



## Russian Engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Motives and Current Situation

Igbal A. Guliev<sup>1</sup>, Svetlana V. Karpova<sup>2</sup>, Rostislav L. Rovbel<sup>3</sup> and Sergey Yu. Perevozchikov<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International Institute of Energy Policy and Diplomacy, MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Logistics and Marketing, Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Corporate Finance and Corporate Governance, Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia.

(Corresponding author: Sergey Yu. Perevozchikov)

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, Russia's pivot to East constitutes an important trend in international relations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an example where Russian foreign policy presents its evolution through the prism of changing developments in Asia. In this article, the authors attempt to analyze Russia's interests in the SCO, its relations with China, and how they can affect the SCO's future work. Security issues, particularly counterterrorism and concerns about future world order, are the topical areas of interest for Russia. The accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO shows Russia's intentions to modify the organization's scope and establish new formats of interaction among the leading Asian states. Russia, in general, tends toward increasing political cooperation within the SCO and retarding economic activities promoted by China. Over the past years, Russian-Chinese bilateral relations have reached new heights both in political and economic fields. This development may lead to a spillover effect when both countries will intensify their efforts to increase political influence of the SCO. The authors take a realistic approach, defining the structural variables of Russia's engagement in the SCO and the interaction of the two major powers in Eurasia – Russia and China. The main contribution of this article is the analysis of Russia's foreign policy in Eurasia, with a focus on the SCO, through its relations with China, a major Asian power.

**Keywords:** BRI, China, EAEU, foreign policy, Russia, SCO.

**Abbreviations:** AIIB, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; BRI, the Belt and Road Initiative; BRICS, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; CSTO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization; FTZ, free-trade zone; EAEU, the Eurasian Economic Union; EU, the European Union; RATS, Regional Antiterrorist Structure; SCO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; US, the United States.

### I. INTRODUCTION

For Russia, the increased attention to the eastern and southern directions of foreign and foreign economic policy has become in recent years one of the most important signs of a return to the position of a great power. The economic pivot to the East establishing a new model of foreign economic relations does not mean a departure from Europe or the replacement of Russia's dependence on European markets with a one-sided dependence on China. In the context of the Russian-American confrontation, the Asian direction of Russian foreign policy has been updated, both in the political and economic fields.

Russia is a founding state of the SCO and plays one of the most important roles in it. This was clear from the very beginning, even during the period of negotiations within the Shanghai Five. In 1996, the Central Asian states proposed to organize negotiations in the 4 + 1 format, since the young Central Asian republics did not yet have enough experience to conduct serious negotiations with China. Russia considers the SCO as an important element of the international system, as one of the pillars of the future multipolar world. In addition to the external role of the SCO, its role in the region itself is important for Russia. Within the SCO, the interests of

China, Russia, and Central Asian countries are balanced when discussing issues of regional importance, which is partially confirmed by the slow progress of the organization itself.

The issue of Russian engagement in Central Asia and its politics towards the SCO has been quite popular among researchers. Yun and Park (2012) [1] discussed the Russian-Chinese cooperation and competition, which result in "the construction of a multilateral security and cooperation system centering on the SCO based on the concept of multilateral security operation as a utilitarian foreign policy". Denisov and Safranchuk (2016) [2] reformulated the issue of enlargement as a problem of finding a balance between globalizing (Russian standpoint) and regionalizing (Chinese standpoint) trends in the SCO strategy and stated that at the practical level this will allow the main interests of Russia and China in Eurasia to be reconciled. Na-Xi *et al.*, (2019) [3] promoted the SCO as a means as a means of deepening economic interdependence in Eurasia by linking economic initiatives such as the BRI and the EAEU and inviting the SCO member states to contribute to those initiatives. [4] and [5] both argued that asymmetrical motivations of China and Russia hinder the SCO from becoming a well-established regional organization. These articles discuss Russian-

Chinese relations within the SCO. However, in this article, the authors analyze Russia–China relations at large as a systemic variable to the development of the SCO.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors analyze Russia's policy towards the SCO through the Russian-Chinese interaction. One of the most common problems in the study of international organizations is that scholars apply state policies to the aims and scope of an organization, which obscures the big picture. To analyze Russian policy within the SCO, the authors discuss structural prerequisites that determine a certain policy. Then, the authors discuss the development of Russian-Chinese cooperation in recent years and the Greater Eurasia concept. Further, the authors address the issue of security and its implementation within the SCO in Russian foreign policy. Thus, introducing these three variables to the study provides a fuller picture and present the Russian foreign policy as a security-centric cooperative agency.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Structural prerequisites for Russian involvement

The SCO's security activities have significant importance for Russia. The SCO was created on the basis of combining the potential of the participating countries in fighting the “three evils” in the region: terrorism, separatism and extremism [4]. Russia has also suffered from this problem, although not in this region, but in the North Caucasus. That is why Russia was interested in joining forces with another regional power to fight separatism and extremism.

