

COOPERATION VS. COMPETITION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The present study highlights the cooperation-competition ratio in the Central Asia region aiming at maintaining a force balance between Russia and China – as main state actors of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and avoiding the dominance of a state over the other member states of the Organization.

Our paper attempts to identify the theoretical arguments that might render a better insight in this organization as a framework meant to mutually balance influence between Russia and China, with the purpose of reciprocally monitoring and limiting their power in a region considered the core of SCO – from a geographical point of view and from the point of view of the two powers' interest.

On the other hand, we should take into account that promoting multipolarity in the global politics is a common interest of China and Russia; both countries started to exclude, to various extents, the Western powers' interests in Central Asia.

Keywords: regional cooperation and competition, mutual balance, multipolarity, Central Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

1. Introduction

In the specialized literature concerning the analysis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, studies can be divided according to the identified goals and internal mechanisms based on which the organization is governed. Therefore, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was described either as the symbol for detente in the relations between Russia and China or as a form of cooperation, aiming at both maintaining equilibrium of power between Russia and China in the region and avoiding the dominance of one country over the others; it was frequently referred to as an anti-American alliance. There are mainly four perspectives upon the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: it represents an expression of regional collaboration aiming at countering terrorism (and subsequently extremism and separatism, which generate the “three forces of the evil” stated in its documents), a mechanism used to restore (normalize) the Sino-Russian relations, counterbalance the United States and determine mutual balance between Russia and China.

None of these theses typify an exhaustive approach of the emergence and further development of the SCO. The main reasons concern the lack of a systematic approach of the organization, the lack of more precise information regarding its activities and also precarious consistency of proofs advanced to sustain one of the theses.

2. SCO, an expression of...

...regional cooperation against terror

One of the perspectives regarding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization conceives that the goal and motivation behind its foundation are to provide a framework for the regional cooperation against terrorism in Central Asia. From this point of view, the central pillar in the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization consists of the necessity to forestall the intensification of terrorist activities that threaten the regional stability and security. For example, Richard Weitz highlights the common view that Russia, China and the other four member states from Central Asia share regarding the Islamic terrorist - separatist groups – these are currently considered one of the most serious security threat, carrying the potential to destabilize the entire region of Central Asia¹. The same point of view is shared also by Subodh Atal², who vividly depicted the fear of Chinese leaders of a possible Islamic rise in the region Xinjiang in the North-East of China, whereas Russia is rather disturbed by the challenges posed by the Chechen separatists. Moreover, the governments of the other four SCO member states from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) face, at different levels, the problems posed by Islamic separatist groups.

Furthermore, the Russian expert Alexander Lukin³ shows that the region of Central Asia became “aware” of the threats rendered by the international terrorism of the late ‘90s, before the terrorist attacks

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¹ Richard Weitz, *Terrorism in Eurasia: Enhancing the Multilateral Response*, China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Volume 4, No. 2, 2006, accessed January 14, 2008. http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/CEF/Quarterly/May_2006/Weitz.pdf.

² Subodh Atal, *The new great game*, The National Interest, Fall 2005, accessed April, 9, 2008. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2751/is_81/ai_n15753423/pg_5

³ Alexander Lukin, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: What Next?*, Russia in Global Affairs, Nr. 2, July-September 2007, accessed May 17, 2008. <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/20/1135.html>

from 09.11.2001, and thus the countries cooperate with the view of enhancing mutual solutions of counteracting Islamic terrorism and separatism, this being considered the main cooperation domain in the field of regional security⁴.

Eugene Rumer⁵ states that the interest of Russia in SCO lays in the „obvious «maliciousness» of Islamic radicalism”, and that for the countries in Central Asia it is „clear the advantage of having two close allies in their own fight against Islamic supporters in the United Nations (UN) Security Council – Russia and China”.

...restoring (normalizing) the Sino-Russian relations

Several analysts support the idea that SCO was founded in order to facilitate the normalization of the Sino-Russian relations. From this point of view, SCO can be considered the Central-Asian version of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and a symbol of detente between the main players of the organization. For example, this is the view of N. Norling and N. Swanström, who conceived that “Shanghai Cooperation Organization was very successful in creating a climate of trust between member states by directly involving them in the process of preventing conflicts”⁶. Furthermore, the two experts added that strengthening the trust generated substantial and efficient effects. They also emphasized the lack of effective military joint actions in order to conclude that the cooperation did not exceed the normalization framework and that the immediate success of SCO was due to the modification of the common norms, shared interests and “progressive approach”⁷ that led to arms reduction in the region. Nevertheless, they mentioned and elaborated on the economic collaboration between 1998 and 1999, which also had a series of positive consequences, but not reliant enough to tackle the arising conflicts, to fight against the militant organizations or to approach the disputes over the borders. For this reason, the intensification and institutionalization of cooperation, under the aegis of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was strongly required.

