question of the Commitment Capacity'.

⁶² Temur Umarov, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Is Ineffective and Irrelevant', 5 July 2024.

⁶³ Alexander Gabuev, 'Russia's Reliance on China Will Outlast Vladimir Putin', *The Economist*, 18 March 2023.

⁶⁴ Eva Seiwert, 'The SCO Faces Rewards and Risks as It Admits Belarus', 2 July 2024.

⁶⁵ Šćepanović.



relations with the West following the 2005 Andijan incident helped to shift its approach towards the SCO as a challenge to NATO.⁶⁶ More recently, China has joined Russia on the receiving end of economic pressure from the West, particularly with the US imposition of economic sanctions from 2018 onwards.⁶⁷ This has likely made China more sympathetic towards Russia's desire for the SCO to challenge forms of Western pressure and contest Western influence over the international economy. In this respect, India occupies an interesting and somewhat ambiguous position, where the extent to which it is willing to align with China and Russia will greatly impact on the overall development of the SCO.

This was evident at the SCO ministerial summit held in Islamabad during October of 2024. Following the summit, the 10 members of the SCO issued a joint statement criticizing Western countries for what it referred to as protectionist trade measures.⁶⁸ The statement also criticized the way in which Western states had imposed unilateral sanctions on certain countries such as Russia and Iran, describing this practice as against international law and harmful to the interests of third countries. This statement can be seen as some of the most forceful rhetoric which the SCO has produced to date in challenging the dominance of Western states within the international economic order. That it was signed by all ten members of the organization also suggests a degree of consensus between them.

Conclusion

The SCO was established over two decades ago as a way of formalizing the cooperation between a small group of states whose principal shared interest was in resolving border issues. Since then, although it has further institutionalized and expanded its membership to 10 states, and although it has held annual summits producing an array of statements, the concrete achievements of the SCO in terms of security and economic cooperation have been relatively limited. In both domains, the development of the SCO has been held back by a lack of shared interests, as well as mutual suspicion and competition between its members, particularly between the most important actors, China and Russia.

However, a lot has happened in the intervening 20 years and especially recently. China has increasingly established itself as a major economic actor in the Central Asian region, so that Russia can no longer ignore this reality. With its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become more interested in the cooperation which the SCO can offer, and more dependent on China, meaning it can no longer block Beijing's ambitions for the organization. These developments, amongst others, have helped bring the interests of the SCO's main members more into line, removing one of the main barriers to the further consolidation of the organization. In the future, we could potentially see a more unified SCO drawing its members together to provide a more forceful challenge to Western dominance. While some have dismissed the SCO as ineffective and irrelevant, it may be too soon to count out its significance in international affairs.

⁶⁶ Song, 'Interests, Power and China's Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'.

⁶⁷ Anthony Tellez, 'Here Are All the U.S. Sanctions Against China', *Forbes*, 8 February 2023,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonytellez/2023/02/08/here-are-all-the-us-sanctions-against-china/>.

⁶⁸ Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, 'China-Led Regional Group Calls for Countering Protectionist Policies, Sanctions', *Reuters*, 16 October 2024.



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