

China's Role in Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Sartaj,¹ & Manzoor Ahmad Naazer²

Abstract:

The word politics and policy making process is highly influenced by multilateralism approach where several actors play an important role. Regional and international organizations play very significant role. China being the core member state of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays very important role for regional stability and economic development. The structure and performance of various organizations shows that the core member is vital for success of these organizations. A number of indicators signifies Chinese important role in SCO. An effective structure and coordination among member states helped to counter regional threats. With rapid economic development and maximization of trade, other countries allowed China to play an active role in this multipolar world. China has used SCO as a regional forum and as a tool of foreign policy to solve regional conflicts and maximize its trade with other states.

INTRODUCTION

international organizations are playing vital role in world politics because they provide a platform and the legitimacy to the actions of states (Diehl 2010). Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 having six permanent members namely; People's Republic of China, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Republic of Tajikistan and Republic of Uzbekistan (Brief introduction to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2001). Recently with the inclusion of Pakistan and India as permanent members, the organization's role became more significant for solving regional issues.

This paper explores China's role in SCO. The studies aims to elucidates the role of core member state for the success of regional cooperation organization. It uses descriptive and historical method and relies mainly on secondary sources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The emergence of SCO can be explained through liberal institutionalism theory of international relations which focused on the cooperation among states through organization which is helpful in reducing tensions and conflicts. In the twenty first century, the world is going towards multi polarity and this can be viewed through the growing influence and role of regional organizations like the EU, ASEAN and SCO. According to Keohane, the membership of international organizations can broaden and widen the scope of cooperation among the states (Burchill, 2005). The neoliberal Institutionalism argues that due to developments in technology and globalization, states are becoming more dependent on each other where regional and international organization can play a crucial role. These main arguments may be explored in the context of China foreign policy as a core member state of SCO. With rapid economic development and growing role in world's economy,

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan and Lecturer Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Riphah International University Islamabad. Email: sartaj@riphah.edu.pk

² Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Politics & International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad. Email: manzoor.ahmad@iiu.edu.pk

China may effectively utilize this platform for economic security and enhancement of trade with other countries around the world. In the recent era, China has adopted an ambitious program to connect the world economically both through land and sea route. These objectives may be achieved through the active role of SCO member states which remained the main source for transportation of Chinese goods to different regions of the world. Liberal institutionalism argues that to bring peace and order in the international system, states must cooperate with each other through international organizations. This cooperation will enable the states to promote economic growth and respond to regional and international issues, such as the growing economic and security cooperation among SCO members. The institutionalism theory explains that the rise of globalization and concerns over terrorism and drug trafficking have shown that the states can no longer react unilaterally to these threats. It is only through regional and global regimes that policy responses can be coordinated to deal with new security threats. This explanation is very explicit in China's foreign policy where it has solved border disputes and paved the way for economic integration and development. In other words, Shanghai Spirit paved the way for BRI project where China is economically integrating with other regions of the world such as West, South Asia and Europe through central Asia. Based on these arguments and regional realities, being a core member state of SCO China has played a very significant role in the organization to cope with security challenges, while on the other hand China has provided a suitable environment for economic development, trade and regional integration.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: ORIGIN AND GROWTH

The history of SCO started from mid 1990s when Shanghai Five was established. Shanghai Five or Shanghai spirit succeeded in solving the border issues and enhanced confidence among the members. The organization further expanded its scope and areas of cooperation in 2001, when Uzbekistan became the 6th member and the organization was transformed from Shanghai Five to Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Within a short span of time, the organization got significant importance in regional and international politics (Khodzhaev 2009).

Meanwhile, the organization expanded and new states were included as observer state. Mongolia was the first country which got the observer status in 2004, followed by Pakistan, India and Iran in 2005 while Afghanistan was admitted to the organization in 2012 (Zeb 2006). With the inclusion of these observer states, SCO became one of the biggest regional international organizations in term of population (Turner 2005). The organization has two permanent members of Security Council and four nuclear powers which show its significance and strength in regional and international politics. The two observer states, India and Pakistan have now become the permanent members to make the organization role more significant in regional and international politics.

