

MULTIPOLARITY AFTER UKRAINE: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

edited by **Aldo Ferrari** and **Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



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Introduction

One year since Russia's invasion, the war in Ukraine rages on. At this time, Moscow has not achieved its objective of toppling the Ukrainian government, nor has it been able to conquer the entirety of the Donbass. Instead, its war of aggression has elicited strong reactions from the West. As this book goes to press, we hear of an incoming Russian offensive from the east, and of a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in the southeast. Be as it may, the war drags on and its "fog" doesn't allow us to shed light on who might come on top.

However, there are already several things that can be said about the effects of this war at the international level. In a nutshell, the invasion of Ukraine has put an end to several "taboos". The first: Germany and Japan, the two defeated countries of the Second World War, are rearming themselves – continuing a long-running trend, it could be argued, but this time without hiding behind any excuses. On the contrary, Berlin is explicitly claiming that the Ukraine invasion is a *zeitenwende* (turning point) and is set to bring its yearly defense expenditure from 50 to 80 billion euros.

A second taboo that has also been broken: long sitting in the "neutral" camp, just a few months after the invasion, both Finland and Sweden formally applied to join NATO. Everyone, it seems, is taking sides. Erdogan and Orbán permitting, NATO is getting larger very soon, while the space for neutrality in Europe will be shrinking.

The third taboo to fall: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put an end to the Western hope that trade and interdependence would bring countries together, or to the very least discourage war. In Europe, the *Wandel durch Handel* ("Change through trade") model exemplified by Germany was completely upset by the invasion, and in a very evident manner. Even as the Russian army mobilized along the Ukrainian border, the German government continued to allow the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline up until 22 February 2022, two days before Moscow decided to invade Ukraine.

As taboos fall, one by one, some certainties appear to be rising as well. It is clear that the US, along with the West, wants Ukraine to hold steady. Since the war began, the US alone has committed 23 billion dollars in weapons and military aid to Ukraine, almost double the amount earmarked by the rest of the world combined (12 billion dollars), and seven times as much as the usual aid it sent to its largest military partner, Israel, in 2020 (3.3 billion dollars). And while it seems farfetched to argue that the West is using Ukraine to wage a "proxy war" on Russia, surely Ukraine today is being held up as a beacon of resistance against countries that do not respect the rule-based international order.

At the same time, the very number of countries that explicitly tackle the notion of a Western-led, rule-based international order is on the rise. On 21 February 2023, just a few days before the first anniversary of the invasion, the Russian President said that it would suspend its participation in the New START Treaty, the last remaining nuclear-arms treaty between Moscow and Washington, and a vestige of the security architecture that helped keep the peace for decades. And while a revanchist Russia appears increasingly bent on renegotiating the conditions that put an end to the cold war (whether successfully or not, it remains to be seen), Beijing seems to be playing along, as Russia and China share a common interest in weakening US dominance.

In this context, this Report sets out to answer to a few crucial questions: have things really changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Is the world becoming more and more multipolar, and is this actual news compared to a pre-invasion scenario? Is China and Russia's challenge to the Western-led rules-based international order really experiencing a step change, or is this just "new wine in old bottles"?

Over the past few years, Western governments and intellectuals have been prompted to think about the future of the liberal international order on several occasions. The war in Ukraine is only the latest and most dramatic event to spur such reflection. Since February 24, however, it seems that Western discourse has progressively moved away from the idea of "liberal international order", rather choosing to call Russia's aggression an attack on the "rule-based international order". In the first chapter, Zachary Paikin sheds light on the conceptual confusion surrounding these two terms, while reviewing them against the background of the shifting global order. This also serves as an attempt to determine what the place of both Russia and the West in this order will be following the end of the war. Paikin argues that the shape of the future international order will largely depend upon the West and Russia's willingness to either face a lengthy confrontation, or compromise on what they have long depicted as core and non-negotiable principles. In Paikin's mind, should the latter prevail, 2022 could go down in history as the year when multipolarity finally became reality.

