

# Sino-Russian Relations within the Framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Framework

**Khayrulla Umarov**

University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

**Kimberly Millie**

Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Russia and China within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Originally created to resolve the border issues among the Central Asian countries, Russia, and China, the organization is now focused on ensuring regional security in Central Asia. In the reapproachment of the SCO member countries, a divergence of interests emerged, primarily between Russia and China. This article presents the views of experts and specialists from Russia, China, and the United States regarding the divergence of interests and the perceived influence of the United States in the region.

**Keywords:** SCO, regional security, cooperation, Central Asia, Russia, China, United States

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, regional cooperation is important for countries in every region. Central Asia, in contrast to other regions, is in the center of Eurasia and has both geopolitical and geo-economic advantages. Considering this aspect, many countries are seeking to establish a presence in the region through various organizations. One of the most important organizations in the Central Asian region is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Sino-Russian relations constitute the core of this organization, which is becoming more complex than ever. In its activities the SCO is committed to constructive dialogue, exchanges and cooperation in various formats with other states and regions.

The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, I. A. Karimov (2011), in evaluating the activities of the SCO over the last 10 years, said that in a relatively short historical period the SCO has emerged as an influential and authoritative international structure. "SCO based on its fundamental principles has been asserting itself as a reliable guarantor of stability and security in the region. At the present stage, it is on the vortex of a rapidly changing, uncertain world...and has a vital, enduring, regional importance" (Karimov, 2011, p. 1).

## RUSSIA AND CHINA TOGETHER

In this regard, many expert analysts are paying close

attention to the current state of relations between China and Russia, as well as their relations with the countries of Central Asia within the framework of the SCO. The establishment of the SCO happened at a time, when Russia surrendered under the onslaught of the West and gradually handed over its geopolitical positions, including those in Central Asia, and was forced to reduce its strategic space. Establishment of the Shanghai Five further contributed to Russia's efforts to attract China to its side in the confrontation with Western influence in Central Asia. In terms of its functionality, the SCO security system has managed to create the conditions for the coexistence of China and Russia and the alignment of their relations with the countries of Central Asia without direct confrontation.

Touching on this aspect, Galyamova (2007) states that for Russia and China the question is not just whether to keep the Central Asian Republics from excessive rapprochement with the West but that a geopolitical defeat in Moscow and Beijing will result in a weakening of the SCO and potential splintering of the resolve of the individual countries to align themselves with the regional powers of Russia and China. This requires the implementation of Russian and Chinese resource-intensive policies in Central Asia, which are more robust and pertinent than those of their rivals.

Chinese researcher, Huasheng (2006), supports this thesis. He opines "the U.S. penetration in the region of

Central Asia represents a significant potential destabilization of the Chinese logistics” (p. 23). In this context, the Chinese expert notes that the task to protect this strategic space within the SCO becomes paramount for Beijing.

### CHINESE AGENDA

The presence of U.S. military bases in Central Asia poses a serious challenge to China’s geostrategic and geopolitical interests. Thus, according to the professor at Xinjiang University, Zhu Zhengong (2005), “Military presence and political influence in Central Asia to a certain extent deepened the socio-political tensions in the region; there are potential destabilizing factors for these powers” (p. 7). According to the Russian expert Borovoy (2004), Beijing’s policies toward Central Asia are influenced by four main factors, 1) formation of a new post-Soviet system of international relations in Eurasia; 2) the relationship among the great powers; 3) the specifics of the regional policy of Beijing; and 4) the problems of the internal development of China (p. 10).

In concordance with this point of view, is the judgment of Trofimov (2002) who believes that is important and the fact that so far the U.S. military and political presence in the region is not only a direct threat to the national interests of Russia and China but also a strong stimulus that produces the extra tactical cooperation between Moscow and Beijing and their mutual desire to maximize, in particular, the Shanghai channel cooperation.

### U.S. VIEWS

According to U.S. expert Cohen (2005), “... the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a tool with which China is increasing its influence in Central Asia. This structure prevents the United States participated in the work even as an observer, although such rights have Pakistan, India and Iran. It is possible that China, Russia and Iran will seek, if not to squeeze the U.S., at least, to not allow Washington to expand its presence in the region». In this regard, China views the SCO as a tool for not only regional, but also national security, the mechanism of participation in the affairs of the countries of Central Asia, and a basis for the comprehensive relations among the states of the region. At the same time, the geographic proximity of China stipulates Beijing’s desire to develop closer relations with the countries of the Central Asian region.

The growing interest in the SCO in the regional and global context is used in China as a valuable diplomatic resource. Topic of the SCO, especially with the approach of the next summit of the Organization, it is often a separate item on the agenda of China’s diplomatic contacts with the United States and the West. In particular, following a statement in one of the

paragraphs of the Declaration of the SCO summit in Astana in 2005 on foreign military bases in Central Asia, the U.S. diplomacy began to attach greater importance and potential of the Chinese influence on it, strongly urging Beijing to prevent the adoption of decisions concerning matters of U.S. military cooperation with the countries of Central Asia.

A number of experts and analysts, including Chinese scholars who study the issue, noted that for Russia and China in Central Asia, there are areas of shared interests and areas where their interests diverge (Alimov, 2006). The first group belongs to a common approach to the problems of extremism, separatism, terrorism and drug trafficking. The second group, in their opinion, is the discrepancy in the economic interests of Russia and China in the region. Therefore, as noted by Chinese experts, it needs a course correction in the economic policies of the two countries. The western analytical publications are also increasingly speculating about the clash of interests between China and Russia in Central Asia as an inevitable phenomenon.