In the same manner, Richard Weitz demonstrated that the founding of SCO represented an institutionalized expression of the Russian and

Chinese common interests in managing the insecurity from Central Asia, a need focused on “strengthening trust by imposing restrictions upon military deployment”.

...Counter-balancing the United States of America

This approach can be found in the work of Sun Zhuangzhi, who considers that „Russia and the Central-Asian countries would want to join China in a balance of power concerning the USA, and this would directly serve the interests of the Organisation”⁸.

In the same manner, Subodh Atal mentions that the defense policy that China pursues aims at „reaching the geopolitical goals through multilateral dialogue and cooperation, preventing this way the emergence of American unipolarity”⁹. If this thesis proved to be valid, SCO would bear the most profound implications, not only for the regional and international security, as it would represent the beginning of a new multipolar order, but also for its impact upon the theory regarding the balance of power, whose expectations seem to be argued against by the last two decades of unipolarity.

...mutual balancing between Russia and China

From this point of view, Shanghai Cooperation Organization should be considered a framework in which the mutual balance of influence between Russia and China develops. In other words, Russia and China created a security organization with the view of monitoring and mutually limiting their power and influence, in order to avoid the possibility of a country to become more dominant than the other.

This view over SCO is, for instance, also promoted by the foreign policy expert Subodh Atal. As a supporter of the regional cooperation against terrorism thesis, he noticed that certain voices from Russia manifested anxiety when it came to the possibility that the power and superiority of China would increase, insofar as to predict the likelihood of transforming Russia into a vassal¹⁰. Moreover, it warns about the fact that Russia initiated proceedings to introduce India within SCO as an observer, aiming at balancing the Chinese influence, whereas China at its turn insisted that Pakistan would be included in the

⁴ Some events are already well-known: the war of Russia against the Chechen separatists; the civil war in Tajikistan supported by the radical Islamic opposition; the terrorist activities of extremist groups advocating for the autonomy of Xinjiang region and the violent clashes burst between the Tibetans and Chinese law enforcement authorities; radical Islamist migration in Kazakstan, coming from neighbouring countries; the attempt to murder the Uzbek president Islam Karimov; the problems generated by the radical groups in Kyrgyzstan etc.

⁵ Eugene B. Rumer, *China, Russia and the Balance of Power in Central Asia*, Strategic Forum, No. 223, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington DC, November 2006, accessed December 18, 2007. <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Strforum/SF223/SF223.pdf>.

⁶ Nicklas Norling, Niklas Swanström, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, trade, and the roles of Iran, India and Pakistan*, Central Asian Survey, 26(3), September 2007, accessed March 26, 2008. <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/2007/CAS-SCO.pdf>.

⁷ The progressive approach can be explained by the fact that the SCO member states concentrated on a limited number of problems, and as these were tackled and dealt with, the author starts referring to the compatibility of the norms/values these countries have, given the fact that they are rather weak and fear an external intervention

⁸ Sun Zhuangzhi, *New and Old Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. and Sino-Central Asian Relations*, The Review of International Affairs, Vol. 3, No. 4, June 2004.

⁹ Subodh Atal, *Op.cit.*

¹⁰ Idem

organization in order to prevent the formation of a Russia-India alliance.

Moreover, Eugene Boris Rumer appreciates further on that this competition for regional influence and dominance between Beijing and Moscow is actually the symbol of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Especially for China, SCO consists of a tool to replace Russia from its role of main player in Central Asia¹¹.

Nevertheless, we believe that each of the previously described theses is characterized by different grades of generality, generating contradictions due to the following reasons.

First of all, as far as the regional cooperation against terrorism is concerned, its plausibility diminishes if we take into consideration the fact that the United States of America, despite their wish to be offered the status of observer within the Organization, were not invited, whilst countries such as Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongol obtained it¹². This might represent rather an insolence, as the USA, Russia, China and the central-Asian member states of SCO already agreed on the necessity of fighting against international terrorism. Moreover, as the former American Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, remarked, it is rather intriguing that Iran, a country well-known for the support provided to international terrorism, was invited as the main observer within an organization whose paramount goal is to eradicate terrorism.

