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[Abstract](#)

Introduction

Situated in what Halford Mackinder has called the “Eurasian heartland” (Mackinder 1942) the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation¹ (SCO) covers a region of utmost geopolitical importance. Central Asia is not only rich in resources, culture and history but also central to a struggle in which three major powers – China, Russia, and the United States (U.S.) – compete for strategic influence. Competition for supremacy in Central Asia is not new. London and Moscow struggled over control of Central Asia from 1813 till the start of the Second World War in the so-called *Great Game* (Hopkirk 1992). It was only after Great Britain had left India in 1947 that Moscow was able to consolidate its position and could block access to the region until the end of the Cold War.

In recent years, the SCO has become increasingly important in this competition as it involves China and Russia – two key players in world affairs. In 1996, Beijing and Moscow combined their efforts in Central Asia and established their first organisational ties since the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s. They created the Shanghai Five, together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2001, Uzbekistan also joined and the SCO was officially established. Since then, this Central Asian organisation has gained strong institutional ties and significantly improved cooperative relationships between its members – chiefly in reference to security issues but also in the economic (energy and trade), scientific and cultural realms.

Up to now, research on this “enigmatic” (Stakelbeck 2006) organisation has struggled to, or simply avoided, analysing what sort of organisation the SCO is. Thus, well-founded information regarding the nature of the organisation is seriously lacking and its position is not fully understood. This work will shed light on this issue and constitutes the first academic attempt to identify what sort of organisation the SCO is. To ascertain crucial knowledge about the nature of the organisation it is important to compare existing views on the SCO and assess their validity. This will help to understand its role in the *New Great Game* in Eurasia’s heartland.

The study will start with outlining the methodology and the research questions it seeks to answer. The first chapter will take up the existing debate and tackle the confusion in the literature. It will show that the main disagreement among scholars occurs as to whether the SCO is an anti-Western grouping or a more neutral regional organisation. Consequently, the work presents the three major arguments of the *Anti-Western Camp* in the literature in its second chapter. After stating the key points of the respective arguments, the validity of the first camps’ claims will be evaluated and a preliminary conclusion on their strength will be provided. The study’s third chapter covers the *Neutral Camp* in the literature and assesses the validity of its three major arguments. As in the previous section, the third chapter will start by examining the arguments of the second camp and then evaluate their validity before providing a preliminary conclusion. The work will close with concluding remarks on whether the SCO should be seen as rather anti-Western or neutral.

1 Russian: Шанхайская организация сотрудничества; Chinese: 上海合作组织.

Methodology

This study is designed as a theory-informed work. It provides an answer to the following central research question:

What sort of organisation is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation?

In order to clarify the SCO's nature, the work compares and assesses the existing controversy in the literature. It will develop a detailed understanding of the opinions of the two camps by breaking down their main arguments and testing the authors' propositions against evidence. The sources employed include official documents, statements from senior officials, indirect observations from other researchers, the recounting of key events and developments which shaped the SCO as well as statistical data.

Testing the main arguments for both positions the study relies on an eclectic set of theories on international organisations and will examine two key dimensions: the member states' *motivations* in forming and shaping the organisation and the *actions* of the SCO (i.e. the way it behaves and acts towards a particular issue or actor) as well as those of the member states. The theoretical work of Muthiah Alagappa on the driving forces of state behaviour helps to identify that the *motivation* of member states is important to further assess the nature of an international organisation. According to Alagappa, state behaviour can best be explained by considering material (power and interests) and ideational (norms and values) factors and their influence on decision makers (Alagappa 1995, 1999a,b,c). These factors form a *motivation* within the national leadership to either support or oppose *actions* of organisations or other states. In their liberal institutionalist writings Robert O. Keohane, Helga Haftendorn and Celeste A. Wallander emphasise that the *actions* performed by an organisation (e.g. as to how it responds to security threats and risks) determine its nature (Keohane 1995; Keohane et al. 1999; Wallander and Keohane 1999; Wallander et al. 1999). Both dimensions are considered crucial for evaluating the nature of an organisation and are consequently in the study's focus.