It is precisely multipolarity that has been the leitmotif of Russia's foreign policy since the early '90s. This came to be particularly the case after 2014, when Moscow started to be more aggressive in its confrontation with the West. Although Russia's efforts in striving for multipolarity have been undeniable, it remains unclear what role it is bound to have in it, nor whether the Ukraine war is going to affect it. To answer these questions, Richard Sakwa considers contemporary international politics, which he defines as moving towards "highly uneven multipolarity". Sakwa proceeds to examine

Russia in the current multipolar world. Here, he claims that while isolated by Western counterparts in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has managed to cement its ties with China and other countries. Nevertheless, he argues that China will eventually compete with the US for the position of hegemony, whereas Russia will seek to balance the dominant powers.

As a new international system seems to be taking shape, there is another sphere in which the effects of the Ukraine conflict are already observable. Indeed, following the breakout of the war, global economy has also dramatically changed. Russia's invasion has brought into sharper focus supply chain vulnerabilities, reigniting once again the debate on the risks of getting too dependent on others' economies. Over the course of 2022, Europe has managed to progressively decouple from Moscow. If it is undeniable that the national security dimension has become more prominent in the mapping of supply chain routes and strategic dependencies, it might be too hasty to talk about deglobalization. To shed light on this matter, Rem Korteweg assesses the overall impact of Russia's war on the global trading system, drawing seven lessons from the conflict while also attempting to outline the future trajectories of globalization.

Besides Russia, a country that has often been mentioned by Western officials with regards to decoupling is China. Just like Russia, China has been among the most assertive actors in challenging the Western rule-based international order. It is this common revisionist stance to have brought these two actors closer in the first place. On February 4, 2022, during a meeting at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, presidents Putin and Xi Jinping proclaimed a "friendship without limits" between their countries, a joint declaration that seemed to crown Moscow and Beijing's endeavors to improve their bilateral relations. However, only three weeks later, Russia kicked off its large-scale invasion, putting China to the test. Sarah Kirchberger investigates how the China-Russia relations have changed since February 24. She describes China's

attitude towards Russia, before and during the Ukraine war, and discusses how the war might impact the future perspectives for a strategic partnership. Kirchberger navigates a multitude of levels of the Sino-Russian alignment, to eventually make the case that the future of the “friendship without limits” should be not taken for granted, especially when looked at from the Chinese side.

Irrespective of this, China and Russia have been some of the fiercest adversaries of the US-led global order. This competition with the West has at times been put into practice with the creation of international organizations and institutions. One of the most notable cases is that of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded on China’s initiative in 2001. Today, SCO comprises 8 member states. Lately, many Western analysts have increasingly labelled the SCO as an anti-NATO. The chapter by Filippo Costa Buranelli and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti deals precisely with this issue. Certainly, there is an important security dimension, and some of the members are at odds with the West. Yet, Central Asian countries seem to be more interested in SCO for the trade and networking opportunities it can offer. Thus, the authors claim that the SCO may well develop to become one of the poles of power in the multipolar world, but it will not necessarily be as anti-Western as many might think.

Albeit wars are traditionally fought on the battlefield, it should not be forgotten that the Internet and the digital sphere represented a new ground for warfare. Oftentimes, we hear of armies of online trolls that, by spreading false information on social media, try to shape users’ views and opinions. This appears to have become particularly relevant with the Ukraine war, which has been dubbed “The World’s First TikTok War”. In light of this, understanding the latest trends of propaganda and digital confrontation has become of the utmost importance. However, due to the huge amount of information, as well as the constant flow of user-generated content, identifying propaganda online can prove extremely hard. In her chapter,

İdil Galip helps us with that, in two ways: firstly, by extensively describing the reasonings behind propaganda; secondly, by elucidating on how memes and digital content have changed things. In her conclusion, Galip further elaborates on digital propaganda, giving final explanations as to why it can be promising and appealing for many actors.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President

5. The SCO: Geopolitical Bloc, Normative Order, or Pragmatic Platform?

Filippo Costa Buranelli, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

On 15-16 September 2022, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held its 22nd meeting of Heads of States in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. At the height of the war in Ukraine, and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 wave that had ravaged societies and economies alike, the meeting was heralded as one of the most important summits of 2022. After all, it was the first time that Russian President Vladimir Putin attended in person such a high-calibre, multilateral event since Russia's invasion of Ukraine; it was Chinese President Xi Jinping's first participation in an official, multilateral meeting after the Covid-19 outbreak; and it was the occasion on which Iran, often considered a pariah and rogue state by Western powers and their Middle Eastern allies, was formally admitted to the organisation. Hence, the focus of the press and analysts alike was very much on this gathering of powerful Eurasian leaders, all members of this organisation. In fact, the focus was once again on the organisation itself. We say "once again" because the SCO has been at the centre of analyses, commentaries and speculations about its geopolitical and normative identity since its foundation in 2005. After all, we are talking about an organisation which accounts for half of the world's GDP and includes more than half of the world's population, and arguably features the most entrenched authoritarian ecology