Secondly, regarding the thesis of detente, this has undoubtedly a descriptive character, taking into consideration the sustained efforts made by China and Russia in order to solve the border dispute and to reduce the military tensions from the border line. The detente began during the '80s and intensified between 1989 and 1996. The objectives established – facilitating the process of drawing the borders, reducing the troops and strengthening power – were mainly accomplished the moment Shanghai 5 was created, in 1996. Hence, a treaty regarding the troop reduction was signed in 1997, and the border dispute was almost entirely solved by the year 1999 (except for Tajikistan, for which an additional agreement was signed in 2002). Thus, the theory of detente is valid when describing the normalization of the Sino-Russian relations, but it does not offer a plausible explanation of the reason why the SCO was founded and how it facilitated the whole process of detente.

Thirdly, a few objections were elaborated on the subject of balancing the United States. For example, based on several empirical data, Alexander Lukin¹³

stated that „it is groundless to consider the SCO a hostile anti-American group” because in fact all the SCO member states are very interested in having an intensive economic cooperation with the United States, since they have to adapt to an economic system ruled by the United States, if they strive to develop from an economic point of view. Therefore, the creation of an anti-American alliance would contradict their economic interests. Nevertheless, a classical concept of the realism is that a problem countries face is the trade-off between the prevalence either of economic or security objectives. Moreover, it is perfectly true that more benefits can be dragged from a strategy of *bandwagoning*¹⁴ with the unipolarity of the USA than its counterbalancing, even though the *bandwagoning* can also record side effects, putting the state at the risk of becoming a victim of the hegemon state. Another critique was advanced by Alexander Lukin, having as the main argument the content of the official documents of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, art. 2, letter e), it is mentioned that “OCS is not intended against other states or international organizations”. This argument though, does not stand given the fact that anti-American attitude can be read between the lines of the Declaration of SCO. Last but not least, the approach of the SCO as a tool for regional balancing is jeopardized by the fact that Russia provides People’s Liberation Army with high performing weapons. This comes in contradiction with the fact that the two state actors are trying to maintain latent the influence and power of one over the other. Moreover, the regional balancing is in direct contradiction with the perspective of detente, the Sino-Russian relations having improved and restored a great deal compared to the period of the Cold War.

3. A possible theoretical approach

Formalizing the close relations and creating Shanghai Cooperation Organization proves the theory of structural realism, according to which the international system is anarchic¹⁵ - an environment where there is no sovereign to hold power over the use of violence¹⁶. An essential characteristic of “life” in an anarchic system is that states tend to pay a great

¹¹ Eugene B. Rumer, *Op.cit.*

¹² Alexander Lukin, *Op.cit.*

¹³ *Idem*

¹⁴ More extensively in Stephen M. Walt, *Alliances; Balancing and Bandwagoning*, accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.ou.edu/uschina/texts/WaltAlliances.pdf>.

¹⁵ Anarchy represents a problem for the main actors of international politics – the states – because anarchy allows the most powerful to exploit and dominate the weakest due to the lack of an arbitrator or a global entity having the power to prevent this situation. This means that states have to rely on their own capabilities with the view of providing their own political independence and physical survival.

¹⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Teoria politicii internaționale*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2006, 167-179.

deal of attention to their relative capabilities¹⁷, because these capabilities are considered to be their key to survival – not only from a physical point of view, but also from the political perspective of maintaining the state autonomy and political independence. Given the fact that states are protected from the abuse of more powerful states based on their relative capabilities, international politics tend to become a competition for acquiring and strengthening relative power and influence. States try to improve their entire range of capabilities, in particular their economic and military power, because the use of military power by other states against them can be disastrous.

Beside all these, structural realism sustains that, in an anarchy states fear a concentration of capabilities, this being able to threaten their own position of relative power¹⁸. Hence, it can be concluded that counter-balancing the others' power is a predictable strategy pursued by states in general and especially by the most powerful ones, due to the fact they have a chance to defend themselves in case one of them rises over the others.

In addition to the balance of power theory, the realists believe that states can also engage in main strategies of *bandwagoning* (alignment), maintaining the current *status quo*, maximizing the revisionist power¹⁹. Nevertheless, balancing in the case of unipolarity is much more complicated than in the case of bipolarity or multipolarity due to the great difference between first line states and second line states, which actually make the balancing possible, but which also hit some additional "barriers". Several realists consider that the barriers of the balancing in a unipolar system make this option totally impossible²⁰. Others consider that balancing is still a viable option in an international unipolar system, but not in the traditional shape that implies investing in the army, war alliances and technology transfer²¹.

Balancing can have different degrees of intensity. The form with the least intense level is called *buck-passing* (passing the responsibilities), which involves the preference of a state to see another state being severely counterbalanced, but at the same time, to hope that a third state would assume the risk to do it²². The halfway between a *hard* balancing and *buck-passing* is the *soft* balancing. The best theory of

the *soft* balancing concept belongs to Robert Pape²³. According to him, *soft* balancing aims at opposing a leading state without involving a direct approach. On the other hand, by using *soft* balancing, the states intend to place obstacles in the way of the superior state or coalition by increasing the costs of maintaining the *status quo* through employing four methods: imposing a ban on using their territory, diplomatic movements, creation of exclusive economic alliances, providing solutions through diplomatic collaboration. Thus, the three forms of balancing can be seen as being situated on a scale, with their place determined by their intensity.