All major arguments of the two camps in the literature are tested against actual evidence in these two dimensions. In essence, the book addresses the following sub-questions: What do the two camps in the literature say about the nature of the SCO? What actions conducted or planned by SCO members support or refute the positions of the two rival camps? Which motivations are central for the SCO members in their dealings with each other and Western states and which camp's arguments do they support?

Therefore, the work will not identify the significance of the SCO for the individual member states, but will bring to light what the participants' motivations for forming the SCO have been and what the SCO is actually doing for them. Future research, however, may use some of these findings as a starting point to address this particular aspect.

1

Confusion in the literature

There has been surprisingly little coherent academic writing concerning the SCO (compared to other regional frameworks like EU, NATO or ASEAN). Even worse, the majority of the literature about the SCO talks about what the organisation *does* or intends to do, but little has been said about what the SCO actually *is*. Additionally, there is huge disagreement about the nature of the SCO in general and its institutional features in particular. While some authors argue that the SCO is an “international regional organization and within the legal framework of the United Nations” (Al-Qahtani 2006: 132), others see it rather pessimistically as an “obscure regional grouping [which] would essentially be an OPEC with bombs” (Mainville 2006; also Blank 2006c) or a sheer “alliance of convenience” (Scholl-Latour 2005: 336).

Former Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov stated that the SCO wants “to become a *modern organization of a new type* in line with the demands of [a] multi-polar world” (Miller 2003: 2, emphasis added). The analytical confusion is increased by the SCO’s description of itself as a “permanent intergovernmental international organisation creation [sic]” (SECTSCO 2008), whose purpose is

“strengthening mutual trust and good-neighbourly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order” (SECTSCO 2001).

In face of such an ambitious agenda, one finds many different institutional descriptions of the SCO in the academic literature. The apparently random use of institutional options to classify the SCO characterises the confusion about the SCO’s nature. The list of available descriptions is long: some authors describe the SCO in rather strong terms as a “front” (Allison 2001: 234), a “bloc” (Sznajder 2006: 93) or an “alliance” (Weinstein 2005b). More neutral descriptions include “grouping” (Buszynski 2005: 553), “forum” (Gulick 2007: 210) or “framework” (Blank 2006a). Other authors see the SCO as a “process” (Pollack 2005: 341), a “regional mechanism” (Yuqun 2006: 2) or a “limited security actor” (Sengupta 2005: 125, emphasis added). Interestingly, a few scholars even have problems getting the organisation’s name right and call it “Shanghai Cooperative [sic] Organisation” (Kornberg and Faust 2005: 113ff) or refer to it as an “association of East [sic] Asian states” (Howland 2006).

However, most authors seem to be unaware that identifying what type of organisation the SCO actually is, should be seen as crucial for a better understanding of it. In this regard, only a few notable exceptions can be found. Leland Rhett Miller, in assessing the SCO’s proposed Free Trade Zone (FTZ), writes that

“despite its high-profile cast, the SCO has remained an enigma throughout its short history – scholars have been at odds as to whether characterize it as a security organi-

sation, a regional forum, an anti-terrorist coalition or some sort of regional hybrid” (Miller 2003: 2).

Marcel de Haas adds that scholars “don’t fully understand what the Shanghai Cooperation does” (de Haas 2007: 11). Marc Lanteigne supports both views by putting forward that

“attempts to accurately define the SCO have proven difficult, since on one side the SCO’s members have repeatedly insisted that it be considered a community based on mutual co-operation and trust rather than an alliance against a specific adversary” (Lanteigne 2006/7: 605).