On his part, the director of the Center for the study of Russia and Central Asia at Fudan University (Shanghai), Zhao Huasheng (2006), notes that China stands for another organizational structure of cooperation with the Russian Federation that would promote reconciliation and balancing of interests between the two states and create new common goals in the region. In addition, the dialogue through regular consultations and meetings at various levels within the SCO and the mechanism of decision-making by consensus, help ensure that the general common interest of both powers reduce the probability of collision between them and prevent the dominance of one’s interest to the detriment of the other. Thus, it can be assumed that the presence of the Russian Federation in the SCO can be a legitimate reason for enhanced cooperation of China with Central Asia under the supervision of Russia.

According to the expert of the American Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Martha Brill Olcott, China is behaving responsibly in Central Asia. In her opinion, "there is no evidence that the Chinese use the SCO as a tool of imperialism or neo-imperialism” (p. 47). As she notes, Beijing is likely to indirectly consider the organization as a means of balancing Russian influence in the region. Even the threat of China’s economic expansion in the region, causing the greatest concern in Central Asia, actually unrelated to another development of economic cooperation within the SCO (Martha Brill Olcott, 2006).

Analysts believe that current powers China and Russia are well balanced within the framework of the SCO. However, in the long run, it will be advantageous for Beijing all the way. In particular, as the expert sinologist Syroezhkin (2007), argues that China has received legitimacy largely due to the SCO. This legitimacy does not cause objections from Russia and

Central Asia. On the other hand, it provides approval of their ability to directly act on the post-Soviet space in the CIS acquiesced by unwritten rules from both sides. In other words, it implies an ability to easily play on the contradictions among the CIS countries as well as among different groups within each of these countries without the risk of being accused of subversion and expansionism.

Sun Zhuangzhi (Ribao, 2007), chief researcher at the Institute of Russian, East European and Central Asian Academy of Social Sciences of China, said that China and Russia support the diverse, multi-level and multi-channel dialogues on regional security and cooperation on the basis of equal participation, full coordination, the desire for unity in discrepancies and maintaining forward movement.

### RUSSIAN CONCERN

According to the Russian Sinologist Devyatov (2004), the SCO countries are a type of rear guard for China since that country focuses on economic and demographic expansion in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific (ASEAN - APEC). Later, as Russian expert Kurtov (Yu, 2007), pointed out in terms of growth of Moscow's foreign policy and strengthening the position of Beijing in the region, it will certainly increase the degree of competition between the two powers. In this connection, the attention of China to the Central Asian region is the result of the following objectives, 1) to ensure stability on its western borders and in the border regions (Xinjiang, Tibet); 2) to create the necessary conditions for the realization of development plans for the western regions of China, in particular, reducing the gap in the economic development of coastal and inland areas as well as western flanks; 3) to provide secure access to energy for its booming industry and the formation of reliable transport corridors to access the markets of the CIS countries and Europe; and 4) to counter the unipolar system and the dominance of the U.S. at the economic, political, and military levels. To date, progress in the SCO framework agreement fully meets the interests of China in Central Asia in the fields of economics, security, and geopolitics.

In recent years, China's role in the SCO has been the subject of lively debate in the world's political and expert circles. Western politicians and experts have often accused Beijing of sponsoring the anti-Western agenda of the organization, as well as participating, along with Russia, in an effort to drive Central Asia in the direction of a Sino-Russian partnership. For example, U.S. researchers F. Bergten, B. Gill, N. Lardi, and D. Mitchell (Podolko, 2008) in their works on the development of an effective U.S. strategy toward China published in 2007, noted that the SCO was originally conceived for the settlement of territorial disputes, "and has now become an active instrument of regional

cooperation in the fight against the three forces of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, and perhaps protection from the unwanted influence of the United States. Backstage, China's actions were critical in creating and shaping the agenda of the organization" (Podolko, 2008, p. 6). China's emergence as a leader within the SCO is the steady growth over the past two decades of the economic, political, and military capabilities of the PRC, which turns it into a more substantial and active geopolitical actor not only in the region but also in the world.

### CONCLUSION

The foregoing leads to the conclusion that the intensely growing economic and political cooperation between China and Central Asian countries may, in the medium term, lead to China becoming the dominant foreign partner in the region. China's role and behavior in the SCO appears acceptable to the Central Asian countries because Beijing's overt priority is the preservation and development of the organization. In this regard, Chinese diplomacy avoids any steps that could undermine the SCO or strengthen the already existing controversy within it.

In general, it is obvious that the interests of China in the SCO are quite pragmatic and multifaceted. It should be emphasized that, although China's image and values provide the ingredients to the development of multilateral cooperation within the framework of the SCO, it is not a higher priority than bilateral relations, especially with key partners, such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Corresponding author: Dr. Khayrulla Umarov, email: [khayrullahu@mail.ru](mailto:khayrullahu@mail.ru)

**Dr. Khayrulla Umarov** is a Professor at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. Dr. Umarov worked as a senior researcher at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In 2005 he visited The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. From 2007 to 2013 he was Head of International Relations Chair at Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies. In 2009 he trained at Beijing Languages University. In 2010 he received a scientific degree Docent. He is the author of multiple manuscripts and several books on Political Theory and International Relations in Central Asia.

**Dr. Kimberly Millier** is a doctoral chair at Grand Canyon University and instructs at the doctoral level. Dr. Millier received her Doctor of Business Administration from the University of Phoenix School of Advanced Studies in 2010. Since 1991, she has conducted research and provided training throughout the Central Asian Republics and worked closely with the Business Women's Association (Tadbikor Ayol) of Uzbekistan. Dr. Millier has published several peer-reviewed articles and briefs focused on Central Asia and the role of women in the region.