From the very beginning, Russia advocated joining forces of the SCO member states to increase the level of security in the region. In 2001, terrorist acts in the United States only confirmed the correct direction of the SCO's activities in countering international terrorism. Russia acted as a partner in the US fight against terrorist groups in Afghanistan and promoted this position in the SCO. However, Russia did not welcome the US presence in the Central Asian region and used the SCO platform to promote its position in the region. Russia's position on the US involvement in the region took final shape after Western states criticized the actions of Uzbekistan government during protests. In June 2005, it supported the proposal of Uzbekistan to set a final date for the withdrawal of US troops from the territories of the SCO's member states [14]. Nevertheless, Russia cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan until 2015, when the United States stopped cooperation in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Central Asia was an integral part of Russia for two centuries – first as part of the Russian Empire, and then of the USSR. Accordingly, Russia still has special interests in this region and is historically connected with it – politically, economically, and culturally. Within the SCO, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia pursues, among other things, the goal of balancing Chinese involvement in the region [15]. The Russian elite does not have an unambiguous approach to China: some advocate cooperation with China as opposed to the United States, while others call for a more cautious policy towards its eastern neighbor, given the size of its

economy and population. Therefore, Russia faces the dilemma of how to build its policy within the SCO– to deepen relations between the participating countries or to maintain them at a relatively low level, turning the organization into a kind of regional dialogue platform.

### B. Great Eurasia as an idea of Russian-Chinese rapprochement

In 2018, when delivering the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin outlined a comprehensive strategic partnership with China in the foreign policy area [6]. Considering multilateral initiatives, Putin said that Russia will continue to work on a project to create a Greater Eurasian Partnership. In the official discourse, this flagship foreign policy project of the Russian president is considered to be the “assemblage point” of various Russian interests: the development of integration in the post-Soviet space, the strengthening of mutually beneficial partnerships with the states of Europe and Asia, the use of multilateral formats to develop new rules for the game in Eurasia. All these efforts are aimed at creating an interconnected, balanced, and safe environment on the continent for the co-development of all interested Eurasian states.

In Russian expert circles, against the background of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, the concept of Greater Eurasia was developed. Trenin (2015) [7] stated that the previous idea of Greater Europe by interfacing the EU with the EAEU from Lisbon to Vladivostok is being replaced by Greater Asia from Shanghai to St. Petersburg and noted that the SCO and BRICS can play an important role in establishing such a political scheme.

An additional impetus to the movement towards the creation of a broad Eurasian economic space was given by Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016 on a large Eurasian partnership with the participation of the EAEU, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran. This idea of cooperation along the EAEU-SCO-ASEAN, as expressed by the Russian president earlier at the Russia-ASEAN summit in Sochi, was supported by the Chinese side [8]. In [9] Putin also noted the idea of creating a Greater Eurasian Partnership formed on the basis of the EAEU and the Chinese “One Belt, One Way” initiative and described it as a flexible project open to other members.

The Greater Eurasian Partnership concept is the result of Russia's continuous efforts to improve its strategic environment by constantly adjusting its overall strategy, a course that at different times led to the promotion of projects such as the North-South Transport Corridor and the Eurasian Economic Union. The main features of Greater Eurasia are the following:

1. Greater Eurasia is a new kind of international united entity formed on the basis of Russian-Chinese rapprochement and efforts to unite the EAEU and the BRI.
2. Other non-Western organizations and groups (primarily the SCO, ASEAN, and BRICS) will play a major role in this process.
3. Greater Eurasia is not yet an official organization or even a group. This is a kind of partnership based on the common interests of non-Western states.
4. The participating states have two types of interests: political and economic. The first is based on concerns

about a unipolar world in which the United States and its allies seek to play a hegemonic role and do not consider the interests and the sovereignty of other states. In this regard, Greater Eurasia is developing a fundamentally different approach to world politics, based on respect for international law that emerged after the Second World War, the leading role of the United Nations and the Security Council, various cultural traditions and political systems, pluralism and democracy, not only within countries, but also in international relations. These principles are consonant with the principles of "peaceful coexistence", which developing countries first expressed at the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the so-called "Shanghai Spirit" of the SCO.

5. Economic interests can serve as the basis for a broad partnership. These interests include the relationship between the EAEU and BRI and the strengthening of the economic component of the SCO after the accession of India and Pakistan and, possibly, Iran. It is also possible to form a common free trade space in the future. Russia and China have already proposed creating a bilateral free trade agreement in 2016. In addition, China has already created such a zone with ASEAN, and a free trade zone has been created within the EAEU. As a result, all of these FTZs can be expanded or even combined.