As the last quote implies, the majority of the literature concerning the SCO can be split into two rival camps. Basically, the disagreement among the scholars writing on the SCO is whether the member states have created an (almost Warsaw Pact-like) “anti-Western front” (Allison 2001: 234; also Artyukov 2006; Blank 2006c) or whether the SCO has a “universal nature and is intended to keep specific dangers in check rather than to move against individual countries and blocs” (Tokaev 2007: 103f).

Although almost all scholars agree that the SCO is dominated by Moscow and Beijing, the first camp of authors sees the SCO as an “illustrious example of multilateral problem management void of US participation” (Gulick 2007: 210) and as “a tool for China and Russia to take back control of the region.” (Thaisrivongs 2004: 6). This *Anti-Western Camp* claims that the SCO is “a regional bulwark against American encroachment in Central Asia” (Akbarzadeh 2007: 110; also French 2006), which “may eventually become the NATO of the East” (Khanna 2008).² Essentially, this group of scholars argues that the SCO is supposed “to act as a restraint on U.S. military entry into (or domination of) the region” (Lampton 2005: 315; also Weinstein 2005a) and should therefore be seen as “a geopolitical counterweight to the United States” (Cohen 2006a; also Syzdykova 2007; Gardner 2007: 89f). The SCO is considered to be “an alternative model for multilateral cooperation for Central Asia [...] with an eastern aspect” (Allison 2003: 34) which “poses a serious threat to the [U.S.] geopolitical position in Central Asia” (Cohen 2006a).

Members of the opposing *Neutral Camp* reply that the SCO “is not anyone’s enemy” (Lukin 2007) and that despite “the decade-long improvement in Russian-Chinese relations [the SCO] has yet to evolve into an anti-American bloc [which] it probably won’t” (Weitz 2003: 53; also Chang 2007). Additionally, scholars claim that “the closest analogy is not the Warsaw Pact but the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)” (Lee 2008: 3; see also Tsunekawa 2008: 85) as the SCO is a “regional bloc [which is] not yet a militarized alliance like NATO” (Levin 2008: 108f; also Beehner 2006). Other advocates of this view outline the trade and investment relationship between the U.S. and SCO member states and argue that “attempts to transform the SCO into an anti-Western or anti-American bloc are doomed to failure as that would run counter to the vital interests of member states interested in cooperation with the West in many areas” (Lukin 2007; see also Feigenbaum 2007; Kosyrev 2007). They maintain that it is “highly unlikely that [the SCO] would become a military counterbalance to U.S. interests” (Roberts cited in Kucera 2007; see also Rangsi-

2 This argument was strengthened in 2005 after the SCO rejected Washington’s and Tokyo’s application for membership while granting an observer status to Iran, Pakistan and India.

2

The SCO as an Anti-Western grouping

The first camp in the literature claims that the SCO is an anti-Western grouping. The proponents of this Anti-Western Camp have three major arguments to underpin their proposition. Firstly, they argue that China and Russia use the SCO to dominate Central Asia by pushing Western forces out of the region. Secondly, they put forward that the SCO is a club of autocratic governments who seek to limit Western influence to maintain their undemocratic regimes by preventing the spread of democracy. Their final major argument is that the SCO is an instrument for both China and Russia to promote a multipolar world order and thereby undermine the perceived unipolar, U.S.-led and Western-dominated order.

2.1

The SCO as an instrument to push Western forces out of the region

The claim that the SCO is an instrument to push Western forces out of the region is based on several actions taken by the SCO or individual member states, with the support of the group. The most important evidence in this regard is the expulsion of U.S. forces from their Karshi-Khanabad base in Uzbekistan in July 2005. The Uzbek's government demand followed Washington's public request for an international investigation of an incident in the city of Andijan in May 2005, where at least 187 people died (Akbarzachev 2007: 115).

The authors of the Anti-Western Camp argue that the Uzbek government was supported by a declaration of the SCO following their Astana-Summit in July 2005. The SCO members stated that they

“consider it necessary, that respective members of the antiterrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use [...] of [regional] infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states” (SECTSCO 2005).