Organizational Structure

In no time, SCO members were able to establish main bodies within the organization for smooth functioning. The organization has some permanent and temporary bodies which perform various activities. The main body is the Council of Heads of State, which was established under the article five and this council is responsible for all the tasks, arrangements and decisions related to the organization. The heads of the states meet once a year in order to discuss the organizational issues and its external relations (Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2009). This Council is followed by Council of the Heads of Government, responsible for budget and economic issues.

Article six of the organization defines the role and responsibilities of this council. Like head of state council, head of government council also meets once a year, while Council of Minister on Foreign Affairs look into international issues related to the organization and facilitates the Heads of States meetings. The duties and responsibilities of this council are defined by article seven of the organization. This council is also responsible for the day to day activities and all other issues concerned to the organization. Making agenda for head of the state meetings and holding consultation on all international issues with organization comes under the domain of this council. For this purpose, it calls a meeting of the minister to set agenda for head of the state meeting and it is necessary that at least two member states ministers should initiate it. If one head of the state reached to an agreement or decision, then it is the responsibility of the Meeting of Head of Ministries to hold meetings of all issues discussed for consideration by the council. Article 8 of the charter of organization defines all the responsibilities of this council. Under the charter of SCO, article nine defines the role and functions of the Council of National Coordinators, which state that the council should do coordination on issues related to the organization. The council is responsible for preparations for the meetings of Heads of Government council, Heads of State Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs to coordinate and manage all the activities.

Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS)

The most pivotal body in the organization is the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) which was established under the charter of SCO article 10 to fight against extremism, separatism and terrorism. With the establishment of this main body, the organization expanded its role from confidence building measure and border issues to broader security challenges. There were a number of reasons for the establishment of this body which includes; first, to further enhance cooperation among member states in security, secondly to provide a legal framework and thirdly to present a positive image of the organization in fighting against terrorism. This standing body of the organization has the following main objectives (Xiaodong, The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation 2012).

- To curb terrorism and extremism, it will maintain coordination and good relation with the institutions of the member state as well as with other regional and international organization in the world.
- It will also cooperate to interact on the request of the member states for fighting terrorism, joint exercise for counter terrorism and preparation for combat operations.
- The body will also draft legal document for fighting against the evil of terrorism, separatism and extremism
- It will also help member states to arrange and prepare workshops and conferences to share their experiences to fight against terrorism and extremism.

Under this arrangement the member states were agreed to exchange information and extradite those who are involved in criminal activities. For this purpose, the members agreed to enhance cooperation and working coordination among the judicial and law enforcement bodies of the member states.

Secretariat

The secretariat of SCO is situated in Beijing, China and this is the standing body of the organization. This standing body was established under the article eleven of the SCO charter in 2001. It is a permanent decision making body with the following duties and responsibilities

- It provides technical information, legal support and coordinates for the activities. It formulates proposals and coordinates with RATS to develop good relations with other international organization.
- It also looks into the decisions adopted by other bodies of the organization
- In order to make greater cooperation and coordination among the members and institutions, secretariat with the help of National Coordinator Council makes draft for the meeting and distributes it among members prior to the meetings.
- This body also provides technical and organizational support for the institution of the organization according to the regulations of member states.

Aims, Objectives and Principles

The main objective of Shanghai Cooperation Organization is to bring stability and economic prosperity in the region. There are some regional realities which compel the regional states to cooperate with each other in order to solve issues related to security (Xiaodong, The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation 2012). Every regional and international organization has multiple objectives but some major issue(s) become reasons for the development of organizations. After the disintegration of USSR in 1991, the newly independent Central Asia was facing severe security challenges such as domestic security issues and border problems. In June 2002, the founding six members signed the charter of the organization in Saint Petersburg (Russia). One of the main objectives was to bring peace and stability in the region. All members agreed on the following points.