in the world and yet includes among its members the biggest democracy known to the world. From a systemic perspective, it is an organisation that includes two of the most important, if not the two most important, rivals of the West – Russia and China – but also all the Central Asian republics except for Turkmenistan, and two of the most mutually suspicious states in the world – India and Pakistan.

At the same time, it is an organisation that bears little resemblance to the European integrationist project, and even less resemblance to the allied nature of NATO. In other words, it is often easier to define the SCO by what it is not, rather than by what it is. Hence, this chapter sets itself the ambitious task of analysing and dissecting the SCO in its structural as well as its normative components, and of presenting a picture of the organisation that is as faithful as possible to what its members claim it to be and how they perceive it. This means paying attention to what local actors say and do, as well as to those organisational dynamics that shed light on this group's specific peculiarities and key aspects.

In quantum-theory fashion, one of the main theses of this chapter is that, given its heterogeneity and diverse composition, the meaning and function of the SCO is in the eye of the beholder. In other words, different members have different perceptions and understandings not of how the SCO works, but rather of what the SCO is the most appropriate vehicle for. Another thesis is that the SCO is less concerned with security than many analysts believe it to be, although it is undeniable that there are underlying security logics that permeate the workings of the organisation. Finally, a third thesis is that the main aspect of the SCO is its normative slant, i.e., the willingness and the ability to present an alternative model for world order premised on normative parameters and priorities that differ from those of the West, or at least from the Western interpretation thereof.

To illustrate these theses, the chapter is structured as follows. The next section outlines the historical evolution, the norms, the identity and the institutions at the heart of the SCO, clarifying

their meaning and function. The subsequent section elaborates on the previous one and deals with the role of ‘security’ within the organisation, arguing that while security is indeed an important component of the SCO, it is polysemic insofar as it assumes different meanings and degrees of importance for different members. The third section builds on the second one and seeks to understand how the SCO is contributing to the construction of an alternative political order, while also advancing the pragmatic interests of its members in the economic and business sectors. In the conclusions, we call for a sober assessment of the SCO: while it would be a mistake – and potentially dangerous – to dismiss the organisation as irrelevant, it would also be misleading to conceive it as an anti-NATO bloc or securitise it as a threat.

The Historical Evolution of the SCO: An Anti-NATO Organisation in the Making?

After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, China and Russia started their rapprochement. The tensions originating from the Sino-Russian split and conflicts over contested borders gave way to a gradual warming of relations and increased cooperation, which eventually also involved three Central Asian countries that form part of Moscow and Beijing’s “shared neighbourhood”. This process led to the informal meetings of the members of the Shanghai Five group – China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan – in 1996. Herein lie the origins of the SCO. Beijing initiated a proposal for more structured cooperation between the countries within the Shanghai Five framework, which was eventually enlarged with Uzbekistan’s accession upon the SCO’s formal establishment as an international organisation in 2001.

Initially, this mechanism was supposed to focus exclusively on issues in the security sphere, notably those pertaining to extremism, separatism and terrorism, but later the PRC proposed extending cooperation to the economic and energy

fields. According to some, this development contributed to the rivalry between China and Russia in the Central Asian region, given that China's economic power could somehow overshadow Russia's waning influence. To others, on the other hand, it signalled their willingness to enter an era of "division of labour" in the region: "Russian leaders understood the folly of any attempt to challenge China's economic penetration of Central Asia, where Beijing had been gaining influence as a major trade and investment partner; instead, they decided to seek a division of labour in the region with Beijing: Russia would wield the gun and China the money, but on condition that it respected Russia-led multilateral mechanisms in the region such as the Eurasian Economic Union".¹