In light of these developments “it appeared to many American observers that Russia and China were working together to build an anti-Western, anti-democratic alliance” (Katz 2007: 17). Observers in Europe convinced themselves that “Russia, and to a lesser degree China, sees the SCO as an instrument through which increasing Western engagement in Central Asia can be countered. Both want US and NATO troops to depart Central Asia” (IISS 2006: 2; see also Sperling 2008: 117).

Furthermore, authors from the Anti-Western Camp argue that the bigger SCO members, Russia and China, pressured Kyrgyzstan to expel the U.S. forces from their last remaining base in Central Asia. This fate, however, could be avoided by the US with paying higher fees. Bishkek raised the fees for Washington's Ganci base from US\$3.5 million to more than US\$150 million per year (O'Rourke 2006; Weitz 2007).

According to the authors, several statements, especially from Russian observers and politicians, could further be regarded as supporting the SCO's intention to expel Western

forces from Central Asia. For instance, in reference to basing rights for Western forces, Leonid Ivashov, the President of the Russian Academy of Geopolitical Problems, stated in June 2005 that Russia “should not have left Central Asian countries face to face with the US [...]. We should have expressed our position within the SCO framework on NATO striving for presence in the region [as] it is impossible to break the US and NATO resistance in the sphere of base preservation single-handed (Ivashov cited in RIA Novosti 2005). The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also said that there was no need for Western forces in the region as “the Shanghai Cooperation Organization understands the problems of its regions very well and is capable of solving them by itself” (quoted in Afrasiabi 2006a).

Finally, the authors of the first camp also see the joint military operations which the SCO countries conduct annually in a bi- or multilateral format as “a dual message to the United States and the Central Asian republics of the extent to which Beijing and Moscow are prepared to go to protect their interests [in Central Asia]” (Blagov 2005b). Generally, the authors claim that “the Kremlin has made little secret that it views the war games as a demonstration of multilateral solidarity, with anti-Western overtones” (Blagov 2007).

Evaluation

Two major motivations drive China and Russia in their pursuit to expel Western forces from Central Asia. The first one is a general strategic concern about the presence of Western troops in Central Asia. The second motivation is the protection of both countries’ energy security. In the first instance, both Beijing and Moscow perceive the presence of Western forces as an intrusion upon their “strategic rear” (Devyatov 2004; Yu 2007). From a geopolitical point of view, Russia and China seek assurance that they can rely on relative stability in Central Asia in times of tensions with the West. The presence of American troops is therefore especially disturbing for them (Odgaard 2007b: 96).

However, concern about the presence of Western forces in Central Asia is not only limited to China and Russia. The four small states share their bigger neighbours’ disquiet because of “the fact that the military presence of the United States [...] can be used not only for the purpose of the [anti-terrorist] struggle, but also for pursuing the States’ own self-interested plans in the region” (Lukin 2007).

Initially, the SCO states were eager to support the U.S. in its global fight against Islamist extremism. The six countries thought that they could not only improve their bilateral relations with Washington, but that regional stability could only benefit from a combined effort against the Taliban’s stronghold: Afghanistan. Furthermore, they all have had their own fights with extremist groups and sought to get Western support for their local struggles. However, when the U.S. wanted to station AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircrafts on their Ganci airbase in Kyrgyzstan in December 2004 and tried to get Kyrgyz permission to conduct reconnaissance flights along the Chinese border, both Beijing and Moscow became very suspicious about the long-term intentions of the West in Central Asia (Knayzev 2008). They began not only to suspect “that Western countries, especially the U.S., [have] a hidden agenda for control of the natural resources of Central Asia” (Dwivedi 2006: 143) but that the West’s entry into Central Asia completed the perceived encirclement of Russia and China (Gompert et al. 2005: 19; Blank 2006b; Tsunekawa 2007: 81). Their shared fear is that, in gaining a military foothold in Central Asia, “the United States would [...] be

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The SCO as a neutral regional organisation