- The members will strengthen relations with neighbors for mutual trust and friendship within the framework of the organization.
- In order to bring peace and stability in the region the members should cooperate in various sectors.
- All the members should work to wipe out three evils which are terrorism, separatism and extremism and also cooperate in transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, narcotics, smuggling and illegal migration.
- Apart from the security issues, the members will cooperate in other sectors such science and technology, defense, environmental protection, transport and energy.
- The organization will develop and enhance good relations with other regional organizations and states to solve the existing conflicts and prevent future conflicts.
- Members of the organization should strictly follow the principle of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, non-interference and use of threat and forces.

Overall Performance of the Organization

Within a decade and half, the organization role became very significant in regional and international politics. Initiated with the basic purpose to solve the border disputes and enhance confidence building measures, its scope has become wider and pivotal. With the passage of time it expanded its areas of cooperation in economic, education, transport and all other sectors. The major achievement of the organization is solving the border issues and enhancing good relations with neighbors. One of the primary objective of the organization was to curb the evils of separatism, extremism and terrorism and a lot of achievement has been made in this regard. Under the organization's charter, the members established Regional Counter Terrorism Structure to enhance greater interaction in security related issues. This body helped the member states to establish a huge data bank of those people who were involved in criminal activities and cross border terrorism. Under the extradition of criminal elements, the organization helped the member states to control the criminal activities particularly those elements which were involved in cross border terrorism. Apart from these achievements, the organization has also adopted various mechanisms for curbing extremism and terrorism like joint military exercises among and between the member states. These exercises helped the members to further strengthen the capabilities and counter terrorism skills and techniques of the security forces. The organization also helped the member states to further enhance cooperation beyond the security and border issues. Cooperation in various field such as economy was accelerated after the Russian proposal to establish Energy Club (infosco.biz 2012). Another reason for the success of the organization is the cooperation with states and other international organizations in countering terrorism and extremism. SCO was the first organization which condemned the 9/11 attacks and supported international community in war on terror. Another main achievement is the interest of different regional states to join the organization such as Turkey announced her interest to join the organization although Turkey was already a dialogue partner state (Kucera 2013). The organization has played very important role and on multiple occasions, its members supported the measure adopted for the stability and security of Afghanistan (Khan 2009).

The keen interest of Pakistan and India shows that the organization will further play a significant role, particularly in the regional politics that's why both states joined it. With the inclusion of the two key regional states, the organization's role will be more effective in solving regional issues as well as in international politics because now four nuclear states are the members.

ROLE OF THE CORE MEMBER STATE IN SCO

China played very active role in the establishment of SCO. There are a number of reasons for this active role such as the rise of China as an economic power as well as China's dominant role in solving the regional issues relating to security. According to Jia Qingguo "One of the most prominent features of China's foreign policy behavior in recent years is its increasing activism in multilateral diplomacy. From the UN to the WTO, from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to the six-party talks, from the Boao Forum to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (Qingguo n.d.). This clearly shows the growing power and influence of China in the regional and international affair.

Stephen Aris, in his book, *The Eurasian Regionalism and SCO*, states that in order to counter the United State influence in the region, China plays vital role in the establishment of the

organization. The organization became widely known for its significant role partially because of the two member states of Security Council. Before the collapse of USSR, China already started outward looking approach in foreign policy and wanted to play active role in international affairs (Aris 2011).

According to Khalid Rehman, both China and Russia have helped each other in solving bilateral and regional disputes. He further argued that the presence of both the powers in SCO will not only help in bringing stability and peace to the region, it also provides a balance within SCO (Rehman, 2007). The organization provides a better option for China as well as Russia to further strengthen its role and influence in Central Asia because without stable and secure region China may not be able to expand its economic power which is the main objective of its peaceful rising through economic development (Yom n.d.). In order to make the region stable and secure, China has conducted many military exercises with SCO members to strengthen the capabilities of regional states to counter the militancy which is a threat not only to security but to the economic development as well. The following table shows the growing trade among the members of Central Asia Economic Cooperation organization.

Similarly, China is also dominating the world market by increasing the export of its goods, i.e., the growing economic development is not only focused on the regional market but on the global market. This economic power has enabled China to play a vital role in international affairs and increase its soft power through greater economic interaction with the major economic power as well as with less developed areas of the world. The following table shows the increase in Chinese export since 2005.