6. Greater Eurasia will be an open partnership for all, including Europe. The interest that European states have shown in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) proposed by China, the BRI, and, most recently, the EAEU, indicate that such an opportunity is possible. A significant role in the success of this initiative is played by Russian-Chinese interaction in a bilateral format, as well as based on international organizations of which Russia and China are members or with which they cooperate. This thesis was emphasized by Vladimir Putin during the BRI International Forum in Beijing in May 2017. As the Russian president explained, adding up the potentials of such integration formats as the EAEU, the BRI, the SCO, and ASEAN can become the basis for the formation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Thus, the two flagship initiatives of the leaders of Russia and China – the Greater Eurasian Partnership and the BRI – have a common agenda, which under the current conditions are opposed to the growing randomness of international political and economic relations [3].

The concerns expressed by Vladimir Putin at the opening of the BRI International Forum about the fragmentation of the global economic and technological space is in tune with the main points of Xi Jinping's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017 [10]. Both countries, therefore, oppose to the fragmentation of international relations and deglobalization supporting the ideas of openness and free trade, as well as the key role of international institutions [11].

Sino-Russian relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction cover almost all areas, and significant results of cooperation have been achieved in each of them. In the new era, China and Russia continue to develop cooperation in all areas, while attaching special importance to the following five priority areas:

1. Strengthening mutual political trust. In a bilateral context, China and Russia comply with international law and international relations, pursue an equal and friendly policy, as well as mutually support efforts to protect sovereignty, ensure security, and realize other vital interests. Both countries also need to maintain close contacts at the highest level, develop the leading role of the heads of state in bilateral cooperation, expand the dialogue between their governments through various mechanisms, ensure mutual understanding and resolve doubts, strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the legislative bodies, and develop bilateral regional and non-governmental exchanges and friendship between nations.

2. Deepening business cooperation, developing sustainable trade growth between China and Russia and improving its structure. It is important to increase mutual investments, implement large-scale joint projects, encourage active participation in the cooperation of medium and small businesses of the two countries, promote financial cooperation to provide financial guarantees for economic and technical partnership. It is also necessary to develop cooperation at all levels in the field of extraction and production of natural resources, electric power, and nuclear energy, strengthen Chinese-Russian strategic partnership relations in the field of energy resources, facilitate the implementation of transport and infrastructure projects, continue to improve the conditions of freight traffic between the two countries, and develop ties in agriculture, industry, science and technology, aviation, astronautics, and other fields.

3. Enhancing security cooperation. It is important to develop ties between the national defense and state security bodies of the two countries, increase the role of consultations and other mechanisms on the strategic security of China and Russia, strengthen contacts in the field of creating security potential, threats to general security and other issues, formulate plans for further cooperation, and develop military-technical cooperation along with the development of the exchange of military technologies, carry out joint research and production, as well as develop other in-depth forms of interaction. Using joint military exercises (land, sea, anti-ballistic, using computer simulation), it is necessary to strengthen the coordination of the two countries in the military sphere and jointly reflect threats to international security, including in the fight against non-traditional security threats.

4. Expanding humanitarian cooperation. It is necessary to develop ties in the field of education, train high-level specialists for all areas of interaction, promote the study of Russia in China and the study of China in Russia, organize joint cultural events, cultural days, film festivals, television festivals, cross-years, and other large-scale events, promote the development of exchanges and deepening cooperation between professional cultural organizations, art universities and art groups, supporting the cultural centers of Russia and China in the active conduct of events, spreading the culture of each country, developing contacts in the field of tourism, science, healthcare, sports and in other areas.

5. Strengthening cooperation on global and regional issues. A constant exchange of views on the situation

in the world and important international issues, the formulation of a common position between China and Russia, and the planning of foreign policy interaction are needed. Coordination of positions and cooperation should be continued in the field of promoting a multipolar world and strengthening the UN's key role in international affairs, jointly oppose the deployment of missile defense systems in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, ensure global and regional strategic stability, and jointly promote multilateral security and the development of trade and economic partnership within SCO, increasing the international influence of the Organization, to carry out fruitful foreign policy cooperation on the nuclear issues of North Korea and Iran, on the problems of Syria and Afghanistan, on terrorism, information security and other international agendas through such multilateral mechanisms as BRICS, the G20, the Organization Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