Authors of the second camp in the literature contend that the SCO is a not anti-Western, rather a neutral grouping, which is more concerned with counterterrorism and trade than fighting the West. To support their point of view the proponents of the Neutral Camp identify three major reasons which they perceive as posing a serious obstacle for the SCO member states in forming an anti-Western alliance. Firstly, they argue that differences in long-term interests between the SCO's two largest members prevent any significant cooperation beyond the fight against extremism, separatism and terrorism. These diverging interests might not only undermine the Sino-Russian partnership in the long-term, but also prevent the SCO from becoming an anti-Western grouping.

The authors of the Neutral Camp also argue that the SCO member states value their trade relations with Western states too much to transform the SCO into an anti-Western grouping. Finally, they see the SCO as a forum to balance Russian and Chinese influence. The proponents of the second camp in the literature claim that the four Central Asian states have no interest in weakening their ability to balance the two SCO heavyweights by cutting their own ties with the West.

3.1

Tensions between SCO members prevent an anti-Western grouping

The authors who do not see the SCO becoming a threat to Western interests state that the SCO “has too much divergence of interests between its members” (Lipkin 2006; see also Lee 2008: 2f). Proponents of the second camp claim that these “serious differences” (de Haas quoted in Bloshakov 2008) are especially severe between China and Russia, which are “de facto rivals” (IISS 2206: 2). The authors therefore believe that the “tensions between [SCO] members – tensions that are only likely to be amplified by any future enlargement – are too pronounced to make the SCO very effective as a regional actor” (ibid.: 1; see also Olcott 2006). They conclude that “the possibility of the SCO developing toward an anti-US coalition is overstated” (Iwashita 2007: 21). The proponents of the Neutral Camp refer to three interrelated areas in which the different interests between China and Russia are most apparent: a general lack of trust, regional energy trade and the future development of the SCO.

Their first argument is that Beijing and Moscow are still suspicious about each others' long-term interests in Central Asia (e.g Chin-Hao 2006: 19; Deutscher Bundestag 2008: 2; Lam 2005: 8; Oresman 2004: 419; Haacke 2006: 149). From this point of view, they proclaimed the Sino-Russian strategic partnership within the SCO “is tempered by strategic competition, evident in manoeuvres for access to Central Asian military bases and energy resources” (Lee 2008: 2f).

The authors also argue that for Moscow “the prospect of Russia becoming a raw material supplier to China is unacceptable, even if this has long been a fact of economic life in

Russia's trade relationship with the West" (Yu 2007). Additionally, while China is trying to diversify its energy supply by improving its relationships with Central Asian states and keeping energy prices low, Russia wants to preserve its regional monopoly on transport and production of energy and has an interest in high energy prices (Germanovich 2008: 20-26; Lee 2008: 4; Cohen 2006b). The scholars also argue that Russia and China are competing for energy resources and political influence in the four minor SCO states (Kimmage 2006; Tanaka 2007: 27; O'Hara 2005).

A further argument of the Neutral Camp is that China and Russia have diverging views on the SCO's future. The authors refer to Russia's reluctance to transform the SCO into a FTZ, something China has continuously been pushing for. As the Central Asian states have no interest in an "unfettered and unmanageable competition" (IISS 2006: 2) with China, the discussions regarding a SCO-wide FTZ have been postponed to 2020. The second camp's reason for this is that Moscow believes that "if a free-trade zone were established, then Russia's economy and the regional Central Asian economies would actually be controlled by China, and Russia would thereby lose its political influence in the former Soviet republics" (Yiwei 2004; see also Alexander Cooley in IA Regnum 2008b; Lukin 2007). They also note that China is similarly reluctant to support Russia's plan to strengthen the SCO's military pillar, i.e. by merging the SCO with the CSTO (Nünlist 2007).