After assuming economic power, China is also becoming a powerful state in terms of military strength. In 2003, during the 16th party congress of China Communist Party, it was decided to bring reforms in Civil-military integration and this reform was included in the strategic goal for the economic development of China (Scobell 2010). According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there is one percent increase in the military budget in 2015 whereas United States is the only country in the world to spend the highest amount i.e., 596 billion dollar followed by People Republic of China. According to 2015 data, China is spending more than 200 billion dollars on defense (Stockholm International 2015).

These figures show the growing military expenditure of all the core regional and international actors which are playing a dominant role. Similarly, China is growing regionally and globally by focusing on economic development and military power. Around the world, Chinese army is the largest standing army followed by United States (Bender 2016). It shows the strength of China as a core state in both economic and military sphere.

The OBOR initiative and SCO

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) ambitious project initiated by China will further increase its role and influence both at regional and global level. This policy was announced by Xi Jinping to economically integrate different parts of the world (Englisg.gov.cn 2015). This initiative shows the ambitious approach of China towards the future economic development of the world. Some major projects are initiated by China being SCO member state such as EPEC project become very crucial for local and regional economic development. Gawader port is playing a significant role in this

regard (Anwar). Regional peace and stability is crucial for regional economic integration and prosperity where regional and international such as SCO may play a crucial role. The background, aims and objectives of this organization shows that for more than a decade it helped to provide a stable and peaceful environment for economic activities and developments in the region. In other words, the successful launch of BRI would not have been possible without Shanghai spirit where all member states of SCO solved their border disputes peacefully. This background of peaceful co-existence and regional stability allowed China to expand its economic interest in the region and beyond.

Experts and analysts are of the view that SCO helped provide a conducive security environment for New Silk Road Initiative because economic development and regional economic integration need stable security environment. For more than a decade after its establishment, SCO played an important role in solving regional and border conflicts which resulted in cordial and friendly relationship among member states. The strategic importance of member states particularly Central Asian states are more significant for BRI where main routes are passing through Central Asia, which shows how China utilized SCO as regional security platform for economy integration.

The above map shows the significance of Central Asian states and other SCO member states for BRI. All main economic routes are passing through Central Asia, Russia and Pakistan which connect West Asia, Africa and Europe. Main economic routes such as CPEC and China Central-Western Asia are playing very important role in regional economic integration. The bilateral trade data between China and other states and regions increased significantly after the initiation of this project (Serikkaliyeva, 2018).

Chinese Perspective on the Expansion of SCO

China, as a core member state of SCO, wants the expansion of the organization which remained an effective tool in foreign policy for the last decade. In this era of rapid economic development, China wants to enhance its influence beyond Central Asia to South Asia and other regions through SCO. In the last decade, the world is becoming multipolar where the role of regional and international organization became more significant in world politics. Being emerging global economic power, China wants to maximize its economic and security interest through this organization (Panda, 2012). Around the world, each and every organization has certain goals and objectives which is highly influenced by core member state such as America's role in NATO and three core member's role in EU. Similarly, all other organizations around the world have similar kind of structure where core member state influence policy making. On the other hand, the ineffective role of core member state may lead to negative impact on the performance of organization such as India's role on SAARC.

There are a number of examples which show the major role and contribution of China for the establishment of this organization such as the organization is named after China's city Beijing, the secretariat is located in China and the first secretary belonged to China (Yu, 2003). The role of China as a core member state can be understood in regional context, in the context of evolving multipolar nature of world politics and proactive Chinese foreign policy in the age of economic development and trade. In other word, China has realized that regional platforms such as SCO may

become an effective tool in the multipolar world where it can promote its regional stakes and also play an active role in decision making process at global level (Dunay, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Regional and international organizations play a significant role in world politics and economic development. These organizations provide a platform for various states to cooperate with each other and also provide legitimacy for their actions which they may not do in isolation like cross border terrorism and other cross border activities. SCO is one of the influential regional international organizations to play a vital role in regional stability and confidence building measure among member state. Since 2001, the organization is able to work out on key issues such as peace and stability, good neighbourly relations and the policy of non- interference in the internal affair of other states. The 2005 uprising in Uzbekistan is one of the example where member countries diplomatically supported the country without any interference in the internal politics.