Today, in addition to its founding members, the organisation also comprises India, Pakistan and Iran (slated to formally join by April 2023),² three Observer States interested in acceding to full membership (Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) and several "Dialogue Partners" (among them, NATO member Turkey). The mechanism of Observer States and Dialogue Partners is useful to engage other states potentially interested in cooperation with SCO, hence serving as an indication of the attractiveness of the organisation. The areas of cooperation among SCO members in the field of international security include the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism – considered the "three evils" by the SCO members –, illegal arms and drug trafficking, and cybercrime. The SCO has been gradually institutionalised for over two decades, with dialogue and cooperation mechanisms that include annual summits of leaders and high-level officials and ministerial meetings covering defence and security, and trade and finance. A Secretariat was set

¹ A. Gabuev and V. Spivak, "The Asymmetrical Russia-China Axis: An Overview". in A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds.), *Russia and China. Anatomy of a Partnership*, ISPI Report, Milano, Ledizioni, 2019, p. 56.

² On Iran's accession to the SCO, and its impact on the organisation, see M. Tishehyar, "Why Is Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Important?", Valdai Club, 28 December 2022.

up in 2004, followed a year later by a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) located in Tashkent (Uzbekistan).

While there are important trade and economic cooperation paths – including attempts to create a single free trade and economic area, which will be discussed in the last section of the chapter, as well as an SCO Bank – the security dimension has grabbed the most attention. In particular, the focus is on the SCO's potential to become part of a new security architecture together with other regional institutions such as the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the actions taken by both China and Russia to try to transform Greater Eurasia into what is sometimes described as a “non-Western international society”.³ Moreover, many Western analysts have increasingly labelled the SCO as anti-NATO. An ECFR paper published as recently as 2022 claims that this perception stems mainly from Russian efforts aimed at a “reinforcement of the organisation's military dimension”.⁴ China's growing tensions with the US have also contributed to creating this image. For decades, both Moscow and Beijing have framed NATO first and foremost as an aggressive organisation “stuck in Cold War confrontational worldviews while Russia and China are open to dialogue and cooperation”, proving – according to this narrative – their “self-proclaimed moral superiority”.⁵ According to the Australian-based Chinese scholar Jingdong Yuan, Beijing saw the establishment of the SCO as a response to non-traditional security challenges emerging after the fall of the USSR. Over time, Beijing has sought to “influence and shape the organisation in support of its institutional balancing

³ J. Yuan, “Forging a New Security Order in Eurasia: China, the SCO, and the Impacts on Regional Governance”, *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2022, p. 2.

⁴ A. Aydıntaşbaş, M. Dumoulin, E. Geranmayeh, and J. Oertel, “[Rogue NATO: The new face of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#)”, ECFR Commentary, 16 September 2022.

⁵ L. Lams, H. De Smaele, F. De Coninck, C. Lippens, and L. Smeyers, “Strategic Comrades? Russian and Chinese Media Representations of NATO”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2022.

strategy [...] against the US, to prevent the latter from gaining access and influence in Central Asia/Eurasia; to foster trust among member states, and develop the SCO into a regional security community, and to safeguard Chinese interests in both geo-economic (trade and energy) and geopolitical (security and regional stability) terms”.⁶

Given the increasing anti-Western attitudes of the founding – and leading – members, it is plausible that the two countries will try to cement consensus among other SCO members on their policies and positions *vis-à-vis* the US and the EU. Yet it is doubtful whether the SCO could and would become a highly institutionalised security bloc that could credibly counter NATO. As a matter of fact, several differences between SCO and NATO are unlikely to be overcome in the future. First, the level of commitment required from members. While NATO is a binding alliance, the SCO is more of a loose partnership: all members remain free to pursue their own policies and even alliances. Nothing remotely equivalent to NATO’s Article 5 would guarantee collective security in case of an external attack; the possibility that such an article could be envisaged is far-fetched, not least because of Russia’s current war against Ukraine and the historical animosities between the two SCO members India and Pakistan. Second, the value dimension of the organisation. According to its charter, NATO explicitly promotes democratic values. NATO’s founding treaty – the 1949 Washington Treaty – stresses the nature of NATO as an alliance of democracies, aiming to “safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”.⁷ Hence, what differentiates NATO from other military clubs is its commitment to shared democratic values, which is so central that the current President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Gerald E. Connolly (United States) has placed

⁶ Yuan (2022), p. 1.