In short, we believe that the key to the emergence and evolution of Shanghai Cooperation Organization stands in a mechanism of balancing, as a response to the United States unipolarity. The theory of structural realism concedes this expectation. In the current international system, the major power from the second line has to engage in the process of counterbalancing the United States due to a change in the distribution of power that took place at the beginning of the '90s in favor of the USA, on the background of the USSR collapse, permitting the emergence of a unipolar system. Therefore, given the fact that *hard* balancing is both hard to accomplish and very risky in a unipolar world, it is more likely that states would choose a *soft* form of balancing, at least at the beginning.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, there are three major moments in the evolution and development of SCO. First of all, the organization (Shanghai 5) was created in 1996, in the context of the USA/NATO intervention in Bosnia, NATO decision from 1995 to expand and also the consolidation of the relations between USA, Taiwan and Japan in 1996. The second milestone of the organization was found in 2001, following the war from Kosovo, the war against terror promoted by the USA in Afghanistan and the retreat of the USA from ABM Treaty. Last but not least, SCO was consolidated and it received a military dimension after the war against Iraq in 2003 and the Iranian nuclear crisis from 2006-2007. In short, the flux of events indicates the fact that SCO can be considered a reaction determined

¹⁷ According to Waltz, the relative capabilities of a state are defined as an aggregate system compound of the size of the territory, population, military power, economic power, resources possessed, political competence and stability.

¹⁸ The improvement of the relative position of a state is a desirable result, although states are much more concerned of a decline. This concern is due to the fact that the deterioration of the international position triggers, in the worst case scenario, a disaster and, in the best case scenario, less maneuvering space.

¹⁹ The four main strategies, balancing, *bandwagoning*, maintaining the *status quo* and maximization of power are large categories that carry several dimensions of variations.

²⁰ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Security Seeking under Anarchy Defensive Realism Revisited*, International Security, Volume 25, 2000/2001, accessed February 26, 2010. <http://www.people.ex.ac.uk/sjenkins/Pages/undergrads/2036acro/taliaferro.pdf>.

²¹ Kajsa Ji Noe Oest and Peter Toft, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization – a Threat or Opportunity for Europe?*, Institut for Statskundskab Københavns Universitet, Nisa, 2007, accessed June 28, 2008. http://www.sam.sdu.dk/politics/nisa/papers/oest_toft.doc.

²² Peter Toft, John J. Mearsheimer: *An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics & Power*, Institut for Statskundskab Københavns Universitet, Nisa, 2007, accessed May 18, 2008. http://www.ucb.br/relinter/download/AP_2003_01.pdf

²³ Robert Pape, *Soft Balancing against the United States*, International Security, Vol. 30, 2005, accessed September 21, 2009. http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/1019-is-30-1_final_02-pape.pdf.

by the actions of exerting and expanding the American international power and influence. More precisely, measures were adopted the moment when the United States actions affected the neighboring area of SCO member states. This cannot be interpreted as if the expansion of American influence and power were the only spring of the development of SCO, but it certainly proved to be of great importance.

On the other hand, Russia became rapidly aware of the rise of China as a key state in Central Asia, context in which the creation of SCO becoming of great use. For China, Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a real tool used for expanding the political influence in the region of Central Asia, given the fact that it had already been created a large platform of interactions with the central-Asian republics. For Russia, this platform was useful as an instrument of monitoring the actions of China and preventing the Chinese dominance. An indicator for the reluctance of Russia to rely very much on China is the fact that Moscow designed the plan of the pipeline from Far East, preferring Japan to the detriment of China, the consequence being the share of its economic dependence.

Bobo Lo, maybe the most seasoned expert in Sino-Russian relations, suggested at the end of an extensive study²⁴ that he dedicated to this issue: „The strategic partnership between the two countries is a complex one, characterized by ambivalence and ambiguities, in which the reality is far from the appearances.” Furthermore, Lo writes that this strategic partnership is an opportunist engagement, an axis of convenience. Other authors rushed into wondering whether we deal with strong and real relations or with a „marriage of interest”²⁵. The Sino-Russian relations, especially the manner in which they developed lately, deserve a more thoroughly examination from a geopolitical and geostrategic point of view.

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²⁵ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *U.R.S.S. a murit, trăiască Rusia!*, București, Ed. Artemis, 2010, 119.

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