### *C. Security issues as motive force for Russian engagement*

Within the SCO, from the very beginning, Russia focused on the development of cooperation in the field of security. The purpose of the Russian chairmanship in 2008–2009 was to ensure further consolidation of cooperation within the SCO's framework, including on the basis of the Treaty on Long-Term Neighborhood, Friendship and Cooperation, signed at the Bishkek Summit in 2007, and in the direction of counteracting new challenges and threats. The member states adopted the Convention against terrorism, which strengthened the legal framework for relevant cooperation, the Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Program for 2010–2012, and the Agreement on the Training of Anti-Terrorist Personnel. Given the deadlock in Afghanistan, Russia initiated a representative international conference, culminating in the adoption of both a general declaration and separate documents between the SCO and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on countering the challenges of regional stability emanating from Afghanistan. During its next chairmanship in 2014–2015, Russia again focused on regional security issues, implementing a number of activities aimed at improving the existing forms of cooperation and testing new ones. The focus was on three key issues of prime importance for improving the SCO's policies: 1) the elaboration of a new development Strategy for the next decade; 2) the launch of the process of India and Pakistan's accession to the SCO; 3) the formulation of a common approach of member states to the idea of the BRI put forward by China in 2013. Its implementation (in addition to the geoeconomic component) would have the most important geopolitical significance both for the initiator of the idea and for other participants in this megaproject.

The July 2015 summit in Ufa undoubtedly took a special place in the further strategic development of the Six. Against the backdrop of the continuing degradation of relations between Russia and the West and the growing conflict potential following the events in Ukraine, the results of the meeting of the heads of state became a significant foreign policy victory for Russia.

Furthermore, the next BRICS summit, held in Ufa, underpinned a new dimension of international cooperation, which is gaining momentum beyond the

participation of the traditional Western community. The documents adopted in Ufa, including the SCO Development Strategy, outlined the commonality of the member states' approaches to the fundamental issues of the modern world order, disarmament issues, the settlement of international and regional problems, the peaceful use of outer space, information security, and the formation of a more equitable international financial structure. Among the priorities for the near future are the need for further comprehensive strengthening of cooperation in the political sphere, building up concerted efforts to ensure regional security, and to counter traditional and new challenges and threats.

Russia is opposed to attempts to turn the SCO into an international player with its own military potential [5]. By agreeing to establish a RATS in Tashkent, Russia sought to maintain the CSTO as the main security mechanism in Central Asia [12].

Russia's position on the SCO's expansion has changed over time as a result of changes in Russia's overall approach to the international situation. Initially, Russia and China did not want to expand the SCO, because they viewed it as a regional organization, the main task of which was to coordinate the policies of the two countries in Central Asia [2]. The negative development of the situation in the field of regional and international security, including the issue of terrorism and security, which is becoming increasingly relevant for the SCO zone, primarily due to the constantly aggravating instability in Afghanistan, has led to a gradual change in this approach [16]. Russia has become the main supporter of the expansion of the SCO in the late 2000s. At the SCO summit in Dushanbe in 2008, Russia initiated the creation of a special expert group, which later prepared draft documents for admission. At the Astana summit in 2011, Russia called for an end to the temporary unofficial moratorium on the admission of new members. Russia's position stems from its strong support for India's candidacy, which is mentioned in the Joint Russian-Indian Declaration on Deepening Strategic Partnership, signed by the leaders of the two countries during the official visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Russia in December 2009. At the Dushanbe Summit in 2014, work was completed on the development and coordination of all the details related to the expansion of the Organization. With the growing tension in relations with the West, Russia began to think more about expanding the SCO functions to make it a more effective counterbalance to Western structures. From this point of view, Russia saw that it could achieve this goal if other major Asian powers join the SCO and the organization can expand its agenda. Therefore, Russia actively supported the entry of India and managed to convince China of its necessity, provided that Pakistan, which was the first to apply for membership, joins simultaneously with India [13].

An unconditional achievement of the Russian Chairmanship in 2014–2015 was the launched process of expanding the SCO by granting India and Pakistan member statuses, as well as granting Belarus observer status, and dialogue partners statuses to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal. The accession of such a large and successfully developing country as India makes the SCO the second largest international organization in the world after the United Nations in

terms of the total population of its member countries. The accession of India significantly increases the SCO's political weight and economic attractiveness among developing countries [2].

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

The Russian leadership does not exaggerate the successes of the SCO. However, it sees the SCO as an important mechanism for international cooperation in the region. The article discusses Russia's policy in the SCO and, in general, in Eurasia through the prism of Russian-Chinese relations. While previous studies tended to analyze Russian policy within the SCO, the authors have decided to consider Russian-Chinese relations as a structural variable of the SCO policy. Today, this approach allows to observe the dynamics of the development of international relations in Eurasia from the point of view of the development of relations between Russia and China, the two largest military powers in Eurasia. Russia's policy in the SCO is confined to the promotion of the regional security and deepening of the relations with major Asian state to establish multipolar world order. Russia is not interested in expanding economic activities within the SCO, since it has historical ties with the Central Asian states and avoids Chinese large-scale financial invasion in the region.

However, future studies should also pay attention to Russian-Indian and Chinese-Indian relations and their impact on political dynamics in Eurasia. In addition, future studies should concentrate on US-Indian relations, which play an important role in shaping the SCO agenda.

**Conflict of Interest.** No.

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