⁷ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, [Debunking misconceptions about a Democratic Resilience Center within NATO](#).

safeguarding the Alliance's shared democratic values at the heart of his presidency.⁸ So, while it is safe to say that today not all NATO members can be defined as liberal democracies (Turkey and Hungary, for example, have been experiencing severe democratic backsliding), it is also evident that the Alliance has been consistently marketing itself as a democratic organisation. The SCO, for its part, despite being made up mainly of authoritarian countries, does not harbour any aspirations to herald or become a champion of either illiberal or liberal values. On the contrary, it simply promotes the so-called Shanghai Spirit, which embodies the principles of "mutual trust and benefit, equality, consultation, respect for the diversity of civilisations and pursuit of common development".⁹ Moreover, sitting among the majority of autocratic members is also India, the world's largest democracy. Finally, while NATO is markedly a security alliance, the SCO's economic and business dimension should not be disregarded, as the last section of this chapter will highlight. But before turning to the pragmatic political and business interests underpinning the SCO, it is worth delving into the security question, which as noted has been at the centre of recent debates about the possible, perceived evolution of the SCO into an anti-Western bloc.

The (non-)role of security

It was mentioned in the introduction that one of the theses of this chapter is that 'security' is not the main strategic driver of the SCO, despite the perceptions and impressions circulating among some Western scholars noted in the previous section. This section aims to elucidate this statement, by contextualising it within the wider remit of the organisation and by providing some reflections on how security itself is understood and practised within it. First, a clarification. Does security matter

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Z. Xin, "The undying importance of the 'Shanghai Spirit'", CGTN, 6 March 2018.

for the SCO? Yes, it does. It is the adversarial interpretation of security, understood as the pursuit of a geopolitical counterbalance to the West, that we claim does not sit at the centre of the SCO's strategic and normative architecture. This calls for a brief reflection on the term "security" itself before proceeding with the analysis.

Security, in international relations as well as in geopolitics and diplomacy, is traditionally understood as the defence of the national interest and the survival of the state itself in situations of threat, real or perceived, coming from hostile forces, often states, acting alone or in concert. This is the logic of security that underpinned, for example, the foundation of NATO in 1949 and the CSTO in 1992, by explicitly referring to "external forces" in the treaties constituting these organisations. The SCO, by contrast, is not an alliance, let alone a security organisation, understood as a centrifugal, outward-looking securitising body. Instead, the *raison d'être* of security within the SCO is centripetal, internal, state-centric and regime-oriented security. It is not by chance that the SCO founding documents and structures, such as the organisation's founding charter and the Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils,¹⁰ all refer to the abovementioned extremism, separatism and terrorism as the "three evils" against which the organisation must equip itself. In fact, extremism and separatism are two threats from within the state, whereas terrorism is seen as a threat that is both transnational and domestic.

In other words, if we follow the logic of the process of securitisation by which "security" *per se* is nothing but the product of a series of rhetorical constructs and speech acts aimed at elevating a given referent person or object as being under threat, the referent objects for the SCO are the state as a subject of international law, its territory and the incumbent regime governing it. In normative terms, as was discussed in

¹⁰ Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils, available at <http://rus.sectsco.org/structure/20190715/564868.html> (in Russian).

the previous section, this is translated into the mantras of non-interference, non-intervention, cooperation without integration (i.e., avoidance of supranationalism) and the primacy of stability and authority over human, political and social rights. In light of the above, it would therefore be unfair at best and naïve at worst to treat the SCO as a “geopolitical bluff”,¹¹ or an “Asian anti-NATO” organisation,¹² for geopolitics has never been among its primary objectives. Instead, it is the maintenance of state-centric order, stability, the preservation of the rule of incumbent regimes (which means the prevention of “coloured revolutions”),¹³ and the eradication of potential transnational threats that have been, in security terms, the main drivers of the group.

This is evident, for example, in the only formal structure of the SCO that deals with security, the RATS. Located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the body is tasked with the collection, sharing and dissemination of information related to internationally recognised terrorist groups (or, more problematically, groups labelled as such by one member of the organisation with the support of all the others), and is in charge of organising training and regular joint exercises of those branches of the security services and armed forces that deal with transnational terrorist threats. The three other platforms that support the SCO and the RATS, i.e., the Meetings of Defence Ministers, the meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils and the Meetings of the Chiefs of the General Staff of the Armed Forces all work to “coordinate the efforts of the SCO member states in jointly countering security challenges and threats in accordance with international treaties within the framework of the SCO on the joint fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic

¹¹ See M. Laumulin, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as ‘Geopolitical Bluff?’ A View from Astana”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 12, July 2006.