SCO has a number of bodies which perform various activities for the smooth functioning. Standing bodies are Council of Head of States responsible for decision making. They meet once a year and discuss all the issues related to the organization, its relations with other states, and regional and international organizations. Another main standing body is the Regional Counter Terrorism Structure (RATS), which is the vital organ of the organization. After solving the border issues and the establishment of good relations among the member state, it was decided in 2002 to wipe out three evils which are terrorism, extremism and separatisms, hence RATS was established. The idea of three evil was coined by China being a key member state, as comparatively China is facing more threats from these evils that's why China plays a dominant role in the establishment of the organization and influenced the decision making and overall activities of the organization. Under this key organ, the organization is performing various activities such as counter terrorism exercises to train and enhance the capabilities of the security forces, particularly of Central Asian states. China in this regard plays a major role by conducting bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises with the member states to counter terrorism and bring stability to the region.

There are one or more core states in every organization which mainly control and direct the policies or influence its activities. Similarly, in SCO, China plays role of core state because it has the capabilities and capacity to play an active role. Economically, China is second largest economy of the world so its role becomes more significant. On the other hand, it also provided a parallel economic structure to western economic institutions such as IMF. The establishment of Asia Investment and Infrastructures Bank (AIIB) shows the growing influence of China in the economic affairs of the world. In term of number, China is one of the largest military power in the world. The defense budget has rapidly increased since the last decade. All these indicators show that China is a core state and it has influenced many areas and organizations. Within SCO, its influence becomes more increased when it started the One Belt One Road initiative which includes all members of the organization. SCO members are playing vital role in developing and enhancing the OBOR project. Like other platforms, China is using the organization as a facilitator for its economic expansion particularly in Central and south Asia and Eastern Europe.

References:

- Brief introduction to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2001, Jun.). SCO Secretariate website <http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/brief.asp>
- Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (2009). SCO Secretariate website <http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/show.asp?id=69>
- Pakistan, India join Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2015, July 11). Dawn.
- Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative. (2015, Mar. 30). English.gov.cn. http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2015). SIPRI military expenditure database. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/>
- Anwar, Z. (n.d.). Gwadar Deep Sea Port's emergence as regional trade and transportation hub: Prospects and problems. *Journal of Political Studies*, 1(2), 97-112.
- Aris, S. (2011). Eurasian regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bender, J. (2016, April 21). Ranked: The World's 20 strongest militaries. Business Insider. <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-worlds-20-strongest-militaries-ranked-2016-4/#no-18-germany-3>
- Diehl, P. F. (2010). The politics of global governance: International organizations in an interdependent world. Lynne Rienner.
- SCO energy club: what it should be? (2012, Mar. 13). Infosco.biz. <http://infosco.biz/en/?newId=9616&domainId=sh>
- Khan, S. (2009). Stabilization of Afghanistan: U.S.- NATO regional strategy and the role of SCO. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 7(3), 11-15.
- Khodzhaev, A. (2009). The Central Asian policy of the People's Republic of China. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 9-28.
- Kucera, J. (2013, Apr. 13). Turkey makes it official with SCO. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66896>
- Qingguo, J. (n.d.). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China's experiment in multilateral leadership.
- Rehman, K. (2007). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects and opportunities. *Policy Perspectives*, 129-136.
- Scobell, R. K. (2010). The PLA at home and abroad: Assessing the operational capabilities of China's military. (USA): Strategic Studies Institute (SSI).
- Turner, M. J. (2005). What is driving India's and Pakistan's interest in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization? *Strategic Insights*.
- Xiaodong, Z. (2012). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and counter-terrorism cooperation. Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden.
- Xiaodong, Z. (2012). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and counter-terrorism cooperation. Institute for Security and Development Policy, 14-27.
- Yom, S. L. (n.d.). Power politics in Central Asia. *Harvard Asia Quarterly*.

Zeb, R. (2006). Pakistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 51-60.

Date of Publication	August 15, 2021
---------------------	-----------------