Evaluation

The literature's Neutral Camp emphasises that Sino-Russian relations are crucial for the SCO's development. This assumption is well grounded. However, contrary to the claim of the second camp, the divergent Sino-Russian interests are highly outnumbered by their shared ones. They do not recognise that "Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia [...] has its limits" (Yu 2006). Importantly, "both China and Russia understand that, should Russia feel sidelined within the SCO, the organization will lose much of its legitimacy and purpose in the eyes of the smaller Central Asian members" (Troitskiy 2007: 31). Ramakant Dwivedi from the Indian *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses* argues that

"any sign of differences among the two powers would have an impact on the workings of the SCO and Central Asia. Presently, such a turn of events look [sic] distant and the Sino-Russian partnership will likely continue in the near future. Both are powerful countries and will not allow strains and differences to affect their relationship" (Dwivedi 2006: 155)

Beijing and Moscow are therefore motivated not only to achieve their shared economic goal of regional development, but to preserve and promote Russia's role as a co-leader of the SCO (Alekseyev 2005; Tie 2005: 245). Additionally, the SCO has enormously increased the trust between both countries in recent years. Kurt R. Spillmann, emeritus for Security Policy at the Swiss *ETH Zürich*, notes that the SCO has helped to improve China's general image in Russia and tempered China's perceptions of Russia as a military threat (Spillmann cited in Nünlist 2007; see also Gonzalez 2007: 67). Furthermore, the two SCO heavyweights share many interests which in turn create a strong motivation in both capitals to overcome any frictions and solve or at least alleviate mutual problems. In this context the SCO presents it-

4

Conclusion

The evidence provided by this work regarding the *actions* and *motivations* of the SCO member states partly explains the confusion in the literature. Indeed, it is difficult to observe a clear picture of the organisation's nature and to label it as either anti-Western or neutral. However, the study's analysis of the six major arguments of the two rival camps allows it to dismiss some of the claims made in the literature. Overall it was demonstrated that the authors of the Anti-Western Camp in the literature are more accurate in their description of the SCO's nature than the Neutral Camp.

The SCO is certainly not a neutral organisation – the members' opposition to Washington is simply too strong to support such a postulation. The first two main arguments of the Neutral Camp in the literature are predominantly unsupported and incorrect. In particular China and Russia are keen to keep American forces out of the region. Both countries see Washington's military presence in Central Asia as the potential completion of a U.S.-led strategy of encirclement. China and Russia have used the SCO to push American forces out of Central Asia. Additionally, they worry that the presence of American troops may jeopardise their energy security. However, the SCO shares an important aim with the West – the fight against Islamist terrorism. French and German troops stationed in Central Asian states to support NATO in Afghanistan have not faced similar difficulties as their American allies. This shows that Moscow and Beijing are especially concerned about Washington's troops and not Western ones in general.

Nevertheless, military cooperation with some Western nations does not preclude the concerns of SCO member states about the West's political influence in Central Asia. The regional states support the two SCO heavyweights in weakening Western influence in their countries as they fear for their regimes' survival. The U.S.-encouraged 'coloured revolutions' are a major reason for the Central Asian states to seek closer ties with China and Russia. While the latter two are generally concerned about the West's democratisation agenda, they suspect that especially Washington is interfering in the internal affairs of other states to install pro-Western governments. Moscow and Beijing fear that new governments might be employed by Washington to advance their further strategic encirclement. Thus, the SCO is used by all six actors to gather regional support for existing regimes.

The SCO is furthermore used by the SCO members to promote multipolarity and challenge perceived American unilateralism. However, while the Central Asian states basically aim to prevent Washington's unilateral activities in their region, Moscow and Beijing are also concerned about the consequences of instability caused by American interventionism.