¹² S. Saha, “The future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, East Asia Forum, 17 October 2014.

¹³ S. Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, Springer, 2009.

substances, illegal trade weapons, transnational organised crime, illegal migration and other threats to national, regional and international security” and to foster military convergence in exercises and drills in the abovementioned areas.¹⁴

The best way to characterise the significance of “security” for the SCO seems to be to say that, ultimately, within the organisation, security simply means different things to different people. For Russia, the SCO is a vehicle to discuss the Afghan problem multilaterally, keep an eye on drug trafficking from the south, balance China’s presence in Eurasia and sit at yet another table with its Central Asian neighbours. For China, the main driver behind its participation in the organisation (and indeed behind its foundation) is primarily the locking-in of Xinjiang. As a matter of fact, since its creation in 2005, the SCO has been oriented towards the formation of an economic, security and infrastructural cordon sanitaire around this western Chinese province, which harbours nationalistic and secessionist sentiments from the centre, with the intent of fully integrating within the macro-regional order promoted by Beijing. In addition to this, China has often used SCO platforms to advance its economic-infrastructure project known as Belt and Road Initiative, taking advantage of bilateral and multilateral meetings to sign lucrative deals, as was the case at the latest meeting when the agreement for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway was finalised.

For the Central Asian republics, the main function performed by the SCO in terms of security is that of guaranteeing a modicum of equilibrium between Russia and China, and benefitting from a double umbrella of economic cooperation and security partnership on the one hand, and authoritarian legitimacy on the other. At the same time, since Central Asia is a diverse region with strategic overlaps but also significant idiosyncrasies, it is important to briefly outline what in security

¹⁴ Meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils, available at <http://rus.sectsco.org/structure/20190715/564868.html> (in Russian).

terms the SCO does for the Central Asian states individually. For Kazakhstan, for example, the main rationale for taking part in the SCO, on top of the reasons listed above, is territorial security (the country borders with both Russia and China) and the possibility to leverage, infrastructurally, on its position as a crossroads between East and West. For Uzbekistan, on the other hand, the main focus is on overcoming the drawbacks of being a double-landlocked country by taking advantage of opportunities for cooperation with several maritime states (including Pakistan and India) as well as having a multilateral forum with both regional great powers to look for cooperation and support with respect to Afghanistan. For the two smaller and weaker states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, security within the SCO is mostly connected to internal (regime-oriented), territorial, economic and, again, infrastructure issues. For India and Pakistan, terrorism is once again the main focus of security activities within the SCO, while, for Iran, membership of the organisation is mainly linked to ideological security (legitimation of the Revolution), again prevention of terrorist acts, and economic security through the consolidation of other multilateral markets to avoid Western sanctions.

While Afghanistan seems in one way or another to be a link that binds together all members in security terms (either because of spillover of violence due to state failure or because of drug trafficking, or terrorist acts, or all of the above), it is important to note that even in its regard the SCO lacks any sort of “collective security” mandate. First, “the SCO itself serves mainly as a platform for member states to coordinate their individual policies and cooperation with Afghanistan, rather than actively pushing cooperation projects”.¹⁵ Furthermore, “military interventions are simply not within the organisation’s mandate. While the group’s goals include cooperation on a wide range, including economic, political, security, culture,

¹⁵ E. Seiwert, “[The SCO Will Not Fill Any Vacuums in Afghanistan](#)”, Oxus Society, 30 September 2021.

research, education, tourism, environment protection, and more, military cooperation is not one of them”.¹⁶ Over the years, member states have repeatedly stressed how the SCO is best characterised as having a non-bloc status and “should not be seen as a ‘scale’ balancing between the West, on the one hand, and Russia or China”.¹⁷ In sum, security does play a role within the SCO, and quite an important one. Yet, it is one of the several pillars of the organisation, which over the years has consistently moved towards other, non-traditional aspects of international relations such as food security and sustainable development. When security is mentioned within the SCO, it is often understood as *internal*, *territorial* and *regime-oriented*, thus characterising the organisation as an example of protective integration.¹⁸ The SCO, it is important to stress yet again, has never claimed, and is unlikely to claim, any anti-Western or Asian-bloc status, especially in military terms.¹⁹ Rather, it is a complex governance structure that, while also taking into account the security of its members, promotes summitry, legitimacy, negotiation, the management of great powers,²⁰ and the outlining of an alternative normative architecture for world order as illustrated in the previous section.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ N. Imamova, “Uzbekistan, Central Asia Try to Redefine Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *VOANews*, 17 September 2022; see also R. Temirov, “Diverging interests scuttle attempts to make SCO an anti-Western bloc”, *Central Asia News*, 23 September 2022.

¹⁸ R. Allison, “Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: Comparing the SCO and CSTO”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, Issue 3, Autumn 2018, pp. 297-338.

¹⁹ For an excellent overview of these misconceptions, see A. Schmitz, “SCO Summit in Samarkand: Alliance Politics in the Eurasian Region”, *SWP*, 20 September 2022.

²⁰ A. Tskhay and F. Costa Buranelli, “Accommodating Revisionism through Balancing Regionalism: The Case of Central Asia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 72, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1033-52.

Pragmatic Interests and Normative Alternatives

While the SCO is usually viewed as a security bloc in the West, the previous section has demonstrated how the organisation means much more than that, especially for its Central Asian members. According to Muzaffar Djalalov, head of Inha University in Tashkent, Central Asians actually prioritise cooperation areas such as education, science and healthcare, and view the SCO primarily as a development platform.²¹

Since 2001, several documents have envisaged the creation of a single trade and economic space. While a single economic space is still far from being achieved, trade turnover among SCO members has been gradually increasing, in line with the expansion of the organisation's membership. In 2019, for example, two years after India and Pakistan joined, the total mutual trade of the eight members reached US\$ 602.94 billion, nearly 20 times that of 2000.²² Moreover, several organisations have been created to work towards further economic integration. Since 2005, for instance, the Interbank Consortium has been helping to establish banking relations between members. In China's initial plans, the Consortium was meant to serve as the basis for the creation of the SCO Development Bank; however, Russia blocked the bank's creation due to fears of China's excessive influence in Central Asia through its dominant role within the SCO development bank framework.²³ Despite the failed attempt to set up the SCO Development Bank, the Interbank Consortium is proving its usefulness. In fall 2022, Chinese media reported that the "China Development Bank

²¹ Quoted in N. Imamova, "Uzbekistan, Central Asia Try to Redefine Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Voice of America*, 17 September 2022.

²² L. Xin and Y.X. Wang, "The Results of the 20-Year Economic Cooperation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Development Prospects", *Finance Theory and Practice*, vol. 25, no. 3, July 2021, pp. 159-74.

²³ B. Hooijmaaijers, "Understanding Success and Failure in Establishing New Multilateral Development Banks: The SCO Development Bank, the NDB, and the AIIB", *Asian Perspective*, vol. 45 no. 2, 2021, p. 445-67.

completed 63 cooperation projects under the framework of the SCO Interbank Consortium, extending loans totalling \$14.6 billion to member banks and partner banks [...], covering production capacity cooperation, infrastructure, green and low-carbon development, and agriculture”.²⁴

In 2006, the SCO established a Business Council to help attract investments, further develop economic cooperation within the organisation and provide expert business assessments to companies from the SCO member states. Moreover, The SCO has been setting up development zones to allow investing businesses from the SCO nations to expand cooperation in specific locations and share technologies, expertise and product types to develop new collaborations and manufacturing processes. The first of these development zones is the China-Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Local Economic & Trade Cooperation Demonstration Area established in the Jiaozhou area of Qingdao on China’s East Coast. The concept, which is intended to be extended to other Industrial Zones in SCO countries, aims to become a sort of “SCO incubator”.²⁵ Furthermore, several meetings and initiatives organised by SCO members offer networking and business opportunities and are widely promoted within the SCO network. For instance, the 2022 edition of the International Business Week Forum – a professional platform promoting dialogue between the state and businesses held annually in the Russian city of Ufa – was opened by SCO Secretary-General Zhang Ming.²⁶

Finally, a key long-term economic strategy shared by most SCO members is strengthening the development of local-currency cross-border payment and settlement systems. For example, at the 2022 summit in Uzbekistan, the SCO

²⁴ “SCO economic cooperation in spotlight amid global challenges”, *Global Times*, 14 September 2022.