The SCO allows China and Russia to cooperate with each other and has successfully reduced most of the suspicion remaining from the Sino-Soviet split. Both countries use the group as a forum to pragmatically work together in the many shared fields of interests (e.g. avoiding encirclement, ensure energy security) and seek to prevent any deterioration in their highly valued bilateral relationship. As Eric Kraus put it, after "having refined policy failure

to a fine art, the administration of George W. Bush managed a feat evading two generations of Communist policy makers – building a durable alliance between the two Asian giants” (Kraus 2007). Moreover, having achieved a certain level of trust in their bilateral relationship it becomes clear that the remaining differences will be insufficient to prevent them from forming an effective counterbalance to American efforts in the region.

The SCO also helps improve the economic cooperation between the member countries. Although trade relations with the West are very important for the economic well-being of Russia and China, it is clear that Western states have a large and increasing trade deficit with their Eastern partners. They import much more from China and Russia than they export to them. Europe depends on Russian energy and America needs cheap, labour-intensive products from China to keep up its standard of living. Thus, both East and West have an interest in maintaining good trade relations. Additionally, China and Russia are willing to increase their bilateral trade and cooperate closely on high-technology projects. They are also much more active in the Central Asian economies than Western states, an important feature not only for regional development but also for strengthening of the SCO.

However, the study at hand also illustrates that the view of the Anti-Western Camp in the literature is not entirely correct. The SCO is used by the Central Asian states to balance the two SCO heavyweights. By developing good ties with both Beijing and Moscow they want to avoid domination by one of them. While Tajikistan also seeks to engage Iran for this purpose, Kazakhstan pursues certainly the most sophisticated balancing policy. Having excellent relations with both Moscow and Beijing, Astana has constantly enhanced its ties with Western nations over the last years via NATO.

In summary, the evidence shows that the SCO is not aiming to go back to the days of the Cold War by creating an anti-Western bloc. This study has demonstrated that the SCO member states do not intend to transform the group into a clear cut alliance against the West and that they are also unable to do so (at least for now). The member states are not interested in the re-emergence of a new bipolar world.⁹ They seek to establish a multipolar international environment which values the norms of non-interference and equality. Additionally, Kazakhstan, the third strongest state in the SCO, would likely block every development in such a direction. This is perhaps the biggest obstacle for any (possible but so far unlikely) future attempt to transform the SCO into a stable anti-Western bloc.

The member states rather aim to effectively challenge and decrease American power in Central Asia. Cooperation with the West in the sphere of economy and security is welcomed as long as the SCO members benefit and do not have to worry about Western interference in internal affairs. Furthermore, the SCO – at least so far – lacks military means like an integrated military command to become a serious threat to the West (excluding the possibility of a nuclear war). Moreover, given the increasing interconnectedness of Europe, Asia and North America all sides have strong motivations to keep up a good level of cooperation. The nature of the SCO is therefore to some extent in flux.

9 This is the most important reason why Teheran's requests for SCO membership have twice been rejected. The SCO countries want to cooperate with Iran on regional issues but do not want to alienate Western states more than necessary.

Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is currently the most important regional organisation in Central Asia. This work examines the existing debate within the literature and tackles the question whether the SCO has an anti-Western or more neutral nature. It is important to answer this question because it provides crucial knowledge on the SCO's current and future role in Eurasia's heartland.

This book outlines the six major arguments put forward in the literature and assesses their validity by testing them against actual evidence. It shows that the claims regarding the SCO's anti-Western nature are basically correct. The organisation tries to push American forces out of the region and seeks to protect regional governments from Western democratisation efforts. Moreover, the SCO and its Sino-Russian combine promote a multipolar world order to end U.S. unilateralism.

The work demonstrates that most arguments regarding the SCO's neutral nature are incorrect. Some suspicion and diverging interests between China and Russia do not prevent the SCO from flourishing. While Beijing and Moscow highly value trade with Western states, the West also needs good trade relations with the two SCO heavyweights. However, the balancing behaviour of Kazakhstan prevents the SCO from becoming a closed anti-Western bloc. This work nevertheless concludes that the SCO will maintain a definite anti-American nature as long as Washington's foreign policy neglects the strategic realities in Central Asia.