²⁵ “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Establishes Economic Cooperation Zones”, Silk Road Briefing, 16 June 2022.

²⁶ SCO Secretariat, *Development of interregional business ties in SCO space*, 17 December 2022.

members agreed on a road map to expand trade in local currencies and develop alternative payment and settlement systems – something the SCO has been planning for years. This agenda is in line with the individual policies of the group's most relevant members, including “Russia’s attempt to cushion the blow of Western sanctions, China’s deteriorating relations with the United States, India’s use of nondollar currencies in its trade with Russia, and Iran’s recent proposal for a single SCO currency”.²⁷ While this strategy mainly speaks to China and Russia’s ambition to de-dollarise the international economy,²⁸ and to reform the broader WTO system, it is also meant to bring concrete benefits to other SCO members.

Hence, while the SCO is being increasingly seen as an anti-Western bloc due to the deterioration of ties between the West and the two SCO founding members, Russia and China, the organisation also has an economic and business dimension that is at least as – if not much more – important than the security dimension. More than a military or an anti-Western bloc, most Eurasian states see the SCO as an instrument for maintaining stability and sustainable development in the region, while at the same time balancing out their ties with China and Russia. This pragmatic dimension ties into a broader understanding of politics that, crucially, does not reject the fundamental normative underpinnings of contemporary world order but advances a more state-centric, pluralist and developmentalist interpretation of it, emphasising the importance of sovereignty and non-interference/non-intervention, the supremacy of territorial over humanitarian international law, diplomatic consensus and inclusivity, state-led market economy, and what has been recently termed ‘authoritarian environmentalism’.²⁹

²⁷ Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “China Is Quietly Trying to Dethrone the Dollar”, *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2022.

²⁸ See V. Nosov, “The Sino-Russian Challenge to the US Dollar Hegemony”, in Ferrari and Tafuro (2019).

²⁹ See G. Agostinis and F. Urdinez, “The Nexus between Authoritarian and Environmental Regionalism: An Analysis of China’s Driving Role in the

Conclusion: What the SCO Is, and Will Be

Far from being a paper tiger, and at the same time far from being an aggressive anti-NATO bloc, the SCO is a regional international organisation that operates, and develops, on the basis of specific principles, understandings, goals and norms. Based on the ideas of regime security, stability, developmentalism and consensus, the SCO is perhaps best seen as an institutionalised platform to pursue three macro-goals: security cooperation; state-led sustainable development and economic diversification; and normative convergence along pluralist lines. These three goals, crucially, are interpreted and managed in different ways by the different member states, and should be interpreted as broad normative preferences allowing for internal diversity and flexibility. Any intellectual, let alone political, attempt to dismiss the SCO as irrelevant or meaningless is necessarily doomed to miss the fundamental role that it plays in bringing together different actors and societies in pursuing an alternative understanding of world order and sources for development without (notoriously Western) conditionality. At the same time, any claim that the SCO is structuring and conceiving itself as an anti-NATO organisation is inevitably destined to misinterpret the fundamentally *internal* logics of security that inform the workings of the organisation, and in fact will contribute to exacerbating tensions and fuelling confrontation. Premised on an essentially anti-bloc understanding, the SCO allows for flexible membership and for diversification of multi-vectoral foreign policies, with the result that most of its members (especially the Central and South Asian countries) do engage in security and economic cooperative relations with the West, too.

In light of the foregoing analysis, and of the member states' preferences, one can expect the SCO to continue to play the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 69, no. 4-5, pp. 330-44.

role of “aggregator” of interests, concerns and connectivity in the Eurasian order, while at the same time promoting normative change at the international level and focusing on the internal security of its member states’ regimes. It is thus unlikely that the SCO will morph into a geopolitical bloc manifestly hostile to the West, while at the same time it is difficult to imagine a militarisation of the organisation in the near future – mostly because of the different capabilities, perceptions of security and diversity of foreign policy interests of the member states. In conclusion, as the SCO is the world’s largest regional organisation in terms of geographic extension and population, accounting for almost 40% of the world population and more than 30% of global GDP, it would be equally wrong – and potentially dangerous – to dismiss it as irrelevant and to securitise it as a threat. Sober, in-depth assessments of its role in agenda-setting, consensus-building, regime-boosting and fostering normative change are needed in order to focus not only on its logics of consequences but also, and especially, on its logics of legitimacy in world politics.

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